



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

Volume 134

(14 December 2020 to 17 January 2021)

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Assembly Members

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Allen, Andy (East Belfast)
Allister, Jim (North Antrim)
Anderson, Ms Martina (Foyle)
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Buchanan, Thomas (West Tyrone)
Buckley, Jonathan (Upper Bann)
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Butler, Robbie (Lagan Valley)

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Carroll, Gerry (West Belfast)
Catney, Pat (Lagan Valley)
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Dunne, Gordon (North Down)
Durkan, Mark (Foyle)

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Frew, Paul (North Antrim)

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Kimmins, Ms Liz (Newry and Armagh)

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

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Poots, Edwin (Lagan Valley)

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Sheerin, Ms Emma (Mid Ulster)
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Storey, Mervyn (North Antrim)
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Minister for Infrastructure.....	Ms Nichola Mallon
Minister for the Economy.....	Mrs Diane Dodds
Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs	Mr Edwin Poots
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Official Report (Hansard)

Assembly Sittings

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 14 December 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: Members, before we move to the formal agenda, I want to return to an issue that was raised last week under a point of order by Mr Paul Givan. Mr Givan raised a point of order last Monday, 7 December, following remarks made by Mr Stewart Dickson in relation to the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill. Members will note that I drew a close to points of order on that matter earlier that day in the hope of returning to a respectful discussion on the Bill at a later point as I did not think that continued exchanges were particularly helpful. I am glad to see that the Bill is coming back to the Assembly tomorrow, and it will be for the Assembly to make decisions. However, I need to return to Mr Dickson's allegations that Mr Givan was seeking to derail the Bill. In my view, the tone and substance of those remarks was unfortunate and over the line of what is acceptable. Mr Dickson should, at the very least, reflect on those remarks.

We all need to recognise and respect the different roles in the legislative process. Ministers have the right, of course, to decide on the timing of legislation that they are leading on. They also have a very important role to provide advice to the House on the merits and consequences of any Bill, given the information that they, as Ministers, have access to. However, it is not Ministers who make the final decisions on the contents of legislation; that is the job of the Assembly. As part of the scrutiny process, Members and Committees have the ability to propose amendments to Bills, and it is very important that I defend that right. For Mr Dickson to use Question Time to another Minister to make a personal attack on a Committee Chair for seeking to move an amendment to a Bill, as agreed by that Committee, was concerning and, in my view, unwise. Members are entitled to have different views on the substance of amendments; that is why we have debates. However, Members and, in particular, Committees should not be challenged for exercising their legitimate ability to table amendments. Neither do I want any Committee Chair to be deterred from reflecting the position of their Committee. I happen to think that a number of things were said last week that had no constructive role to play in resolving the situation that we were in. Mr Dickson's remarks were just an example of that. I work on the basis that the Minister and the Committee have good intentions. All Members should take that view when the Bill comes back to the Assembly tomorrow. I suggest that everyone should maintain the standards of good temper and moderation in their language. In all of this, we need to remember those who will rely on the new measures contained in the Bill, which are intended to protect

them. Ill-tempered exchanges do not help to meet those objectives. Let us move on from the matter.

Matter of the Day

Outcome of EU Trade Talks

Mr Speaker: Dr Caoimhe Archibald has been given leave to make a statement on the outcome of the EU trade talks, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. If other Members wish to be called, they should indicate such by rising in their place and continuing to do so. All Members who are called will have up to three minutes in which to speak on the subject. I remind Members that I will not take any points of order on this or any other matter until the item of business has finished.

Dr Archibald: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, for accepting the Matter of the Day, which is on a very important issue for us all. There are only 17 days left until the end of the transition period, and, despite ongoing and, we are told, intensive negotiation, there is, as yet, no outcome on the future arrangements for a free trade deal between Britain and the EU.

Although it was welcome to get some degree of clarity on the implementation of the Irish protocol last week, four and a half years after the North and our citizens and businesses were plunged into Brexit calamity, it is very clear that the systems and processes needed for businesses to trade seamlessly without tariffs are nowhere near ready and that the grace period that has been provided offers a short-term relief. We need to see serious work done by the British Government over the next six months and for there to be real and meaningful engagement with businesses here.

Last week's clarity was welcome, but there remains great uncertainty for businesses and individuals that will be resolved only when there is an outcome to the current negotiations. To be still in the situation in which, in just over a fortnight, new trading arrangements of some description are supposed to be in place but for us, as yet, not to know what they will be is ludicrous. The operation of the protocol will be more or less difficult depending on the free trade deal that is or is not agreed.

Those who campaigned for Brexit, including those in parties here, have clearly miscalculated and mis-sold the notion of what leaving the EU will mean, despite all warnings to the contrary. Back in 2016, Michael Gove was saying:

"We'll be in a position I think to secure a better deal than the one that we have now. No-one is seriously arguing that Britain would be outside that free trade area, that tariff barriers would be erected and that Britain's manufacturing goods would be at a disadvantage."

He has probably had a rethink on that.

The British Government have dragged their feet in negotiations over the past year and, instead of engaging genuinely, appear to have tried to wriggle out of commitments that were made in the withdrawal agreement. Back in September, the British Government seriously damaged trust in the process through the publication of the Internal Market Bill, but they have now removed those clauses that breached international law and undermined trust in the negotiations. That was a needless attempt at a delaying tactic in the wider negotiation, and it is not clear

what they have achieved by it, because there was simply no logic to it. Deals are secured by agreement, not threats.

Deadline after deadline has been missed, but the only real deadline is 31 December. It is simply not on that the fate of our businesses and communities is in the hands of Tories who appear to be intent on running down the clock and who care not one jot about this place or our citizens and businesses, other than when it serves their interests to use them as a bargaining chip.

Mr Stalford: I have no intention of repeating the arguments that were aired at the time of the referendum, other than to say that every citizen of the United Kingdom had an equal say and an equal vote in that referendum, whether they were a citizen in John o'Groats or Land's End, in Strabane or London. Each citizen of this country had an equal say, and the country, as a whole, made the decision to leave the European Union. I believe that it was the right decision to leave the European Union.

I welcome some of the clarity that has been provided over recent weeks, and there has clearly been improvement in the situation vis-à-vis Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, it is a fundamental right of any country to make its own arrangements for the regulation of its own trade and internal markets, and it is baffling to me that any Government, least of all a Conservative and Unionist Government, should hand away that right.

Far from being helpful to Northern Ireland businesses or providing the best of both worlds, the provisions in the protocol will be a hindrance to businesses in Northern Ireland. The Chair of the Economy Committee, or the Member for East Londonderry, referred to other parties in the Chamber — by which, I presume, she meant my party and two thirds of the Ulster Unionists who supported Leave as well — as not acting in the interests of the people. When a person stands up and says that having a regulatory border up the inside of the Irish Sea or placing barriers to trade from Northern Ireland businesses is a good thing for our people, it is for that person to justify how that is so, because it evidently is not.

Anyone who argues otherwise is being disingenuous — I am not suggesting it for one second; I am mindful of your ruling, sir — or economically illiterate. It is therefore for them to justify that argument. I will be clear: of course a trade deal would be preferable, but it must be on favourable terms for the United Kingdom. If the Prime Minister is not in a position to secure those favourable terms, then sometimes, in a negotiation, the answer has to be no.

Mr O'Toole: I am pleased, if a little surprised, to see this Matter of the Day granted. As we speak, negotiations are continuing. What we were told was a deadline yesterday has proven not to be a deadline. The UK, including Northern Ireland, is due to leave the EU transition period at the end of this year, trade deal or no trade deal. It is worth saying that it is unconscionable and immoral that Boris Johnson's Government chose not to extend the transition period in the middle of the biggest pandemic in 100 years. Sometimes, in the midst of debates over the protocol and trade between the UK and the EU more generally, we forget how extraordinary an act it was to continue pursuing this in the middle of the biggest public health crisis and economic disruption that any of us have experienced in our lifetime. Nevertheless, we are where we are. The

transition period is ending in 17 days. Our businesses have been criminally let down and given inadequate information to prepare for the end of the transition period. Last week's announcements from the Joint Committee on mitigations and preparations for the protocol were certainly welcome, but they do not go all the way to making those arrangements as seamless as we want them to be. I am glad that there is some goodwill at the Joint Committee, and that principles have been agreed on how to make those arrangements work.

Let us return to why those arrangements are necessary. They are necessary because successive UK Governments have insisted upon a rigid, hard definition of Brexit; they have insisted upon a Victorian concept of sovereignty; and they have insisted on asserting it on the island of Ireland without the consent of people in Northern Ireland. That is why the Ireland protocol — an uncomfortable set of arrangements to manage the complexity of our society and economy — has, unfortunately, been necessary. We welcome the fact that it is being implemented. Where we are now is that the UK and the EU are still talking. They should cease talking and agree a deal. Boris Johnson, in particular, should finally conclude what he said would be easy — a trade deal between the UK and the EU. For years, he said that the EU would be begging to give the UK a trade deal. Well, we are a little more than a fortnight from the end of the transition period. Businesses in Northern Ireland and, frankly, across these islands, and their employees, want certainty. They should get it. Particularly in this part of the world, people do not need any more uncertainty. We do not need any more disruption. As I said, it is frankly unacceptable that we are even having to debate this today, in the middle of the pandemic. Anyone who is still waiting, and still thinks that no deal is a good idea, should listen to this place: sign that deal and do it now.

Dr Aiken: The fact that we have not yet reached crisis point on the free trade agreement, and the fact that the European Union and the United Kingdom Government are still speaking, should be welcomed by everybody in this House. Those of us who listened to Micheál Martin, the Taoiseach, yesterday, on the Sunday media programmes, when he took a much more emollient line to the discussions than Simon Coveney, will also welcome that. Singling out the United Kingdom Government for sole blame throughout this situation does not work. We have reached this stage through something that is between the European Union and the United Kingdom Government. However, everybody in the Assembly should be concerned that we are 17 days away from a lot of the rules and regulations coming into place, as has been pointed out by the Chair of the Economy Committee. Anybody who had the misfortune to read through the Northern Ireland Office's Command Paper that was published on Friday, as I did, to try to seek some detail of what was going to happen to Northern Ireland businesses will have been sorely disappointed.

12.15 pm

I am particularly concerned that, today, the Joint Committee was supposed to sit, but I understand that it is not sitting. We are not looking at 17 days before there is clarity on these rules and regulations; we are potentially looking at a much shorter period. Now is not the time to keep information from Northern Ireland businesses or

people who need to know what to put in place starting on 1 January.

I urge and ask every Member to encourage Michel Barnier, Lord Frost and the British and European Governments to make sure that there is some form of free trade agreement. If they say, "We are down to some very small areas of concern that need to be worked out", those need to be worked out rapidly. No matter what happens here in the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Northern Ireland protocol comes into place on 1 January. That will have significant implications for everything that we do. The fact that we, as an Assembly, will not have any say on close to 136 areas of competency that will, slowly but surely, flow their way into what we are trying to do, should be a concern for all of us who believe in devolution and democracy.

That will be the approach that the Ulster Unionist Party takes from now on. We will closely examine every piece of legislation that is likely to be imposed upon us and ask ourselves these very clear questions: does it undermine the principles of the Belfast Agreement? Is it good for Northern Ireland?

Mr Dickson: Before I start, Mr Speaker, I will say to you that I will reflect on your advice. Thank you for that.

Recriminations and how we got to where we are today with the protocol and, indeed, Brexit in general, are probably really not the Matter of the Day whether you are in a party that dragged the United Kingdom out of the EU or in one that did not do enough to keep us in it. However, it is important that we recognise that the Prime Minister is either working to, or against, that very famous book by another world failure, 'Trump: The Art of the Deal'. Our Prime Minister is not going to be able to achieve a deal because he is, clearly, trapped in the arms of his rabid Brexiteers. Those are the people whom he is looking over his shoulder at in order to ensure that the UK gets a no-deal Brexit.

None of that can be in the interests of the citizens of Northern Ireland, and they are the people who matter in the Chamber and in this discussion. Members referred to the protocol, but that is not the ideal mechanism to deliver for Northern Ireland. The only real deal for Northern Ireland would be to remain in the European Union.

However, the Prime Minister needs to do a deal. He needs to compromise and recognise, as Mr O'Toole and others in the Chamber will undoubtedly say, that the jingoistic days of gunboat diplomacy are over for the United Kingdom. We live in a modern, sophisticated and integrated society, one where we all depend on each other. That includes the single European market. To deny us and the United Kingdom access to that market is nothing short of a disgrace.

I support the Matter of the Day.

Mr Allister: Given that the outcome of these matters will affect each and every citizen and constituent of ours, is it really too much to hope that everyone will hope for, look for and support a good outcome for the United Kingdom? Instead, alas, I detect that there are some who are hoping and looking for a good outcome for the EU, and they are prioritising the advantages of the EU over our own country. At this critical time, that is quite shameful.

There are others — we just heard one of them — who cannot get over himself or the outcome of the referendum and still wants to fight a lost battle.

We really are at the point where the United Kingdom's future and the deal that it gets affects us all; therefore, we should all have common cause in seeking the best outcome for the United Kingdom. Whether you were pro-Brexit or anti-Brexit, the challenge of the moment is getting the best deal for the United Kingdom. I am saddened that, for some, this Matter of the Day is just another device to have a go at the British Government and all that goes with it.

Of course, we must remember that, whether it is a good deal, a bad deal or no deal, we in Northern Ireland are sadly still left with the iniquitous protocol and have to live with the dreadful economic and constitutional circumstances that it creates. That is why I will use every opportunity in the House to oppose the iniquity of that protocol and will not roll over and be enslaved by EU rules and regulations. Anyone who cares anything about the integrity of the United Kingdom should do likewise.

Ms McLaughlin: Some Northern Ireland politicians advocated Brexit and believed, against all the evidence, that it would be positive. Surely, no one still believes that, but, perhaps, some do, as we have heard from Mr Stalford and Mr Allister. I will not say this politely to spare the feelings of the DUP, the TUV and, indeed, People Before Profit, but they are deluded if they still believe that Brexit is positive. Brexit has always been a great delusion. For four years, businesses across Northern Ireland have been deprived of investment that would have come if investors had known what shape trade would take after Brexit. Just over two weeks before the end of the transition arrangements, those investors still do not know the shape of the outcome. You could not make it up.

At least we know that Northern Ireland will have an open border North and South but trade barriers in the east. Consumers will pay a price for that, including higher food costs, not exactly what the Brexit campaigners claimed would happen. Nor was it mentioned that British nationals with property in France or Portugal or wherever might only be able to visit their homes for three months out of every six.

There is one thing to be grateful for across the House: Northern Ireland has a protocol. Without it, all the problems on the other side of the Irish Sea border — there are plenty of them — would be happening on the island of Ireland, only much worse. Let us at least be thankful for the protocol. The problem is not the protocol; the problem is Brexit and its architects, who did not have a clear idea of the shape of the Brexit they wanted or how to achieve their objectives through the negotiations. That is why the negotiations thus far have failed.

If the First Minister could, like Cher, turn back time, would she regret her phone call to Theresa May blocking a deal that would have been much better for every citizen in Northern Ireland? Had it not been for that phone call, Northern Ireland would have retained a closer relationship with Britain and had clarity from that point about how Brexit would work in practice on this island; instead, those who made the political decisions went into denial and pretended that, when it came to the economic outcomes, Brexit did not really mean Brexit. As it is, it is a disaster for all of us.

Brexit was always a great delusion, and the result is that the North has lost investment and jobs and the wealth that would have come here with them. We have little more than two weeks —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms McLaughlin: — left. Let us forget about the delusion. Let us get a deal done and support every citizen in Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms McLaughlin: The UK must give up its delusional dreams of Brexit.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up. Thank you.

Mr Beggs: As others have indicated, there are only 17 days left until the end of the transition period, and, whilst some say that there is increased certainty on trading arrangements going forward as a result of the Northern Ireland protocol, I differ. If you examine the document, you will see that, first, it says that there is agreement in principle, so it is not finalised. That must be of concern to everyone.

Some of the aspects of it may be a slight improvement on what we might otherwise have faced from the earlier versions. Nevertheless, what is in it should concern everyone, particularly with regard to our supermarkets and the supplies on shelves. They have a three-month extension, and, thereafter, they have to work out how they will get stock to their shelves. Some items may not be stocked in the future. I do not welcome that. It is healthy that there is adequate choice, and there should be freedom of movement of products within any country, but the border down the Irish Sea has been agreed at a high level, against the Belfast Agreement, which was meant to protect all sides. There has been no agreement from the unionist community to a border down the Irish Sea. That requirement has been totally ignored in the process to date, and therefore I cannot welcome it.

There was meant to be — it was promised — unfettered access east-west and, with that, west-east. That is not the case. As I have said, there will be restrictions, particularly on food and animal products and even on the farming community. I understand that there are ewe lambs trapped in Scotland. They cannot move until 1 January, but they cannot move after 1 January. They cannot move. They are caught in some sort of limbo. What about future breeding stock? Farmers frequently bring bulls in from the Stirling sales or Carlisle sales. How will that happen? There will be additional costs, quarantining and regulations, if it is possible to bring that stock in at all. It will be the same with other animals.

There will be difficulty with people going on holidays with their pets. Presumably, new vaccines, pet passports and other bureaucracy will be required, and I cannot welcome that. It is not appropriate that there should be restrictions on movement within any country. I do not welcome that; in fact, I find that it disregards, as I indicated, what was agreed in the Belfast Agreement. The status of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom is changing as a result of these announcements —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Beggs: — and, for that reason, I cannot support it. I wish that others would reflect on that change as well.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Matter of the Day.

Mr O'Toole: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Briefly, I hope that you can advise on the process for deciding on a Matter of the Day. Last week, I submitted two Matters of the Day on precisely this subject, and they were not granted. This one was. Can you advise as to what changed?

Mr Speaker: I suggest that you are straying into territory that you do not want to go into. You are challenging the ruling of the Speaker. You were advised last week, when your Matter of the Day was not accepted, that we would look at this week. I advise you not to repeat that. Thank you. You did that last week as well.

Speaker's Business

Public Petition:

Lucy's Law for Northern Ireland

Mr Speaker: Miss Rachel Woods has sought leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22. The Member will have up to three minutes to speak.

Miss Woods: The petition that I bring today calls for the introduction of legislation similar to Lucy's law, and, as of this morning, the petition has been signed by 2,935 people. The petition calls on the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to bring forward legislation similar to Lucy's law, which came into effect in England in April.

In a letter to Belfast City Council this February, the Minister outlined that he intended to take cognisance of the change in the law in England with a view to considering a way forward for Northern Ireland and that he remained committed to ensuring that Northern Ireland has high animal welfare standards and that the well-being of pets remained protected.

Puppy farming is a cruel and inhumane practice that seeks to make profit from the misery of animals who are bred in horrendous conditions and often lack the basic needs of food and water. They are denied adequate healthcare, and young pups are often ripped from their mother long before they are ready to leave the litter.

12.30 pm

Lucy's law is named after the Cavalier King Charles Spaniel who suffered multiple health conditions, including a curved spine, bald patches, epilepsy and fused hips as a result of spending most of her life in a cage being used to breed litters of puppies at a Welsh puppy farm. In 2013, Lucy was rescued by Lisa Garner, who then took to social media to spread the word about the conditions that breeding dogs like Lucy were kept in, gaining huge support from across society. Lucy was able, because of Lisa, to spend the last three years of her life in a happy, loving home where she was able to enjoy everything that she was tragically denied in her past. I thank all those who give their time and their home to rescued animals in Northern Ireland.

In effect, Lucy's law for Northern Ireland will mean that cats and dogs under six months old will be sold only through breeders directly, must be born and reared in a safe environment with their mother and must be sold from their place of birth. Third-party sellers such as pet shops and commercial dealers will not be able to sell young pups unless they have bred them themselves. Lucy's law is designed to target large commercial breeders who often work out of warehouses or caravans filled with animals in dirty and disgusting conditions who are being bred on a large scale. The ban is designed to deter smugglers, who often abuse the pet travel scheme to bring animals into the UK to be sold, often from across the Channel, and to deter them from using Northern Ireland as a staging post to get pups and kittens into the UK from the Republic of Ireland.

I will finish by saying that dogs and cats are not a commodity to be abused and sold for profit. They are living and breathing animals who, with the right owner, can

enjoy a lifetime of happiness. We should all think about that at this special time of year and do our best to get that message out to others. I commend the petition to the House.

Mr Speaker: Normally, as the Member will be aware, I would invite her to bring her petition to the Table and present it here. However, in light of the social-distancing requirements, I ask the Member to remain in her place, and I will make arrangements for her to submit the petition to my office. I thank the Member for bringing the petition to the attention of the Assembly. Once received, I will forward the petition to the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and send a copy to the Committee.

Assembly Business

Committee Membership

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

Resolved:

That Ms Cara Hunter replace Mr Colin McGrath as a member of the Committee for Health. — [Mrs D Kelly.]

Assembly Members (Remuneration Board)

Bill: First Stage

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Robbie Butler to move the First Stage on behalf of the Assembly Commission.

Mr Butler: I beg to introduce the Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill [NIA13/17-22], which is a Bill to amend the Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 to make provision about the name, functions and membership of the Independent Financial Review Panel and for connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Speaker: Members may take their ease for a moment.

Ministerial Statements

North/South Ministerial Council: Health and Food Safety

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Health 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 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 Speaker's Table directly. I remind Members to be concise in asking their question. I also remind Members that, in accordance with long-established procedure, points of order are not normally taken during a statement or the question period afterwards.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I wish to make the following statement on the twenty-second North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meeting in the health and food safety sectoral format, which was held by videoconference on 2 October 2020. Junior Minister Declan Kearney MLA and I represented the Northern Ireland Executive at the meeting, while the Irish Government were represented by Stephen Donnelly TD, Minister for Health. Minister Donnelly chaired the meeting. The statement has been agreed with Junior Minister Kearney, and I make it on behalf of both of us. The following topics were discussed, and decisions were taken where appropriate.

The Council renewed its expression of appreciation to all those who have played a part in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular the health and social care workers who have led the front-line response. We welcomed the close and productive cooperation that has taken place between Health Ministers, Chief Medical Officers (CMOs) and health administrations — North and South — to deliver an effective public health response. The Council noted that, since the meeting of senior representatives of the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish Government and their Chief Medical Officers at the NSMC secretariat offices in Armagh on 14 March to review the situation regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, senior representatives from both Administrations have continued to meet regularly to discuss the ongoing COVID-19 response. We noted that the Chief Medical Officers had met on 25 September to review the ongoing response to the pandemic, including the particular challenges being faced in the north-west region, and the joint statement that was issued following that meeting. We recalled the memorandum of understanding (MOU) on public health cooperation on the COVID-19 response agreed between the Departments of Health, North and South, on 7 April. The Council noted the further memorandum of understanding for the sharing of the anonymous diagnosis keys generated by each jurisdiction's COVID-19 proximity app that was agreed between the Departments of Health, North and South, on 30 July. We welcomed the achievement of interoperability on an all-island basis of the apps that are deployed in each jurisdiction. The Council noted that Health Ministers will continue to meet both within the NSMC and outside the structures of the Council to discuss the response to the pandemic.

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

We discussed the implications of UK withdrawal from the EU, and the Council noted the update provided on the matter.

The Council noted the current work programme in the health sector and welcomed the progress made to date in the relevant areas. We noted that an update paper on the review of the work programme will be brought to the next meeting in this sector. We noted that a review of the current child protection work programme, which was under way in 2016, was recommenced and that a draft revised all-Ireland work programme will be presented at a future health sectoral meeting.

The Council noted that the all-island congenital heart disease network has successfully delivered its initial work programme and will move forward with the next phase of establishing the academic partnership and developing the research programme. Ministers also noted that a memorandum of understanding between the Beaumont Hospital in Dublin and the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust has been signed for a North/South living donor exchange kidney transplant service.

The Council noted the success of the North West Cancer Centre in providing radiotherapy services for the whole north-west region and in delivering the highest standards of specialist care with the latest high-tech radiotherapy equipment. The Council noted that patients with ST-segment elevation myocardial infarction (STEMI) from County Donegal continue to be transferred to Altnagelvin Area Hospital for primary percutaneous coronary intervention (pPCI) treatment. Ministers noted that both jurisdictions intend to maximise the opportunities of the new cross-border structural funds programme — PEACE PLUS — which is currently in development.

The Council noted the updated memorandum of understanding that is in place between the ambulance services to provide for cross-border assistance in the management and resourcing of emergency and urgent calls and declared major incidents. Ministers noted that the Cooperation and Working Together (CAWT) cross-border health and social care partnership continues to benefit from EU funding to support cross-border service delivery. It is leading four health strand INTERREG Va projects and is partnering in a fifth, including projects that focus on acute services, mental health, population health, primary care and older people and children's services, with a total allocation of approximately €37 million.

The Council noted that the potential for collaboration between Ireland and Northern Ireland on the implementation of appropriate aspects of their drug and alcohol strategies will be explored. They also noted that the North/South alcohol policy advisory group, established to contribute to reducing alcohol-related harm on the island of Ireland, has continued to meet since 2016.

Ministers noted the update on smoking initiatives in both jurisdictions, including a tobacco-free Ireland, electronic cigarettes and banning smoking in cars. The Council noted that, in February 2020, the Department of Health published a midterm review of its tobacco control strategy and that the development of the strategy was assisted by the Institute of Public Health in Ireland, which provided a comprehensive evidence review and facilitated a stakeholder engagement exercise.

Ministers noted that the various research initiatives under the physical activity plan have been progressed on an all-island basis, including the Irish Physical Activity Research Collaboration and the 'Children's Sport Participation and Physical Activity Study', led by Sport Ireland and Sport Northern Ireland.

The Council noted that suicide prevention continues to be a key priority in both jurisdictions. The Department of Health in Northern Ireland's Protect Life 2 suicide prevention strategy is being implemented, and new structures have been established to drive progress.

Ministers noted that a memorandum of understanding has been developed between the Health Service Executive in Ireland, the psychosocial response to COVID-19 Programme, the Department of Health in Northern Ireland and the mental health and resilience strategic working group to engage in cooperation and collaboration on the psychosocial response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Council noted that the cross-border steering group of officials, co-chaired by the Department of Health in Northern Ireland and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in the Republic of Ireland, continues to meet to promote a coordinated approach on child protection issues. The Council noted the update of provision, including the updating of the protocol between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland for handling inter-jurisdictional child cases, and that an updated protocol will be considered at a future meeting of the NSMC.

The CEO of Safefood provided an overview of its work and referred to high-level achievements and campaigns, including successful campaigns related to handwashing, childhood obesity, cooking chicken and cooking burgers. The Council noted that Safefood has developed and distributed various resources in educational settings. Ministers noted that Safefood has engaged with customers on social media and carried out research on food allergens, folate status in women, lifetime costs of childhood overweight and obesity, food portion sizes, treat foods and the impact of climate change on dairy production. Safefood has developed networks including community food initiatives, knowledge networks and the all-island obesity action forum.

The Council noted Safefood's attendance at the Balmoral show and the ploughing championships to highlight the childhood obesity campaign. Ministers also noted the progress of the tripartite initiative between Safefood, the Public Health Agency and the Food Standards Agency in Northern Ireland on rolling out minimum nutritional standards in catering for staff and visitors in health and social care settings. They noted Safefood's annual reports and accounts for the years 2016, 2017 and 2018, which have been laid before the Northern Ireland Assembly and both Houses of the Oireachtas.

Ministers noted that Safefood has prepared a draft 2020-22 corporate plan, which includes a 2020 business plan, and that, following approval by sponsor Departments and Finance Ministers, it will be submitted to the NSMC for approval at the earliest opportunity. The Council noted that Safefood's business plans for 2017, 2018 and 2019 will be presented to the Council for approval at a future meeting. Ministers approved two appointments to the Safefood Advisory Board and 11 appointments to the Safefood Advisory Committee. Ministers approved the appointment

of Mr Ray Dolan as CEO of the Food Safety Promotion Board, better known as Safefood.

Finally, we agreed that the next NSMC meeting on health and food safety will be held in early 2021.

12.45 pm

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): Go raibh maith agat, Minister. Thank you, Minister, for the statement. I want to acknowledge briefly how much I welcome the consultation on a soft opt-out system for organ donation that you have announced. It is brilliant to see that progressing.

Minister, there are considerable areas of potential cooperation between North and South, many of which you have set out. Did you take the opportunity to discuss the lack of paediatric pathology in the North and to explore the possibility of having those services available on an all-Ireland basis? Can you outline what plans there are to build on the good work of CAWT, which you referenced, considering the fact that €37 million has been allocated?

Mr Swann: I thank the Chair for his questions. I welcome his support and that of many Members across the House who have already been in contact with me about the announcement of the consultation on organ donation.

The issue of paediatric pathology was not touched on at the meeting, and it was not included in the minute, but it is something that I and my officials have been engaging with, on not just a North/South but an east-west basis, because the issue has been raised previously in the House. The lack of available service is as a result of the lack of skilled and trained paediatric pathologists available not just in Northern Ireland and in Southern Ireland but across western Europe at this time.

On the expansion of CAWT and the work that is going there through the circa €37 million support, we, the Republic of Ireland and the UK Government are having ongoing discussions about how that work can be continued and funded.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for his statement to the House. It has never been more important that we have good communication with our neighbours in the Republic of Ireland than it is during this pandemic. Will he outline what discussions and communications he and his Department have had about managing any future strains of coronavirus? I use Denmark's scenario as an example of that. Perhaps the Minister can also clarify whether private care workers from the Republic of Ireland who work in Northern Ireland will be able to access the UK COVID vaccine.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her point. Managing any new strains was not raised at the meeting, because the strain found in mink in Denmark had not been discovered or disclosed at that point. I have had conversations with my counterpart in the Republic of Ireland, however. The issue has also been raised UK-wide, given our concerns that three mink farms are operating in the Republic of Ireland. From the update that we have received at both a Northern Ireland and a UK level, we are assured by the Republic of Ireland authorities that they have tested their mink and that the current strain that caused concern in Denmark has not been detected

and is not present. They continue to monitor the situation, however.

When we get down to that level, we are clear that the criterion to be met to access the COVID vaccine is that people are employees of the health service, irrespective of residency. It is therefore our employees whom we will be protecting and supporting.

Ms Hunter: I thank the Minister for his statement. I am delighted to hear that suicide prevention is a priority in your Department and your equivalent Department in the South. What discussions have you had together so far on suicide prevention?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member and welcome her to her place on the Health Committee. She continually brings to the House the issues of suicide and mental health, and I can tell her that mental health and suicide prevention are priority areas for the Executive that are going forward through the implementation of the Protect Life 2 mental health action plan and the future publication of the new mental health strategy. As the Member will be aware, Protect Life 2 focuses on suicide prevention as a societal issue and seeks to ensure collaborative cross-departmental engagement to address risk factors for suicide and self-harm, as well as engagement across wider society.

As Members are aware, Professor Siobhán O'Neill has recently been appointed as interim mental health champion. In my opinion and that of many in the sector, Siobhán will be a positive voice in advancing emotional well-being and good mental health.

As regards the conversations that we continue to have with the Republic of Ireland, a wide range of work continues on a cross-border basis to tackle emotional health and well-being, mental health and suicide prevention. That includes the collaborative work through the self-harm registry, work with sporting bodies, official teleconferences on the COVID response to mental health, the development of a memorandum of understanding on the psychological response and support for families in cases of suicide in border areas. Hard copies of a 'Concerned about suicide?' leaflet have been distributed throughout local areas across Northern Ireland, with a print rerun of the leaflet delivered each year. That is a common resource that will be used in Northern Ireland and Southern Ireland, albeit with some variance in the information contained within it, depending on the area. The Public Health Agency also continues to support the Lighthouse Charity in Northern Ireland in coordinating discussions with the Department of Health and the Southern health sector to gain support for an all-island approach. Focus groups and pilot training have now been implemented and evaluated in the Republic of Ireland.

Ms Bradshaw: Minister, in 2015, young people in England benefited from legislation that banned smoking in cars with under-18s present. I welcome the reference in your statement to banning smoking in cars. Please can you update the House on the legislation here and tell us whether it will be aligned in both jurisdictions?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. If I recall right, in 2015, it was a party colleague, John McCallister, who brought that issue to the House. By way of an update, draft regulations to introduce a ban on smoking in private cars when children are present and prohibit the sale of e-cigarettes

to minors are being progressed and will be subject to Assembly debate. A midterm review of the tobacco control strategy for Northern Ireland was published and updated on 11 February 2020. That review assesses progress made against targets and objectives and makes recommendations for the remaining term of the strategy. That work was supported by an extensive evidence review taken forward by the Institute of Public Health in Ireland. Unfortunately, there has been a delay in implementing the midterm review recommendations as a result of COVID-19, but we hope to resume that work soon.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Minister for his statement. Has he had the opportunity to discuss with his counterpart in the Republic of Ireland the Dying with Dignity Bill that is going through the Oireachtas and its potentially worrying implications for people in Northern Ireland? If not, please can he provide a timetable for seeking such engagement with his counterpart in the Republic?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his point. That has been raised with me. I have not discussed it with my counterpart in the Republic of Ireland, because my understanding is that that is a private Member's Bill, so it has not been brought forward by the Government. The Bill has not had its Committee Stage yet. I know that there are concerns being raised with health professionals across Northern Ireland about the implications for Northern Ireland residents, should the legislation come into being. We have not yet had that discussion, because of the status of the Bill and its current position in the Dáil.

Ms Flynn: I thank the Minister for his statement. He acknowledged the close and productive cooperation between the Health Ministers, the CMOs and both Administrations. Can he confirm whether the issue around the sharing of traveller information data North and South has finally been addressed and, hopefully, resolved?

Mr Swann: Again, that has been a matter of great concern, and I have raised it on numerous occasions in any conversations I have had with my counterpart in the Republic of Ireland. As yet, it has not been resolved, to my frustration and disappointment. At the end of last week, we wrote again to Stephen Donnelly, and he responded at the weekend, laying out, I think for the first time, some specific details of the Government's concerns. They are concerned that any information that they pass to our jurisdiction will be used to legally force people to self-isolate, which is not a requirement in the Republic of Ireland. Now that we understand their specific concern, which they raised in the past without that level of detail, we can work our way around it to see whether there is a solution that we can bring. It remains a serious area of concern that people can enter not just Northern Ireland but the UK via Dublin and not transfer that information as seamlessly and openly as we would like. My officials continue to work with Stephen's officials in order to make sure that we can provide a legal resolution to a problem that we wish, on both sides, was not there but that is due to the technicalities and legalities that seem to be causing the sticking point.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire fosta as a ráiteas inniu. I thank the Minister for his statement.

First of all, I welcome the consultation on soft opt-out organ donation. I know that the Minister has met young Dáithí and his parents, Máirtín and Steph, who come from

my constituency. Dáithí attends the same school as my children. I know that they are overjoyed at the beginning of this consultation, and they see it as another step forward in their campaign.

Moving on to North/South cooperation, will the Minister provide information on the cooperation on contact tracing between North/South? Who is collecting the data? How is it shared between the North and the South? How can that information be accessed for examination?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his support for the soft opt-out organ donation. Anybody who meets Dáithí will not fail to be convinced that that is a worthy cause, because he has such a strength of character for what he has come through and what many other children are going through. If there is anything that we in the House can do to provide help and support, we should do it. I look forward to the Member's support when the matter is brought to the Committee and then when it is brought to the House so that we can put it in place.

There are continual conversations between my officials, the Public Health Agency and the Republic's contact-tracing service on sharing data, especially in border areas. That is done on a weekly, if not a daily, basis depending on the size of an outbreak or on an outbreak in a certain location. One of the early advantages that we had — I mentioned this earlier — was the interoperability of our proximity apps and sharing data and alerts from those apps. Whilst no data is captured through the app, the number of shares that are going back and forward across the border show that it is being effective. To date, 5,620 alerts have been received by Northern Ireland app users from the Republic of Ireland's app service, and our app has alerted 8,355 people going the other way to the Republic of Ireland. Sharing information on our contact-tracing apps is working well. The contact-tracing teams are also proving to be very valuable, especially when we see the large numbers of outbreaks that previously happened in border areas in particular.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Minister for his update. Further to what he just said, it is encouraging to note that there were what sounds like 13,000 total cross-border alerts. Will he ensure us that, if there is no thorough EU/UK deal on data-sharing provision, there will not be any disruption to that critical cross-border contact tracing? Will he also give us a broader update on what was discussed on the EU exit at the NSMC?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his questions. There is no concern about how that data will be shared following Brexit at the end of the month.

1.00 pm

We discussed health and social care services across the island of Ireland. They face major challenges in meeting rising demand in a constrained fiscal environment, which have been made more difficult by the pandemic. However, EU programmes, such as INTERREG Va, are extremely valuable not only in the funding that they provide but in facilitating new ways of collaborating and delivering services on a cross-border basis.

The withdrawal agreement reflects the continued commitment of the EU and the UK to the North/South INTERREG and Peace programmes funded under the current multi-annual financial framework (MFF) 2014-

2020, and to the UK's participation in future PEACE PLUS programmes. So, continued access to EU competitive funds, such as Horizon 2020, is also guaranteed under the terms of the withdrawal agreement. The arrangements whereby the UK may be able to access the successor programme, Horizon Europe, are subject to ongoing negotiations in the EU.

Mr O'Dowd: Minister, you have covered a number of areas in relation to COVID-19 and how the various jurisdictions are cooperating. However, what is your assessment of how the memorandum of understanding is working, overall?

Mr Swann: The memorandum of understanding that we have on COVID-19 is working well. As I said in an earlier answer, however, it could be working better, especially in the sharing of data of passengers arriving in the Republic of Ireland and travelling into Northern Ireland. At an official and ministerial level, there is good cooperation and coordination between CMOs, public health agencies and contact-tracing services, but there are still legalities that we need to challenge.

I do not think that they could have been covered in that detail in the memorandum of understanding. However, by how both jurisdictions work together, how we combat COVID-19, and what is necessary, the memorandum has built a firm foundation. However, there is still work that can be progressed in some specific challenges that COVID-19 presents and which we see developing daily if not weekly.

Mr Allister: I note that the statement does not start with the usual recital made pursuant to section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act. The reason for that, presumably, is that it is in flagrant breach of section 52C of the Act, which requires such statements to be made:

"as soon as reasonably practicable".

Why is it that two and a half months have passed before the Assembly has the privilege of hearing this statement?

It refers to the radiotherapy treatment at the North West Cancer Centre for citizens of Donegal, and the coronary service provided for citizens of Donegal at Altnagelvin Area Hospital. Can the Minister remind the House of the funding arrangements that pertain in that regard, and are they being met?

Mr Swann: In regard to the opening paragraphs, the Member will know that there is no dereliction on my part in coming forward in the support and openness that I give to the House. If he looks at any record of ministerial attendance and openness on answering questions and moving regulations, he will find that I am, in fact, here more often than most.

He asked about finance and financial support. Department of Finance and Department of Health approval for the radiotherapy unit at Altnagelvin Area Hospital was given in May 2014. There was a capital cost of £66.1 million, which included a £19 million contribution from the Republic of Ireland. That was for the day-to-day running costs, which are shared between the two jurisdictions, according to the terms of a service level agreement, which is being reviewed. The review is taking longer than expected, as the number of patients referred for treatment has not been as high as initially anticipated. That review is likely to be completed shortly, and I am sure that, when it is

completed, I will provide the detail to the Member so that he is aware of the exact figures.

Mr Carroll: Minister, while I welcome the news on the soft opt-out consultations, which is great news for wee Dáithí and so many others across the North, there have been increased concerns raised about future pathogens and zoonotic diseases, and maybe mutations, of COVID-19. Hopefully not, but it is a real possibility. The main reason for these is factory farming. Were there any discussions in the meeting about tackling the increasing problem of factory farming across the island?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his comments. As I indicated, the meeting was held before the COVID outbreak on a mink farm in Denmark, so that matter was not touched on. The specific of factory farming does not fall under my remit, as Health Minister, or the Safefood remit, which is about the consumption of food, how food substances are produced, the effects of obesity and good diet. Factory farming and initial production fall under the AERA Minister's responsibility, so the question may be better suited to him and his North/South Ministerial Council discussions.

Mr Chambers: Thank you Minister for the statement. Minister, you alluded earlier to the issue of travellers coming in via Dublin Airport. Are you satisfied with the level of cooperation that your officials are receiving from officials in the Republic of Ireland on helping to tighten up the release of data on travellers arriving via Dublin Airport and then travelling home to Northern Ireland?

Mr Swann: As I said in a previous answer, I had hoped for more engagement on those specifics. However, now that we know what the Republic of Ireland Government's specific concerns are, we will be fit to address those. I hope that we can find a speedy resolution because it is an area of concern. I am informed that our departmental officials are meeting officials from the Republic of Ireland today to discuss this matter, following a letter that I issued to my Irish counterpart last week.

Mr McAleer: I thank the Minister for his statement. Is the Minister concerned about the impact that Brexit could have on food safety? What mitigations could be put in place to address these concerns?

Mr Swann: Again, the specifics of food safety which come under the remit of Safefood are about the promotion of how you cook, obesity and the use of food more than challenges in the supply of food post Brexit. Safefood will continue its work on sensible eating, good nutrition, tackling obesity and how food is cooked. We received an update, on the day of the meeting, that the point of information on the Safefood website that has been accessed the most throughout the world and has international context is on how to cook a turkey at Christmas. That is that sort of advice that Safefood supplies. The work that Safefood does will not change come the end of this month or come transition. I have no concerns that the work that Safefood does will continue to the current high standards.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That concludes questions on the statement. Members, could parties ensure that their names are supplied to the top Table? It can be quite difficult to try to second guess who wants to speak. Thanks.

Dormant Accounts Fund: Strategic Plan

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I have received notice from the Minister of Finance that he wishes to make a statement.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I wish to provide Members with an update on the dormant accounts fund. Today, I laid the dormant accounts fund strategic plan in the Assembly Library. That is required under Part 1 of schedule 3 to the Dormant Bank and Building Society Accounts Act 2008. This is a significant step that will enable the £20.5 million fund to open for applications in January.

COVID-19 has challenged every part of our society. Voluntary and community groups have played a vital role in responding to COVID by providing services to vulnerable people while facing a loss of income and fundraising revenue. That is why the Executive allocated £29.8 million to support the community and voluntary sector through the emergency charities and social enterprises funds. With funding in place to secure the survival of voluntary and community groups and a vaccine starting to be rolled out, dormant accounts funds can be used as part of the longer-term recovery from COVID. That is in line with the original themes of capacity, resilience and sustainability.

Extensive engagement with a wide range of stakeholders has taken place to inform the strategic direction of the fund. In May 2019, the Department of Finance hosted a strategic insight lab with a wide range of stakeholders from across the third sector to identify the themes that the fund should address. In September 2019, the Department directed the National Lottery Community Fund to establish a scheme to use dormant accounts funds here. The National Lottery Community Fund played a key role in delivering the COVID-19 charities fund and will bring its expertise to the delivery of the dormant accounts fund.

The dormant accounts fund is not an emergency response fund. A key principle of the £20.5 million fund is that it will be used to support services that would not normally attract public money. That provides a real opportunity for a range of organisations, including community and voluntary groups and social enterprises, to access funding. The dormant accounts fund will support the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector to be more resilient by funding activity that increases capacity and sustainability. We know that there are organisations that are ready to start looking to the longer term, and that is where the dormant accounts fund comes in.

Under the fund, multi-year grants of up to £100,000 will be available to individual organisations to build core resilience and develop their business models to allow them to become more sustainable. It is anticipated that funding will be awarded for between one and three years. The ability to offer three years of guaranteed funding will be welcomed by many community and voluntary groups.

As well as providing those flexible grants, the fund will provide for larger region-wide or sector-specific investments that will enable collaboration, leverage in other funding and develop new and creative approaches to sustainability. Those might focus on specific themes such as volunteering, digital capacity, diversity and inclusion or explore new social investment or collaborative models.

The National Lottery Community Fund will identify these proposals through convening and opening calls to action.

The dormant accounts fund is available to organisations from rural and urban locations. It will open for applications in January, and I encourage organisations in the sector to visit the National Lottery Community Fund website to find out more.

I take this opportunity to update Members on work being led by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to expand the definition of dormant accounts to include dormant assets, such as company dividends, share portfolios etc. That expanded definition will likely result in further funding being made available here. I will continue to update Members on that issue and to engage with the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector on how those additional funds can be used most effectively here. I also intend that any future fund will reflect a co-design approach and reflect the needs of people here.

The establishment of the £20.5 million dormant accounts fund is a hugely significant opportunity for the community, voluntary and social enterprise sectors. It will help those sectors to adapt to future challenges and to be more financially resilient in the longer term. Multi-year funding provides certainty and will enable our community, voluntary and social enterprises to continue to make a positive and meaningful impact on many people's lives. I look forward to updating Members in January when the fund opens.

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): I thank the Minister for meeting me earlier and briefing me on the contents of his statement. I welcome the statement. As the Minister said, Northern Ireland's share of the money has resided in the Department of Finance for many years and has not been put to use. Indeed, my very learned friend from East Antrim pointed out that it was 2008 when the issue was first raised.

1.15 pm

I am sure that Members will recognise that the wider community and voluntary sector will be keen to access those funds to allow it to continue its vital work. In particular, when he discusses dormant assets, can the Minister tell us when we can expect to get some indication of what those dormant assets are likely to be and when we are likely to be informed of Northern Ireland's allocation of them? Given the potential for increased allocation, is there a likelihood that the level of funding each year could be subject to significant variation as we go forward?

Mr Murphy: I thank the Committee Chair for his input. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport in London continues to work on the matter of dormant assets. It is intended to expand out and, therefore, increase substantially. Our expectation is a substantial increase to funding that is available through those schemes to the community, voluntary and social-enterprise sectors. The exact amount will become clearer once the level of detail is worked through in London. As I have said, it is a one- to three-year funding stream, so I hope that we would get that certainty with regard to year-on-year funding, so that not only could we distribute it to where it is needed most but we could actually give organisations some guarantee about their future funding. As the Member knows, it is about capacity building, resilience and allowing

those organisations to develop, grow and become more sustainable. It is important that the money stretches out over a period for them. As soon as we get more detail on that, I will be happy to update the Committee and Assembly.

Mr Frew: How will the Minister encourage and promote that fund with faith-based communities and organisations and other communities and organisations that have a Christian ethos and may not have a relationship or connection with the National Lottery? How will he ensure and inform those groups that the money is from the dormant accounts fund and the lottery is being used as a vehicle by which to distribute it and that it is not purely National Lottery funding?

Mr Murphy: There has been dialogue with faith-based groups in relation to that. It is important that we state very clearly that the source of those assets is not derived from gambling. Those groups should understand that. I hope that they do understand that and that they are able to look to those funds for whatever sustainability and resilience issues that faith-based groups might need to access them for. The details on all that will be available, probably from later today or, certainly, in the next couple of days, on the National Lottery Community Fund website. It will open for applications in January. I encourage everyone, including faith-based groups, to access that information. I can assure them that the assets are not derived from gambling.

Ms Ennis: I thank the Minister for his statement. He said that dormant accounts can be used to assist with community asset transfers. Is that assistance both with purchasing an asset and developing it? I am thinking particularly of organisations such as Omagh Enterprise, which has purchased an asset from government but does not have sufficient finance to develop it. Does the Minister agree that that issue needs to be addressed?

Mr Murphy: There is certainly an issue there with regard to developing an asset. There is also an issue with regard to money that is put forward by a Department and given out by the National Lottery that is then paid back to a Department for the actual purchase of an asset. Therefore, building up a case to purchase, developing an asset when it has been purchased, and all those matters would come under the scope of the scheme, but not the actual purchase itself.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Minister for his update. His statement said that these funds are not intended to be an emergency response to COVID. However, clearly, organisations throughout civil society and, indeed, the broader economy are dealing with the COVID response. Will the Department, through the strategic plan, think about how to communicate to possible beneficiaries about their COVID response or, at least, building back better in the long-term post COVID; for example, by improving high streets where businesses are closing down? Will that be part of the communication to people who might want to benefit from the fund?

Mr Murphy: As I said, it was developed in 2019, before we experienced COVID. Undoubtedly, the need for resilience and sustainability in organisations and social enterprises has been heightened by the COVID experience and challenge. Those organisations not only assisted many of the Departments and, indeed, councils in working with the community during the pandemic but they lost a lot of

possible revenue, and there was uncertainty over funding. So, while the fund is not intended to be specifically COVID related, the COVID experience has exacerbated the position of some of those groups and heightened the need for support for sustainability measures for them, and I see this as fitting into that.

Social enterprises in particular have a presence in the broader economic recovery. This morning, I had the opportunity to visit the Footprints Women's Centre in the Colin area of west Belfast, which provides a hugely valuable service to the community there but also has a social enterprise side. This plan fits very neatly into that model and can encourage economic recovery as well as ensuring that services and support are provided to vulnerable people and communities.

Ms Armstrong: Of course, I thank the Minister for bringing forward £20.5 million for the community and voluntary sector. Who would criticise that? However, he talked about resilience, and, throughout COVID, those organisations saw their sustainability eroded as requirements to spend their legally held reserves were brought in by many of the funders. The strategic action plan for the dormant accounts fund for Northern Ireland is absolutely welcome — multi-year grants of £100,000 a year are fantastic — but when will procurement be amended to make it a fair, level playing field so that community and voluntary organisations and social enterprises can, at last, be contracted with fairly?

Mr Murphy: I agree on the need for fairness across all those issues. I chair the reconstituted Procurement Board, which meets for the first time on Wednesday, and social value policies will be on the agenda. I am still looking at a social value Act to underpin that with legislation.

Mr McHugh: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. I thank the Minister for his statement today. His response to the Chair of the Finance Committee has answered the question that I was going to ask, which was about the scale of funding that could be associated with dormant assets.

Mr Storey: It is disappointing that four years or more have elapsed since I left the Department, and only now are we getting to the point where an announcement is being made about the fund.

Following on from my colleague Paul Frew's question, I appreciate what you said about an exchange or discussion with faith-based organisations, or that you informed them that none of the money emanates from gambling, but that is only one of their concerns. The issue for faith-based organisations is the association with the lottery. It was always intended to have a fund whereby faith-based organisations, which have suffered severely during the COVID crisis and before, would be able to access money without recourse to the National Lottery. Will the Minister give an assurance that his officials will continue that discussion to ensure that that way is still open for faith-based organisations to engage and become beneficiaries of this fund?

Mr Murphy: As I said, there has been quite a lot of discussion about all of that, as the Member will know from his time in the Department. I am glad that we are now in the position where the fund is being launched. We had hoped to have done so earlier this year, but the pandemic knocked an awful lot of work sideways, and the

National Lottery then became involved in supporting the charities and social enterprises assisting the Department for Communities, which was a very valuable piece of work. I am sure that those charities included faith-based organisations. I made the very clear statement that this money is not derived from gambling. This is the fund that has been set up. The National Lottery has been tasked with delivering it — that is now underpinned by guidance and regulations on how to carry it out — so that is the channel through which to access dormant accounts.

I am happy to talk to faith-based organisations at any stage, but the dormant accounts fund is being managed by the National Lottery, as was, on behalf of the Department for Communities, the money for charities and social enterprises. Of course, that was the remit of the Department for Communities, but I have not heard of any negative experience.

Mr McGuigan: I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome the announcement, as, I am sure, will many in the community and voluntary sector. I particularly welcome the fact that multi-year funding is attached to the announcement — grants of £100,000 for up to three years — because that addresses a particular complaint that many groups and organisations have about applying for grant funding. Another common complaint is excessive bureaucracy. Will the Minister make a commitment that there will not be unnecessary red tape associated with applications to the fund?

Mr Murphy: One lesson that the pandemic has taught us is that there are ways in which to get money out more quickly to people on the ground, particularly to struggling organisations that provide a valuable and vital service. As I said, many community and voluntary groups have stepped up during the pandemic to assist in the delivery of government services, including services to vulnerable people. Social enterprise has also been hugely important in that regard.

The experience of COVID and the fact that the National Lottery was involved in the charities fund and the social enterprise fund has shown us a more efficient way in which to do this. Of course, there has to be accountability. Money that is given out has to be accounted for and audited properly. Given the level of bureaucracy attached to some schemes in the past, however, we have all learnt that there is a better way of doing things. This fund gives us the balance between getting money out quickly and more easily and making it more accessible to certain organisations and making sure that it is accounted for properly.

Mr Catney: Minister, it is good to hear that you were in west Belfast this morning meeting with the Footprints Women's Centre, which does a lot of work with the Atlas Women's Centre in Lagan Valley. What consideration has been given to targeting the fund at specific groups to help in the area of mental health, particularly in our youth services?

Mr Murphy: The strategic insight lab, which worked this through, and the consultation both happened in 2019. That is before I was in post in the Department of Finance. A view was taken over the course of that dialogue, which involved all the sectors, that a fairly broadly defined fund that assisted all the groups, and not one that was specifically targeted at sectors, was wanted. Resilience

and sustainability were themes. I am sure that the groups that the Member referred to have a space in there. I encourage them to engage with the National Lottery website to find out how to access the funding and for what it is specifically designed. The fund is about achieving much broader resilience without being too sector-specific, but I hope that all sectors will benefit from it.

Mr Beggs: I welcome the Minister's announcement that £20.5 million of dormant funding has been agreed in principle and will focus on those groups that do not normally attract public money. There have been voluntary groups that did not draw down money from the National Lottery because of their opposition to gambling and the National Lottery's association with it. I therefore ask the Minister to ensure that no barriers be put in the way of such individuals and groups applying.

The issue has been floating around since the legislation was passed in 2008. Indeed, I was briefed on it at the Finance Committee in 2008. When will the application period open so that people can apply for grants and draw down funding?

Mr Murphy: I share the Member's frustration and that of the sectors that have been waiting on the fund that it has taken so long. I am glad that we are now at the point of being able to do it. We came back into post only in January, and this would have been done earlier this year only for the pandemic overtaking an awful lot of the work in all Departments, including my own. The fund is here now, however, and the strategic plan was laid today in the Assembly Library. Applications will open in January on the National Lottery website, after which I expect that funding will be delivered within a matter of weeks to certain organisations.

I repeat the point that the money is not derived from gambling, so there is no obstacle to faith-based groups engaging with the fund.

Ms Dolan: Roy Beggs asked my question. I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome the progress made on the dormant accounts fund.

1.30 pm

Mr Allister: I ask the Minister to amplify one sentence in his statement, which is:

"A key principle ... is that it will be used to support services that would not normally attract public money."

What exactly does that mean? For example, does it mean that bodies such as sporting organisations, which have ready access to various aspects of public money, will not be eligible? What are we talking about when we say that they "would not normally" be able to access public money?

Mr Murphy: As I am sure the Member knows, there are a lot of people who operate in the community and voluntary sector and social enterprise whose remit and ambit straddles various Departments, such as Economy, Health and Education; some of the work is health- and education-related. Communities is a natural home for some of them. A lot of these projects have many facets to them. The one that I visited this morning does work that is beneficial to the trust and the Health Department. It also does educational work and work for the community, which would come in under the remit of the Department

for Communities, and it does a lot of social enterprise as well. No specific Department would assume the role of providing funding to overarching groups for resilience and capacity-building, apart from the particular areas of the project that relate to that Department.

When we are talking about services that are not normally funded, we mean that gap between departmental responsibilities. It is not to exclude any scheme or to say that certain organisations cannot apply; it is about capacity-building, resilience and sustainability. Sometimes, when a lot of these community and voluntary sector groups and social enterprises have a range of services that they provide, they cannot get overarching support to sustain the groups themselves; they get support only for some of the individual component parts. It is not about exclusion; it is about finding a level of support that would not ordinarily come from a single Department to allow those groups to grow and to build their own capacity.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he outline the measures that either his Department or the National Lottery has taken to ensure that those who do not need funding do not get it and that those who need it do? Given the scandals that we have seen in the past year, it is essential that we do not have skipping over bureaucracy, as it is called, but that proper measures are in place to ensure that organisations that need the funding get it. I would appreciate it if the Minister could outline what measures are in place to ensure that that happens.

Mr Murphy: The National Lottery has significant experience; it has been involved in the distribution of this in England, Scotland and Wales. It has been involved this year in the distribution of charity and social enterprise funding for the Department for Communities. Of course, we want to ensure that funding is targeted where it is needed. There is always that balance between cutting through red tape and doing things quickly and making sure that it is properly accounted for and that it gets to where it is intended to go to. I am sure that that will be a feature of the approach. The accounts for this will be laid in the Assembly and can be studied by Members. They will also be audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General to make sure that there is accountability for where this is being spent.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask Members to take their ease while we rearrange things at the top Table.

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

Executive Committee Business

The draft Alien and Locally Absent Species (Aquaculture) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The next item of business is a motion to approve a draft statutory rule (SR). I have been advised that junior Minister Gordon Lyons will move the motion on behalf of the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. The motion has been relaid by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister in order to facilitate the arrangement, and a revised Order Paper was issued earlier.

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

That the draft Alien and Locally Absent Species (Aquaculture) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

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

Mr Lyons: I apologise for being a little bit late; business moved on quicker than I expected.

The draft regulations before the House today are to be made under the powers that are conferred by the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. They will ensure that secondary legislation relating to the use of alien and locally absent species in aquaculture continues to operate effectively at the end of the transition period in a way that ensures that Northern Ireland remains legally compliant.

The purpose of the regulations, which the proposed SR amends, is to ensure that there is adequate protection of aquatic habitats from the risks that are associated with the use of alien and locally absent species in aquaculture while contributing to the sustainable development of the aquaculture industry. While facilitating beneficial introductions, the proposed introductions of alien species and locally absent species to Northern Ireland are assessed using a risk-based approach in order to prevent interaction with indigenous species and damage to our native ecosystems.

Northern Ireland has many biological differences from other countries, and such species could have significant and unique impacts in the local context. It is vital that we protect not only our aquaculture industry from the introduction of such species but our native species and their habitats. It is, therefore, a policy of DAERA's to control and where necessary restrict movements into Northern Ireland of species that could pose a threat to aquaculture businesses and the environment.

Similar legislation is in place in other parts of the UK, which also seek to protect their aquaculture sectors and aquatic environments, with permit requirements in place for the introduction of alien and locally absent species into other parts of the UK. The UK policy on the matter is the same in that respect, and there is no policy divergence between Northern Ireland and other parts of the UK.

The draft regulations are one of a number of SRs that are being laid before the Assembly in order to ensure that Northern Ireland has a functioning statute book on and after 1 January 2021. As the draft regulations amend secondary legislation relating to offences, the 2018 withdrawal Act requires that they are subject to the draft affirmative procedure. The regulations cannot be made until the Assembly approves them.

The amendments that are made by the draft regulations are technical, but before I explain what they do, it may assist Members if I provide a brief overview of the legislative background. In 2018 and 2019, a number of statutory instruments (SIs) were made at Westminster in order to ensure that domestic legislation could operate in the event that the UK left the European Union without an agreement. Some of those SIs amended Northern Ireland legislation for which the Department has responsibility. They were taken forward at Westminster to ensure transparency and scrutiny in the absence of a Northern Ireland Assembly, and they are due to come into operation at the end of the transition period. Although some of the provisions in those SIs are still needed, because they reflect the fact that the UK is no longer a member state of the European Union, some changes do not take account of the new arrangements between the EU and the UK.

Further amendments are, therefore, required to domestic legislation relating to the use of alien and locally absent species in aquaculture. The draft regulations make minor technical amendments to one piece of secondary legislation, namely the Alien and Locally Absent Species in Aquaculture Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012. They will ensure that those regulations continue to operate effectively after the transition period. In summary, the amendments remove the wording:

"or to Northern Ireland from another part of the United Kingdom"

to reflect the fact that the UK is no longer a member of the EU and to ensure that we are legally compliant with our obligations.

I will briefly provide Members with detail on the effect of the proposed amendments. Regulation 4(1) of the 2012 regulations provides that a permit is required for the introduction and translocation of alien and locally absent species for use in aquaculture into Northern Ireland. It is an offence for a person to undertake the introduction of an alien species or the translocation of a locally absent species, except under, and in accordance with, the conditions of a permit issued by the Department. The 2012 regulations also allow the Department to exempt movements by way of notice from the permit requirement to translocate locally absent species into Northern Ireland from another part of the UK.

Due to those changes, the Department will no longer be able to exempt movements of locally absent species into Northern Ireland from other parts of the UK from the permit requirement. As a result, it will become an offence to move those species into Northern Ireland from other parts of the UK without a permit. That constitutes a widening of the scope of the offence contained in the 2012 regulations. As that is the case, the matter is considered to be cross-cutting with the Department of Justice. The Agriculture Minister, therefore, sought approval from the Justice Minister for the proposed rule. The Justice Minister

has confirmed that she is content that the widening of the scope of the offence in the 2012 regulations is necessary and that the offence remains proportionate. She is satisfied that this will not have a disproportionate impact on the justice system.

There will be no change on the ground. I will explain that further. DAERA must be notified of all introductions. That has not changed as a result of the proposed SR, which allows for assessment of the request based on risk. Since the 2012 regulations were introduced, the Department has never introduced a permit for movements of alien species or locally absent species. That is due to the fact that there is already a licensing system in place that takes into consideration the activity, the species, its risk to the environment, and the biosecurity measures that are in place. Under Northern Ireland domestic legislation, all aquaculture businesses must hold a fish culture licence and be approved as an authorised production business by the Department.

To date, the Department has not granted any licences for the cultivation of an alien or locally absent species in an open aquaculture facility here. Any request to introduce such species, whilst considered on the basis of risk, would also have to be on the basis that the applicant holds the necessary fish culture licence and is an authorised production business. Under current environmental legislation, it is highly unlikely that we would grant a licence authorising the cultivation of species not indigenous to Northern Ireland in an open aquaculture facility, other than for certain listed species that are cultivated here. Consequently, it is not envisaged that there will be requests for permits to translocate locally absent species into such facilities here.

In addition, at the Executive meeting on 19 November, Ministers agreed to the making of the proposed regulations, subject to their approval by the Assembly. The Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee also considered the draft regulations on 5 November and agreed that they could progress to the next legislative stage.

1.45 pm

The Examiner of Statutory Rules has considered the draft regulations and has not raised any issue in her report.

The changes contained in the draft regulations are technical in nature and do not represent a change to current policy. As I have stated, we must protect our aquaculture industry from the introduction of alien and locally absent species whilst also protecting our native species and their habitats. It has always been the policy of DAERA to control and, where necessary, restrict the movements of species into Northern Ireland, which could pose a threat to aquaculture businesses and the environment, from other parts of the UK and elsewhere.

I am, therefore, happy to support the introduction of these regulations and recommend that the Assembly consents to the motion. I commend the draft regulations to the Assembly.

Mr McAleer (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I welcome the opportunity to speak as Chairperson to outline the views of the Committee.

Invasive alien species are one of the key causes of the loss of native species and harm to biodiversity. Aquaculture can be one of the routes for the introduction of new species. It is also particularly exposed to negative impacts and risks derived from invasive alien species.

Regulations concerning alien and locally absent species in aquaculture provide protection from these risks and are listed in annex 2 of the protocol. Under the terms of the withdrawal agreement and the protocol, this jurisdiction must remain aligned with the EU rules listed in the protocol.

The Alien and Locally Absent Species in Aquaculture Regulations 2012 provide for a system of permits that govern the introduction and translocation of alien and locally absent species in aquaculture into this jurisdiction.

The AERA Committee considered a written briefing on the statutory rule on the Alien and Locally Absent Species (Aquaculture) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020, at its meeting on 5 November. The Committee was advised that this SR amends the 2012 regulations and makes the technical amendments required to ensure compatibility with the withdrawal agreement and the protocol at the end of the transition period.

On 5 November, the Committee indicated that it had no concerns or objections to the rule. It has been advised that there is no policy change. It has always been policy to control and, where necessary, restrict movements to here of species that could pose a threat to aquaculture businesses and the environment from other parts of these islands.

The Committee was also informed that, as a consequence of the technical amendment to regulation 4(2)(b), it will become an offence to move these species into this jurisdiction from Britain without a permit. Given that this statutory rule widens the offence, this is a cross-cutting matter with the Department of Justice. The Justice Minister has approved the amendment relating to offences contained in the statutory rule.

The Committee considered the draft SR on 10 December and was advised that a screening exercise had been carried out and no equality issues were identified. No regulatory impact assessment was required, as there will be no impact on the private, voluntary or public sectors as a result of the changes. A rural-needs screening exercise was carried out on the statutory rule and no impact was identified. There are no financial implications associated with the introduction of the rule. The statutory rule does not have any human rights implications, nor is it incompatible with EU law. It therefore complies with the requirements of section 24 of the NI Act 1998. The report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules has not identified any issues in relation to the statutory rule.

At the meeting on 10 December, one Committee member objected to the rule, leading to a vote. Four members voted for the rule, one voted against and three abstained. The Committee, therefore, recommends that the rule be approved by the Assembly.

Mr Irwin: The end appears to be in sight, with regard to the tabling of motions by my colleague and Agriculture Minister, Edwin Poots. I give my best regards to him, as he continues to recover from his recent emergency surgery. I hope that he continues to improve after his stay in hospital, and I am sure that he is being well cared for at home.

In recent weeks, much legislation has been brought before the House ahead of the 1 January deadline. From a DAERA perspective, this is one of the last pieces of legislation to be brought to the House before the Christmas recess. The continuation of this legislation is important for the protection of our environment and ecosystems in Northern Ireland.

On a wider point, there is still much uncertainty as we wait for the outcome of the latest round of negotiations between the Westminster Government and the EU. Much has been said in recent days as to what lies ahead in January. As a priority, the agri-food sector needs clarity about what is required for trade and the movement of goods in the future. The grace period is reasonable and pragmatic in order to allow the food industry to make further preparations. I note that pressure has been applied by our UK negotiators to have the grace period extended to all goods, which, in the circumstances, would be a further positive step.

At the AERA Committee a few weeks ago, I said that a grace period would be sensible, given that many preparations by industry are not at an advanced stage. The current grace period has been broadly welcomed by trade representatives, but it shows that there is still much preparation to be done across the industry in a very narrow time window. The additional time is useful. While there will be much more debate as we hurtle towards 1 January, and there is a mixture of views of how and why we have arrived at this point, I have always believed that there will be opportunities. I believe that it is vital that the House makes preparations to ensure that Northern Ireland maximises the opportunities that will be presented. I support the motion.

Mr McGlone: The SDLP agrees to the Alien and Locally Absent Species (Aquaculture) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020. The junior Minister outlined the importance of the regulations and the relevance of aquaculture legislation. The amendment regulations constitute more of the many legislative changes required by Brexit that the Assembly has had to scrutinise in a very short time. Indeed, to be frank, on some occasions, scrutiny has not been possible in a short time because the material has not been available. Information has not come from Westminster, so it has gone down to the wire on many things and is a bit lastminute.com. Indeed, when it went to a Division in Committee, I was in the Building using the WiFi, which went down at just that point. I do not know whether that was deliberate or some sort of alien infiltration.

The regulations will ensure that the legislation is compatible with the withdrawal agreement and the Ireland protocol, and will continue to operate effectively after the end of the transition period. Tightening the restrictions on the movement of locally absent species onto the island of Ireland from GB will help to protect aquaculture businesses and the environment, which is crucial.

On a wider note, the Justice Minister has approved widening the offence that relates to the amendment, and it will be up to the Department — indeed, it will be cross-departmental — to ensure that the necessary checks are in place and that the regulations are enforced after the transition period. The SDLP supports the SR.

Mrs Barton: At first glance, the legislation appears innocuous. However, from an Ulster Unionist perspective,

it gives us some concerns. The statutory rule removes references to the United Kingdom and states:

“omit ‘or to Northern Ireland from another part of the United Kingdom’”

to reflect the fact that the United Kingdom is no longer a member of the EU. The problem is that the legislation separates Northern Ireland from the rest of the UK. In the regulations and their outworkings, Northern Ireland will remain aligned with the European Union, so paperwork and permits will have to be completed for movement within the UK.

The UUP will look closely at all legislation that is being brought before the Assembly to determine whether it will have a negative or detrimental impact on the businesses, economy and environment of Northern Ireland. With the new regulations that amend the Alien and Locally Absent Species in Aquaculture Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012, provision is being made that it will be an offence to import from Scotland or elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Previously, if the Department decreed that a permit was not needed, there would be no offence. As the Assembly is fully aware, the current smooth and seamless links to the Scottish aquaculture sector are vital for our sector. The impact of that on our fish farms and other areas of aquaculture would be highly detrimental to our industry. Therefore, we will not support the legislation.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Members. As it is nearly 1.56 pm and Question Time begins at 2.00 pm, I suggest that Members take their ease for a moment. When we return to this debate, the first Member to speak will be Mr John Blair. Members, if you are leaving the Chamber, do not forget to clean your surfaces and what have you. Thank you.

The debate stood suspended.

2.00 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Brexit Preparations and Post-transition Regulations

1. **Mrs Barton** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on negotiations on the administration and implementation of regulations following the end of the transition period. (AQO 1332/17-22)

4. **Ms Dolan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on Brexit preparations. (AQO 1335/17-22)

10. **Mr McCrossan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on preparedness for the end of the transition period. (AQO 1341/17-22)

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): Mr Speaker, with your permission I will take questions 1, 4 and 10 together.

The EU rules that will apply here following the transition period are set out in the protocol. The Withdrawal Agreement Joint Committee has responsibilities regarding the implementation and application of the protocol. The UK and the EU announced on 8 December that they had agreed in principle on key decisions to be made by the Committee relating to at-risk goods, agricultural subsidies, customs exemptions for fish and aquaculture, and EU oversight.

After the announcement, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster spoke to the deputy First Minister and me, and he explained those decisions and how they will help to ensure that the daily lives of our businesses and citizens will not be adversely affected. The draft joint decisions of the Withdrawal Agreement Joint Committee have been published, and we are analysing the text. It is expected that these issues will be brought formally to the next meeting of the Committee, the date of which is expected to depend on the outcome of the negotiations on the future relationship.

Over recent weeks, the UK and the EU have intensified their negotiations, with the aim of securing an agreement. Yesterday, the Prime Minister and the president of the European Commission announced that the negotiations will continue to see whether an agreement can be reached. We recognise that the talks could still result in a non-negotiated outcome and that the delays to this process have added further pressure to the already challenging timeline to prepare for the end of the transition period. An understanding of the text was published last week, and further clarity is needed on any agreed deal to inform our planning. Our officials have worked with officials from other Departments to scrutinise readiness issues and identify possible mitigations. The Executive have considered the outcome of this work and agreed to focus on the priority high-impact risks to operational readiness.

On the basis of our planning for operational readiness, Departments have also identified the residual risks that would remain in the event of a non-negotiated outcome, and those form the basis of cross-Northern Ireland Civil Service contingency plans. Our preparations for a non-negotiated outcome are being taken forward in conjunction with the COVID-19 response and the normal planning for winter issues to ensure that we are prepared for any concurrent risks that may arise.

Mrs Barton: I thank the First Minister for her answer. First Minister, will you also update us on the Northern Ireland protocol?

Mrs Foster: I hope that I have set out the Northern Ireland protocol and the agreement that was reached between the European Union and the UK Government in the form of Maroš Šefčovič and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Michael Gove. As I said, we are analysing the text from that agreement, and, of course, we also hope that the current negotiations will bring us to a free trade agreement. We are watching very carefully how those negotiations take place.

Ms Dolan: Minister, do you share my concern that Brexit, particularly a non-negotiated Brexit outcome, will have devastating long-term economic consequences, particularly along the border corridor and in rural communities like ours?

Mrs Foster: As you know, the Executive have different views on Brexit. Of course, the Executive Office does not have an agreed position on Brexit. In my view, there are many opportunities to be had from leaving the European Union and all the regulations imposed on us by the non-accountable EU Commission. I look forward to taking up those opportunities. Undoubtedly, it would be much better if we had a negotiated settlement, and we hope that that will be the case at the end of these negotiations.

Mr McCrossan: What work is being done with the sectors that will be most impacted on by tariff rises, such as car dealers, in the event of no deal?

Mrs Foster: I take it that he means second-hand car dealers and cars coming across from Great Britain into Northern Ireland. That is an issue that is still being considered in Westminster. I understand that Robin Walker, the Minister of State at the Northern Ireland Office, is dealing with the matter with Her Majesty's Treasury to try to find a workable solution. Of course, there is always the stopgap of article 16 in the protocol, which states that, if there is any damage to the economic well-being of the people of Northern Ireland, the United Kingdom Government can intervene in an appropriate and measured way. I will certainly be reminding the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and the Government of that commitment in article 16 of the protocol.

Mr Allister: The First Minister knows, and indeed has propounded, the very destructive nature of the protocol to the economic and constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom. Why then is her Agriculture Minister building the very infrastructure for the Irish Sea border at our ports over her "blood red" lines? Why did she and her MLAs vote last Tuesday to bring in, in perpetuity, 45 EU directives and regulations so as to help implement the protocol?

Mrs Foster: As the Member well knows, they are not brought in in perpetuity. They can be revisited again by

this place. The whole point about our leaving the European Union is that the Assembly can revisit those regulations, and that is in the protocol.

Let me be very clear: my party voted against the protocol and opposed it at every level. Having the sea border did not once pass through the House of Commons when we held the balance of power there. A general election then happened, and we were faced with the protocol and the withdrawal agreement as it is. We have worked very hard to mitigate the worst excesses of the protocol, and we will continue to do so. We have made some progress on those matters, and I hope that we can make more progress.

Ms Anderson: Notwithstanding your views on the protocol, do you agree that it prevents the hardening of the border in Ireland, protects the Good Friday Agreement in all of its parts and preserves the all-Ireland economy?

Mrs Foster: First, I hope that she knows that the Belfast Agreement is about east-west as well as North/South, and, of course, our biggest market is with Great Britain. I welcome the fact that the unfettered access promised in the Command Paper is now something that seems to be protected by the recent agreement. We also need to ensure that there is also unfettered access from Great Britain into Northern Ireland, and we will continue with that work, because it is very important for our businesses and citizens. When we talk about the Belfast Agreement, it is important that we reflect on the whole of the Belfast Agreement, not just on parts of it.

Dr Aiken: When the First Minister talks about article 16, can she envisage a time when the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, through the Joint Committee, could have a formal mechanism by which they could invoke article 16, rather than rely on the two co-chairs of the Joint Committee? Of course, as we are all reminded, one is from the European Union and one is from the United Kingdom.

Mrs Foster: Article 16 of the protocol is not for the Joint Committee. It is actually for the UK Government, if the UK Government believe that it will lead:

“to serious economic, societal or environmental difficulties ... the Union or the United Kingdom may unilaterally take appropriate safeguard measures.”

Those issues are therefore not for joint agreement but for the UK Government, if they believe that Northern Ireland is being damaged by the operation of the protocol.

Mr Stalford: Since 1998, the founding principle of how this place is governed is that of parallel consent. I invite my Rt Hon friend the First Minister to state to the House and the wider public that the unionist people do not consent to the provisions of this protocol. Will she agree with me that the preparedness of the Government to use article 16 in the national interest will demonstrate to us all just how unionist the Conservative and Unionist Party actually is?

Mrs Foster: As the Member points out, there is certainly no consent for the protocol from the representatives of the unionist people at Westminster. We voted against it on every single occasion. However, given the scope of the Conservative and Unionist Party's win at the last general election, when it got an 80-seat majority, the protocol could not be stopped. We had to make sure that we mitigated the worst excesses of the protocol. We have made some progress on that but, of course, there is still

much work to do. I assure the Member that this leader and First Minister will not be found wanting when there is work to do to mitigate the worst excesses of the European Union and the protocol.

Mr O'Toole: First Minister, Brexit is happening and the protocol is happening. The people of Northern Ireland did not ask for either; the second is a response to the first. Now that it is happening, will your office do everything to take advantage of possible benefits for Northern Ireland around access to EU trade deals? Will you and the deputy First Minister advance together the interests for Northern Ireland? We need access to those trade deals. Businesses here are asking for that.

Mrs Foster: Businesses are asking for access to their main market in Great Britain, and to make sure that they get their goods over from Great Britain into Northern Ireland as well. That is, of course, my priority, and to make sure that we use my good office to do that. Of course, we will take any benefits that flow from the protocol. It has been a very difficult period for us all around this, and it is important to look at access to UK trade deals. Those deals are now beginning to become a reality, and it is very important that we have full access to those trade deals. That is part of the ongoing work to ensure that we have access to those trade deals.

Veterans Commissioner

2. **Mr Dunne** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of how the new Veterans Commissioner can impact on the needs of citizens. (AQO 1333/17-22)

Mrs Foster: As you know, Mr Kinahan was recently appointed as the Veterans Commissioner by the Secretary of State. The introduction of UK-wide legislation to further incorporate the armed forces covenant into law and the appointment of a Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner are contained in annex A of 'New Decade, New Approach' and are listed as commitments of the United Kingdom Government. The Commissioner will act as a voice and advocate for veterans as they make the transition to civilian life by, first and foremost, making himself accessible to veterans. He will listen to their needs and do his best to ensure that they are given the best opportunities to positively contribute to, and benefit from, the society that they are part of. This is a non-statutory role. The Commissioner will have no statutory power. He will provide analysis and advice on issues affecting veterans when requested. We understand that, since his appointment in late August, the Commissioner has been meeting stakeholders across the veteran support network, including those in charitable organisations and local councils, to deepen his understanding of the issues facing veterans. I am sure that he will be a strong advocate for the interests of the estimated 150,000 veterans living here.

Mr Dunne: I thank the First Minister for her answer. I welcome the support for our veterans, who have given so much for our country. How does the First Minister respond to the announcement earlier today by the Secretary of State to mark the centenary of our great country of Northern Ireland, which is part of New Decade, New Approach?

Mrs Foster: I very much welcome the announcement by the Secretary of State that he has put forward the UK

Government's plans to mark Northern Ireland's centenary year. There is a new logo and a new website, and, at a Policy Exchange event earlier today, he announced that £3 million will be made available for events taking place right across Northern Ireland. We welcome this as part of New Decade, New Approach. It is therefore being implemented by the United Kingdom Government, and we look forward to being able to commemorate and celebrate the centenary of Northern Ireland next year.

Mrs D Kelly: I congratulate Mr Kinahan on his appointment and am sure that he will do a very fine job. First Minister, can you advise whether there will be any staff in his office, and do you have any concerns around their recruitment, given that there are still unfilled posts within the Historical Institutional Abuse Redress Board's office?

Mrs Foster: As I understand it, at the moment, the staff will come from the Northern Ireland Office. They will be seconded into Mr Kinahan's office. I think that he has one or two staff seconded to him. As it is a non-statutory role, it is the NIO that is going to provide the staffing complement for Mr Kinahan.

2.15 pm

Mr McAleer: Yesterday, I attended the funeral of Patrick O'Hagan, who was a friend and neighbour of mine. As an 8-year-old child, he and his brothers witnessed the murder of their mother, Kathleen, in their family home. No proper investigation has been carried out into Kathleen's death, and the dark forces of collusion in her murder have been pointed to. Will the Minister agree that no one is above the law, including veterans, who, as members of the British state forces, were involved in murder and criminality?

Mrs Foster: I am very happy to confirm to a member of Sinn Féin that nobody is above the law and everybody should face justice if they have done something that is not within the legal purview of where they live. I find it incredible that I am challenged about collusion when we are talking about our armed forces veterans, who have lived with such difficulties throughout the years. We are trying to help them to get through what have been very difficult times for them as they have come under attack and low-level intimidation whilst living in their community. I hope that Mr Kinahan can listen, help and advise those people as they move forward with their life after dealing with some very difficult circumstances in that life.

Mr Allen: At the outset, I declare an interest as a veteran. Indeed, I have witnessed first-hand some of those difficulties that the First Minister alludes to.

First Minister, will you advise whether, with the appointment of the Veterans Commissioner, you will nominate him to the armed forces covenant reference group? Also, will the Executive Office work with the commissioner in order to compile a report to the UK-wide armed forces covenant review?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. He raises a very important point, because, to date, there has not been agreement in the Executive Office to appoint somebody to that group. That disappoints me, because the voice of veterans in Northern Ireland needs to be heard in that group. It is a matter on which, unfortunately, we have not been able to reach agreement.

I am pleased, however, to tell the Member that in January the Armed Forces Bill will come to the Floor of the House in Westminster, and that will provide for the armed forces covenant to be made a legal duty on this place and right across the United Kingdom. That is very important because there are still people who do not get access to services in the way that they should, and when the armed forces covenant comes into place in Westminster, it will apply here in Northern Ireland. That is very important for everybody.

Racial Equality Strategy

3. **Mr Blair** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the co-production and co-design with external stakeholders of a racial equality strategy. (AQO 1334/17-22)

Mrs Foster: With your permission, Mr Speaker, junior Minister Lyons will answer this question.

Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): We are midway through the current 10-year strategy, which was launched in 2015, and we are continuing to progress with full implementation.

Whilst we acknowledge the reference to the strategy in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, that was in the context of the Programme for Government and a number of strategies that could underpin it. It was not explicit nor, in our view, intended that a new racial equality strategy would be published. Our focus is very much on fully delivering the commitments that are set out in the current strategy, which remain critical to achieving equality and good race relations here.

Mr Blair: I thank the junior Minister for that answer. Does he not agree that time has been wasted in the successful implementation of a racial equality strategy, because, even long before COVID, there was too much lag in ensuring that we move forward with working alongside those in our communities and their representative stakeholder organisations?

Mr Lyons: It was very much the case that if you were here during the debate in September on race relations you would have felt that frustration from Members from right across the House who reflected the concerns of people in that sector who are very concerned about the length of time that it has taken to make progress on this. Obviously, COVID has been an issue that has further complicated the process.

We all want to get there with the strategy, and an awful lot of work has been going on in recent months. In particular, progress has been made on the appointment of a racial equality subgroup, along with racial equality champions, in each Department. A review of the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 and relevant aspects of other legislation is under way, and we are moving from the review stage to the development of options and associated consultation. A review of the delivery of the minority ethnic development fund is now complete, and we are considering the implementation of that as well as ways that we can tackle racist bullying in schools. Much work has been done. It has been slower than we would have liked, but we are now starting to see real progress, and I hope that that can continue.

Mr Carroll: Minister, given the number of anti-racist organisations, Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) groups and human rights organisations that have recently written to the Policing Board to express their outrage at how the police responded to them during the Black Lives Matter protests on 6 June, does the Minister agree with me that, if we are to have any semblance of racial equality, fines and threats of prosecution must be dropped and an apology made to all those who attended safe, socially-distanced protests in Belfast and Derry on 6 June?

Mr Lyons: It is important that everybody is equal under the law and is equally subject to the law. If people or organisations do not believe that that has been the case, they can go down various routes, including the Police Ombudsman, and I think that that route has been taken. On behalf of the Executive, let me make it very clear that there is no tolerance whatsoever for people being treated differently on the basis of their race.

Ms Sheerin: Minister, can you give an update on the key actions under the racial equality strategy, please?

Mr Lyons: I hope that I have already done that in my opening remarks. We are moving forwards with the racial equality subgroup, the review of the Race Relations Order, and the minority ethnic development fund.

One issue that I have not raised yet is the research on ethnic monitoring. The Member will be aware that that issue was discussed during the debate. The final report has been received and contains extensive recommendations for ethnic monitoring that include amending the Race Relations Order, the design phase of Encompass — the IT project being overseen by the Health and Social Care Board — and the establishment of a data hub and equality monitoring unit. The Member will be aware that that is all a little bit more difficult to progress than the other issues that we have taken on board so far, but I hope that progress can be made on it very soon.

Mr Nesbitt: One of the key themes is participation, representation and belonging. However, there is no great sign of that round this Chamber. Can the Minister detail the plans to promote elected representation?

Mr Lyons: I hope that all political parties make sure that they are not in any way a cold house for those from different ethnic and racial backgrounds. We should be trying to encourage people from all backgrounds to get involved in politics and in political life in Northern Ireland. It sends a very strong message to ethnic-minority communities here to see people from their background in this place. I certainly encourage parties and individuals to get involved.

Ms Hunter: How much has the Executive Office liaised with schools and the Department of Education to ensure that anti-racism in the school curriculum is enshrined in the racial equality strategy?

Mr Lyons: Work is ongoing with the Department of Education in particular on how we tackle racist bullying in schools. I do not have any further information on that for the Member, other than to say that it is taking place. I am happy to furnish her with that information.

Together: Building a United Community: Update

5. **Mr Easton** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC). (AQO 1336/17-22)

Mrs Foster: With your permission, Mr Speaker, junior Minister Lyons will answer that question.

Mr Lyons: There has been significant progress in delivering the Together: Building a United Community strategy, including its headline actions. Over 20,000 young people have taken part in T:BUC camps, and five Urban Village areas have been established. Four shared education campuses have been approved and are progressing. Ten shared neighbourhoods, providing 483 homes, have been completed. Over 4,000 young people have completed the Peace4Youth programme. Approximately 2,700 young people have engaged with the Uniting Communities Through Sport and Creativity programme. The number of interface barriers has been reduced by 14, and we provide some £19 million annually to support strategy delivery.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for his answer. Can he outline the impact that Together: Building a United Community is having in North Down?

Mr Lyons: Absolutely. In 2020-21, the central good relations fund (CGRF) has awarded funding totalling £365,682 to seven projects that deliver in the North Down area. One T:BUC camp has been delivered in the North Down Assembly area for 2021, with funding of £7,000 provided. More broadly, three camps have been delivered across the Ards and North Down Borough Council area with funding of nearly £18,000. Over £170,000 of funding has been provided through the District Council Good Relations Programme (DCGRP) for 2021 to deliver 15 projects. The Department for Communities has delivered one shared neighbourhood, the Church View development in Holywood. This provided 30 homes and benefits from good relations funding of £380,000.

Ards and North Down Borough Council was awarded £3.3 million of funding through the EU's Peace IV programme. The Community Relations Council (CRC) provides funding of £245,000 to organisations delivering in the Ards and North Down Borough Council area in 2021.

I hope that that satisfies the Member about the money that is going to North Down.

Mr G Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Sóisearach as a fhreagraí go dtí seo. Will the Minister commit to progress the New Decade, New Approach commitment to give legal expression to sectarianism as a hate crime?

Mr Lyons: That is not something that I am aware of as being considered, but I can write to the Member with the Executive Office's view.

Mr Beattie: Future T:BUC initiatives are likely to be linked with the outcomes of the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition (FICT). Will the Minister advise the House whether the FICT report is presently being developed and who, within TEO, is leading that development?

Mr Lyons: T:BUC outcomes will not just be determined as a consequence of what is in the FICT report because

they go far beyond that. It would be a very narrow outlook to consider only what is in the FICT report and to transfer that across to T:BUC. I think that it will be far wider. That is being looked at by the Executive Office, and as soon as we have information on that, we will release it.

Petition of Concern: Reform

6. **Ms Armstrong** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what discussions they have had with Executive colleagues in order to bring forward reform of the petition of concern (POC). (AQO 1337/17-22)

Mrs Foster: The Member will be aware that the petition of concern is not a devolved matter. Provisions to effect the changes to its operation, as set out in New Decade, New Approach, will therefore be included in the Westminster Bill to be brought forward by the Secretary of State. The consequential amendments to Standing Orders will be for the Assembly to make thereafter.

Ms Armstrong: I thank the First Minister very much for her answer. In the run-up to the centenary of Northern Ireland, does she believe that it is time to change the designations so that people, like myself and others, who are designated as "others", will have an equal voice in the House?

Mrs Foster: I say to the Member that, if we want to reopen all of the Belfast Agreement again, we can do that, and we can revisit all of the very difficult areas. We cannot deal with some of the issues that have already passed, such as the release of terrorist prisoners and the so-called reform of the RUC — I would call it the destruction of the RUC. There were a lot of things in the Belfast Agreement that were certainly not to my liking, and the Member knows that that comes from the Belfast Agreement, and if she wants to raise it in any talks process, we will listen to the arguments that are made.

Mr Butler: Can the Minister outline when the ministerial code of conduct will be brought before the Chamber?

Mrs Foster: As I understand it, that is a matter for the Department of Finance.

Ms Flynn: Does the Minister agree that the petition of concern should be used only for the very precise purpose for which it was intended, as a cross-community safeguard?

Mrs Foster: That is somewhat rewriting the Belfast Agreement, because there is no explanation in it of when the petition of concern should be used. However, others are adding things into the Belfast Agreement all of the time, and that is a matter for them. At the time of the Belfast Agreement, I did warn — if you want to, you can look at it — that the constructive ambiguity would be used in a way that was not foreseen at that time, and that has proven to be the case.

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. I call Justin McNulty to ask the first question in 15 minutes of topical questions.

2.30 pm

COVID-19: Business Support Schemes

T1. **Mr McNulty** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in light of the fact that the First Minister will know that huge frustration exists over the pace of delivering

support to employers, workplaces and families that have been affected by the COVID-19 restrictions, which is particularly disappointing given that, as of 2 December, 1,271 businesses that applied to part A of the COVID-19 restrictions business support scheme had not yet received a payment, for the First Minister's assessment of that situation and whether she can state the plans that she has to raise the matter with her colleague the Minister for the Economy. (AQT 821/17-22)

Mrs Foster: We have been keeping an eye on all financial packages, whether from the Department of Finance, the Department for the Economy or the Department for Communities, to make sure that they get out to people. Of course, the Member will recognise that, because it is public money, the schemes have to be set about in an appropriate way, and that people come forward with proof that what they are asking for is appropriate.

My ministerial colleague shared with me the experience of someone who sent her receipts for shampoo and a pair of scissors, expecting to be paid £800 for being a hairdresser. As you well know, the Northern Ireland Audit Office will not accept that as proof. We need to go through the proper processes. As I understand it, those in part A who are now left are some of the more difficult cases, where proof is being sought from accountants or applicants themselves.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for her answer. Minister, that does not wash, pardon the pun, given the example that you have given. There are genuine businesses that are on their knees and need the money to be forthcoming fast. They need help. What is your Christmas message to those businesses that are asked to send workers home, close their doors, and that were promised financial assistance but are still waiting for help?

Mrs Foster: I certainly do not want the economy to be closed down. I certainly do not. I have been one of the people arguing to keep the economy open while others have argued to close it down. However, the health message is very clear: we need to take action, and there is a personal responsibility on us all to take action to stop the spread of COVID-19.

In terms of the payments coming out of the Department of Finance or the Department for the Economy, if there are specific instances, they should do what my constituency office does and, I am sure, what other constituency offices do, which is to phone the helpline, whether the Department of Finance or the Department for the Economy, and try to get answers to deal with those issues.

I am not denying that there are people in need. Of course, there are people in need. This has been a terrible, terrible year for businesses and communities right across Northern Ireland. In our offices, as elected representatives, we must do all that we can to help those people, recognising that there are systems in place that have to be satisfied.

COVID-19: Infection Rate

T2. **Ms McLaughlin** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the First Minister agrees with the head of the British Medical Association (BMA) in Northern

Ireland, Dr Tom Black, who said this morning that the current rate of COVID-19 infections will be a nightmare for our health service. (AQT 822/17-22)

Mrs Foster: I certainly think that we are facing a very difficult time. Unlike others, however, I think that it is important to give some hope to people in our community. I very much welcome the fact that the vaccination programme is now rolling out. I welcome the fact that there is a hope that all care home residents will have their first vaccination before Christmas.

I was looking at some figures over the weekend. Sixty per cent of all COVID deaths in the UK are in the over-80 category. As you know, in the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) recommendation for vaccination, those people are in phase 1. I very much hope that, when they have received their second vaccination, that will help us to move forward towards normality because, of course, they are the most vulnerable section, which is why they are being vaccinated first.

The vaccination programme needs to be in place, and I am glad to say that it is rolling out well. I am pleased to see that the second batch of vaccinations arrived over the weekend. We need to have our testing regime in place. The deputy First Minister and I visited the contact-tracing service in Ballymena on Friday to see the work that is going on there. We also need to take personal responsibility so that we go with those basic messages that we have been talking about for so long now but that are so very important.

Ms McLaughlin: I thank the First Minister for her answer. I agree that people need hope. Last week, there were 98 deaths in Northern Ireland. Some of our hospitals are at overcapacity.

Dr Black also indicated that a logical decision from the Executive based on the facts and the numbers would be to have another four-week lockdown. What are your thoughts on that, Minister?

Mrs Foster: I hope that the Member does not mind if I wait to hear the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser's advice on the issues and take into account where we are on our testing regime, our vaccination programme and all the other things. None of this is inevitable. I have said this many times: if people just pull back, try to cut down their social contacts and try to deal with all the things in front of them, it is not inevitable that we will have more restrictions. Unfortunately, it appears that our numbers are not where we would like them to be, so we will undoubtedly have further discussions around this in the days just before Christmas or after Christmas.

Brexit Legislation

T3. **Mr O'Toole** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in light of the fact that we now have just over two weeks before the end of the Brexit transition period, to give us an update and give the Assembly confidence about what we will be required to pass in the next two weeks, be it deal or no deal, albeit that, on various occasions, we have had updates, usually through questions for written answer, as to the volume of Brexit legislation that the Assembly will be required to pass, we have, however, no idea of how much is required before the end of the

transition period, with little update from the Executive Office on where our statute will be in the event of deal or no deal. (AQT 823/17-22)

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. The latest monitoring returns from 10 December on the volume of legislation required for the end of the transition period indicate that no Assembly Bills are required to be brought forward before the end of the transition period. Originally, 78 statutory rules were identified. Fifteen of those have been deprioritised and will be laid as soon as possible when we get into 2021. Of the remaining 63 statutory rules needed, 41 have already been laid, and 22 are still to be laid before the end of the transition, including one confirmatory rule that will subsequently be affirmed in 2021. There are nine Westminster Bills, seven of which have had their first legislative consent motion. The Trade Bill and the UK Internal Market Bill remain under consideration by the Executive.

Mr O'Toole: I am grateful to the First Minister for that update. It would have been helpful to have it in written form so that the whole Assembly could see it. Further to our interaction earlier in Question Time, I say that Northern Ireland will be in a specific and unique position in relation to the protocol; no one doubts that. There are debates in the House about the benefits and disbenefits of the protocol, but it is clear that we will have privileged access to the EU single market and the EU customs area. Can I ask her again to make specific representations on behalf of Northern Ireland business on maximising the benefits that we will have — deal or no deal — from our unique access to the EU single market and trade area?

Mrs Foster: I am sure that he meant to say, "and with access to Great Britain", as well. We will have access to the full UK market and the EU market. That means that, if you are in a business coming over from America or somewhere else in the world and looking for access to the United Kingdom single market and the European Union single market, Northern Ireland will seem a very good place to locate your business.

Lambeth Palace Legacy Talks

T4. **Mr Beattie** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what the Executive Office knew about the Lambeth Palace legacy talks. (AQT 824/17-22)

Mrs Foster: I did not know that the Lambeth talks were taking place until I learned about them from perhaps the same source as the Member did. I was made aware that the talks were taking place. We got a read-out, and, subsequently, some of my party colleagues were in touch with the Archbishop of Canterbury's office to find out what the situation was. However, from my point of view, no, we did not have any prior knowledge.

Mr Beattie: Thank you, First Minister. That is absolutely clear. Will the Minister agree with me that any legacy talks or strategies must include victims and have victims' input?

Mrs Foster: Indeed. Everything that has been talked about in respect of legacy has always said that victims have to be at the very centre of any process. I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has confirmed today that, if victims are not going to be present at legacy talks in Lambeth, he will also not be present.

Post-Brexit Border Trade

T5. **Mr McCrossan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what assurances the First Minister can give to traders along the border who are rightly concerned about trade tariffs and the future of their businesses, because he knows, being from a border area, that there is a great deal of uncertainty among border businesses that are worried about trade post Brexit and, while it is welcome that trade talks will continue, many are sceptical of any tangible outcome. (AQT 825/17-22)

Mrs Foster: As the Member knows, because of the protocol, we can trade with the EU and now, because of what has happened with the protocol and the Joint Committee discussions, we will also be able to trade with Great Britain. That puts us in a different position from the Republic of Ireland and a slightly different position from Great Britain. That said, I very much hope that we can reach a negotiated outcome with a free trade agreement that will benefit the whole of the United Kingdom and, of course, Northern Ireland in particular.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the First Minister for her answer. Will she give an absolute assurance that, regardless of the ongoing negotiations and Tory politicking at Westminster, her office will categorically and absolutely oppose any land border on this island?

Mrs Foster: The protocol has dealt with those issues: he knows that. He also knows that we need to ensure that there is unfettered east-west access. I am sure that he will want to ensure that businesses in Omagh and Strabane have access to the Great Britain market and can sell their goods and services there.

The Executive, as part of our readiness planning, before the Joint Committee agreement on the protocol, prioritised six high-impact risks. Those are food supply; the flow of highly regulated and priority goods, such as medicines; business preparedness; data flow, which is very important; sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) facilities; and transport. Those are the areas that we are really focusing on. I hope that it gives some comfort to his constituents that we are prioritising the risks and putting forward our operational readiness plans.

Brexit: Taking Back Control

T6. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given that one of the first things that the UK Government had to do after leaving the European Union was negotiate a protocol with the EU for the movement of goods within the UK, whether the First Minister accepts that that gives the lie to the concept that Brexit was about taking back control. (AQT 826/17-22)

Mrs Foster: I think that there was a grave misunderstanding of the Belfast Agreement and what it meant for the movement of goods within the United Kingdom. Unfortunately, Theresa May decided to go with the argument that there should be no infrastructure on the land border on the island of Ireland, which led to a range of issues.

We are where we are. We understand parliamentary sovereignty at Westminster. We understand that this was voted through last December and became the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020. Therefore, it is incumbent on all of us to try to mitigate the worst excesses

of the protocol and deal with the issues that are in front of us.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the First Minister. Given that the expression "Take back control" implies that we did not have control when we were members of the European Union, does she accept or understand that there are more restrictions now that we are out than there were when we were in?

Mrs Foster: I do not accept that that is the case. We will be free from many of the rules of the EU's customs union and are in the United Kingdom's customs union. We also have the advantage of being able to trade into the European Union and the rest of the United Kingdom market. We are taking control of immigration, our money, our laws and all the things that were talked about at the time.

I am not making any excuses for the protocol. I voted against it and would not have welcomed it in any way. However, it has been voted through at Westminster, and it is my job to mitigate its worst excesses and to try to make sure that the people in Northern Ireland can do their business properly.

Mr Speaker: I call Kellie Armstrong. You get one question, Kellie.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Common Frameworks: Implications

T7. **Ms Armstrong** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given that the level of awareness and knowledge of the common frameworks is extraordinarily low, with, indeed, the Committee suggesting that there needs to be increased coordination and communication, what the Executive Office and the Department for the Economy are doing to ensure that, in particular, the service sector is aware of the implications. (AQT 827/17-22)

2.45 pm

Mrs Foster: The Member is right to say that there is not an awful lot of knowledge of the common frameworks. We will have to take notice of them after the transition period ends. A number of common frameworks have been worked through. Many of them have been agreed provisionally. Some are still to be worked through. I hope that we can continue that work in 2021.

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

Finance

Shared Prosperity Fund

1. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Finance for his assessment of the impact on Northern Ireland of the UK shared prosperity fund, relative to the EU structural and investment funds that it is designed to replace. (AQO 1346/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): There is still insufficient detail available on the shared prosperity fund to make a final, informed comparison, but I have a number of concerns about where we may lose out.

In my engagement with the British Government on the fund, I have made the case repeatedly for at least full replacement spending power, saying that local control over spending is essential to ensuring that the fund meets local needs.

The heads of terms for the shared prosperity fund, released alongside the spending review, indicate that its full introduction will be delayed by a year, representing a potential loss of some £70 million of spending power for us. It is also clear that, when the fund is eventually introduced for 2022-23, it may not provide full replacement spending power, will have objectives that are more aligned to the English levelling-up agenda than to our local needs, and will have Whitehall-based rather than local delivery arrangements. That is unacceptable, and I intend to make that case strongly to British Ministers.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Minister for his response. There are clearly very serious concerns about central control of the fund. Can you assure the House that you and the Department will do everything in your power to ensure that such funds that are allocated will be decentralised to the regions, particularly Northern Ireland? Can you estimate the amount of funding that has already been received by the Department so that we can work out what the loss might be?

Mr Murphy: That funding is not received only by my Department. European funding is across a range of areas. When we go beyond the European social fund and some of the big-ticket items, there are quite a lot of small pots of funding that go to various Departments. We therefore have to analyse that when we estimate the total loss. From looking at that figure and at what the British Government have estimated in their pilot scheme, however, we believe that we could be down some £70 million.

One issue is replacement spending power in full, which is a principle that we want to see established, and the other is the ability for the Executive to set priorities locally and allocate funding accordingly. The Internal Market Bill that is passing through Westminster seems to wish to take that responsibility into Whitehall and align it with the British Government's levelling-up agenda, which in no way matches the sort of agenda that we have here. There is therefore a significant battle ahead. Fortunately, in that, I am on the same page as the Scottish and Welsh Finance Ministers. We have been making the case collectively and will continue to do so.

Mr O'Toole: I agree with the Minister on the need to be firm with the UK Government on their obligations in delivering on no reduction in funding. Can the Finance Minister explore and maximise every other possible opportunity for Northern Ireland participation in relevant EU programmes in order to maximise the interpretation of the protocol when it comes to things like this, including things like the European green deal, which is a continent-wide plan for a just transition to overhaul our economy? Will he pledge to be as ambitious as possible in seeking funding and participation in those programmes?

Mr Murphy: Yes, absolutely. It may be the responsibility of other Departments and other Ministers to seek access to that funding, but I will try to ensure that we take full advantage of whatever funding may become available to the Executive through those programmes, depending on the outcome of the talks between the British Government

and the European Union. We are facing into a very challenging Budget period, as the Member knows, with the potential loss of EU funding, and we have to access whatever support we can, wherever it is available from. We will examine what is available to us and make sure that any Department, agency or body that can access that is aware of it and is encouraged to do so.

Mr Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn.

Localised Restrictions Support Scheme

2. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Finance to provide an update on the localised restrictions support scheme. (AQO 1347/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The latest position on the localised restrictions support scheme is that 13,925 applications have been received. Some 7,025 of those applications have been approved, resulting in £49 million being paid to local businesses, and 4,198 applications have been rejected. Members will be aware that further restrictions took effect for a two-week period from 27 November 2020 which placed restrictions on non-essential retail and some other businesses. In relation to those restrictions, over 2,000 applications have been received, and 497 of those have been approved, resulting in almost £1 million being paid out to local businesses. Approximately 500 have been identified as ineligible. Staff were working through the weekend to clear the outstanding cases as quickly as possible, and I expect that more payments will be released this afternoon.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for the up-to-date position. When this question was submitted, things were in a much worse state, and I thank Land and Property Services (LPS) and Mr Snowden for their help during what has been a very difficult time. However, I am sure that the Minister will agree that, when a business has not been paid at all and another business beside it has now received two payments, that is unacceptable, and that business owners who have not received any payment are downhearted.

Mr Murphy: Yes, I absolutely get that. The purpose of these schemes is to get money as quickly as possible out on to the ground. The applications have to match and they have to be correct. For some reason, a high level of applications were inaccurate in terms of incorrect business addresses, bank account details, eligibility for the scheme or applying for the wrong scheme. Bear in mind that, when a lot of close contact services closed, some of those could not apply through the rates-based scheme; they needed to apply to the Department for the Economy scheme. So there was duplication in that. There have been a high level of inaccurate applications and multiple applications to deal with, but, as the Member rightly acknowledges, LPS is working as hard as it can to get this done and get it out as quickly as possible.

Mr Beggs: The scheme has been operating since mid-October. I had difficulty finding a helpline number. I do not think that one exists. I am aware of constituents who are frustrated that they do not understand what is going on. When will a helpline number be established so that constituents can understand whether they ticked a box wrong or why exactly they have been rejected? Even responding to emails has been problematic on occasions.

Mr Murphy: I am sorry to hear that the Member has had difficulty getting through, because most of the elected representatives that I have spoken to have managed to get through. At times, it has been difficult. There has been a backlog built up over weekends and things like that which has proved difficult to shift. The Member has to understand that the scheme has changed four times since its original iteration at the start of October. It changed from Derry and Strabane to being 11-council-wide, it increased the payments and it added in additional businesses. All of those changes have had to be factored in to the payment out. That has added to the complexity of it all.

I have raised the issue at the Executive to say that, when Health comes forward with a series of recommendations, it does not often think —. Understandably, it is dealing with a jigsaw to try and restrict the COVID spread, but the consequence of identifying certain business sectors is that a scheme has to be put in place to correctly and accurately identify and distinguish those from other business sectors.

I raised with the Executive that the way that those are devised adds to the difficulty in finding and quickly paying the people who have been caught up in the restrictions. There are challenges, and we will try to meet them, learn lessons from them and continue to apply them, including those that relate to communication.

Mr McHugh: Given that Invest NI is this region's business grants agency, why does it fall on LPS, which is a rate collection agency, to distribute business grants?

Mr Murphy: The Member is right; LPS is a rate collection agency. The only grant-paying body that we have for business is Invest NI, which comes under the Department for the Economy. Of course, when the pandemic hit, a lot of Departments offered to step up to the plate to assist and make sure that we were all sharing the burden of not only getting funds to the front-line of the health service and assisting it with acquiring critical supplies but of meeting the challenge of businesses. LPS stepped up with paying out for business properties that could be identified. Of course, differentiating between businesses that were under restriction and those that were not was an added challenge and has continued to be. The Department for Communities stepped up to pay social enterprises and charities, which were not within its remit, and the Department for Infrastructure stepped up to pay taxis and coach services, which, again, were not within its remit. Other Departments stepped up to try to assist. I often hear the Executive being criticised for lacking a joined-up approach, but those are examples of Departments going beyond their remit and taking on work that they did not have to take on but needed to in order to respond to the pandemic and to what the public required.

Mr Muir: As the Minister is aware, the purpose of the scheme is to assist businesses that have been required to close as a result of the coronavirus public health regulations. Will he commit to look at the situation whereby an overall business is allowed to open but the businesses that are embedded within it are required to close and are not getting any financial assistance?

Mr Murphy: The Member identifies the complexity of business arrangements. It is not always as straightforward as a shop having to close, being easily identified and paid out to because it is on the rate base where the application

was put in correctly. A lot of applications were not put in correctly.

There are multiple formations of businesses, and the task is getting to the difficult ones that are a business within a business. I encourage the people who are affected to make sure that all those matters are made available to LPS so that it can properly assess them. It adds to the complexity of considering the case, and sometimes you find that it takes longer to consider those cases than the more straightforward ones.

LPS is getting through them as quickly as it possibly can, and we encourage people to make sure that they provide the most up-to-date and accurate information. We also encourage people to continue to check their email inboxes and junk mailboxes because requests often go back out for further information and are not received but are recorded as having been received. I encourage people who are waiting to do that to continue that communication.

Dormant Accounts Fund

3. **Ms Rogan** asked the Minister of Finance to outline when the dormant accounts fund will be available for distribution. (AQO 1348/17-22)

Mr Murphy: This morning, I visited the Footprints Women's Centre in west Belfast to announce the dormant accounts fund. Footprints provides training and childcare on a social enterprise model as well as a social supermarket. Over the last 30 years, the organisation has developed and evolved and is firmly at the heart of its local community.

The establishment of the dormant accounts fund is a hugely significant opportunity for the community, voluntary and social enterprise sectors, especially as it will support services that do not normally attract public money. The £20.5 million dormant accounts fund will open for applications on 12 January 2021. By offering multi-year funding, it will provide much-needed certainty to community and voluntary groups and social enterprises. It will help them to meet future challenges and adapt to be more financially resilient in the longer term so that they can continue making a positive and meaningful impact on many people's life. I encourage organisations to visit the National Lottery Community Fund's website for further details of the fund.

Ms Rogan: I understand that the fund can be used for community asset transfer. In my constituency of South Down, a mental health charity called Mind Your Mate and Yourself (MYMY) is seeking a site from the Department of Education in Castlewellan — the former Ardnabannon education centre. Is the fund appropriate for it to apply to?

Mr Murphy: In building the case to deal with the Department of Education or, if the asset is transferred or bought, or however it is exchanged, in order to develop the asset, the purchase is not eligible under the scheme, because there is an issue with giving public money to buy assets from Departments, meaning that the money essentially comes back into them. I had the opportunity to meet people from the project that the Member talked about, and they were very impressive in their ambition and in the work that they are doing in the area.

I hope that they have every success in what they are pursuing. However, that scheme is more for developing beyond purchase or building the case to purchase.

3.00 pm

Mr Catney: Are you, Minister, committed to that funding on a multi-year basis to ensure that there is maximum flexibility and impact for Northern Ireland's voluntary and community sector?

Mr Murphy: Yes. That is one of the key components of the funding, particularly for those in the voluntary and community sector, who tend to live on year-to-year funding, which makes it very difficult to plan and sustain themselves and establish longer-term projects to develop their capacity and resilience. The funding is for up to three years, which is important, and it is for up to £100,000, which is a significant amount for many projects. I hope that people will check the lottery website to see whether they fit in to that.

Of course, it is also for various sectors to come together to enhance what they are doing in a collaborative way, rather than there being just a single project. The fact that it is over three years is an important aspect.

Mr Stalford: Will churches be able to apply for support from the fund? The Minister knows that, whether it is uniformed youth organisations, mother and toddler groups — you name it — if the state were to pay churches for the work that they do, it could not afford it. Will churches be able to avail themselves of that scheme as well?

Mr Murphy: Yes. I encourage them to visit the website to see how they may fit in to it. Of course, it is for building capacity and resilience and improving the long-term standing and ability of a scheme, charity or group to sustain itself and build its own capacity. If they meet the criteria, I see no reason why they should not apply.

McCloud Judgement: Police Pensions

4. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Finance how he will ensure the proposed remedy to discrimination established by the McCloud judgement is subject to an impact assessment for members of the police pension schemes. (AQO 1349/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My Department has undertaken an equality-screening exercise on the remedy proposals. That will be updated as necessary in response to the issues raised in the recent consultation on the matter. Responsible authorities for the individual public service schemes, including the Department of Justice for the police pension scheme, are also expected to undertake their own assessment of scheme level equality impacts in accordance with the existing commitments in their departmental equality schemes. My Department is monitoring scheme preparedness on all remedy-related matters as part of its regular interdepartmental engagement on the issue.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for his response. Will he clarify what he sees as the distinction between an equality screening and carrying out an equality impact assessment (EQIA)? He will be aware that the Scottish Government have already commissioned a specific EQIA on behalf of the Scottish police pension scheme advisory board. He will also be aware that there are a number of schemes in Northern Ireland, not just one that affects police officers in particular. Will the Minister ensure that there will be no inequalities in relation to how that is rolled out and, ultimately, how it will affect police officers?

I take this opportunity, just in case it passes me by — I may not have the opportunity tomorrow — to wish Members a very happy Christmas, ever remembering that the message at this time of the year is that, unto us, a Saviour was born. That is what we all need in these critical days.

Mr Murphy: I thank the Member for his good wishes.

The Department of Finance screening exercise is generally in relation to section 75 matters. I presume that the Department of Justice, which has responsibility for the police pension, will go in to the individuals involved in that scheme. It is a more generic approach from the Department of Finance; we have a responsibility to monitor all of that and to engage with the other Departments. I am sure that the points that he made will be picked up by officials as they engage with other Departments. I assume that the responsibility for the impact and the issue of what has been done in other jurisdictions lies with the responsible Department, which, in this case, is the Department of Justice.

Ms Kimmins: What will the next steps be for implementing the remedy to the McCloud judgement?

Mr Murphy: The Department of Finance consultation closed on 18 November. It received 443 responses. Feedback to the consultation is being analysed, and a response will be published early in the new year. Following the publication of the Department's response, I will write to Executive colleagues with firm proposals to progress a legislative solution in order to implement the removal of unlawful age discrimination in public service schemes.

Mr Nesbitt: What assessments are being made of the potential implications for other organisations, not least the other emergency services?

Mr Murphy: There are substantial implications under the judgement, right across the public sector. I assume that each Department is going to have to assess that. My Department is responsible for interdepartmental liaison, but there are significant implications. We have done the consultation and we have received responses to it. There are implications for people's employment as regards the schemes that they have been in and in which they choose to continue working into the future. We will want to assess the consultation responses, and it will be up to each Department to inform us about the particular issues that face them and the public-sector bodies that are under their broad umbrella. The Member is right; there are significant implications that will challenge us in the time ahead.

EU Successor Funding

6. **Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Finance what discussions he has had with the UK Government regarding a local consultation on EU successor funding in Northern Ireland. (AQO 1351/17-22)

Mr Murphy: EU successor funding will operate within the devolved sphere. As such, I do not consider it appropriate for the British Government to conduct local consultations, and therefore I have not discussed that issue with them. I have emphasised to the British Government the need to respect the devolution settlement and to provide the devolved institutions with the funding to spend according to our local priorities. There is insufficient detail available on the priorities and the delivery arrangements for

the proposed shared prosperity fund for us to carry out a sensible consultation exercise here. The British Government have indicated that more details will be available on a pilot programme in January 2021 and for the full programme in March 2021, and we will reconsider the position then.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for his answer. Has he engaged with the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) and the local government sector on a co-design and regional consultation approach to shared prosperity funding?

Mr Murphy: As I said in response to Mr Dickson earlier, the problem is that we do not have the detail on the shared prosperity fund to be able to consult with people. While Scotland and Wales have engaged in some consultation exercises, they have been fairly superficial and subject to change. The Internal Market Bill, which is currently going through Westminster, purports to take responsibility for designing a shared prosperity fund, setting its priorities and applying the funding from Whitehall. That was not the understanding of the devolved Administrations. We, Scotland and Wales clearly understood that EU funding would move to the devolved Administrations, the schemes would be designed by us and the funding would be allocated according to our own local priorities.

So, to engage with council groups — I am happy to talk to them at any time — on the shared prosperity fund at this stage would be premature because we do not have the detail to give them any advice. We have been engaging with others on PEACE PLUS and other matters that are progressing, but there is insufficient detail on the shared prosperity fund, and there is not even certainty as to whether we will be administering any of the fund at all.

Ms Dolan: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Have the British Government guaranteed that CAP funding will be replaced in full?

Mr Murphy: The main elements that cover farm support for 2021-22 have been largely replaced. We have been provided with £315.6 million, but there is no certainty or guarantees beyond that. Of course, we will need to continue to liaise with the Treasury on the position for future years.

Mr Speaker: Caoimhe Archibald is not in her place. I call Christopher Stalford.

Supermarkets: Rates Relief Repayment

8. **Mr Stalford** asked the Minister of Finance whether any major supermarket chains have indicated to his Department that they will be repaying moneys granted in the form of rates relief. (AQO 1353/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Members should note that the rate relief that was awarded to food retailers here was much less generous than in other jurisdictions. Whereas in other areas, food retailers were awarded full rates relief for the whole of this year, we provided only large food stores here with the four-month rates holiday that was awarded to all businesses.

To date, Tesco and Asda are the only supermarket chains to have contacted me directly to say that they would like to return their rate relief. However, I am aware that other large retail chains that operate here, including Sainsbury's, Lidl,

B&M Bargains and the Kingfisher Group, which includes B&Q and Screwfix, intend to repay the relief as well. My officials are currently engaging with the Treasury, along with other devolved Administrations, on how the return of the money will be handled. It is anticipated that the money will be returned by the large retail chains to the Treasury and then reimbursed to the Executive.

Mr Stalford: In the midst of all the suffering that has taken place in the wider economy, one sector — the big multinational supermarket chains — has done very well out of things. When the money is brought back to the centre, will the Minister commit to re-profiling it in order to further help small businesses in the community?

Mr Murphy: It will be up to the Executive to decide how to spend any funding that comes back. I can make recommendations, and I would like to see funding there, because it was COVID-related. I mentioned that it was for only four months here because it might be less that what people will, perhaps, expect, since they have heard the amounts that are being talked about in Britain, which covers a 12-month period. It should be put to good use. It was COVID-related, and it was to assist businesses. There is, therefore, a strong argument for it to be used in that fashion, but it will be for the Executive to decide.

Mr O'Toole: Can the Minister confirm whether any large online retail operators, such as, most obviously, Amazon, have benefited here from rate relief, notwithstanding the fact that many of the supermarkets that we have discussed also have online operations?

Mr Murphy: They will have benefited if they have premises here that qualified under the 12-month holiday. I can find out the figures and see what it was. I have had no contact or indication from them that, if they have benefited from rate relief, they intend to return any.

Mr Muir: In the great scheme of things, the money that is due to be received will not be a massive amount, but it will be money to help local businesses and the excluded. Will it have to be spent in this financial year, or will we have time to consult with businesses and scope out a scheme over the months ahead?

Mr Murphy: The rate relief money that we provided to all the businesses for four months, and to the targeted businesses for the further eight months of the financial year, was COVID money that came, via the Barnett consequentials, from COVID spend in England. The clear sense of that funding was that it was to be spent in the financial year, so I assume and expect that, if and when it is returned, and once it is apportioned by Treasury, it will have to be spent in this financial year.

NICS Absence Management: Inefficiency

9. **Mr Beattie** asked the Minister of Finance whether the Northern Ireland Civil Service human resources has reviewed the use of the term inefficiency in written warnings, as part of managing absence arising from mental ill-health. (AQO 1354/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My Department very much recognises the importance of handling absence relating to mental health with sensitivity and understanding. Northern Ireland Civil Service human resources is reviewing the way in which sickness absence is managed throughout the Civil Service. That is an extensive piece of work, which includes

a review of the current policies, supporting processes, staff guides and all forms of communication to staff, including warning letters. That work will seek to ensure that the language and tone of all communications with staff who are absent from work due to underlying medical conditions, including mental health conditions, focuses on how those colleagues can best be supported. The review of the sickness absence and inefficiency sickness absence policies is under way and will see them merged to create one single policy. The word "inefficiency" will not be included in its title. The review is being carried out in consultation with trade unions and is scheduled for completion in early 2021.

Mr Beattie: I thank the Minister, particularly for saying that the word "inefficiency" will not be used with regard to mental health. The Minister will understand that many in the Prison Service, who have an extremely stressful job, are resentful of the use of the word "inefficiency" in respect of their mental health. I ask the Minister to confirm, for them, that that will be removed.

Mr Murphy: Yes, I can confirm that. I know that the Member has raised the issue before, and we have talked previously in the Chamber about it. I do not believe that there was an intention, with the use of the word, to insult or to add hurt to people who were suffering from mental health problems. There is a recognition now that it is not a correct term. Increasingly, we know more and more about mental health and how it affects people, so there is a recognition that the word is redundant and needs to be replaced with something better. I am happy to say that, yes, it will be replaced. It will not longer be used in that regard.

Ms Brogan: What impact has the increase in the number of those working from home as a result of the pandemic had on absence rates?

Mr Murphy: The absence rates have dropped significantly.

I do not have the figure to hand, but I know that has been the experience. There is more research to be done on whether that is a consequence of the pandemic and working from home. Clearly, the pandemic has accelerated us into new working arrangements that probably would have developed over the next number of years anyway, with more use of technology and remote working. There are benefits to all that and lessons to be learned on how that has worked out over the course of the pandemic. One of those benefits is the reduction in sickness among civil servants.

When we get beyond the experience of the pandemic, there are a lot of lessons to be learned for working practices, the need for buildings and for so much office space, the ability to afford people more flexibility in their working arrangements and how that balance helps them in their daily life.

3.15 pm

Mr Speaker: I call Kellie Armstrong. You will not have time for a supplementary question.

Brexit Preparations: Update

10. **Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the £150 million for longer-term support for business rates announced on 23 November 2020. (AQO 1355/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My officials are working closely with the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre and other Departments to identify the business sectors most severely impacted by the economic consequences of the pandemic. That will allow me to determine how the relief can be applied to the best effect to support local business. I fully appreciate that businesses need as much clarity as possible on major costs such as rates in the longer term, and I intend to make a further statement on this in the near future.

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

PSNI: NDNA Commitment

T1. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Finance how and when his Department, in conjunction with the Department of Justice, will find the additional £40 million to facilitate the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) commitment to increase the number of police officers and, given the recent focus on the activity of our Police Service and the challenges that it faces, what assurances can he give, particularly on the back of what he said previously about the financial challenges that will come in 2021, that the £40 million will be found, given that he will be aware of the issue, which has, on a number of occasions, been raised with both him and the Justice Minister in the Chamber, albeit that her answers have been less forthcoming. (AQT 831/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I agree that we should meet all the NDNA commitments. I have discussed this with the Justice Minister. A lead-in period is required, according to the Department of Justice, to give effect to this. The Member knows that, immediately after our NDNA agreement was reached, the British Government withdrew from quite a substantial number of the financial promises that they had made to support and underpin it. Nonetheless, we have to find ways to meet the obligations under NDNA as best we can. There was £350 million in the Budget for this financial year to meet them that has not come back. We now have a Budget that is a slight improvement on last year, but, when you absorb that amount of it, it is a very limited improvement on last year.

There will be a challenging time ahead, particularly with the economic downturn and probably a loss of income to various public bodies and the Executive generally across the economy. That will be challenging. Nonetheless, I am committed to working with the Department of Justice to see how we can meet the commitment. Unlike the Secretary of State, the Northern Ireland Office and the British Government, I think that, when we make a commitment under New Decade, New Approach, we should do our best to honour it.

Mr Storey: The Minister refers to the £350 million: will he clarify whether that £350 million is no longer available? If that is the case, what does the Finance Minister have left in unallocated moneys? Obviously, there is a huge demand on that money for a variety of services. Does he see that any of that money will be used to meet the commitment to additional police officers?

Mr Murphy: The £350 million was earmarked and has been spent in this financial year, so it is not available. That would have been a loss from our baselines. We got a slight increase in the Budget that took account of that and gave a little more, but it is basically a standstill

Budget for next year, unless the Executive decide on a reprioritisation exercise and reallocate money by taking it from some Departments and adding it to others. However, that is a big undertaking at this time of year, given that the comprehensive spending review reported late and left us with limited time.

I have sent a Budget paper to the Executive, and I want, if they approve it, to make a Budget statement tomorrow. We need to start the Budget consultation process as quickly as possible, not leave it until the new year, which would shorten the consultation time. It will be challenging. There are no additional pots of money. Next year, we will have some COVID money, but that is not what is required for this commitment and is much less than we had this year. I am committed to working with the Justice Department to see how we can put this into effect.

Student Nurses and Midwives: COVID-19 Funding

T2. **Ms Flynn** asked the Minister of Finance whether he has considered additional funding packages for student nurses and midwives, given that he will be aware that those who are undertaking their placements are doing so in really difficult and challenging circumstances because of COVID-19. (AQT 832/17-22)

Mr Murphy: In the earlier part of the pandemic, many students who had not completed their term willingly came into the front line of the health service, and I think that that was recognised in a payment to them. I think that that has run its course, but I have encouraged the Health Minister to consider continuing that payment. We have some COVID money allocated to the Department of Health, so I think that the payment should continue until the pandemic has run its course, certainly until the end of this financial year. I hope that the Health Minister will do that in recognition of the sacrifice that they made in stepping up. Those students did not have the full experience and were immediately thrown in at the deep end of one of the biggest challenges that the health service has faced. They merit a reward for that.

Ms Flynn: Will the Minister fund the Agenda for Change pay awards as part of the 2020-21 Budget?

Mr Murphy: As part of NDNA, funding was given to us for Agenda for Change. As I said in my previous answer, the Budget position for this year is very challenging, but we will look at how that can be met from that funding and the Budget available to us.

Public-sector Pay Freeze

T3. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister of Finance whether public-sector workers here will be affected by the Chancellor's recent announcement of a pay freeze next year. (AQT 833/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Public-sector workers have played a vital role in delivering public services throughout the pandemic. Therefore, I was hugely disappointed by the Chancellor's announcement that he was freezing the pay of many hard-working public-sector employees, outside of those in the health service, for 2021–22. I understand that the Treasury will not seek to impose the pay freeze on workforces for which the Executive have direct responsibility. However, at the same time, the Treasury has, effectively, frozen

our resource budget, so any pay increases will inevitably have an impact on spending on other vital public services. Furthermore, the pay of many staff groups here is linked to pay processes in Britain, where the freeze is being imposed by the Chancellor. Clearly, it is a matter that the Executive will need to carefully consider in the time ahead.

Mr G Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that it is shameful that the Conservative Government are returning to an austerity narrative and seeking to penalise public-sector workers who, along with the front-line workers we were talking about, stepped up to deliver services during the pandemic?

Mr Murphy: I have to agree with him. The small dose of cynicism that most of us felt when we saw people standing outside Downing Street to clap for public-sector workers has been borne out by this announcement, even if they are providing some relief for health service workers. Clearly, there has been widespread recognition of the value of public-sector workers and those in all the jobs that kept society going during the pandemic and of the vital nature of the work that they do for the general public.

In many ways, we have not escaped austerity, even though there was one Budget that was an improvement. However, the long-lasting effect of years of austerity has meant that we have not begun to recover, so heading back in that direction is worrying. It is the wrong policy. To improve the situation, we need to support public services and support economic growth.

Building Regulations: Climate Action Considerations

T4. **Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister of Finance, in light of the fact that, last Friday, the all-party group on climate action received excellent presentations from people who are trying to take forward the Minister for Communities' ambitious targets for housing, and given that building regulations are within his remit, whether co-production and co-design will be required in building regulations in order to ensure that climate action considerations, such as zero-carbon emissions, will be included. (AQT 834/17-22)

Mr Murphy: We are some way behind on our carbon targets in building regulations. People in the Department are doing an exercise and very quickly trying to catch up and perhaps exceed what is happening in other areas, and they are involving people from the sectors and experts who can give some very valuable advice. I hope that that work is taken forward as quickly as possible, because, yes, if we are able to embark on housebuilding and an ambitious project of construction, we have to try to ensure that it is future-proofed to meet all the standards that we will need in the time ahead. We need to catch up to some degree, but that work is being undertaken at pace to try to get us into the correct position.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you very much, Minister. One recommendation from the all-party group on climate action was the need to put better insulation into the homes that we already have. That would be one way in which we could reduce emissions. Obviously, an enormous amount of money would be needed for that, but we pay out an absolute fortune in corporation tax for the Housing Executive. Can you give us an update on how we are

getting on with trying to get some of that money back from the Treasury?

Mr Murphy: Discussions are ongoing, and we anticipate a good outcome. The discussions with the Treasury have not been negative, so we are hopeful of a good outcome. Of course, if money is returned to the Executive, it is up to the Executive to decide how to spend that money, but I am sure that the Minister for Communities will make a very strong pitch for it to go back into housing in general terms.

Changing Places: Mo Mowlam Play Park

T5. **Ms Dolan** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the availability of Changing Places facilities at the Mo Mowlam play park, given that he will know that it is essential to provide equality of access for all our citizens to basic and essential facilities and that this estate should be an exemplar in doing so. (AQT 835/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I will do, if I can find it here.

We have been focused on the issue, particularly in recent times, and we have had an opportunity to engage with those who are affected. We will bring forward provision by amending the local building regulations as quickly as possible. It is proposed that a requirement will be introduced by amending the technical guidance to the building regulations rather than by changing the regulations, mirroring the approach that has been taken by Administrations in Britain. As she referenced, work is also progressing to install a Changing Places toilet on the Stormont estate at the Mo Mowlam play park, and that is due for completion by early 2021.

Ms Dolan: Thank you, Minister. Will you join me in encouraging other venues to take similar steps to increase accessibility through the provision of those types of essential facilities?

Mr Murphy: Yes, I certainly will, and that is why we want to move as quickly as possible with the legislation. Members may have engaged with parents who have had to use changing facilities and toilet facilities that are not adapted to suit the particular needs of young people and children who need to use them. It is a heart-wrenching experience for them to have to change children on toilet floors. There is a requirement to provide those facilities. The work at the play park down the hill will perhaps be completed ahead of the regulations going through, so we are taking the lead on that, and I hope that other services and other public bodies will follow suit.

Legal Aid: Domestic Abuse Victims

T6. **Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Finance to confirm whether what, on 17 November, the Justice Minister said about a proposal to increase access to legal aid for victims of domestic abuse — “That is a risky strategy to take, given that the Finance Minister was clear that he agreed the Bill on the basis that it did not incur additional costs.” — remains his position and to state whether he believes that there should be a price on justice for domestic abuse victims. (AQT 836/17-22)

Mr Murphy: No, we are not saying that at all. We are saying that the Committee’s amendment was not properly thought through and had much bigger scope to increase the provision of legal aid, including perhaps to some who were accused of being involved in domestic abuse. That

amendment clearly needed to be tidied up and the proper ramifications of it thought through.

Not only are there implications for the extent of legal aid available here, but there would be a repercussive impact if people were to seek similar remedies in England, Scotland or Wales based on what had happened here. It was very clear that the Committee needed to be advised on the full extent of the amendment that it had put forward, and I assisted the Justice Minister in providing, from a financial point of view, advice to the Committee. I hope that the Committee will take that away and look at it and that an agreed approach to the Bill can be taken so that we can get the strongest possible protection and support for people through legal aid.

3.30 pm

Mr McNulty: Minister, I am not sure that that response cuts through. You are still saying, essentially, that there is a price on justice for domestic abuse victims. Will you commit to working with the Justice Minister and my colleague Sinéad Bradley, who has undertaken an enormous amount of work in this area, to ensure that the Bill passes and that victims of domestic violence are not subjected to coercive financial control using restrictive legal aid rules?

Mr Murphy: I am not sure whether the Member has not listened to what I have said or whether he has just not understood what I have said. I have said clearly that I am committed to that, but that the Committee, in some of the amendments that it put forward, went far beyond what it was intending to do, so there were unforeseen consequences to some of the proposals that it was making. The Committee needs to understand the consequences of those and get assistance to amend its proposals properly and take them forward. I am committed to seeing the strongest possible legislation, including support for people who require legal aid, but we want to ensure that people who do not deserve that or who we do not intend to be caught up in that amendment do not fall within it. There are consequences beyond that, which I do not believe that the Committee fully either examined or understood, and those must be made clear. When we are voting for legislation in this House, we need to know what we are voting for. Absolute clarity is needed in relation to all of those matters so that we can get the best possible legislation that supports victims of domestic violence.

Mr Speaker: Members, time is up.

Assembly Business

Standing Order 10(3A): Suspension

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 14 December 2020 be extended to no later than 11:00 pm. — [Mr Butler.]

Mr Speaker: The Assembly may sit until 11.00 pm if necessary. Members, take your ease for a moment, please.

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

Executive Committee Business

The draft Alien and Locally Absent Species (Aquaculture) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Debate resumed on motion:

That the draft Alien and Locally Absent Species (Aquaculture) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved. — [Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office).]

Mr Blair: As pointed out earlier by Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs members, the Committee first considered the named statutory rule last month. At that time, no member of the Committee raised any issues with the regulations. The Committee was on that occasion content with the merits of the policy and agreed that it should move to the next legislative stage.

Pressures on biodiversity in Northern Ireland stemming from the impacts of invasive alien species are related to an alarming rate of loss of habitat and species.

We are in urgent need of policies to protect and preserve Northern Ireland's wildlife and habitats from invasive alien species, and Members across the House will recognise that. These regulations are necessary in order to implement restrictions on the movement of species from the regions of the UK and elsewhere into Northern Ireland that could pose a threat to aquaculture, business and the environment. Therefore, the purpose of the statutory rule is to ensure that Northern Ireland's subordinate legislation, which relates to alien and locally absent species and aquaculture, is compatible with the withdrawal agreement and the protocol so that we can operate effectively after the transition period.

It surprises me that there are those who, even at this late stage, seek to senselessly block these important matters that relate to our environment and to allow such laws to potentially fall by the wayside. It could be that when the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone spoke — she is another Committee member — she was simply stating her party's latest position on the matter. However, in doing so, I hope that it considers the consequences carefully. If every party — I say this respectfully — took that stance in opposing necessary statutory rules, we would have great difficulty progressing our legal responsibilities at a very critical period. This is not about whether we like the protocol; it is about putting and keeping processes in place so that essential business and normal operations can continue. In that regard, on behalf of the Alliance Party, I, on this occasion, support the regulations, and I urge other parties to work collectively and progressively, with our obligations to the people of Northern Ireland in mind.

Mr M Bradley: I join my colleague in wishing the Minister a speedy recovery from his operation. Some of these points have been made, but we have to consider that the statutory rule has been before the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for approval, and the motion consequently seeks approval.

As there are no direct policy changes, the few amendments in the Bill are technical. The rule will ensure

the continuation of legislation that is designed to protect and restrict movements of species into Northern Ireland from other parts of the UK and elsewhere that could pose a threat to aquaculture and the environment. Our habitats and environment need protection. The SR will ensure compliance with current EU regulations through the Northern Ireland protocol. As already mentioned by the Committee Chair, no issues were found in the legislation. The Committee has also been informed that no financial implications will be associated with the SR. Therefore, I support the motion.

Mr Wells: Many of the points that I would like to make are similar to those that were made on last week's adoption of regulations. As a keen environmentalist and one who has dealt with alien species, this is not an issue of whether Northern Ireland requires legislation to control alien species; that is something that we, as an Assembly, through the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, can adopt, and it can be tailor-made for the needs of Northern Ireland through our own legislation.

The problem with what we are doing this afternoon is that we are, yet again, rushing through legislation that has incubated in Europe. It is being rushed through at the last moment when, of course, we will be free from the European Union on 31 December. We will be out, and that is not a day too soon. Lord Morrow, the former honourable Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone, said that he had a 45-year political career and if the only thing that he had achieved in that 45 years was that he was able to help get Northern Ireland out of the grasp of the European Community, he would feel that he achieved so much. He is right; that is a fundamental change. Why, oh why, are we trying, at this very late stage, with only a few days left before we leave Europe, to rush through binding legislation that we cannot amend and that we will be stuck with forever?

As I said, I am not for one moment decrying the need to control alien species. I am sure that members of the Agriculture Committee are very aware of the threat that is posed by Reeves's muntjac. I am sure that that phrase is on the lips of every member of the Committee. In fact, if I was to ask Mr Irwin, Mr Harvey or Mr Bradley to give me a 20-minute presentation on Reeves's muntjac, of course they would be able to, and that is because they are experienced members of the Agriculture Committee. To refresh other Members' memories, Reeves's muntjac deer is a small deer, about the size of an Alsatian dog, which has been released on the Ards peninsula. In GB, it has wreaked havoc on farmers' crops and woodlands. It has become a pest species because it has no natural predator. The result is, unfortunately, that it is almost impossible to eradicate.

We have already seen the problems with the release of mink into the environment in Northern Ireland, the grey squirrel and, of course, for those interested in aquaculture, the zebra mussel and the Canada goose. All those species are very deleterious to the wildlife, environment and farming of Northern Ireland. Many in my constituency complain bitterly about the impact of deer on crops and gardens. The argument is well made: we have to control these alien species. As we have become a much more cosmopolitan society, and as our climate warms as a result of climate change, inevitably there will be greater problems.

I am sure that Mr Lyons is very aware of the ring-necked parakeet issue in southern England, a species that is now flourishing in warmer conditions. It is not unusual to see 2,000 or 3,000 of these alien birds coming to roost at night in places such as Surrey. People are aware of this, but that is not the issue. I have asked many questions for written answer in the Assembly about species such as Reeves's muntjac, and I do not believe that the Department of Agriculture is taking as seriously as it should the enormous environmental implications of allowing these species to breed uncontrolled.

I call upon the Department to take urgent steps to eradicate that species from Northern Ireland by capturing the small population on the Ards peninsula, putting them in captivity, exporting them back to China where they came from or somewhere else so that we do not damage our wildlife, crops and woodlands. That is not the issue. That is something that the Department of Agriculture should have been formulating its own response to, its own tailor-made regulations for Northern Ireland and putting legislation through the Assembly. I am sure that it could be put through very quickly because there will be unanimous support, particularly from the Agriculture Committee because it is aware of the potential damage to farmers' crops. That could be done. That is not the issue. That legislation could be amended as we, the elected representatives of Northern Ireland, deem necessary, not being tied into some bureaucratic nightmare of an institution that we are trying to get free from.

By all means, go down this route. Some of these statutory rules, regulations and legislation will be needed and can be amended to suit our needs; others will not be needed. Indeed, they will just create endless bureaucracy and problems for our commerce and farming. Why is there this blind notion that we just rush this all through? Mr Bradley and Mr Irwin said, "Oh, but it went before the Agriculture Committee and they did not have any objections to it." That is true, but it was not aware at the time of the implications of what it was doing. Had its members been aware, had they sat in on the debate last Tuesday and heard the eloquence of the honourable Member for Antrim North suggesting the problems that we are storing up by adopting this route, they might have taken a different view.

I have never been allowed to sit on the Agriculture Committee. In my 26 years in this Building, for some reason they have never allowed me to sit on that Committee because it has the word "environment" in its title. You cannot have a keen environmentalist on the Environment Committee. Oh, definitely not; that would bring this place crashing down. You can populate the Education Committee with teachers, all the nurses and doctors that you like on the Health Committee, and all the accountants you want on the Finance Committee, but woe betide putting one person who has spent most of his career in the environment on the Environment Committee. That would be dreadful.

I have never been allowed into the hallowed portals of the Agriculture Committee. It is a very special type of person who goes on to that Committee; only the cream of the Assembly is allowed on to it. Some day, many years hence, I hope to rise and be deemed fit for the Agriculture Committee, but not at the moment.

I am saying to the members of that Committee that we need to look at this. What is coming next? How many more

of these regulations are we to have foisted upon us before it is too late? Therefore, if it goes to a Division today, I will be voting against it, not because I do not believe that we should not be doing a lot to eradicate alien species but because of the constitutional problems that we are storing up for ourselves by voting this through so meekly this afternoon.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am sure that all would agree that, in the long history of this institution, the fact that you have never been appointed to the Agriculture Committee is one of its greatest scandals.

3.45 pm

Mr Allister: Principal Deputy Speaker, this is not a mere technical matter. This is not something that does not make a policy change; in fact, the regulation asks the House, I believe for the first time since it came back, to criminalise an obscure aspect of trade within the United Kingdom. The issue may well be obscure, but its significance is in inverse proportion to its obscurity. What the statutory instrument seeks to do is to make a fundamental change to the previous order. The previous order, of course, is the 2012 order, and what did it say? It said that it was a criminal offence:

“for a person to undertake the introduction of an alien species or the translocation of a locally absent species except under, and in accordance with the conditions of, a permit.”

It goes on to say that the paragraph:

“does not apply in relation to the translocation of a locally absent species within Northern Ireland or to Northern Ireland from another part of the United Kingdom if the Department has served notice under regulation 8(2) on the person undertaking the translocation that a permit is not required.”

So, up to this moment, if a fish farm or a pet shop — the most likely relevant bodies for legislation such as this — had a permit covering the translocation of one of these species from anywhere else in the United Kingdom to Northern Ireland, it would not be a criminal offence, because the United Kingdom, through its permits, was governing that arrangement. This regulation removes the caveat about the rest of United Kingdom. It now makes it a criminal offence to trade on an item such as this within the United Kingdom. That is no technical or non-policy issue; that is a fundamental outflow from the protocol. What that is declaring is that, courtesy of the protocol, Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom are now so separated that the rest of the United Kingdom is a non-EU third country — an “alien jurisdiction” in the words of the order — and that we are no longer integral in the United Kingdom and are now criminalising trade within the United Kingdom. Why are we doing that? Why is a DUP Minister asking us to do that? Because the DUP is now a promoter of the protocol. Without the protocol you would not have the order in front of you.

The junior Minister managed to speak to us for 10 minutes or more and never mentioned the protocol. Why? It is because they do not want the public to know that they are in the business of legislating under and for the protocol. You cannot hide it. Just read the explanatory note for the statutory instrument:

“The Statutory Rule will ensure Northern Ireland remains aligned with EU rules in these areas in accordance with the Protocol”.

The protocol is the driver of the statutory instrument. Its destination is to criminalise trade on these issues within the United Kingdom, because it regards the rest of the United Kingdom as an alien place — a non-EU third country — whereas we are regarded under the protocol as being under EU jurisdiction. That is what this pernicious statutory instrument is doing.

Some on this side of the House will enthusiastically vote for it, because, of course, they want to divide the United Kingdom. Of course they want to hive us off from the rest of the UK. Of course they are content to criminalise and inhibit trade with the rest of the United Kingdom. There are some in the House, however, who know better but will do worse. Why is a DUP Minister bringing to the House a motion on a statutory instrument to criminalise this obtuse but, in principle, important area of trade in the United Kingdom? That is what is being done. There is no wriggle room there. There is no dodging that. That is the emphatic import and effect of the statutory instrument. It is not technical; it is not non-policy. It embraces the most pernicious of policies: that Northern Ireland should not be treated as an integral part of the United Kingdom but should be treated, in goods, as an integral part of the EU. Everyone who goes through that Lobby today is voting for that. Do not say, “Oh, it’s only technical”: it is not. Do not say that you did not understand it — you do now. It is with that understanding that the House will make its decision.

I welcome the fact that the Ulster Unionists and Mr Wells see the issue. I continue to be appalled that those who should know the issue refuse to see it and will promote the very protocol that they claim to oppose.

Mr Lyons: I welcome the opportunity to respond to Members’ comments today, if for no other reason than, hopefully, to explain better the purpose and intent behind the SR. It is worthwhile for me to say that it would be a good idea, when Hansard becomes available, for Members to read what I said in my opening remarks so that there is a better understanding of what the SR is about. I note the broad support from many parts of the Chamber today. I will not rehash the arguments and comments that have already been made. However, I want to address some of the comments made by Mrs Barton, Mr Wells and Mr Allister.

Rosemary Barton commented that this would be detrimental to the movement of goods from Scotland. There will continue to be movements between Scotland and NI, as there are now, of non-alien and derogated species in aquaculture such as salmon and rainbow trout eggs. The amendment does not change that at all. It is important that that is made clear to the Member. She was sincere in expressing her concerns on that, but the amendment does not affect that.

Dr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyons: Yes, I will give way.

Dr Aiken: I thank the junior Minister very much for making that comment. How does he know the clarity of this, bearing it in mind that, through the Joint Committee, we have not seen any of the detailed regulations and their likely out-turn as they come forward? Maybe the Minister could publish the detail of the particular part of the

regulations where it refers to aquaculture. As somebody from East Antrim, he will be very aware of the impact that that is likely to have on one of our finest forms of food.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before the Minister answers, I advise that I have just been contacted by Hansard to ask whether you could bring the mic a little closer, so that what you say can be picked up. That is grand.

Mr Lyons: I hope that Members will now be able to hear me and that Hansard will be able to record my comments for posterity.

The Member needs to read — he is not just a Member; he is my constituent — what I said earlier and the regulations. He will see specifically what this is related to: locally absent species and alien species. That is why I can say with confidence that it will not affect the species and product that Mrs Barton refers to. I ask him to look at the 2012 regulations. I will come on more to that later.

The importation of locally absent species into Great Britain from Northern Ireland is subject to the same policy; for example, domestic legislation in England and Wales is being amended to reflect the requirements of the withdrawal agreement. Operators wishing to move locally absent species into England and Wales must do so under the requirement of a permit. Competent devolved authorities in Great Britain will wish to protect their aquaculture industry and environment from harmful species in the way in which Northern Ireland does. It is important that we look exactly at what the regulations have to say on the very limited way in which alien species and locally absent product is concerned.

I understand the concerns that people have expressed relating to the protocol. Let me make it clear that, from my party's position, we were never supporters or advocates of the protocol. I wish that the Bill had not been introduced at Westminster, but it was. I wish that MPs had not voted for the withdrawal agreement, but they did. As a consequence of Parliament passing the withdrawal Act and subsequent legislation, there is a legislative duty and a requirement on us to make a number of SRs. I wish that that was not the case. There are aspects of the protocol that have the potential to be hugely damaging to businesses and citizens in Northern Ireland. That is something that I am concerned about, as all in the House should be. However, there are requirements that are placed on us and duties and obligations that we have. I am sure that Members would want to make sure that we adhere to the requirements that are on us.

I turn to some of the comments made by Mr Wells. I commiserate with him on his inability to serve on the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. It has been a long-standing ambition for him, and I am sure that the House will join me in wishing him success in that endeavour. I had the pleasure of serving with him on the Finance Committee for a period, a couple of mandates ago. I am sure that he will not have wanted to miss that opportunity, for which, I am sure, he is grateful.

Mr Wells: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Lyons: Why not?

Mr Wells: [*Inaudible*] accept that one is put on the Finance Committee because one has been a naughty boy? It is

certainly not, by any means, a great accolade to have, although I have enjoyed it enormously.

On a point that is more serious and important than the fact that an obscure Bank-Bencher cannot get onto the Agriculture Committee, it is clear that he has expressed his concerns about the protocol. It is also clear that that was not made clear to the Committee and that it was nodding this through as humdrum, normal, day-to-day legislation.

4.00 pm

Does he accept that, if there is a problem with alien species, we do not have to go down the route of the diktat of Europe? We can tailor-make our own legislation in this House, and, if we want to amend or delete it at a later stage, we can do so. The problem is this: once this legislation goes through today, we are lumbered with it, probably for the rest of our lives, and cannot amend or delete it. Does he accept that?

Mr Lyons: If I were to be put on the Finance Committee, I would like to know what I had done, if it is such a punishment. Maybe we will find that out at some point in the future.

Dr Aiken: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Lyons: First, let me answer the point that Mr Wells made.

This is not about signing ourselves up to regulations. This is about a change specific to Northern Ireland within these regulations. However, this also helps to protect, in a way, what comes into Northern Ireland. We want to ensure that alien species that can do great damage to our ecosystem and biodiversity do not come in.

Actually, since the regulations were brought in in 2012, no licence has been granted by DAERA. As I said in my opening remarks, DAERA said that it was highly unlikely that it would grant a licence to operators for these types of alien species or locally absent products. So, if the licence is unlikely to be granted in the first place, there would be no need for the permit. That is the way in which it is intended to continue.

This is seen as a technical change because there is no change in policy. What happened before —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyons: I will give way in a moment.

What happened before will continue to be the case. None of those licences was approved, and none of those permits was required, because it is the view of DAERA that that should not happen.

I am guessing that it is on that point that Mr Allister wishes to come in. I will bring him in before bringing in Mr Aiken.

Mr Allister: Surely the Minister is trying to kick up dust to obscure the reality. The reality of this statutory instrument is that it would not be before us but for the protocol, and it would not be before us but for the fact that the protocol now says that, in these matters, GB is a non-EU third state, a third party. What this regulation is doing, and what the Minister is defending, is making it a criminal offence to trade, on this subject matter, with GB. That is the crux of it. The Minister can duck and dive as much as he likes but he is asking the House to criminalise this specific

trade between GB and Northern Ireland at the behest of a protocol that he is now implementing.

Mr Lyons: I have already put on record my views on the protocol. This requires us to have the same rules North/South as east-west. If you are bringing something from the Republic of Ireland into Northern Ireland, it will require a permit. Mr Allister is shaking his head, but something coming from the South to the North will require a permit in the same way as something coming from west to east or east to west.

Mr Allister: That is not right.

Mr Lyons: That is exactly right. The current situation is that a permit is required. It will be the same North/South as it is east-west. That is the factual position as confirmed to me by the Department. It is exactly the same. The Republic of Ireland will not be treated any differently from east-west. Those are facts, but it seems that the Member disagrees. I understand why he is disagreeing. This is not the making of new law. This has come in as a result of the protocol. DEFRA is doing the same in England. I understand that he might not like that. However, that is where we find ourselves.

I thank the Members who contributed to the debate. These changes will ensure that domestic legislation can continue to operate effectively after the end of the transition period. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put.

Some Members: Aye.

Some Members: No.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Clear the Lobbies. The Question will be put again in three minutes. I remind Members that we should continue to uphold social distancing and that Members who have proxy voting arrangements in place should not come to the Chamber.

I ask Members to resume their seats. Before I put the Question, I remind Members that, if possible, it would be preferable to avoid a Division.

Question put a second time.

Some Members: Aye.

Some Members: No.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before the Assembly divides, I remind Members that, as per Standing Order 112, the Assembly currently has proxy voting arrangements in place. Members who have authorised another Member to vote on their behalf are not entitled to vote in person and should not enter the Lobbies. I remind Members to ensure that social distancing continues to be observed while the Division is taking place. Please be patient at all times and follow the instructions of the Lobby Clerks.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 74; Noes 11.

AYES

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Ms Brogan, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Clarke, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon,

Mrs Dodds, Ms Dolan, Mr Dunne, Mr Durkan, Mr Easton, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gildernew, Mr Givan, Ms Hargey, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Ms Hunter, Mr Irwin, Mr Kearney, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyons, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Miss McIlveen, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Middleton, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Mr Newton, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Harvey and Mr McGuigan.

NOES

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

Tellers for the Noes: Mrs Barton and Mr Wells.

The following Members' votes were cast by their notified proxy in this Division:

Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr Buckley, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey [Teller, Ayes], Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Storey and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Allen, Mrs Barton [Teller, Noes], Mr Beggs, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt and Mr Stewart.

Mr Lyttle voted for Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Mrs Long and Mr Muir.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Brogan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan [Teller, Ayes], Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan and Ms Sheerin.

Mr O'Toole voted for Ms Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Mallon, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin and Mr McNulty.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Alien and Locally Absent Species (Aquaculture) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease for a second while we change the top Table. Do not forget to clean the surfaces if you are leaving the Chamber.

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

Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 17) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The next items of business are motions to approve two statutory rules (SRs) that relate to the health protection regulations. There will be a single debate on both motions. The Minister will move the first motion and commence the debate on both motions listed in 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. If that is clear, we will proceed.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I beg to move

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 17) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 18) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): 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 two motions.

Mr Swann: Before I do that, could I have the indulgence of the House to provide a quick update? Since my earlier statement today, I have received an update from our Chief Medical Officer (CMO) to alert me that he has been made aware of a variant of SARS-CoV-2 that has recently been identified through genomic sequencing in England. While the significance of that is being assessed, the UK authorities have provided an early alert to the relevant World Health Organization and European surveillance bodies.

The variant has been identified in the UK and is believed to be causing the faster spread in the south-east of England. My colleague Matt Hancock has provided an update to the House of Commons. Its spread is growing faster than that of the existing variant with, currently, over 1,000 cases. However, Mr Hancock has reassured the House of Commons that there is nothing to suggest that this variant is more likely to cause serious symptoms and has added that it is highly unlikely that it will not respond to a vaccine. I have directed my officials to urgently ascertain whether, during the genomic sequencing of Northern Ireland samples that has been ongoing over the last number of months, the variant has, at any time, been detected in Northern Ireland. As soon as I receive information on that, I will update the House.

Moving on to the motions that are the subject of today's debate, the regulations under consideration are the amendment (No. 17) regulations and the amendment (No. 18) regulations, which constitute the circuit-break restrictions announced on 19 November and introduced for a two-week period from 27 November to 10 December. The amendment (No. 17) regulations were made on 26 November to come into effect on 27 November, and the

amendment (No. 18) regulations were made the following day to come into effect immediately.

4.30 pm

The restrictions were brought in after modelling indicated that doing so offered a greater likelihood of avoiding further restrictions before Christmas. The Executive had been advised that, without such an intervention, hospitals risked being overwhelmed. In the week preceding the decision on 17 November, the number of cases had stabilised, with only a very slow decline. The R number for cases was around 1 at that point. Hospital admissions had continued to decline slowly over the previous week, but they remained at a relatively high level and had not decreased as quickly as hoped at the outset of the period of restriction. COVID hospital inpatient numbers had fallen even more slowly than admissions and remained at a high level. That was a major concern in terms of hospital capacity. At that point, hospital occupancy stood at 100%. In the preceding week, 76 people had lost their life to COVID-19. In those circumstances, the Executive agreed to put in place the most extensive number of restrictions since the spring. The regulations were designed to be a short, sharp circuit breaker to reset and drive down infection rates. They were accompanied by the message to stay at home, work from home if at all possible and otherwise leave only for essential purposes such as education, healthcare needs, to care for others or outdoor exercise. The amendment (No. 18) regulations were made the following day to address two specific issues in the amendment (No. 17) regulations, which then needed to be amended. As you will be aware, Mr Deputy Speaker, the active period for the regulations has come to an end. They were intended to be in place for only a fortnight, and that period ended at midnight last Thursday night.

We believe that the restrictions have had some effect and have slowed down the spread of the virus, which would not have been the case if they had not been in place. We also know, however, that we are far from being in the clear. As I have said over the past few days, the virus is still circulating in our community and is still claiming lives. If there is a festive free-for-all, with public health advice being ignored, it will cost lives and place unbearable pressure on our hospitals. We must avoid those catastrophic consequences. We have to keep doing the basics of reducing our contacts, keeping our distance from others, wearing a face covering and washing our hands. If you experience any symptoms at all, you need to isolate yourself immediately and seek a test. We are depending on everyone to act responsibly and thoughtfully in the realm of their own life. Now that the two-week restrictions have come to an end, the infection rate and our return to normal life and activities depend on the behaviour of every one of us.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): I acknowledge the seriousness of what the Minister has said. It is a concern, given where we are with the levels of spread. I note that the Minister said that it was hoped that the variant would respond to a vaccine, but I am not clear about whether that is the vaccine that is currently available. These are worrying times. I reiterate the message to the public at large to do everything that they can personally to protect themselves and others by reducing their contacts at this time.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gildernew: Yes.

Mr Wells: The Member has raised a valid point that, I am sure, has occurred to other Members who listened to the Minister's speech. It would have been helpful had the Minister indicated whether the variant, which is quite worrying, can be dealt with effectively by the vaccine that is available at the moment rather than our having to wait, perhaps, for a further vaccine to deal with it. I did not quite detect from him a clear indication that that was the case.

Mr Swann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gildernew: Go ahead, Minister.

Mr Swann: I will bring some clarity to that point for the House. The information about the variant's seriousness has been brought to light today. Most activity on the virus is being undertaken at the military labs at Porton Down. People are working there to see whether the variant virus will respond to and be dealt with by the vaccine that is currently on offer. At the minute, there is nothing to say that it would not, because it is a variant of the original SARS-CoV-2 virus. That work is ongoing as we speak. As soon as I receive an update on that, I will update the House.

Mr Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat.

Colin McGrath is not in his place, but normally he would be here. As Chair of the Health Committee, I acknowledge the work that Colin has done on the Committee through a very intensive time. I thank him for that. I also welcome Cara Hunter to the Committee and look forward to working with her.

The Health Committee was briefed on the regulations on Thursday 10 December. The Committee is conscious of the significant restrictions on people's freedoms imposed under the two-week circuit breaker but also of the persistently high levels of infection in the community and the continuing pressure on our hospitals and on health and social care workers, who face into a very dark winter after, probably, the most arduous year that any of us have ever seen.

Mr Sheehan: I thank the Member for giving way. Will he agree that the high levels of transmission of the virus are worrying and that, although restrictions such as these are aimed at lowering transmission, that does not seem to be happening? Even at the minute, the rates of transmission in the North are more than four times what they are in the South. That suggests that we are doing something wrong up here.

Mr Gildernew: I thank the Member for his intervention. I agree that the figures are certainly worrying. There are differences between rates here and in the South, and I urge that the maximum cooperation is undertaken as a matter of urgency in relation to testing, tracing, communication of messaging and all of that on a North/South basis. The continued high level of transmission is a concern as we face into Christmas.

The Committee raised the monitoring of effectiveness of measures and again placed on record its concern about the processes for doing that. In relation to monitoring, members acknowledged that transmission rates appeared to be stubborn, and it was suggested that monitoring of the effectiveness of the restrictions on each sector was therefore important. Officials advised that the imposition of

restrictions on a particular sector did not necessarily imply evidence of impact on that sector and that it was difficult to disaggregate the net effects beyond confirming that the evidence showed that transmission was higher anywhere where people congregate in enclosed spaces.

The timely communication of frequently changing rules to enforcement bodies was also raised. The Committee was advised that, for main sets of amendments, extensive engagement was undertaken in advance of regulations being made, but the official conceded that, perhaps, where small adjustments were made to rules, such as in the amendment (No. 18) regulations, further work was required to update the police and others. It was also confirmed that enforcement powers were in place from the time that the rules have effect.

The Committee's concerns centre on matters outside the particulars of these regulations, and we continue to press for further, better and more timely engagement on policy development ahead of the making of further regulations. In closing, once again, I remind those listening to please consider the pressure on our health and social care workers as they try to stretch, yet again, their reserves of strength and resilience for the winter months before the vaccinations take effect. I urge everyone not to waste this year's efforts: limit your social contact, keep your distance, wear a face covering and keep washing your hands.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for his commentary on the new information from the UK Government that we have had this afternoon on the new variant of COVID-19. It is important that our systems and our test, trace and protect processes are adequate and can cope with the new variant going forward. It is vital that those are working well and that we will be able to track the variant. If it has reached UK shores, it is most probably in Northern Ireland. It is critical that the Assembly is kept informed, so I thank the Minister for the commitment to do that in relation to the new variant. It is also critical that the vaccine is rolled out as quickly as possible in order to protect our most vulnerable.

I want to put on record my sympathies to the families who have lost a precious family member in the week since we last discussed the health protection regulations. We all need to bear it in mind that our individual actions over the next few weeks can and will have an impact on how many of our elderly population will be here to receive the much-anticipated COVID-19 vaccine. Hearing the news of vaccine deliveries into Northern Ireland over the weekend was fantastic. It is right to feel a certain amount of relief and to look forward with some optimism to 2021. However, we need to act with much caution in the coming weeks, and, in particular, we need to ensure that we continue to protect those who are most at risk. Let us give them the time that they need to get the vaccine and to gain the much-needed protection that only the vaccine can give.

It is only natural that we are very focused on the next couple of weeks and the opportunity to live in a less restricted way over the Christmas period. While the freedom being offered to people is welcome after the restrictions of the past nine months, the message must be one of caution, particularly as we consider the case numbers in the past week. The rules and guidelines continue to be an unwelcome intrusion on our freedom, but they are necessary. We must keep the basic measures of protection to the forefront of our minds and actions: wash

our hands regularly; avoid touching our face; use a face covering; and keep social distance from others, including family members and friends who do not live with us or share our home.

It is while considering the case numbers from last week that we reflect on the regulations before us, particularly the amendment (No. 17) regulations, which give effect to the circuit breaker agreed by the Executive on 19 and 24 November. The regulations ask a lot of people. They ask a lot of our business community, our churches and those involved in sport and the many social activities that we long to see back up and running in our communities. However, the measures set out in the regulations are necessary. The R number has shown an upward trend. Our health advisers have admitted that the measures did not have the effect that was sought to drive down R. That poses questions for those advising the Executive, and it highlights the need to study the reaction to each of the restrictions. We need evidence that the price being paid by those whom the restrictions target is worth it. That needs to be considered as we look to find a balanced and proportionate way through what might come in January, and we need to reflect that the businesses and activities so hugely impacted by the restrictions did not contribute to the case numbers that we see today. Understandably, our hospitality sector and our churches ask, "Why us?". While acknowledging that some congregations have had clusters, it is right that we recognise that the closure of churches is a significant ask of our faith community. We need to look at how we can work with churches to allow worship to continue in the coming weeks and months. The regulation makes a necessary adjustment for congregations that host online services, which is welcome, but we want to see our churches open.

We need partnerships as we tackle COVID-19. It is right to thank councils for working collaboratively with the Executive. The additional regulation grants enforcement powers to councils in a range of areas, and their support in that is welcome. However, enforcement needs to be done fairly and in an even-handed way across Northern Ireland, and I trust that councils are working through the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE), for example, to ensure that that is the case.

In recent days, we have seen how damaging it is to the public acceptance of the regulations when some, including some of those sitting across the Chamber, continue to escape questioning and being held to account for breaching regulations and causing so much damage to our public health messaging and its effectiveness. No one is above these laws. We need that message to be loud and clear.

In summing up, I put on record my party's appreciation of all of our incredible healthcare workers and the wonderful way in which they have played their part throughout the pandemic in what has been a challenging year for everyone. We support the regulations.

Ms Hunter: I thank the Minister and other Members for their welcome as I become a member of the Health Committee. I look forward to working with them all.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on the health protection regulations, as I have previously. As I reflected in my remarks last week, this has been an extremely difficult year. It has changed all aspects of our daily lives

and brought great hardship and grief to many. I continue to be mindful of the emotional and mental health impact that the pandemic and isolation have had on our society and of the long-term impact that, as we all acknowledge, they will have in the months and years ahead.

4.45 pm

In line with the amendment (No. 17) regulations, it is evident that those businesses in hospitality, close-contact and leisure services have been hit particularly hard as a result of COVID-19. I am sure that there is not one day on which Members right across the House do not hear from many business owners, and staff from businesses, about the impact of COVID-19.

I welcome the fact that, under the current restrictions, in particular in the run-up to the Christmas period, more people are allowed to attend places of worship, in line with the amendment (No. 18) regulations. As the Member who spoke previously said, however, church closures have been very difficult, especially for many of my constituents. In this time of great turmoil, when people are perhaps more than ever in need of a place in which to practise their spiritual beliefs, I hope that the recording and live-streaming of services has been something of a comfort to some and enabled thousands of people across the North to have the comfort of their faith.

As colleagues have said, it is deeply regrettable that these issues are only being debated today in the Assembly. Dealing with and managing the pandemic has been our most important item of business this year. As such, I feel strongly that a proper opportunity to debate the regulations, which touch on almost every aspect of our lives and our constituents' lives, must be given to the Assembly.

News of the vaccination and its roll-out over the past week has given us all hope that 2021 will be a much better year for us all. We hope that we will not see a surge in COVID-19 cases in the coming weeks. We acknowledge that the weeks and months ahead may be just as difficult as those that have passed. Ongoing and further restrictions may well be required, unfortunately. I hope that any new regulations in the weeks ahead will be debated by MLAs in advance of their implementation, allowing us the opportunity to reflect the views, worries and concerns of all our constituents that lockdown raises.

The approach over the past month has seen many businesses shut their doors. They were allowed to open for one week and then made to close for two. In addition to the financial hardship that that entails, I am also deeply concerned about the mixed message that that approach gives to the public about dealing with the virus. A more consistent approach would resonate more strongly with the public and make clear what is required of us all in order to beat the virus.

My party colleagues and I support the Health Protection Regulations and fully recognise the need for them. We feel strongly, however, that more debate and scrutiny should be allowed in the weeks and months ahead.

Ms Bradshaw: The Alliance Party supports the amendment regulations. They, particularly the amendment (No. 17) regulations, which brought into law a circuit breaker, had far-reaching consequences for our non-essential retailers, bars, restaurants, gyms, sports clubs

and places of worship during what should have been an important time for their operations. The only glimmer of normality for many of them was the ability to provide carry-outs and a click-and-collect service and to move their services online.

On Saturday, I visited a florist in south Belfast to see how the restrictions had impacted on the business. I was pleased to learn that the owner's experience had been somewhat positive and that trade had increased, owing to the ability to click and collect and greater support from the local community. I sincerely hope that that is replicated across the entire small-business sector over the next few weeks and into the new year. Another observation that I made was that it was fairly easy for social-distancing restrictions to be introduced and, importantly, that customers were happy to queue accordingly while I was there.

It is regrettable therefore that, also on Saturday, in images on social media, we witnessed once again huge queues outside a large clothing retailer. I repeat that it would be prudent for the regulations relating to the wearing of face masks to be introduced on a more universal basis. It is essential that retailers be required to enforce social distancing outside their premises. Not to do so is to allow other retailers to lose out on customers who will avoid the area for fear of community transmission.

I made a point at the Health Committee, to which the Chair made reference, about a small adjustment in the amendment (No. 18) regulations to remove sports massage from the list of close-contact services. I welcome that amendment, as it allows for those who require physiotherapy to be able to receive it at the earliest opportunity. It is unfortunate that a constituent of mine did not feel that the change was properly communicated. She felt that she would fall foul of the PSNI, after some engagement with it, if she operated within the two weeks. I therefore repeat that communication around that amendment, and others, needs to be better.

Again, going forward, I sincerely hope that those businesses and non-essential retailers who have been affected by the circuit breaker receive the financial support that was promised as soon as possible. Earlier, during Question Time, I was amazed that the Finance Minister did not seem to grasp how many businesses have lost out, have not received communication or are in the middle of an appeal under the local restrictions support scheme. I support the call made by Roy Beggs and others for a dedicated phone line for elected representatives. Like every Member in the Chamber, I continue to be contacted by desperate business owners who have not heard back about their claim or, worse, have been advised that they are not eligible when they have blatantly met the stated criteria. It is unfair to force these businesses to close and then to deny them support. I sincerely hope that things will be done better for businesses and their staff going forward.

In closing, I wish a happy Christmas to all the health and social care workers who have so valiantly battled the virus this year. I sincerely hope that they can all have some time to spend with their families and can recuperate from an exhausting year. Finally, I send my deepest sympathies to everyone who has been bereaved this year. We all lament the loss of their loved ones before the vaccine programme was in place.

Mr McGrath: As ever, I welcome the opportunity to debate the efficiency of our current regulations and restrictions. Once again, the regulations being discussed date back to November and do not currently apply. Perhaps it is because Christmas is approaching, but I cannot help but think that our current way of implementing the restrictions is a little bit like the hokey-cokey: we are in lockdown, we are not in lockdown, then we are in, then we are out and, to complete the dance, we have certain parties turning around on their approach to the regulations and the restrictions. However, unlike in the song, that is not what it is all about; it is about saving lives and relieving the pressure on our health system and the heroes in our health sector.

At this time, I want to pay tribute to those heroes, who consistently go over and above the call of duty to save lives and ensure that families do not suffer the devastating loss of a loved one to a most unforgiving and indiscriminate disease. Just last week, I called for a one-off payment of £500 for our health and care sector staff. These heroes have gone the extra mile for us over the last nine months, missing precious time with their families, changing in car parks, not getting breaks or time off, and £500 would be a small payment to recognise the sacrifice they have made for us. It is not beyond the reach of our Executive.

This week, healthcare staff will implement the roll-out of a vaccination that offers much-needed hope and light in the darkness. The amendment (No. 17) regulations being debated today concern restrictions on sporting events, close contact services, leisure venues, non-essential businesses, licensed premises, places of worship and hospitality. The amendment (No. 18) regulations concern the number of people able to be present to live-stream a church service. We are being asked to debate and ratify these regulations and restrictions, but why do we continue to delay the debates until after they have lapsed? I could, at a push, understand the 28-day delay for regulations that continue to be implemented, but to debate and ratify something that has lapsed is farcical. Why must the Assembly continually play catch-up?

Look at the way business is done in the South. We saw them enter a six-week intensive lockdown that the SDLP supported and wanted to see emulated in the North. Now, the numbers of people contracting the virus in the South are reducing significantly. That was not an easy course of action for the South, but it worked. Meanwhile, here in the North, we have had a four-week lockdown, then something resembling a reopening, then a further two-week lockdown, and now we are getting ready for a further loosening of the restrictions next week. On and on it goes, like a never-ending hokey-cokey. There must be a better and more efficient way of doing things.

I appreciate that our Health Minister is doing his best with what he has, and I will continue to support his work. However, last week he refused to answer whether or not schools should be closing at this time, as it was the concern of a different Department. That is the silo mentality that we need to move beyond. The ratification of these regulations and restrictions will have its own ripple effect, and the restrictions that we place on one Department will have effects on others.

I should also make clear at this point that the actions that we take this week will have their own direct and indirect

effect, but be under no illusion about this: next week is not a free-for-all. To treat it as such is a slap in the face for our healthcare heroes. Household gatherings that breach the rules, if only in a minimal way, such as an extra household slipping in to breach the three-house-only rule, will have their own indirect consequences, such as nurses being unable to take leave or having to go outside to their car for a cup of tea during a night shift. We owe our healthcare staff much more. Let us at least give them a fighting chance to combat this invisible enemy by providing the conditions under which they can do so. People need to think about those effects and consequences when they gather together next week.

In conclusion, let me reiterate that I support the amendments and that I continue to support our Health Minister. However, that support is in no way blinkered. My support for these health amendments and for the Health Minister is very much tied to the way that business is done here. As we approach Christmas and the new year, let us stop playing catch-up and let us take the lead in debating and implementing these regulations. I support the motions and the amendments.

Mr Chambers: We have received very serious news today from the Health Minister about the new variant of the virus, just at a time when we were all quietly celebrating that we felt we could see the light at the end of the tunnel. At that point, this new challenge has come along. Let us hope that the vaccine proves that it can deal with it.

BBC 'Spotlight' recently did a programme that outlined the success in Wales, particularly with the different track-and-trace procedures that it had in place, and the efforts there were certainly very impressive. However, over the weekend, we heard the bad news that transmission of the virus has gone through the roof in Wales. It is easy, when that happens, to look for reasons and to want to find somebody to point the finger of blame at, but it happens because people let their guard down and facilitated the transmission of the virus.

Our Executive have granted relaxation of social gatherings over Christmas, and there will be a temptation to say, "Thank you very much" and to take advantage of the relaxations. Indeed, it might even be tempting for people to try to stretch them a little bit further to suit their own circumstances. I say this to anyone who is planning to take that approach: you do so at your own peril. If ever there was a time to raise our guard, it is now and in the coming few weeks. We owe it to our family, our neighbours, our workmates and all our fellow citizens to keep that guard up.

I have, as I am sure everybody else in the House has, received numerous emails from different organisations affected by the relaxation of these regulations, such as indoor sports clubs, swimming clubs and people who are involved in all sorts of activities, telling us that they have put fantastic things in place to prevent the transmission of the virus and asking whether we could lobby to allow them to reopen. The reality is that there is no safe or absolute way to avoid transmission of the virus in a situation where people gather, and just one little slip could lead to a death.

My family has made decisions that are, quite frankly, heartbreaking at a time of the year when we all love to get together, and I appeal to everyone to make sacrifices over Christmas. It is the right thing to do, and it is in keeping

with the Christian message, which, let us not forget, Christmas is all about.

We will beat this virus, but we all have to do the right thing. If we do the right thing, it will happen sooner rather than later.

5.00 pm

Ms Bailey: I have to agree with some of the other Members. Here we are again, with the Assembly debating and voting on regulations after the period in which they applied. Ten months into this pandemic, we should not be in this position, fumbling our way from one set of restrictions to the next, with no overarching plan or strategy. We keep being told that we cannot have endless cycles of lockdown, yet here we are in another endless cycle of lockdown, with speculation already starting among the public about when the dates for the next lockdown will be agreed.

Of course we must follow the science and the public health guidance, and if that dictates restrictive measures to deal with the virus, that is absolutely understandable, and everyone needs to get behind it. However, the problem is that the Executive do not seem to have a plan that extends, at the very best, beyond a week or two. There is no strategy in place for when one set of restrictions is easing and what that means. There is no forward planning and no guidance ready to let people know what it means.

The amendment (No. 17) restrictions came in only after another shambolic display of decision-making from the Executive. I need to put on record that the public's confidence in the Executive and their ability to deal with the pandemic has been decimated. How do we expect the public to adhere to the public health regulations, with the confusion and mixed messaging that has been happening and when we are here debating and approving restrictions that no longer even apply? Is it any wonder that people are confused?

We had the shock of a cross-community veto being used against proposals from the Health Minister to deal with the crisis, and we had some businesses being allowed to open for one week and then being closed down. We are told that essential retail only can remain open, but since when was buying a flat-pack coffee table or a fancy vase more essential than children's clothing? Like everyone, I have businesses contacting me in a flurry when these restrictions are announced, but, as an MLA, my source of information was just as good as theirs. I looked at Twitter and to journalists' newfeeds.

Time and time again, we have put businesses in impossible situations. One business owner phoned my office very confused as they were clear that they were not essential. They had not intended to remain open and had everything ready to close down in line with what they believed was public health guidance. They then found out that, because they sold hardware, they were classed as essential and that, if they did go ahead and close as planned, they would be deemed to be making their own choice and would not be eligible for financial support.

I note that the regulations and guidance that were due to come into effect on Friday past were published, once again, at the eleventh hour. So much for the promises from this Executive that they would not make decisions without giving people notice. Hours before some businesses were

due to open, they learned that they could not do so. How is that acceptable? All of this is happening while we are still seeing worrying levels of community transmission and too many people still losing their life to this virus. This is an unprecedented situation, but, unfortunately, the Executive's inability to deal with the crisis in a timely manner has set the precedent.

We do have hope on the horizon with the vaccine, but it remains to be seen whether we have any sort of plan to get us to the point where the vaccine has ensured widespread immunity. Therefore, like others, I cannot welcome the opportunity to discuss these regulations today. They have passed and have gone, so does it matter whether I, or anyone else here, support them? They are done and dusted, but I welcome the chance to hear from the Minister on the detail of what lies ahead of us. What are the predictions for COVID over Christmas? Is 4 January the date that is being earmarked as the next lockdown? Will the NHS make it until then? Are there plans in place for restrictions before, after or during Christmas, if they are needed? Will we have to turn to Twitter and the newsfeeds of journalists to find out when that is, or will the House be respected enough to be told?

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Ms Bailey: I certainly will.

Mr Wells: The Member, like Mr Chambers, has made some very useful points. It may be that when the decisions that she is requesting are made, we will be in recess. I think that it is important that the Minister takes this, which could be the last opportunity, to let us know what the current thinking is from the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Adviser on these issues. Early January has been suggested by many media commentators as being the likely time when yet another lockdown will be implemented. Many businesses are saying to me that it is not worth their while to open, as their Christmas trade has been utterly destroyed. However, unfortunately and sadly, they have not been allowed to claim compensation because they are not deemed as being required to close. Can the Minister, in his summation, tell us very clearly what is going to happen in the first week of January so that we have clarity? Is there going to be a lockdown and is that the latest thinking?

Ms Bailey: I thank the Member for his intervention. That is exactly what this House needs to hear. Tomorrow will be the last plenary day before the new year, and, yet again, we know nothing, so I would really welcome that from the Minister.

Mr Carroll: I rise, once again, as I have over the last number of weeks, to speak to the absolute absurdity of the situation that we are in today. As of last week, we have seen new regulations, which have reopened large numbers of workplaces and sectors of society, come into effect, and that is something that others have mentioned. However, this Assembly still has not discussed those, never mind voted on them. That is very worrying, and it continues to set a dangerous precedent that effectively says that the Executive and their Ministers will act, and if you are not in the club, tough luck, as your voice will not be heard in any real or meaningful sense. What way is that to run a political institution? Where is the democracy and accountability here? Obviously, we are discussing the amendment (No. 17) and amendment (No. 18) regulations today, but when will we have the time to discuss the current regulations that

are in place and their effects? Presumably, it will be in the middle of next month, by which time, the regulations will have been in place for the guts of a month. Hopefully that is not the case, but, by all accounts, we are likely to be in a scenario — as many health experts are warning — where there will be an increase in cases and infections and the likely deaths that result from that.

One key theme throughout this crisis has been an attempt at victim blaming from a political establishment that is, itself, responsible for presiding over the spread of this virus. It is my contention that the Executive are primarily responsible for the surge of the virus. Broadly speaking, they had two major opportunities to combat the virus: initially in March, when it arrived on our shores, and later in the summer, after the first major lockdown. The Executive wasted those opportunities, and it is dangerous to follow the pursuits of the Tories, with their commitment to a for-profit model of society and the economy and their refusal to properly implement a zero-COVID strategy.

Now, Executive Ministers appear to be clamouring to cover their mistakes by blaming individuals for their actions, while ignoring the policy decisions and wider structural obstacles that have prevented us from beating the virus, such as the disastrous track-and-trace system and the shambolic mismanagement of restrictions. The big parties are lining up to blame another surge on ordinary people for mixing over the Christmas period. You can already see the blame starting. However, that is not good enough, because the deadly context that we are entering is one that they have created.

Consider this, as the restrictions were eased last week — as I have said, we still have not discussed them — COVID cases per 100,000 of the population were at a significant high when compared to previous weeks. That indicates that the Executive's pre-Christmas circuit breaker was an abject failure by all accounts, as some of us predicted it would be. It further indicates that the Christmas period will likely be followed by another period of restrictions, as others have alluded to, and that is because of their precise failure to get the virus to manageable levels. All of this was utterly predictable.

The Executive were warned about such a scenario by Gabriel Scally, who said that reopening in December would mean that:

"in January and February we may well be burying some relations".

What shocking stuff. Some MLAs are fond of quoting Mr Scally — sometimes after the fact — but they seem incapable of following his advice when it matters. If there is a spike early next year, it is not good enough for the Executive or Ministers to blame that on people visiting their families over Christmas, not when they have permitted such actions. Ministers reopened workplaces and caused surges, presided over another failed circuit breaker and threw workers and businesses under the bus, and if they want someone to blame for the next surge, I suggest that they look in the mirror. The Executive have presided over an omnishambles, including how quickly they lifted restrictions in the summer, danced along to the tune of the Tories throughout the pandemic and issued mixed messaging, confused messaging and downright baffling anti-scientific messaging. That is not the fault of the public; it is the fault of Executive Ministers in this Building.

The so-called circuit breaker that ended last week has been an unmitigated disaster. We have seen not only a failure in health terms but more job losses because of the uncertainty. The stop-start attitude towards restrictions and the inability properly to track, trace and control the virus and work towards creating a zero COVID situation has resulted in a disastrous health and economic scenario. Even when the circuit breaker was in place, as I said, the infection rate was shooting up. Rather than taking stock of the situation, slowing down and saying, "Let us look at this and respond accordingly", as other countries have done, the Executive have opened up the shutters to the virus. What disgraceful stuff.

As one scientist, Mr Einstein, said many years ago:

"Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results."

I suggest that there are not many Einsteins currently in the Stormont Executive. In the absence of any lead from the Executive, people have again been forced to act themselves, including some bar owners who are able to close over the Christmas period or are doing so for health and safety reasons.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. He paints a picture of a utopia, whereby Government closes the entire country down, so keeping infection rates under control, while not mentioning the need for personal responsibility. Under his scenario, if the Government adopted an approach whereby a lockdown closed the entire country and people did not take personal responsibility — what then?

Mr Carroll: It is not utopia. I will give the Member two words: New Zealand. That example could have been followed, but it was not. He claims to be against the strategy of going in and out of lockdown but is pursuing and defending the strategy, which, by definition, means going in and out of lockdown. He fails to grasp the point.

People have been forced to act because the Executive have failed to act. Principals and teachers, in the absence of any real action at all from the Education Minister — much like earlier this year — have been forced to close schools in order to protect pupils and staff. While it may be fashionable or easy to blame everyone else, the Executive and their approach cannot be let off the hook, especially as we see what will happen over the next few weeks. By all accounts, another dangerous surge seems to be on the way. I hope that that is not the case.

Mr Allister: Some Members have rightly said that there is something farcical about this debate. Here we are, a legislative Assembly, being asked to approve legislation that is already dead and gone. It does not matter whether or not we approve the legislation. That is the very essence of the farce.

I am sure that the regulations could have been before us last week with the others that we debated. I would have thought that the regulations that are now ruling us could be before us today. As a Member pointed out, the current regulations will run their course during recess, and we will be invited to debate them at the end of January. That is why a debate such as this is fast losing traction. It is why far fewer Members are speaking today: they recognise the futility of the exercise. It does not reflect well on this House and on those who set the business of this House that this

is the persistent arrangement that we have in respect of these regulations. I will, therefore, keep my own remarks quite brief.

5.15 pm

There is one issue that I want to draw the Minister out on, if I can. Under these regulations, churches were closed. There was very little indication in the public domain of scientific or other advice indicating that churches were such a problem that they had to be closed. I want to know why it was that, essentially without notice and apparently without much indication of churches being a difficulty, and in the face of many indications that several churches were taking conscious, effective steps to reduce their numbers, to have social distancing and to do all the right things, nonetheless they were visited with a punitive measure that would have come if they had done nothing. Why were churches closed during that two-week period? What was the advice that gave rise to that?

Now, when churches are reopened, it is in circumstances where there is an added restriction, which did not exist before, in that you now have to wear a mask, not just going to and from your seat but while you are in your seat throughout the service. Why is that, because the social distancing within the buildings is the same as it was before? To my knowledge, there has been very little indication that churches have been a significant problem, so why this added, suddenly announced, restriction? It is one thing, in terms of comfort and durability, to wear a mask going in and out of a shop or going in and out of a church, but it is quite another thing to be asked to wear a mask for the total duration of a service where one generally is not moving about. What is the rationale and the reason for putting that punitive measure upon churchgoers? That is something that we need to hear from the Minister.

The only other comment that I want to make is that the regulations that have just passed drew their own opprobrium. In my constituency, I can think of a couple of devoted toyshops. That is all that they do: they sell toys. They were forced to close, but you could buy some of the same toys in Tesco. Why was there this disparity, which, in fact, punished the small independent trader and advantaged the large supermarkets and international traders? That caused a good deal of resentment, particularly amongst those who had spent money and scarce resources on preparing and readying themselves, only to be slapped in the face with these regulations.

Going forward — whatever forward entails — I trust that the Minister and the Executive will temper these issues with a greater degree of what would appear to many to be common sense than heretofore.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I now call on the Health Minister, Robin Swann, to conclude and make a winding-up speech on the two motions.

Mr Swann: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I thank the Members for being in attendance today and for their contributions to the debate.

I appreciate the willingness of the Assembly to work within unusual processes, whereby the role of legislative scrutiny is being applied after the event. In this case, the scrutiny takes place in respect of regulations that have already expired, as many Members have said. Nevertheless, I

believe that it is important that this scrutiny takes place in order to examine and comment upon measures that have been taken.

On the timing of this debate, I will not defend where we are today, but I will explain, from what I know, why we are debating the regulations today. The debate is being held at the earliest opportunity available to my Department. The regulations were laid before the Assembly on 27 November and 30 November respectively. The Examiner of Statutory Rules reported on them on 9 December, and the Committee moved quickly to scrutinise them on 10 December, so today is the first opportunity for them to be debated. The timing of the debate is a matter for the Assembly, given the Assembly's requirements for the input of the Examiner of Statutory Rules and the timing of scrutiny by the Health Committee.

If there is another way in which the regulations can be brought forward and debated, I am up for that. As I said earlier to Members, in the past nine or 10 months, I have been in the Chamber more than any other Minister. In today's opening comments, I provided an update on the new variant of COVID. I brought that update to the House first, not to the media or anywhere else, because I think that this is the proper place for such an update. If there is another way in which we can debate the regulations and have meaningful and democratic input, I am up for that, and Members know that.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Swann: I will.

Mr Wells: As someone who has sat in the Minister's chair and who is glad that he is not sitting in that chair at the moment — I have thought of that many, many times over this last while — I accept —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I encourage the Member to speak into the microphone.

Mr Wells: Sorry about that.

As someone who has sat in the Minister's chair and who is very glad that he has not been sitting in his chair for the last month, I accept that he has been before the Assembly far more than any other Minister and, indeed, has made himself available to the media far more than any other Minister. He is to be congratulated on that. Given that we are going into recess, can he guarantee that, if a problem arises with the vaccine and the new variant, he will immediately issue a written statement to Members to update them on such a worrying situation so that we can hear that directly from him before it appears in the media or on Twitter or Facebook?

Mr Swann: I will issue a written statement. The Member will be aware that, on a number of Fridays, I issued written statements to update Members on where we were, and I was criticised by Members for doing so. I will issue and have issued written statements. Can I guarantee that Members will know before the media or Twitter finds out? I cannot give that guarantee. I cannot even give that guarantee about an Executive meeting, so I cannot give it to the House. If I could give that guarantee to the Member, I would do so. I will update Members. As I have said, I will provide current and regular updates to the House and the Committee on the variant and the vaccines. I think that I am due at the Health Committee just before Christmas,

and that will be my twelfth attendance at that Committee this year.

Things move fast in the current context, and the observations and concerns of Assembly Members are taken on board as we develop policy and work on the next set of amendments. I will explain the process — I have had this conversation with the Committee Chair, whose duty it is to scrutinise the regulations — which is that the regulations come forward as a result of policy development by the Executive, not solely my Department, although I take great pleasure in coming here to have such debates and answer Members' questions. I believe that the public must have confidence that the Executive are not acting without scrutiny, and, for that reason, I am happy to respond to a number of questions and comments raised by Members during the debate.

In response to the Committee Chair's comments, I thank the Committee for its engagement with my officials and other officials in scrutinising these regulations. If there was a way in which they could come forward earlier, at policy development stage, I would support that, but the policy is developed by the Executive, not solely by my Department.

Mr McGrath: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Swann: Yes.

Mr McGrath: I appreciate the Minister's remarks about coming to the House to give updates. Nobody could fault the Minister of Health for the number of times that he has made himself available for that. Does he accept that two separate things might need to happen: updating the House and scrutinising the decisions that have been taken?

Scrutiny of the decision can be done in Committee, where experts can be called in. That takes time, but the update to the House could be done by ministerial statement by any of the Ministers at the next available time, after which all Members could seek the clarity that they need. Seeking clarity is often not about scrutinising the impact but about getting an update and asking questions. A response to an official email can take weeks to come back, when all that we are looking for is a quick update. The processes of updating the House and scrutinising the policy could be helpful.

Mr Swann: I agree with the Member. If I recall correctly, and I stand to be corrected, when the regulations were brought in and announced by the Executive on the Thursday, I came to the House and made a statement on the Monday morning. As I have said, this is the place where the questions should be asked and answered.

I move on to the contribution from the Deputy Chair of the Committee, Mrs Pam Cameron, about the vaccine. I believe that it was Mr Chambers who spoke about the light that the vaccine brings. Let us not lose the hope and positiveness that the vaccine brings. I know that I mentioned the new variant in my opening statement, but we do not know where that stands yet or how successful the vaccine will be against that variant. We do know, however, that the vaccine is effective against the current variant that we are battling.

As of close of play yesterday, we had vaccinated 1,700 individuals, including vaccinators, healthcare workers, and care home residents and staff. From a standing start, from when we received the go-ahead for the vaccine and then received the vaccine, the programme is now well under

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way. As the Deputy Chair of the Committee indicated, we received further deliveries of the Pfizer vaccine over the weekend. We now have stock of 50,000 vaccines, which is enough to vaccinate 25,000 individuals without waste.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Minister for giving way. You said that 1,700 vaccines were administered over a seven-day period. Will there be an increase in the numbers who are vaccinated within a one-week period?

Mr Swann: I gave an update to the House during a debate a couple of weeks ago on how the vaccination programme would work. We have started off by vaccinating our vaccinators. That programme ran over the weekend in a number of trusts. It started last week in the Belfast Trust, because of the logistical supply and management of the vaccine. It requires a pharmacist to be present to dilute it and draw it up. The other trusts are moving into care homes today. I spoke to the chief executive of the Northern Trust, who had teams out vaccinating care home residents and staff this afternoon. The multiplier effect will kick in from today. As I have said, I am willing to provide written updates on how the programme is progressing. It is my intention that it will become another part of the public dashboard on display so that people can see the progress that we are making. It takes time to develop that and to validate the information that is displayed.

The Deputy Chair commented on the value of our healthcare workers. She knows that well, having family members who have been on the front line from the start and who continue to be there. Other Members have indicated the support that we need to give to those workers. The best present that we can give to any healthcare worker this Christmas is to play our part, reduce the number of contacts that we have and break the chains of infection so that they can have an easier time over the festive period.

I will move on to comments from —.

Mr Givan: Thank you, Minister, for giving way. Forgive me, but I should have asked to come in sooner, as this is on the vaccination issue. I welcome the progress that the United Kingdom has made in being the first country in the world to roll out the vaccine, from which Northern Ireland has been able to benefit.

As we build up our resilience and protect the most vulnerable, cross-border travel from North to South clearly has implications whilst the Republic of Ireland is yet to roll out a vaccination programme. Is there any indication as to when the Republic of Ireland will start to carry out its vaccination programme?

5.30 pm

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. I cannot give any firm update; it is not information that I have to hand. The European Medicines Agency (EMA) is due to give the go-ahead for the Pfizer vaccine, I think on 29 December. I hope that, if that approval is given, the Republic of Ireland will start its vaccination programme, using the Pfizer vaccine or any others that come to hand before that.

Ms Hunter, in following her predecessor's role on the Health Committee, has big shoes to fill. I thank Colin for his contribution over the past few months in holding my Department and officials to account in a constructive way,

which he always did. I hope that the Member is able to follow on in that regard. One thing that she has already brought to the House is her passion for mental health and how she has presented that.

This morning, I visited Holywell Hospital to show the staff our thanks and appreciation for the work that they have been doing these past months. They are the front line that is already there and is often forgotten about. When we think about mental health, we think of the challenges in the community and for GPs but often forget those who are staffing mental health facilities on a full-time basis, supporting some of the most vulnerable. It was an honour, and a humbling experience, to see the work that they are continuing to do, day in and day out.

With regard to Mr McGrath's comments on our assessment process, I covered that. I would just caution him: I know that he likes to use illustrative language such as "hokey-cokey". I do not think that lessening or lightening the seriousness of this virus is the right thing to do. I am not criticising him for it, but we just need to be careful around our words.

Ms Bradshaw commented on what we saw at the weekend with regard to face coverings. I was amazed and shocked by what I saw in the Abbey Centre. I am challenged as to how the owner of the facility and the managers of the facilities did not have those structures in place. I was reassured by the retail engagement group that is headed up by the junior Ministers, the engagement by the Economy Committee and the work that has been done by the retail sector that there would be things in place to prevent us from falling into what we saw a few weeks earlier outside the same shop, only it was outside on the streets of Belfast — that it would not happen again. It is about taking on those responsibilities. Some of the commentary with regard to how others saw that, especially on social media over the weekend, puts it into stark reality. How necessary are a pair of pyjamas when it comes to putting yourself or your family members into that challenging situation?

Mr Chambers said that anyone who ignores these restrictions does so at their own peril. I think those were his actual words. One of the things is that we ignore the restrictions at someone else's peril, because if we ignore them, there is the opportunity for someone else to become infected and end up in hospital. That is some of the selfishness that we need to challenge.

I take on board Mr Carroll's comments —

Mr Chambers: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Swann: Certainly.

Mr Chambers: Minister, the Chief Medical Officer, Dr Michael McBride, said at a press conference in this Building recently that just because you can does not mean that you should. Does the Minister agree that those words will carry a huge significance in the coming days?

Mr Swann: I do. I always take the advice of the Chief Medical Officer with great value and cognisance. Those words have resonated and have been used by myself and, I think, the First Minister as well, because it is about self-responsibility. I agree with Mr Buckley on what we can do and what we should do. This is not a challenge to Mr Carroll, because I would not do that, but just because the Executive have put relaxations in place, it is not about

looking for someone to blame in the future. It is about enabling people to have their own level of sensibility and seriousness about and observance of what they can do, should do and should not do. The concern, especially about the guidance for over Christmas, was that, without a structure, people would simply revert to a free-for-all in the number of people they have in a house. The relaxations are there as a framework that people can work to; they are not something that they have to abide by.

Clare Bailey commented on where we are, and she criticised the Executive. I have said in the House many times that it is not easy for a five-party Executive, with the different political outlooks that we have on many things. However, one thing that I am assured of is the consistent message that has come from my Department and the healthcare workforce across Northern Ireland. In fact, earlier today, the chief executives of all six health trusts issued a statement on their concern about that. Their message is consistent with anything that has come from me, as the Health Minister, from the Chief Medical Officer or from the Chief Scientific Adviser about how dangerous the virus is, how dangerous it continues to be and the steps that we can take to break the chains of infection.

Mr Wells: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Swann: Certainly.

Mr Wells: Ms Bailey also raised a very important point about what is likely to happen on 4 January. Given his understanding of the situation and the advice that he has been given by the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser, what is his best educated guess about where we, as a Province, will be on the first Monday in January as far as restrictions are concerned?

Mr Swann: I was just about to come to that comment. I did not know what I was going to say, but I was just about to come to it [*Laughter.*] I say with all respect that Members know me well enough. The Member for South Down indicated the number of times that I have come to the House and the number of times that I have made myself available to the media. One thing that I have always done is have those conversations in the Executive first and then communicate them. It is challenging. As I said, it is challenging that, often, when we have those conversations in the Executive, some in the media are able to put them on Twitter before I have taken a note of what we actually agreed.

Do I think that we will be facing further restrictions before this year ends or at the start of the new year? Over the next week, we will assess how effective the two-week circuit breaker has been or whether it has had any effect at all. We can see how it has slowed the infection rate and plateaued the number of inpatients that we have, but it has not lessened the pressures on our health and social care staff across the system. Going back to the World Health Organization guidance and advice, you utilise a circuit breaker in order to alleviate the pressure on your healthcare system. The Member will know, because he has sat in this seat, the pressures that we face at this time of year anyway, never mind in the middle of a pandemic and what could be a further wave.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Minister for giving way. On the point about the reinfection rate etc over Christmas, first, I know that he will agree with me that personal responsibility will be paramount in that time. The Government enter a

contract with the people, but it is the people who must exercise restraint when it comes to the restrictions that are in place. In light of where the R rate is at the moment, the developments in and our knowledge of test and trace now, is the Minister able to elaborate to the House where the main sources of infection and the increases in the R rate are?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. He will be aware that one of the changes and advancements that we have made in our test, trace and protect system is the ability to look back. On 16 November, we started to ask people who have tested positive where they have been over the last seven days rather than just the last 48 hours. When we received the presentation from the Public Health Agency on Friday, the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and I visited our test, trace and protect offices in County Hall in Ballymena to see further guidance and information about where the outbreaks had occurred. They occurred in various settings, including churches, gyms and the retail sector. They were all proportionate with the time and where the restrictions fell. The First Minister and the deputy First Minister received the same update that I did so that we could validate the information and make it public, as we do not want to send out a false sense of that information or to present it in a non-useful way to the public. They should see the evidence of where outbreaks are occurring in schools and churches.

Mr Allister mentioned churches and church settings; we have had outbreaks in churches and church settings. That is why there was a step to introduce the two-week circuit breaker for churches and places of worship as specific locations that had not been included before. That is coming from the Public Health Agency system. I do not want to put churchgoers off engaging with our Public Health Agency, but one of the things to have come clearly through from our systems, and which has been indicated before, is that — I am thinking about how I can put it sensitively and in a politically correct way — when a contact tracer contacts people who have been at church in the previous seven days, they are more likely to say that they have been in church, if the Member gets my drift. The contact tracers have indicated that there is an openness and honesty that —.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Swann: Yes.

Mr Allister: The Minister seems to be confirming that going to church may, in fact, do you some good. [*Laughter.*]

Mr Swann: I wholeheartedly agree with the Member. I have never met anyone it has harmed, although some in the House might benefit greatly by listening when they are there.

I hope that that clarifies some of the reasons why the two-week circuit breaker was in place.

On face coverings, one of the challenges —.

Ms Bailey: I thank the Minister for giving way. Minister, there will be a mass shift of people trying to come home for Christmas from other countries. I know of people who will have to be tested clear in the country that they are in and get a certificate before being allowed to travel. Under the test, track and trace system here, will we ask for and

look at those certificates on entry? Will we test people who leave here to travel elsewhere?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. I will come back to her once I have dealt with Mr Allister's contribution. He asked about face coverings. One of the things learned from international advice, and from looking at other practices, is that the aerosols generated by singing have caused outbreaks in churches. The advice in other places, which we have adopted, is that wearing face coverings all the time is a better management tool than putting them on and taking them off. For the sake of the hour that someone is in church, we should try to minimise the risk and allow churches to go ahead with their services as much as possible.

Mr Wells: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Swann: Yes.

Mr Wells: If the Minister had attended a Baptist or a Free Presbyterian church, he would know that it certainly would not be for an hour; it is more likely to be two hours. It is a bit of an inconvenience to wear a mask for that length of time. I do not know what church he attends, but if he is getting only an hour, he is being short-changed.

Mr Swann: I will come —. *[Interruption.]* And we wonder why there are so many Protestant denominations in Northern Ireland. As a Presbyterian, if you cannot get three points into a sermon in an hour, there is something —. Sorry. I will not go any further; I am probably in enough trouble.

5.45 pm

Maybe I will not answer all the Member's concerns. However, the junior Ministers are leading engagement with the leaders of the main Churches. From feedback that I have had, I believe that the junior Ministers understand fully the passion and feeling of the main Church leaders when that decision was made. The Member will know that it is not something that I would do, nor a recommendation that I would bring forward, easily.

Ms Bailey asked about travel. We have set our regulations on international travel depending on the country that someone comes from rather than the test on arrival. One thing that we have not done yet, although we have explored and are looking at it, is the commercial nature of testing on arrival; those who can afford to fly could pay for their own tests or get priority access to National Health Service testing because they can afford to fly. That is not something that would sit comfortably with me. That is why we have maintained and followed the route of assessing the country from which someone travels and the risk there, and, depending on that, whether we deem it necessary for them to undertake 10 days of isolation. That is done on an international basis by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI). That country analysis is used in the same way across the four nations.

Mr McGrath: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Swann: Yes.

Mr McGrath: We know that the travel sector has been hit greatly by the pandemic. In London, Dublin and other places, someone can now isolate for five days on their return and get a test and release. Can the Minister give us any indication of when that system might be brought in

here? At some point in the future, when we are over the worst of this but there are still some restrictions, that may unlock and open some routes and help the travel industry, which, at this stage, feels that it has been left behind somewhat.

Mr Swann: As I said, we are observing that. It has just recently started in England. As that is a commercial transaction, it would be neither pillar 1 nor pillar 2 testing by the National Health Service. A commercial transaction would take place. We have concerns that it would start to use up testing capacity for what is a commercial transaction rather than one of a health nature. We are keeping an eye on that.

I think that I have covered most of the concerns.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for giving way. Does he know when the House will discuss the latest regulations that are in place? If cases go up early in the new year, will he and his Department be willing to reconvene the Assembly to discuss that? Whilst people deserve a break, the worst possible thing would be for this place to be closed if there was a massive spike in cases. Has the Minister considered or taken a view on that?

Mr Swann: I have never been reluctant or hesitant to bring forward recommendations to the Executive. With regard to the seriousness of recalling the House to assess further restrictions or regulations that need to be brought in, I will leave that in the hands of the Speaker and Members. Under Standing Orders, 30 Members can recall the House. I believe that it is in the gift of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I do not believe that it is in the gift —.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Mr Swann: Yes.

Mr O'Dowd: The Minister is quite correct about the process that he has outlined. The Business Committee, which sets the business of the Assembly, has already taken that into consideration. It is aware of that and is prepared to recall the Assembly if needs be for any matter of business that arises over the break.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member, who is a member of the Business Committee, for that clarity. As I was about to say, I do not believe that the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response still has the facility to do that. The Member will know that I will do that if needs be. I will also commit to providing written statements, if necessary, to ensure that Members are kept as fully up to date as possible.

Mr Gildernew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Swann: Certainly.

Mr Gildernew: As a follow-up to John O'Dowd's question earlier, I am concerned about the roll-out of the vaccinations. The Minister said that 1,700 were done over a seven-day period. The first delivery of 25,000 vaccines will, I presume, do 12,500 people, given that it is a split dose. At that rate, we would be looking at some six weeks. I presume, therefore, that there will be significant scaling up. How long does the Minister expect it to take to do the first 12,500 vaccinations?

Mr Swann: With regard to my answer to Mr O'Dowd's question, I will also say to the Member that what we did at the start was to ensure the logistics. Remember that

the vaccine itself presents severe logistical challenges because it has to be stored at -70°C. The vaccine came in batches of 1,000, so we had to work out how to split that. We are the first part of the United Kingdom to get the vaccine into care homes. Our plan for the first batch is to do the entirety of our care home sector, including residents, at least once by the end of the year. That is a major logistical challenge in itself, so I ask the Member not just to take what we have done in the past few days, because that was about setting up systems and processes and making sure that our vaccinators were vaccinated first.

Today is the first main day of vaccination. We will be able to get an assessment of that tomorrow, and we will provide an update sooner rather than later on how we are progressing with the initial batch. As I said in response to the Deputy Chair, we now have 50,000 vaccines in place. We are hopeful that more will become available towards the end of the year, so that supply line will continue to produce.

I think that I have covered everyone's queries or comments. There were challenges at the start about the usefulness of this debate and the time spent in the Chamber, but our engagement has allowed Members to raise questions and get some answers, but perhaps not the level of detail that they would have liked.

We all have a responsibility to help to curb the spread of the virus. We do that — I repeat this — by maintaining social distancing; maintaining good hand and respiratory hygiene; wearing face coverings; self-isolating immediately if we experience any symptoms, including a new persistent cough, a fever or a loss or change of smell or taste; seeking a test if we experience any of those symptoms; downloading the StopCOVID NI app; and complying with the restrictions. By following that advice as we go about our daily lives, we can protect ourselves and others from serious illness, protect our health service and our economy and help to avoid further prolonged and more stringent restrictions.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I confirm that the Ad Hoc Committee can meet if a Minister informs the Speaker that they wish to bring a statement to the Committee. It is within our provisions to arrange such a meeting quickly, and — who knows? — if it is needed, within the next number of weeks.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 17) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 18) 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. 18) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved. — [Mr Swann (The Minister of Health).]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments.

The Maximum Number of Judges Order (Northern Ireland) 2020

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): I beg to move

That the Maximum Number of Judges Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 be affirmed.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit for this debate.

Mrs Long: The draft order will amend section 2(1) of the Judicature (Northern Ireland) Act 1978 to increase the statutory limit of High Court judges from 10 to 15. That legislative change will not, by itself, increase the number of judges who sit on the High Court bench. The draft order is, however, intended to allow for the future appointment of part-time judges and to create sufficient headroom for the addition of judges should pressures emerge.

A primary duty of my Department is to ensure that the High Court is, at all times, properly resourced to be able to meet its business needs. Both the Historical Institutional Abuse Redress Board and the newly constituted victims' payment board have appointed members of the High Court bench as presidents. That will inevitably impact on the availability of High Court judges to deal with High Court business. The Lord Chief Justice will want to make a case for additional High Court appointments to meet the capacity need. Allowing for that possibility requires an increase in the overall maximum. Creating sufficient headroom within the statutory limit will also allow for changes to the High Court complement to be made more efficiently without the need for repeated draft orders. It is also hoped that increasing the overall complement will more readily allow for future creation of part-time positions on the bench, adding to the potential pool of applicants for the High Court. Ideally, that will further increase diversity at that tier. Any increase in the actual High Court judicial complement will still have to be supported by individual business cases, taking into account the overall volume of High Court business whilst ensuring that funding is available for the additional salaries and pensions.

I thank the Justice Committee for its careful consideration of the draft order, and it is with the Committee's support that I bring this before you today. I commend the draft order to the House.

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): I am pleased to speak briefly to the motion on behalf of the Justice Committee. The Minister outlined details on the statutory rule before us, which will increase the maximum number of High Court judges from 10 to 15. That will allow for headroom for the addition of judges that may be required due to unforeseen circumstances. For example, the president of the Historical Institutional Abuse Redress Board is a member of the High Court bench, which has decreased the number of judges who are available to deal with High Court business. The rule also will allow for the appointment of part-time judges, which could potentially increase diversity at that tier of the judiciary, and the Committee would welcome that.

At its meeting of 22 October, the Committee agreed that it was content with the proposal to make the rule. The statutory rule was subsequently considered at the meeting of the Committee on 3 December, when the Committee noted that the Examiner of Statutory Rules had no

comment to make by way of technical scrutiny and agreed to recommend that the statutory rule be affirmed by the Assembly. I therefore support the motion on behalf of the Committee for Justice.

Ms Rogan: This statutory rule will increase the statutory limit on the number of High Court judges from 10 to 15, which will allow for the appointment of part-time judges. As has been said, that will allow for headroom where judges are required for unforeseen pressures and circumstances. We have read and heard statistics being rehearsed over the last number of months that have made it clear that COVID has increased the backlog of cases that are waiting to be heard across all court divisions. Although that increase is concerning, concern about the backlog of cases waiting to be heard existed prior to COVID. There is a major need to increase the speed at which cases are heard and progressed, and key to that could be increasing the number of High Court judges who are available for trials.

6.00 pm

The statutory rule will not, in itself, increase the complement of High Court judges; it merely increases the statutory limit. I encourage the Department to carry out further work to examine whether there is scope to increase the High Court judicial complement and to assess the impact that that would have on the speeding up of justice. The Department needs to do all that it can to recruit additional judges to ensure that the diversity of the judiciary is increased.

My party supports the motion.

Mr Allister: The Minister points out that the order increases the saving but not the number of appointments. I presume that the situation will prevail that, for any additional judges above 10, a business case will need to be approved by the Department. However, an increase of 50% is substantial.

I did not follow the Minister when she said that it would enable the appointment of part-time judges. Back in January, we appointed, I think, eight or 10 part-time judges, so that facility exists. What is the juxtaposition between the order and the appointment of extra part-time judges?

Some of the legacy issues giving rise to increased pressure are being dealt with by County Court judges. Is the Minister minded to increase the number of appointments in that domain and, if so, to what extent?

The Minister mentioned diversity. That causes me to draw attention to the composition of the Court of Appeal in Northern Ireland. It is permitted to have four holders: the Lord Chief Justice and three Lords Justices. At present, there is a vacancy. However, at present, the court, in its community background, is exclusive to the Catholic community. If that situation existed in reverse, there would be uproar from some quarters. There would be cries of "Sectarianism", cries about human rights and cries of "Imbalance". Yet, we have a situation where, in our Court of Appeal, there is not one member — it is the highest court in this jurisdiction, subject only to the Supreme Court — from the Protestant community. We talk about diversity, but does the Minister have a view about that? If my information about the vacancy is correct, the appointment that is to be made — I am not faulting the

person at all professionally — will mean that there are four persons from the Catholic community and none from the unionist, Protestant community. Is that healthy in terms of ensuring respect across the community? If diversity applies, why does it not apply in the Court of Appeal in Northern Ireland? All of that is said without questioning the professionalism or dedication of the members; it is said in the context that this is a divided society and there is therefore a legitimate expectation that the Court of Appeal should reflect the entire community.

Mrs Long: I thank the Members who have commented on the motion. As you know, the draft order is before the House following consultation with and the approval of the Justice Committee and the Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission (NIJAC). It provides for an increase in the statutory maximum number of High Court judges from 10 to 15. I just want to touch on some of the points that have been made.

I thank the Chair for the Committee's scrutiny of the draft order and, indeed, a number of other orders that have been brought to it over recent months. It is very much appreciated that that has happened in a timely fashion.

There are a number of things that I would like to say about diversity in response to the comments made by Ms Rogan and Mr Allister. First, I want to clarify the rationale, which Mr Allister raised. Creating extra headroom now would allow for any future unforeseen pressures on the High Court bench to be dealt with more efficiently. That quite clearly requires a business case to be made, however, and it would not be automatic. Lifting the threshold to 15 therefore does not mean that we will have 15 High Court judges. It simply means that we will have the capacity to do that without having to return to the Assembly to make legislative change.

As I said, it also allows for the future appointment of part-time judges, who could be added to the potential pool of applicants for the High Court, thereby increasing diversity at that tier. A part-time, pro rata judge would count as one judge within the statutory maximum. Were you therefore to have a part-time judge, that judge would take up a full one of those places. That would require us to have more flexibility were we, for example, to replace one full-time judge with two part-time judges, because they would count as two extra judges.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Long: Yes.

Mr Allister: I cannot remember whether it was eight or 10, but did we not appoint part-time judges for a period of three years back in January? If they count pro rata, we are then already touching the quota. If an uplift in the quota was needed in order to appoint part-time judges, how did that happen, or is an uplift not needed to appoint part-time judges?

Mrs Long: For clarity, Mr Allister's point is that the part-time judges whom the Department appointed were temporary judges but that pro rata appointments would be made by the bench and go through NIJAC's procedures and would be permanent. As well as that, they would be reduced-hours positions, so that shows the difference between the two. A part-time, pro rata judge would therefore count as one judge, and that is why we would need the extra headroom: in order to multiply. Those who

were appointed by the Department are temporary, so that is one of the reasons.

When it comes to judicial diversity, it is important to make the point that, when NIJAC makes its appointments, whether it be to the judiciary generally or, indeed, when it comes to issues such as the Court of Appeal, those appointments are made solely on the basis of merit, and it is correct that it ought to be so. We should, however, look at what barriers there may be to people entering those competitions to become judges or other members of the judiciary and progressing through the ranks. One such barrier may be the lack of flexibility around working, and that is one of the reasons that we are looking at the creation of part-time judges.

I thought that it would be important to give an overview of the diversity issues that we have, particularly around gender breakdown, in the judiciary in Northern Ireland. Across the salaried judiciary, from the Lord Chief Justice to the coroners, the headline figure is 40 males and 23 females. When that figure is broken down, however, there are quite significant differences across the hierarchy. The Lord Chief Justice is male, as we know. There are two Lords Justices of Appeal who are male, while the third position is currently vacant. There are eight male and two female High Court judges. There are 11 male and seven female County Court judges, and two vacant positions. There are 12 male and seven female Magistrates' Court judges. There are one male and two female district court judges; three male and four female masters of the High Court; and two male and one female coroners.

Breaking the figures down by age shows that there is a range of ages. If we look in particular at lay magistrates, however, the youngest are in the 40-to-44 age bracket. That continues up to the 65-to-69 age bracket, because, as the Member will be aware, lay magistrates have to retire from the judiciary at the age of 70, although I believe that that may be under review. Increasing judicial diversity here is important, and it is the role of the Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission to promote it. That is an outcome that I fully support. I take on board people's concerns that they need to see a reflection of their identity and background at some level in the court system among those who are their peers as jurors, but they also need to see that reflected among those who represent the court itself. That is an important outcome.

To that end, it is hoped that the creation of additional headroom now through the draft order will allow for the future appointment of part-time judges, which may add to the potential pool of applicants.

Court advocacy is not an essential requirement for High Court appointments. The Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission is keen to attract applicants from a broad range of skilled lawyers, regardless of professional background.

In closing, I will outline the qualifications needed to be a High Court judge, because there may be people out there who feel that only certain people can apply for the role. A High Court judge must be either a member of the Bar of Northern Ireland of at least 10 years' standing or a solicitor of the Court of Judicature of at least 10 years' standing. Therefore, experienced people in legal practice have the ability to apply, and I encourage them to apply when such vacancies come forward. It is hugely important that we

have a diverse judiciary, but also that we have an effective judiciary that is based on appointment on merit.

I commend the order to the House. I believe —.

Mr Givan: Thank you, Minister, for giving way. I had not planned to comment more widely on judicial appointments, given the limited scope of what we were doing, but Mr Allister has raised an issue.

The Committee wishes to have the Lord Chief Justice come before it, as he has in the past, in his role as chairman of the Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission. The Minister may recall that, back in 2013, Judge Desmond Marrinan came before the Committee and made very serious allegations about his failure to be appointed. He highlighted his view that it was not a fit-for-purpose body because it is chaired by the Lord Chief Justice, unlike in England and Wales, where it is chaired by a layperson. Has the Minister looked into the way in which the Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission is constructed and at the postholders of that organisation? That is something that I am keen to pursue, albeit I have not brought it before the Committee yet. It may be an area where Mr Allister's complaint could be looked at in more detail.

Mrs Long: First, we will have to separate the issue that Mr Allister raised from any suggestion that either the current chair of the Judicial Appointments Commission, or the wider Judicial Appointments Commission, are responsible for any imbalance or have failed in their duty to apply processes on merit. Most Members will agree that merit is an important principle. It is certainly one that I believe in and support in respect of how we deal with diversity. It is often in supporting people to be able to come forward and apply where the weaknesses lie.

As Minister, I have not taken a particular interest in NIJAC and the appointment of judicial office holders, beyond the conversations that I have had with the current Lord Chief Justice about the demands that are being placed on the judiciary at this time and how we can be of assistance. If the Chairman of the Committee wishes to take that forward as something that the Committee is interested in, he is of course at liberty to do so.

Without further ado, I commend the draft order to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Maximum Number of Judges Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 be affirmed.

The draft Carriage of Explosives (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): I beg to move

That the draft Carriage of Explosives (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Business Committee has agreed that there will be no time limit on this debate. I invite the Minister to open the debate on the motion.

Mrs Long: This draft rule is made under the powers conferred by the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. It addresses deficiencies in Northern Ireland domestic legislation which implement EU laws that have arisen as a result of the withdrawal of the UK from the European Union. The rule also makes provision in consequence of the 2018 Act and restates domestic law in a clearer and more accessible way. It makes necessary amendments to the Carriage of Explosives Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010 to ensure that there continues to be a functioning legislative and regulatory regime for the carriage of dangerous goods in Northern Ireland.

6.15 pm

In this case, the regime covers the transport of class 1 dangerous goods, explosives, explosive substances and articles by road and rail. The regime for the transport of dangerous goods in the UK and Northern Ireland is derived from the United Nations subcommittee of experts on the transport of dangerous goods. The UK is a signatory to the European agreement concerning the international carriage of dangerous goods by road, known as ADR, and to the equivalent for rail, the regulation concerning the international carriage of dangerous goods by rail, known as RID.

The United Kingdom is committed to the ongoing implementation of those requirements. ADR and RID do not automatically have legal force and were implemented in the EU by the dangerous goods directive. In Northern Ireland, the Carriage of Explosives Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010 implement the dangerous goods directive for class 1 dangerous goods and, by consequence, implement the requirements of ADR and RID. The dangerous goods directive is not one of the specified EU regulations in annex 2 to the Northern Ireland protocol, and it will not continue to extend to Northern Ireland after the transition period.

The draft rule is, therefore, required in order to correct Northern Ireland legislation that is for the carriage of class 1 dangerous goods and that would otherwise cease to function properly at the end of the transition period. The amendments make sure that the 2010 regulations will continue to function as before by ensuring that the regulatory framework for the carriage of explosives by road and rail will remain in place on implementation period (IP) completion day.

The amendments that are made by the rule will revise references that are predicated on the UK being a member state of the EU, retain the power for the Department of Justice to grant authorisations, apply existing derogations

that are approved prior to the protocol completion day and issue new exceptions.

The rule is subject to the draft affirmative procedure, as the function of the EU is now exercisable by a public authority in the UK, namely the Department of Justice, which falls within paragraph 1(2) of schedule 7 to the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. The draft rule provides that the Department of Justice may issue new exceptions from the requirements and prohibitions of the carriage of dangerous goods by road and rail. Formerly, it was the European Commission that authorised new derogations from the dangerous goods directive. Northern Ireland, as well as the rest of the UK, will continue to work to the same requirements and standards in the carriage of dangerous goods underpinned by the ADR and RID agreements. The requirements for those involved in the carriage of class 1 goods by road or rail in Northern Ireland are not being changed by the draft rule.

I thank the Justice Committee for its careful consideration of the draft rule. It is with that support that I bring the rule before Members and commend it to the House.

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): I am pleased to speak briefly on the motion on behalf of the Committee. The statutory rule that is before us, as the Minister indicated, ensures that the Carriage of Explosives Regulations 2010 will continue to operate at the end of the transition period for the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union by ensuring that the regulatory framework for the carriage of class 1 goods will remain in place. The 2010 regulations implemented the EU's dangerous goods directive, so far as it concerned class 1 goods and, by consequence, implemented the requirements of the international carriage of dangerous goods by road and the international carriage of dangerous goods by rail, which is part of the convention of the international carriage by rail and to which the UK is a signatory.

The dangerous goods directive is not listed in annex 2 to the Northern Ireland protocol so will not extend to Northern Ireland at the end of the transition period. Instead, the United Kingdom is committed to the ongoing implementation of the requirements of ADR and RID, which predate EU membership and the dangerous goods directive. The rule does not change the requirements for those involved in the carriage of explosives by road and rail in Northern Ireland.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

The Committee first considered the proposals for the rule on 5 November and agreed to request some clarification of whether it was anticipated that there would be any remaining gaps in the carriage of dangerous goods at the end of the transition period. In its response, the Department clarified that it has responsibility for class 1 goods only. The proposed SR will ensure that regulations continue to function as before, with no gaps being identified.

The Department also advised that the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSENI), which is an agency of the Department for the Economy, is responsible for the remaining classes of dangerous goods legislation. The HSENI proposes to make a similar EU exit SR for classes 2 to 9 that, subject to completion, should ensure

that there are no gaps in the regulatory framework for the carriage of dangerous goods.

Having considered the additional information provided by the Department at its meeting on 26 November, the Committee agreed that it was content with the proposal to make the rule. The statutory rule was subsequently considered at the meeting on 10 December. The Committee noted that in her report on the rule, the Examiner of Statutory Rules had highlighted a minor drafting error that the Department of Justice had undertaken to rectify. The Examiner was otherwise content with the technical aspects of the rule, and the Committee agreed on 10 December to recommend that the statutory rule be affirmed by the Assembly. Therefore, I support the motion on behalf of the Committee for Justice.

Ms Rogan: The purpose of the rule is to correct legislation that would otherwise cease to function properly at the end of the Brexit transition period. The proposed rule will ensure that the Carriage of Explosives Regulations 2010 will continue to operate as before by ensuring that the regulatory framework for the carriage of class 1 goods will remain in place. The regulations relate to health and safety protocols for the transportation of dangerous goods. Therefore, it is only right that those involved in such transportations are offered the same protections post-Brexit to allow the safe and secure transport of dangerous goods. Given that dangerous goods are not listed in the Irish protocol, as well as the need to ensure the continued alignment with the technical regulations at the end of the Brexit transition period, my party will be supporting the statutory rule.

Mrs Long: I thank Members for their consideration of the draft rule. In particular, I thank the Chair, Paul Givan, and Committee member, Emma Rogan, for their comments.

The rule is being made to address deficiencies in Northern Ireland domestic legislation that implements EU law and which have arisen as a result of the UK's withdrawal from the European Union and thus to ensure that the Carriage of Explosives Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010 continue to function appropriately in Northern Ireland at the end of the transition period on 31 December 2020. The proposed draft rule is essential to ensure that we continue to have an effective regulatory framework for the carriage of dangerous and class 1 goods by road and rail following the end of the transition period.

There are no implications for the cross-border transport of class 1 goods. The same international agreements for the carriage of dangerous goods by road and rail will continue to apply on both sides of the border in Ireland. The regulations are essential for the foreign transport of class 1 dangerous goods. They reassure our trading partners that exports of dangerous goods from the UK will be transported safely in accordance with the international carriage of dangerous goods by rail, by road and the UN model regulations and, thus, they ease the passage of those goods.

The requirements for those involved in the carriage of dangerous goods and class 1 goods by road and rail in Northern Ireland are not being changed by the draft rule. Therefore, I hope that the Assembly will join me in supporting the regulations. I commend the draft rule to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Carriage of Explosives (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two.

The Harbours (Grants and Loans Limit) Bill: Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister for Infrastructure, Nicola Mallon, to move the Bill.

Moved. — [Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure).]

Mr Speaker: No amendments have been tabled to the Bill, and I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to group the three clauses of the Bill for the Question on stand part, followed by the Question to agree the long title.

Clauses 1 to 3 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Harbours (Grants and Loans Limit) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Assembly Business

Mr Swann: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I made a statement earlier about a new strain of COVID, and I want to update the House, as I said I would. I can confirm that, as of 7 December, there were no Northern Ireland sequences on the UK COVID-19 genomics database to show that this mutation has been present in Northern Ireland. I gave the commitment that I would come back to the House with information, so I wanted to do that.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Minister for advising the House through that update. Thank you very much, Minister.

Committee Business

Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 11 June 2021, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill [NIA Bill 11/17-22].

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on this debate. I call the Chairperson of the Committee for Justice to open the debate.

Mr Givan: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Committee Stage of the Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill began on 17 November. The Bill consists of six clauses and one schedule and aims to improve the operation of the criminal justice system by reforming committal proceedings, which is the procedure that determines whether there is sufficient evidence available to justify putting a person on trial in the Crown Court.

As I outlined during the Second Stage debate, delay in the criminal justice system and the time taken to progress cases through the system has been a recurring issue and concern for the Committee since the devolution of policing and justice in 2010. Reducing delay is one of the biggest challenges facing the justice system and has been identified as a priority for the Department, its criminal justice partners and the Criminal Justice Board. Reforming the committal process is a key part of the plan to reduce avoidable delay.

To assist with its scrutiny of the clauses and schedules in the Bill, the Committee issued a call for evidence and is seeking views from a range of key stakeholders. Despite current circumstances and the continued need to adhere to social-distancing requirements, the Committee intends to undertake careful consideration of the Bill and will take appropriate oral evidence on the key issues highlighted in the evidence and raised during the Second Stage debate to ensure that the legislation is properly scrutinised.

On 26 November 2020, the Committee discussed the timetable for the Bill and agreed to seek an extension to the Committee Stage until 11 June 2021. This is relatively short and focused legislation but is no less important for that, and the Committee will make every effort to complete the Committee Stage before 11 June.

The extension, however, provides flexibility for the Committee to manage the expected heavy legislative programme for it to scrutinise over the next four to six months. The programme is expected to include two or possibly three further justice-related Bills, including the protection from stalking Bill, in the new year, and the miscellaneous provisions Bill, which is expected to be substantial and cover a wide range of justice policy issues. The extension will also provide leeway to deal with other issues that arise unexpectedly and to manage the Committee workload in the current context of COVID-19 issues.

6.30 pm

The Committee will report to the Assembly on the Bill as soon as possible within the proposed extension and the constraints imposed by the workload that I outlined. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Speaker: No other Members have indicated that they wish to speak.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 11 June 2021, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill [NIA Bill 11/17-22].

Adjourned at 6.31 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 15 December 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: Before we begin today's business, I remind Members that, as the Business Committee is not meeting today, there will be no lunchtime suspension. Business will continue until 2.00 pm, when it will be interrupted for Question Time.

Public Petition: Provision of Free Period Products in all Schools

Mr Speaker: Mr Chris Lyttle has sought leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22. The Member will have up to three minutes to speak.

Mr Lyttle: It is my privilege to present this petition for free period products in schools. I do so on behalf of the 5,000 people who have signed it and the organising charity, The Homeless Period Belfast, which is a volunteer-led initiative that was founded and is managed by Katrina McDonnell. It alleviates period poverty by providing period packs and by campaigning for universal access to free period products. The Homeless Period Belfast's Menstruation Matters campaign is calling on the Education Minister to bring Northern Ireland in line with other parts of the UK by providing free period products in all schools. Schools provide free toilet roll, hand soap and hand towels in toilets. We would never accept children bringing any of those essential items to school, and period products should be no different.

The Homeless Period Belfast conducted a survey of 200 schoolgirls in Northern Ireland, and it found that 74% left school early or missed school because of a lack of period products; 87% said that a lack of period products negatively impacted on their attention in class; and 91% had used toilet roll as a temporary measure, due to a lack of access to period products. In a Homeless Period Belfast survey of 100 teachers in Northern Ireland, 60% had bought period products for use in their school. The survey also asked pupils how access to free period products would impact on their experience at school. One schoolgirl said, "I wouldn't miss as much class time and would feel a lot happier in knowing that the products are in toilets so that I don't have to feel embarrassed in approaching the school nurse or my teachers". Another schoolgirl said, "I dread getting my period in school. I pretend I am sick so I can go home because I am too embarrassed to tell my friends that I do not have any money for pads and can't ask my mummy because she has lost her job and is struggling to do food shopping for me and my brother. I use toilet roll instead, and I'd much rather use that at home and risk leaking in my own house than in school, where everyone could see."

No young person should suffer this experience or have their education disrupted by a bodily function as natural as their period. Free period products in schools would ensure that every young girl has equal opportunity to learn and achieve their potential. The Education Committee has written to the Department of Education in support of this campaign, and I will be glad to submit this petition to your

office electronically for the consideration and response of the Education Minister.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Mr Lyttle. Normally, I would invite the Member to bring his petition to the Table and present it here. However, the Member is aware that, in light of social distancing, I will ask him to remain in his place, and I will make arrangements for him to submit the petition to my office. I thank the Member for bringing the petition to the attention of the Assembly. Once the petition is received, I will forward it to the Minister of Education and send a copy to the Committee.

Ministerial Statements

North/South Ministerial Council: Tourism

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister for the Economy that she wishes to make a statement. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members that, in light of the social-distancing practices 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 or by notifying the Business Office or Speaker's Table directly. I remind Members to be concise in asking their questions. I also remind Members that, in accordance with long-established procedure, points of order are not normally accepted during a statement or in the period for questions afterwards.

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement, in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, regarding a meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in tourism sectoral format. The meeting was held via videoconference on 25 November 2020. I represented the Northern Ireland Executive and was accompanied by Minister Conor Murphy. The Irish Government were represented by Minister Catherine Martin TD, Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, who chaired the meeting. The statement has been agreed with Minister Murphy, and I make it on behalf of us both.

Ministers noted the efforts made to deal with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism industry and acknowledged the importance of continued cooperation across both jurisdictions to address the impact of COVID-19 as the sector begins to recover.

Ministers noted the activity undertaken by Tourism Ireland to prepare for the UK's withdrawal from the EU and that the Department for the Economy and the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media will continue to support Tourism Ireland in this regard.

The Council received a report from the chairperson of Tourism Ireland on the work of the board since the last NSMC tourism meeting. The report outlined the work of the board in developing, approving and monitoring the business plans for 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020 and the corporate plans for 2017-19 and 2020-22. Ministers also noted the progress made in delivering Tourism Ireland's performance goals from 2016 to February 2020 and its activity during the COVID-19 pandemic since March 2020. The NSMC noted the progress made in developing the COVID-19 recovery planning framework — restart, rebuild, redesign — to support the recovery of the tourism industry.

The Council approved Tourism Ireland's business plans and budgets grants for 2017, 2018 and 2019, and Tourism Ireland's 2017-19 corporate plan, which has been agreed by the sponsor Departments and Finance Ministers. Ministers noted that Tourism Ireland's business plan for 2020, including the budget grant provision, has been completed and submitted to sponsor Departments and will be brought to a future NSMC meeting for approval. The NSMC noted that Tourism Ireland has prepared an addendum to the 2020 business plan to guide its operations in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Council noted that the Tourism Ireland 2020-22 corporate plan has been approved at board level but is currently being reviewed in the light of COVID-19. An amended plan will be brought to a future NSMC meeting for approval. The Council noted the annual reports and accounts for the years 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018, which have been laid before the Northern Ireland Assembly and both Houses in Dublin.

Ministers noted that, on 17 December 2019, the Tourism Ireland board approved the granting of a general power of attorney as a short-term measure until further board directors were appointed by the NSMC and agreed that that power of attorney was to remain effective until the board meeting on 25 March 2020. The Council noted the continuation of the appointment of the chief executive officer of Tourism Ireland. It also noted recent developments in Tourism Ireland's staffing complement and that officials will take forward discussions on that and report back to a future meeting.

The NSMC agreed that officials from the Department for the Economy and the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media will review the existing work programme in the NSMC tourism sector and report back to the next meeting of the Council in that sector.

The Council agreed to meet again in tourism sectoral format in early 2021, on a date to be confirmed. I commend the statement to the Assembly.

Dr Archibald (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): I thank the Minister for her statement. Tourism is a very important sector in the North, and the pandemic has had a particularly hard impact on it. In the couple of months that the sector was able to open during the summer, there was a large increase in all-island tourism. In the light of that, what work is being done, particularly on marketing and the development of experience packages, because, even though we may have a vaccine online, next summer we are likely still to be dependent very much on domestic tourism to compensate for the loss of international visitors?

When do you expect the corporate plan for 2020-22 to be signed off?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for her questions. The marketing of Northern Ireland in the Republic of Ireland is, of course, a matter for Tourism Northern Ireland. We will take forward those issues with Tourism Northern Ireland.

You are also absolutely correct in saying that we have seen a 30% increase in visitors from the Republic of Ireland. That has been very important for supporting tourism businesses over what has been an extraordinary period for them. We will continue that marketing with Tourism Northern Ireland and will continue to use the Northern Ireland brand of "Embrace a Giant Spirit" in that market to encourage our neighbours in the Republic of Ireland to come and spend some time with us and support our tourism industry.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Minister for her statement. The tourism sector is a vitally important one for us in Northern Ireland. How can we use the centenary year of 2021 to promote Northern Ireland as a tourism destination across the world?

Mrs Dodds: I know that in the House there will be different views on Northern Ireland's centenary, but I think that we

can come together and use the 100 years of Northern Ireland to drive forward the new economy of Northern Ireland and not just commemorate, celebrate or whatever way we want to look at those 100 years of Northern Ireland but look forward to the new economy of Northern Ireland. Tourism has an absolutely pivotal part to play in that.

In the next year — vaccine and COVID permitting — we will drive forward our marketing campaigns in GB, because we see there as being a pivotal market and one of the easiest markets for a return to tourism activity. We will drive forward our campaign with Tourism Northern Ireland in the Republic of Ireland and will be working with international tour operators. There is no doubt that Northern Ireland's centenary will play a key role in that marketing.

Ms McLaughlin: Thank you, Minister, for your statement. Tourism is an extremely important sector in Derry and along the coastal route, the Wild Atlantic Way. Is the Minister working with the Irish Government to develop a continuation of the Wild Atlantic Way along the northern coast? The brand is so strong worldwide that we should be locking on to it in order to grow tourism in Northern Ireland.

10.45 am

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for her question. I agree that tourism is extremely important for the north-west of Northern Ireland; it is hugely important. Just last year, Tourism Northern Ireland launched its own brand for the promotion of Northern Ireland, and that is Embrace a Giant Spirit. We have been going into the GB marketplace with that brand, and Tourism Ireland delivered, in September and October, a very specific campaign in the GB marketplace around the "Embrace a Giant Spirit" brand. That is what we have been using when we have been having our meetings with buyers from outside and other world markets, and that is the brand that we will be using. No doubt, the Wild Atlantic Way is a well-known brand, but the brand for Northern Ireland is Embrace a Giant Spirit.

Dr Aiken: Thank you very much indeed, Minister, for your statement. I am aware that, in the past, Tourism Ireland has been accused of over-promoting Dublin Airport. Bearing in mind that the Northern Ireland Executive provide a third of Tourism Ireland's budget, what steps is the Minister taking so that at least our airports will be equally supported in the forthcoming years, as we deal with COVID and Brexit, as Dublin Airport seems to be? That seems to be an underlying, key element in what Tourism Ireland has been doing over the last couple of years.

Mrs Dodds: Of course, Dublin Airport is an important route for international visitors into Northern Ireland, but I believe that we can support and develop our own airports. I have had recent conversations with Belfast International about routes to North America, and I have had conversations with Belfast City about a wider network of routes throughout Europe. In Northern Ireland's centenary year, we would like to explore how we, with our national Government, can support and grow that network of routes for Northern Ireland, and I have already taken up that challenge with Grant Shapps, the Transport Minister.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, Minister, for your statement this morning. Up to now, EU funds have made a considerable contribution to the whole tourism project, particularly in

border counties. What action are you proposing to take to ensure that we maintain comparable amounts of support after Brexit, given the news yesterday from the Finance Minister that he expects the prosperity fund to have a deficit of some £70 million in year 1?

Mrs Dodds: Of course, tourism was not specifically supported under PEACE or INTERREG in the last iteration of those funds, although there were environmental programmes that support the tourism sector. I hope that the wider range of funding will support tourism, particularly in border counties. There is some very important work to be done on, for example, tourism on the waterways. On the Member's wider question, I am in the process of preparing a paper on this for the Executive. Our national Government promised us a like-for-like replacement for European funding. I would like to see that being honoured, and I will do what I can to make sure that it is honoured. Of course, European funding is very important for the Department for the Economy in terms of employability and providing support for social enterprise and those who are far from the labour market, and we need to continue that very important work.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for her statement. We are all very much aware of the challenges faced by the tourism sector in 2020. What more can Tourism Ireland do to bring life back to our major tourist attractions such as Titanic Belfast, the Ulster Folk Museum and the Antrim coast and, of course, to get our buses back up around Stormont to see what goes on?

Mrs Dodds: The Member makes a really important point. I have been working with Tourism Ireland to make sure that Northern Ireland, as a brand and as a destination, is part of its campaigning. I have also been looking at its research on the general tourism area.

Let me share with you some of the conclusions that Tourism Ireland has come to on the research and insights for tourism for the next year. All the research indicates that holidaymakers are still planning and dreaming of taking their next trip away and that that is an important part of people's personal planning for 2021. The most influential parts in that will be the roll-out of the vaccine and driving down COVID transmissions over the next number of months. Summer 2021 is seen as the most opportune time for people to take further breaks. You are absolutely right to say that we need to drive forward that spend in Northern Ireland.

Over the last number of months, a campaign has been rolled out since August, September and very early October, promoting Northern Ireland as a tourism destination in the GB market. We allocated three quarters of a million pounds to that campaign, which was done, as I said, under the "Embrace a Giant Spirit" banner. That ceased in early October because of increases in virus transmissions. That campaign included talking to travel journalists, influencers, having relationships and media partnerships with 'The Guardian', marketing activity in Scotland and social and traditional media marketing. Those are the important things that were carried out, and we will continue to do that work.

Ms Ennis: I thank the Minister for her statement. She will be aware that the Narrow Water bridge project is gaining pace. When that project is finally completed, it will act as a major catalyst to economic and tourism growth in the wider

south Down area. We need the region to go from one that people pass through to a region that people stay in. That can be achieved through extending Ireland's Ancient East marketing franchise to the north-east counties of Ireland, as opposed to the ambiguous nature of "Embrace a Giant Spirit". I am not even sure what that means.

Will the Minister commit to exploring that with Tourism Ireland and ensure that it will be on the agenda when tourism is discussed at the next NSMC on tourism?

Mrs Dodds: As someone who comes from south Down but who lives in upper Bann, I know that part of Northern Ireland very well. We need to drive tourism in that area forward, and I look forward to looking at, for example, Kilkeel harbour's plans for expansion as well as the Narrow Water bridge project. Those will drive tourism forward in the area, although real economic development would allow lorries to pass on the bridge, as opposed to the more limited form that it is in. Those are really important issues for south Down.

Tourism Northern Ireland has spent a considerable amount of time using the "Embrace a Giant Spirit" logo to sell Northern Ireland to international destinations. That has been going very well, and that is the logo that we will use for Northern Ireland in the future.

Mr Stalford: At least 15 presidents of the United States of America can trace their family back to the province of Ulster. The migration of Ulster Scots down the Shenandoah valley had a huge influence, particularly in shaping the development of country music. How does the Minister's Department intend to tap into not only the huge diaspora that exists in the United States but into the interest in music and the arts as a means of marketing Northern Ireland as a tourism destination?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. One of my first jobs in politics was to chair the tourism committee of Belfast City Council when we set up the Belfast-Nashville partnership. I still think that that is a very strong partnership for not just Belfast but wider Northern Ireland, given, as you say, the general interest in music and the historic connections with the area.

The greatest thing that we can do is to increase our connectivity to the area, not just for tourism but for business. One of our greatest FDI partners in Northern Ireland is North America, so I would really like to see connectivity enhanced. That is why I said, in response to Mr Aiken, that those are the things that we would need to explore to take full advantage of for the future, particularly in Northern Ireland's centenary year.

Ms Dolan: The importance of all-Ireland tourism has been mentioned, but the importance of all-Ireland tourism to Fermanagh is of the utmost importance. Initiatives such as the Shannon-Erne Waterway have provided a unique opportunity for visitors to travel through Leitrim, Fermanagh and Cavan by boat. Minister, you mentioned the potential of waterways. Have any commitments been made regarding further investment in the Shannon-Erne Waterway as a major tourism initiative, particularly in the linkages between Clones and Upper Lough Erne, which were set out in New Decade, New Approach?

Mrs Dodds: The Member asks a specific question, as well as making a general point. We can cooperate with our neighbours in the Republic of Ireland to ensure the

exchange of tourists, which is important for the economies of both jurisdictions on this island. I look forward to working to ensure that that happens. As someone who has Fermanagh links, I understand the importance of that to the county. It is hugely important.

We have just completed our first NSMC meeting after I do not know how many years — I think that 2016 was the last NSMC meeting — and those issues will come forward in due course.

Mr O'Toole: Minister, the Irish pub is critical to our international tourist offer on both sides of the border, but because of COVID-19, pubs everywhere, particularly on the island of Ireland, are in terminal crisis. What thought is the Minister giving to a long-term rescue and revitalisation plan for our pub industry? We have to be realistic in the next couple of months, so what is the Minister doing for the long term, with her colleagues in the South, to think about rescuing and revitalising pubs on the island? Furthermore, will she speak to the Communities Minister about licensing reform, including reform of the surrender principle, which could mean that we lose a load of pubs in the coming months if they do not feel able to reopen?

Mrs Dodds: The Member is quite right that licensing is a matter for the Minister for Communities, but that is something that we can look at together.

With regard to the wider pub trade in Northern Ireland, we all know that pubs have been enormously impacted on by COVID-19. As I have said many times in the House, no amount of grants, money or funding that we can provide is enough to sustain them in this repeated round of closures. I am finalising — it should be ready for the Executive on Thursday — the grant that will look at traditional pubs that have been closed, virtually continuously, since March. In the long term, revitalising our tourism and hospitality industries is the way that we will be able to help pubs to sustain themselves.

In 2019 in Northern Ireland, tourism and hospitality contributed about £1 billion to the economy and employed about 70,000 people. That is an enormous contribution to the overall economy, so driving forward tourism will help our hospitality industry to get back on its feet.

Mrs Barton: Minister, thank you for your statement and some of your answers. I heard your party colleague refer to tourism in a number of places in Northern Ireland. However, he forgot to mention his home county.

Minister, can you inform the House how you intend to market the beauty of the lakes in Fermanagh, especially to get trade that is coming into Belfast to move west into Fermanagh and, further along, to Donegal?

11.00 am

Mrs Dodds: Fermanagh is indeed a beautiful county and is very important to the tourism industry in Northern Ireland. I was recently down in one of the large sites in Fermanagh overlooking a lake, and it was absolutely beautiful and wonderful to see it in all its glory.

We need to make sure that tourism covers all of Northern Ireland and is not concentrated on just the wider Belfast region or the north coast. We need to do two different things. It is about driving the product and the destination of tourism. We will always associate Fermanagh with the fishing, the waterways, the golf and the wonderful

hospitality. In my home town of Banbridge in Upper Bann, we will offer a new tourism product next year with the opening of the 'Game of Thrones' exhibition and tour, which will be world-renowned. We need to develop product in the different regions and then try to maximise our audience with our promotional activity.

Mr McGuigan: Minister, I noted in the press yesterday that the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media in the South, Catherine Martin, responded positively when asked by a TD if she would consider extending an invitation to Ireland to the organisers of the Tour de France. Minister, I hope that you will be aware that I submitted a question for written answer on 15 October — nine weeks ago — which I resubmitted on 2 November, asking whether, given the success of the Giro d'Italia Grande Partenza in 2014, you would work with your ministerial counterpart in the South, Catherine Martin, whom you met at this meeting, to put together a bid to bring the Tour de France to Ireland, in particular to my constituency along the north coast and the glens of Antrim. Minister, given that major events have the potential to drive participation in sport and contribute to trade, tourism, business, community pride, community engagement and economic growth, will you give a commitment that you will look at the issue and work towards bringing the Tour de France back to Ireland?

Mrs Dodds: There are a number of initiatives around at the moment. There is an initiative around a five-nations approach to the soccer and rugby World Cups. As you rightly said, we had an enormously successful time with the Giro d'Italia in Northern Ireland, and we have had contact with it again. We would be happy to look at whatever is proposed in relation to the Tour de France. These are enormous, world-renowned events that have a lasting impact. We need to take events tourism forward. We had an enormously successful Irish Open golf tournament at Galgorm in Ballymena, in September, and I look forward to engaging with the Royal and Ancient with a view to bringing the tournament back to Northern Ireland. Events tourism is hugely important. However, to strike a note of reality for the House, events tourism requires huge financial support. We would have to work as a whole Executive to ensure that the financial support is there to help to encourage events tourism.

Mr Allister: I return to the question of the centenary. Unfortunately, much of the promotion has to rely on Tourism Ireland by virtue of the subordination of Tourism NI. Why, then, is there no mention in the statement of discussions about the centenary? In checking what the board of Tourism Ireland's attitude might be to such matters, I ask why the board minutes do not appear on its website.

Mrs Dodds: The Member makes an excellent point and one that I have made to Tourism Ireland. That is why I am still waiting for the revised plans.

Mr Speaker: That concludes questions on the statement. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two.

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

North/South Ministerial Council: Trade and Business Development

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister for the Economy that she wishes to make an additional statement.

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, with your permission, I wish to make a statement in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 about a meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in trade and business development sectoral format. The meeting was held in Armagh by videoconference on 25 November 2020. Minister Conor Murphy MLA and I represented the Northern Ireland Executive. The Irish Government were represented by Leo Varadkar, Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment and Tánaiste. The statement has been agreed with Minister Murphy, and I make it on behalf of us both.

The Council noted the impact of the pandemic on society and on the economy in both jurisdictions and the measures put in place by both Administrations to support communities and businesses affected by the crisis and to assist economic recovery. Ministers welcomed the productive cooperation between both Administrations and InterTradelreland on support for businesses facing challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic and noted that InterTradelreland will continue to provide support to assist businesses in coping with the challenges posed by the pandemic, particularly in the areas of supply chain management, health and safety and human resources.

Ministers noted the work being carried out to prepare for the end of the transition period and the implications for cooperation in the trade and business development sector arising from the UK's withdrawal.

Ministers welcomed the overall achievements of InterTradelreland from 2016 to 2020 and recognised the valuable contribution that it has made through its trade and development programmes for small and medium-sized companies trading across the border and in both jurisdictions. Ministers commended InterTradelreland for its work in helping businesses to prepare for the UK withdrawal from the EU and for its research on the issue. The Council recognised the impact of the innovation and technology programmes run by InterTradelreland and its support for building relationships between companies and researchers.

The Council approved InterTradelreland's business plans, budgets and grants for 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020 and its 2017-19 corporate plan, which have been completed in accordance with agreed guidance issued by the Department of Finance and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and agreed by the sponsor Departments and Finance Ministers. Ministers noted InterTradelreland's annual reports and accounts for 2016, 2017 and 2018, which have been certified by the Comptrollers and Auditors General and laid before the Northern Ireland Assembly and both Houses of the Oireachtas.

Ministers asked sponsor Departments to consider InterTradelreland's staffing complement, in consultation with the NSMC secretariat and the Finance Departments,

and to provide an update to the next trade and business development meeting. The Council approved the appointment of Martin McVicar as vice chairman, Michael Hanley and Richard Kennedy, and the re-appointment of Florence Bayliss, Adrienne McGuinness and Micheál Briody, to the board of InterTradelreland.

Ministers noted the progress and current position of North/South collaboration in relation to the Horizon 2020 programme and the achievements and current position of the US-Ireland R&D Partnership. Ministers noted that InterTradelreland will continue to work with relevant stakeholders, including sponsor Departments, to explore new ways, both financial and non-financial, to maintain and strengthen research and innovation collaboration across both jurisdictions.

Ministers noted that the process for appointing a chief executive officer to InterTradelreland has commenced, using the existing approved process and following consultation with the NSMC joint secretariat and the respective Finance Departments.

Finally, Ministers thanked Aidan Gough and Margaret Hearty for their work in successfully leading InterTradelreland, as designated officer and assistant designated officer respectively, since they were appointed to those positions in September 2017. The Council agreed to meet again in trade and business development format in spring 2021. I commend the statement to the Assembly.

Dr Archibald (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): I thank the Minister for her statement. In it, she said that it was noted that work was carried out to prepare for the end of the transition period. A couple of weeks ago, the Committee for the Economy received a briefing from officials on business preparedness. We were told that InterTradelreland's all-island business monitor for quarter 3 showed that only 9% of firms had plans in place to mitigate the impacts of Brexit. In the light of that, what is being done by both the Department and InterTradelreland to help businesses to prepare following the announcements last week on the protocol and the ongoing lack of clarity about the overall trade deal?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for her question. InterTradelreland has a number of programmes that it has been using to help those businesses that it works with to prepare for the end of the transition period. That, as well as the work that Invest Northern Ireland is doing, has been important in helping businesses to prepare.

Just so that we could have a little bit of thought about that, I printed off, for the week beginning 7 December, the kind of things that, for example, Invest Northern Ireland was doing with businesses. They include working with businesses in the chemicals industry, fisheries and the legal sphere; looking at authorised economic operator status, the export of live animals and animal products, the moving of animal products from 1 January, inward processing relief, customs warehousing, and the trading and moving of goods in and out of Northern Ireland; and providing a large range of information and webinar support to businesses just last week.

Of course, the Member is absolutely correct: last week's announcement will have helped significantly, particularly around the movement of goods from Northern Ireland to Great Britain and the fact that there will not be excess paperwork and bureaucracy. That still leaves the issue of the

Trader Support Service and the hope that it will work; that enough firms in Northern Ireland have signed up, as well as enough firms in Great Britain, to make sure that it works. It also includes the small derogations for a brief and limited period. Those are real, live issues that need resolution. It has avoided a hard stop but not provided that resolution.

11.15 am

Mr Dunne: I thank the Member for her statement. We all recognise the need for continuous support to help business recovery during the pandemic. Those of us who have been around for a while recognise the good work of InterTradelreland, but what is being done to ensure that there is no overlap in the efforts of InterTradelreland and Invest NI in supporting businesses?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. He is right about the work that InterTradelreland has been doing. I draw the House's attention to two particular aspects of InterTradelreland's work. The E-Merge programme provides consultancy support of £2,500 to help businesses to develop online sales, marketing and e-commerce solutions. From April to June, it supported 140 businesses. The next phase of the programme supported 270 businesses. That made available almost £1 million of support to those businesses. There is also the emergency business solutions programme. Those are the kinds of things that InterTradelreland is doing. It mainly works with much smaller businesses that are dipping their toe into the export market by doing cross-border exchanges. That is the value of the InterTradelreland work, whereas Invest NI's work tends to be wider, larger and focused on a more international audience.

Ms McLaughlin: What practical steps has the Department taking in conjunction with the Irish Government to maximise the opportunities that the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland has given us?

Mrs Dodds: There is always room for cooperation. However, the Member should remember that, in the search for FDI, the Irish Government are our competitors. That is an important distinction. I do not say that in a political sense; it is a practical, economic reality. The protocol has given us trade that will flow between us and the Republic of Ireland and, indeed, between us and the rest of Europe, but it has given us significant disruptions to trade within the United Kingdom's internal market. I could not and would not support the protocol because I believe the interruption of the United Kingdom's internal market to be wholly wrong. However, I am also a realist, and the House voted to instigate the protocol, and we must ensure that we help businesses in Northern Ireland to navigate this complex scenario as best we can.

Dr Aiken: I declare an interest as the ex-chief executive of the British Irish Chamber of Commerce. The Minister talked about the success of InterTradelreland, but the reality for many small and medium enterprises that have been involved with InterTradelreland is that, in the past, it was seen to be especially bureaucratic and not particularly helpful in their development. Come 1 January, we will be through Brexit, and the protocol will be in place. Will she therefore commit to InterTradelreland refocusing its present role of supporting the move towards Brexit to one of promoting Northern Ireland businesses, particularly those in the small and medium-sized businesses?

Mrs Dodds: I am sorry to hear that the Member thinks that some of the processes of InterTradelreland are overly bureaucratic. If he has details of specific instances that I can take up with InterTradelreland, I will be very happy to do so.

We will all need to leave Brexit behind and move forward to promoting Northern Ireland as a really good place to do business, to live, to work, to bring up a family and to have a really good all-round education. That is what I will be doing in the next year.

I look forward, along with InterTradelreland, Invest Northern Ireland and, indeed, the wider Executive, to being able to get back out into the wider international sphere to attend some of the fairs, particularly in Dubai and elsewhere in the Middle East, explore new markets for Northern Ireland and try to get that side of Northern Ireland's promotional activity going again.

Mr Dickson: Minister, I am pleased that you noted the progress made on, and the current position of, North/South collaboration through the Horizon 2020 programme. Given that that is an EU programme, what action are you going to take to make sure that such research cooperation can be continued on a cross-border basis before those whom you supported consign the EU to the scrapheap, along with the funds and support that we have received up until now?

Mrs Dodds: I am not going to bite at the last remark, you will be happy to know.

Research and development and innovation for Northern Ireland firms are really important elements of how we build the economy. I have some brilliant examples of innovation and creativity by Northern Ireland firms, even during the COVID pandemic, such as how they linked up with our universities to produce goods that go to market in the current situation. Innovation and research and development are therefore the way forward. They will build the economy of the future, which is very important.

The United Kingdom would be wise to become a partner in Horizon 2020 and its successor programmes if it can prove that it is value for money for it to do so. Horizon 2020 and its forerunner, FP7, are successful programmes, but they are focused on very large businesses, and that has been one of their downfalls. One of the successes of FP7 was that one of its greatest benefactors was Israel, which, the last time that I looked, was not in the European Union. That kind of research, collaboration and buy-in to the programme is perfectly possible and feasible, and our Government have said that it is something that they would like to do.

One of the other programmes that we are supporting is the US-Ireland R&D Partnership. The Member will probably have noticed the number of COVID-related joint research funding applications that we submitted yesterday. As I said in my statement, COVID knows no barriers, so, in our search for solutions, we should not either.

Mr Middleton: The Chair of the Economy Committee mentioned the officials who came to the Committee and raised the issue of the low levels of preparedness of businesses and firms, primarily because many of them have been focused on the COVID-19 pandemic, and rightly so. Minister, what engagement have you had with counterparts across the UK to ensure that businesses are

prepared, particularly for the disastrous east-west trading implications of the protocol?

Mrs Dodds: Those are huge issues for Northern Ireland. Fundamentally, the House should remember, when it thinks about the protocol and the interruption to the UK's internal market that it represents, which our Prime Minister instigated, that GB is Northern Ireland's biggest market by far. We sell more in the GB market than we do in the Republic of Ireland, the rest of Europe and the rest of the world put together, so any interruptions to that business will be very serious and very difficult. The announcements last week did help us with NI to GB trade and also helped us somewhat with tariffs. However, the best thing that can happen is that we have that zero-tariff, zero-quota deal so that we are able to trade freely in all directions; between GB and Northern Ireland, North/South and with the rest of Europe. That is massively important.

I took the opportunity last week to talk to the Northern Ireland Office Minister, Mr Robin Walker, about not just Northern Ireland's centenary — we are looking at promotional work for Northern Ireland in really important trade markets — but the £400 million funding that was announced. We should have a synergy between what the Northern Ireland Office is going to look at with that funding and what the Executive are looking at so that we can reskill and rebuild for the future.

Mr O'Dowd: The Minister will be aware that the latest NISRA figures show that more businesses are trading North/South than to anywhere else, including Britain, and that the value of that trade is growing year on year. What discussions has the Minister had with her Dublin counterparts about protecting the supply chain and the intermediary trades that are involved in that trade to ensure that our businesses are not disrupted as a result of Brexit and that that growth area continues to grow?

Mrs Dodds: Of course, the Member is right that more businesses trade North/South, but the largest impact and the largest volume is with GB. We need to remember that. I am hoping that we will be able to grow our markets North/South, east-west and throughout Europe and use the new trade agreements that the UK has signed to explore potential in those markets. I was really encouraged last week when I spoke to the red meat industry; the first exports of beef to America were from Northern Ireland. Those are huge opportunities for Northern Ireland in wider international markets. We must take those as part of the new opportunity that we will have in the next number of years.

Mr O'Toole: The Minister is right: Brexit will lead to North/South and east-west disruption to Northern Ireland's trade. Whatever about the scant detail in the statement, Brexit will, unfortunately, cost jobs and lead to severe disruption. Since the referendum in 2016, and indeed the supply and confidence arrangement in June 2017, the DUP is the sole party in the Assembly that has had the power to force the whole UK into a soft Brexit and a closer relationship between the UK and the European Union, which would have been in the interests of not just Northern Ireland but all businesses and workers in the UK. Since the DUP did not use that power and has left us at the precipice of chaos, would the Economy Minister like to take this opportunity to express regret for the actions of her party? Indeed, would she like to apologise to the people and

businesses of Northern Ireland for the situation that we face?

Mrs Dodds: I —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask the Minister to resume her seat. I generally allow leeway, and I do not mind back-and-forward; indeed, when I am not in the Chair, I engage in back-and-forward myself and I enjoy a bit of sport, but I remind Members that, when they ask a question, they should, in so far as is possible, try to relate it directly to the content of the statement that the Minister has given to the House. If the Minister wishes to respond, I am happy to let her do so.

Mrs Dodds: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I am going to resist getting into too detailed a response, except to say that I thought that Sinn Féin was the only party in the House to rewrite history; I now discover that the SDLP is at it as well. What we need for Northern Ireland going forward is the ease of movement of goods between us and our largest market in GB, and between it and us. That is fundamental to the Northern Ireland economy and to jobs and families in Northern Ireland. That is something that I have worked at since I became a Minister. We had some easement of that last week with the agreements around the protocol, but I would much rather that we did not have to do that at all, that the UK's internal market remained intact and that we could trade as a third country with the EU on that basis.

11.30 am

Mrs Barton: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. Will she clarify the support that transport firms have been given for transporting goods back and forth between Northern Ireland and the Republic and east-west and west-east to ensure that there is least disruption?

Mrs Dodds: The Member will be aware that transport is a matter for my Executive colleague the Minister for Infrastructure. However, if the Member looks at the things that Invest NI has been doing, she will see that significant work has been done on transport.

I will focus on one area of transport that is very important for Northern Ireland's economy, which is ensuring that Northern Ireland lorries taking goods to the south of England that prefer to use the Dublin to Holyhead route should be free to do so, given that Dublin would also like to use the transition agreement to allow lorries to cross GB for access to the EU. That is a really important issue for Northern Ireland hauliers and firms because around 20% of our goods go to market in GB in that way.

Mr Allister: The statement says:

"Ministers asked Sponsor Departments to consider InterTradeIreland's staffing complement".

Does that mean more staff and more cost for InterTradeIreland? Given the perilous state of our trade and the threats to it with our main market, would it not be better now to refocus and create an "InterTradeUK"? Would the Minister work for and support such a body?

Mrs Dodds: The Member knows that to consider something is not to consent to it. That is exactly what the position is on staffing. Those issues will, no doubt, be discussed further down the line, given finance or direction of travel on the matter.

Yes; the Member and I are absolutely in agreement that trade with our biggest market — the internal UK market — is the most valuable thing for Northern Ireland. We must protect it and allow it to grow in future years. If the Member wants to write to me with his proposals for such a body, I will be happy to look at it and take it forward.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions on the ministerial statement. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments. If you are leaving the Chamber, please make sure that you clean your surfaces and what have you. Thank you.

Assembly Business

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I have an item of business that I have to transact. Members will have in front of them the revised indicative timings for today's business, which show that the Minister of Education was to be on his feet at roughly 11.35 am. It is now 11.34 am, so I think that I can anticipate the response that I will get.

The statement arrived in the Speaker's Office at 11.18 am. Standing Order 18A(2) requires that a written copy of a statement be made available at least half an hour before it is delivered in the Chamber. That has not happened in this instance, but, as I said, I suspect I know what the explanation will be. Therefore, before calling the Minister, I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 10.45 am in order to allow 10 minutes for Members to familiarise themselves with the statement [*Interruption.*] Mr O'Toole, do you want to make a point of order?

Mr O'Toole: Pardon me, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I did not mean to do it from a sedentary position. I believe that you said 10.45 am, but it will be 11.45 am.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The record is corrected. We will return at 11.45 am, so that Members have the chance to read the statement before questions.

Mr Lyttle: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I may have missed your initial remarks, but this applies to two back-to-back statements effectively. We are getting 10 minutes to read two significant statements.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I will tell you what I will do: we will have 10 minutes for the first one and five minutes for the next one. All right? Grand. Ten minutes, folks. The sitting is suspended for 10 minutes.

The sitting was suspended at 11.36 am and resumed at 11.45 am.

Ministerial Statements

Summer 2021 Examinations: Contingency Arrangements

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order, Members. I have received notice from the Minister of Education that he wishes to make a statement. Before I call the Minister, it is my obligation under Standing Order 18A(2) to ask him to state to the House the reasons for the statement arriving with less than 30 minutes' prior notice.

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I apologise to the House for the late arrival of the statement. From the original indicative timings, I had anticipated that the statement would happen a little later in the day, and I have been caught slightly unawares and missed the deadline. I have been around this place long enough to know that timings will alter, but I humbly apologise to the House and, indeed, all Members for missing the deadline. My intention had been to brief the Chair and the Deputy Chair of the Committee prior to the statement. Obviously, because of the timings, that was not possible. I put on record that, subsequent to today's statements, officials and I will be available to the Chair and the Deputy Chair to discuss any details that are not drawn out by questions. I am happy to meet them after the statements.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I thank the Minister for that, and it is now on the record. I call the Minister of Education, Mr Peter Weir, to make his statement.

Mr Weir: I welcome the opportunity to make a statement to the Assembly. Today, I am announcing a further package of comprehensive measures, which, I believe, will ensure fair, inclusive and flexible public examinations in 2021. As I have said on a number of occasions, exams will go ahead but will be underpinned by contingencies for all scenarios. However, it is not business as usual. I know that our students are facing unprecedented disruption to their learning, which is why our qualifications will be different next year and why I will be taking exceptional steps to ensure that they are as fair as possible.

Over the past few weeks, my officials have been working closely with the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) to develop wide-ranging measures that will best support students in these unprecedented times. In doing so, they have engaged with the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), school leaders, teachers and, very importantly, young people to seek their views on the way forward. I believe that the changes that I am announcing will provide young people with the clarity and confidence that they need to achieve success. The changes include not only more generous grading across all qualifications but significant reductions in the content that will be assessed in comparison with a normal year. I am conscious that our young people have faced incredible challenges as a result of the pandemic. In making these far-reaching adaptations, we will ensure that their lives are not defined or held back by the disruption that they have experienced in 2020.

I start by publicly thanking each and every teacher, school leader, governor and all the vital support staff who work in and around our schools for their incredible efforts. They have dealt with a wide range of difficult and exceptional issues. Thanks to those efforts, our children have been

able to return to school and continue their education. In particular, I pay tribute to the work of the many dedicated teachers who continue to go above and beyond to give every pupil, whether in school or at home, a high quality education.

I recognise that this is a difficult period for young people. Many of them have been personally impacted by the pandemic and are particularly concerned about how there can be fairness in the examination process. I trust that the changes that I am announcing today will go some considerable way to reassure those young people that we will continue to support them and help them to succeed.

I reiterate: I will not be cancelling examinations. I have been clear about that over the past number of months, and my position has not changed. Indeed, with the COVID vaccine being rolled out across the country, I am confident that examinations will be delivered in summer 2021. The recent November series went extremely well and heralded a successful return to public examinations. I have heard the calls from some for me to cancel examinations. Those voices have been loud and clear, but I have also heard the quieter voices of those who are equally as anxious that exams go ahead and have urged me to stand firm. While some have called for centre-assessed grades — I entirely understand their position — I have equally heard from many who feel that the cancellation of exams will put school leaders and teachers under terrible pressure and put schools at risk of numerous appeals and litigation.

In recent days, I have also heard from many young people who want exams to go ahead.

Just last week, my officials met groups of sixth-formers across a range of different school types, in different sectors and in selective and non-selective schools, and many were not in favour of replacing exams with centre assessments. They expressed concern about objectivity and fairness and wanted the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and skills through the examination process. I am also conscious that our focus needs to be on the well-being of our children and young people. Cancelling exams would lead to further months of continuous testing, adding to the stress and anxiety experienced by pupils; in effect, it would be the worst of all worlds. That point was very well articulated by the sixth-formers.

Some other jurisdictions that are purporting to avoid exams are instead running them by the back door. In Wales, young people will face externally-set assessments, and they will be taken earlier than usual. The harsh reality is that there is no alternative to assessment or examinations in one form or another. The education system in 2021 must ensure that the cycle of over-testing is broken. I know that numerous concerns have been raised about what is happening on the ground with pupils. Over-testing is not healthy and is not in the interests of those pupils. That time could be better spent on concentrating on teaching the specification and preparing them for progression to the next stage of their education. With exams, pupils know that they will be assessed, the form and timing of that assessment, and they will be able to focus their learning on revision and progression.

As Education Minister, it is my job to weigh up these differing views, to consider all the evidence and to make a decision that, I think, is in the best interests of all the young

people in our schools. It would be easy sometimes to make a seemingly populist decision, but being in government is about making the right decision in the interests of all. While, on the face of it, simply cancelling exams may seem like a good approach as we sit here today, I do not believe that it is the right longer-term approach for our young people. The best way to ensure fairness and comparable standards across all schools is to have a common assessment tool that is applied under the same conditions in every school and is marked externally to ensure fairness.

I genuinely believe that the experience of summer 2020 has shown us that exams remain the fairest method of assessing and awarding qualifications. We saw right across the UK and, indeed, in much of western Europe that, despite every effort and good intention, other forms of assessment are likely to be more inequitable. Cancelling exams would undoubtedly lead to different sorts of anxieties for young people and would put incredible additional pressures on schools. Therefore, I believe that it is in the best interests of pupils and schools that public examinations go ahead. Exams are the best way of giving young people the opportunity to show what they can do, and that is why it is so important that they take place next summer.

I will turn to standards. First, I want to reassure all our young people that we will take a generous approach to grading, similar to that recently announced in England. These are extraordinary circumstances in which you have had to complete your qualifications. In recognition of the challenges that this cohort has faced and is facing, I have decided that grading will carry forward the overall generosity and standards of 2020. That will ensure that the 2021 cohort are treated fairly, relative to their 2020 peers. Students will be awarded more generous grades in line with last summer's significantly improved results. Schools can be confident that my Department and CCEA have the tools to make summer 2021 exams fair and that young people in Northern Ireland will not be disadvantaged. The aim should be to achieve a level playing field for all candidates right across the UK.

I have also agreed that the collection and publication of school-level outcomes through the summary of annual examination results should be suspended for a further year in recognition of the significant disruption experienced by schools. The 2021 examination outcomes will not be used for accountability purposes. I want our school leaders and teachers to feel supported and confident as they prepare young people for public examination. That will lead to collaboration and cohesion across our system rather than competition.

In October, I announced a range of changes to CCEA qualifications, making a range of public health adaptations to ensure safety in delivery and reducing the number of examinations that pupils will take. I have also agreed that CCEA should delay the start of the summer exam series by one week to provide more time for preparation. In the October announcement, I said that GCSE candidates would be able to omit assessment of one unit of each of their qualifications, up to a maximum of 40% of each qualification. Taken as a total package, this represents a considerable reduction in the assessment burden and goes significantly further than adaptations in England, where 100% of the course will be assessed. Recognising

the difficult public health circumstances and continued disruption, I have decided that pupils taking GCSE maths in January and June 2021 will be provided with additional support materials. These support sheets will relieve candidates of the burden of memorising all the information that they would normally have to memorise. I feel that they will be more prepared and more confident as a result, and this aligns with the recent announcement in England.

Today, I am also announcing significant changes to AS-level and A-level qualifications, which will sit alongside the earlier amendments to GCSEs. In recognition of the challenges of studying for level 3 qualifications in such disrupted times, I am taking unprecedented steps to reduce the assessment across all these qualifications. Young people will have the opportunity to omit up to 60% of their AS or A2 assessment. In a significant number of subjects, this will mean taking only one unit of assessment. The key requirement is that the unit or units assessed must comprise at least 40% of the AS or A2 qualification. At the centre of this reduction is choice. Our schools and colleges will choose which unit or units of assessment their pupils will take. Our young people will be assessed on topics and content about which they feel most confident and for which they are well prepared, allowing them to demonstrate their skills and knowledge to the highest possible level. In line with the emphasis on choice, individual candidates will be able, should they so desire, to take all their AS or A-level units.

I believe that these changes will relieve much of the stress that our young people are experiencing. The approach will allow them to focus on key topics for a small number of examinations whilst enjoying teaching and learning in other areas of the qualifications that will not be examined. This is a flexible and unique solution. It is designed to reflect the differing approaches to and experiences of teaching and learning across schools and colleges whilst retaining the rigour of external assessment that universities have told us is so important. Our universities have told us that, while preferring regulated, external assessment, they will take a sensible and pragmatic approach in these extremely difficult circumstances. The solution that I have presented today provides assurances to universities that the outcomes in Northern Ireland will be robust and comparable between learners whilst recognising the need to reduce the burden and safeguard the well-being and mental health of our young people. I will write to schools, pupils and parents tomorrow setting out my decisions and providing more details. I am confident that the changes announced today will help all learners to build their understanding and knowledge of these important qualifications.

There will be a reserve exam series for A2 candidates who miss exams through illness or self-isolating. This will remove any doubts or uncertainties and ensure that every young person has the opportunity to progress to education, employment or training in 2021. The reserve series will run in early July, immediately after the main A-level series. The timing is to ensure that results are available to the system and to pupils who wish to move into tertiary education. The results will therefore be available to every pupil at the same time. CCEA is working to develop a process that facilitates the award of grades to candidates who legitimately miss GCSE exams due to, for example, illness or self-isolation, thereby facilitating their progression.

I turn to the mitigations for different levels of disruption. Disruption to learning has not been uniform across Northern Ireland or even within schools and families. Last week, my officials met young people who had experienced vastly different levels of disruption. Some had missed significant periods of school; others had missed none. First, I reassure candidates who have been ill during the academic year that CCEA's existing special consideration process will continue to be available and will operate as it has done in previous years. In addition, a process to consider COVID-specific special circumstances for young people will have to be developed. I will therefore explore the possibility of a COVID allowance or tariff for young people who have missed a significant number of days of face-to-face teaching due to self-isolation. This will allow specific account to be taken of the variations in disrupted learning since September. To be clear, I reiterate that this will be separate from and additional to the existing special consideration scheme.

I have asked CCEA to work closely with other awarding bodies to develop a UK-wide approach to any potential scheme. It is, as with all of these things, important that our students are not disadvantaged in that respect compared with their counterparts in other jurisdictions.

12.00 noon

In conclusion, I thank the House for the opportunity to address it on these important issues. My Department is working hard to make sure that we take into account the effects of the pandemic; to make the best contingency arrangements that we can; and to make sure that exam results will be fair and command public confidence. Fairness to pupils is my priority, and it will continue to be at the forefront of every decision that is taken in the lead-up to exams next summer. Exams are the fairest way of judging students' performance, so they will go ahead underpinned by contingency measures developed in partnership with the sector. In these exceptional times, I have taken exceptional and unprecedented steps to ensure that our young people are supported to progress in education, training or employment.

Let me make one further commitment to our students. Across GCSEs, AS levels and A levels, candidates will be awarded a grade based on their performance in the units of assessment that they have taken. Their work will determine their final marks and grades. There will not be, this year, the use of algorithms or anything that goes beyond that. Again, I commend all our school leaders and teachers for their efforts in these difficult times.

In closing, to all those in our schools — staff, pupils and their families — at the end of what has been a very difficult year, I send my best wishes for a quiet and restful Christmas, and I wish every success to all our students in 2021.

Mr Lyttle: The Education Minister's inaction, indecision and U-turn caused grading chaos in 2020, so we are entitled to expect more than a statement that was late in its arrival and vague in its commitments. The statement mentioned generous grading, reduced content, support sheets, a COVID allowance tariff and a UK-wide approach, but it was without any great detail on any of those commitments. Other jurisdictions have taken decisive action to cancel or modify significantly examinations in 2021, owing to the unprecedented disruption to learning. In

the week commencing 12 October, approximately 50,000 children were unable to attend school. We know that some pupils are on their fourth period of self-isolation, and many staff are in self-isolation as well. What level of COVID-related pupil absence is the Education Minister willing to accept before introducing moderated teacher grading and centre-assessed grading for 2021?

Mr Weir: I wish the Member a very happy Christmas as well.

I will respond to some of the issues that he has raised. He mentioned other jurisdictions. Scotland has made a decision to use some form of assessment but has not come up with the details of that. Wales's position is one of flux, where it is effectively introducing examinations by the back door but has still to hammer out a reasonable level of detail. England has made some announcements but, again, still has to sketch out some of the details. As I have said, we also need to make sure that none of our students is in any way disadvantaged compared with other students.

The Member mentioned the levels of absenteeism, and the position is that there are always a number of pupils who will be missing at any particular time. He mentioned a particular week: in that week, for those whose absence was related to the COVID situation, 2-4% of the school population were isolating because of some level of illness, while another 5%, roughly speaking, were not there because they were isolating because of contacts. That was the peak point. There will be other students who were missing during that time for a range of reasons. Let us remember, however, that, although it is important that the situation be taken into account, those pupils were receiving remote learning and other learning throughout. Let us not create a situation in which we simply equate students' not physically being in school on a particular day with not working hard at home. I want to make that fairly clear.

The Member mentioned centre-assessed grading. Anywhere that that has happened, grades have been mitigated. Again, that creates one of the problems that we saw in 2020, because it is not fair across the system. Schools will take different approaches. Schools may well have a situation in which they give particular grades to their pupils, knowing that they are likely to be reduced. We would be faced again with the spectacle of a situation where a pupil gets a grade that differs from what their school gave them — generally speaking, it will be lower — and that will create a level of conflict. It is also the case that, to reach that grade — this is one of the dangers that could happen in the system — you will have six months of continuous assessment where pupils feel that they are under the microscope every day. There is no route out where there will be no examinations. The alternative will be a range of examinations, possibly on a weekly basis, by schools, because they will feel concerned that a disgruntled parent might try to sue them, for example.

We need something that is recognised clearly and has the support of universities but is also fair to students. I appreciate that, in current circumstances, getting something that is fair across the board is difficult to achieve. If you make a move in one direction, it is maybe fairer for some and less fair for others. The mitigations that I have put forward go further than what is in England. They also avoid, quite frankly, the confusion in Wales — they will have external examinations but will just not call them external examinations — or the uncertainty that will

happen in Scotland, which, in any event, has a completely different examination system. This is the fairest way forward.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for this work, for all the hard work that has gone into the preparation of the statement and, indeed, for the initiatives that he is prepared to undertake. Can I just seek total clarity? Minister, you mentioned consultation in your statement and said that your officials had worked extensively with CCEA and that you had engaged with the Education and Training Inspectorate, school leaders, teachers and, importantly, as you said, the young people or pupils themselves to seek a way forward. Will you clarify that the new assessments at AS and A2 level will effectively be reduced by up to 60%?

Mr Weir: Yes, extensive work has gone on. Obviously, because of the nature of this, it has had to go on in the background with CCEA and the ETI. We have worked with a group of school principals and stakeholders drawn from a range of schools of widely differing nature in terms of sector but also in terms of whether they are selective or non-selective and whether they go to sixth form or not. There are a range of things. This has been teased out on a number of occasions and discussed back and forward, making sure of what is doable. There is no point in producing some idyllic solution that then cannot be implemented on that basis. Also, significantly, last week, my officials met confidentially within a number of schools to talk through with the sixth-formers what they saw as the options. Again, there was strong support for this type of route in connection with that.

The issue is — this should not be forgotten — that, when talking about A levels and AS levels, we are putting a minimum standard of a 40% floor. Some schools will take a different view of which units they would like to see assessed. We appreciate that some will have had different levels of disruption at different times of the year. They will want to ensure that the units that they take will be ones that relate most directly to their circumstances and their children. That will lift the burden of up to 60% of the assessment from children at A level and AS level. There is a different arrangement for GCSE, where units have been taken out at a slightly earlier stage, but, again, there will be a considerable reduction there. That runs alongside some of the other measures, including the generosity of grading.

Ms Mullan: I thank the Minister for bringing the statement to the Floor today to give students some assurance before Christmas.

Minister, I heard you say before that nothing replaces in-classroom learning. Following on from the Chair's point, your answer to him was that those students are working hard at home, but we know that there is very much a varied learning experience at home, particularly for those who have special educational needs and need that in-classroom support. For those students and the others who have missed up to eight weeks and will continue to be disrupted, when will you publish the full details of the special circumstances?

Mr Weir: I want to work with colleagues across jurisdictions on that. You make a very good point about where it will be in the individual side of things. The system-wide adaptations will go a long way to meeting that, so if a student is expected to be assessed only on particular units — they will know from their school very early on which

units those are — they are, effectively, being assessed on 40% of the course. That removes more than half the course from the assessment, which means that even with considerable time missed, there is still that level of compensation.

It is important to consider special circumstances, because if we reach a point where it is possible that that is universal across jurisdictions, we should try to create a situation where our students are not disadvantaged. One option is that some additional tariffs or marks could be given to students who missed a particular length of time, and if we reached a point, for example, where our students are getting a much higher tariff than anyone else, there would be a suspicion in universities and other places that, effectively, a Northern Ireland or CCEA qualification has come from an easier exam than anywhere else.

We also have to take into account in the comparability that we have about 20% of our students at A level and AS level sitting exams set by boards that are outside Northern Ireland. I should make it very clear what can be delivered on. I appreciate that sometimes this has probably been a bone of contention between me and the honourable Member for Upper Bann, but, at present, we want to make sure that children are also treated equally to one another.

On the flip side of the coin, if we were simply to go on a solo run with special circumstances and did not go as far as other jurisdictions, achieving particular grades would be harder in Northern Ireland than anywhere else. A bit of work needs to be done so that we can reach a common position, if at all possible, between different jurisdictions to try to make sure that special circumstances are reflected so that no one is disadvantaged in future employment, for example, or a university place. Sometimes you get different levels in university places. We want to make sure that our students are given that level playing field.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Minister for the statement. Minister, in order for your Department to engage in evidence-based policymaking for these examinations and recognising the potential for differential adverse impact, it will be necessary — this is the view of the Children's Law Centre — for your Department to screen the policy and carry out a full equality impact assessment of each available policy option, including having proper consultation with affected young people and their family, educators, exam bodies and other affected stakeholders. Have you done that, Minister? A human rights impact assessment and a rural impact assessment should also have been conducted. Have you done those also?

Mr Weir: All necessary procedures will have been gone through, and we have done that level of consultation. There have been accusations that we have delayed this. The Member needs to be aware that we have been trying to ensure that this has been got right. We could spend the next six months consulting on all these things, but that is not going to be a great deal of use in giving some certainty to pupils. We need to ensure that what we have is robust and has a broader level of buy-in. Indeed, in our adaptations, we have gone a bit further than England while ensuring that those are still acceptable to universities. We have given a level of clarity that is not there in other jurisdictions.

Mr Butler: I join the Minister in thanking our teachers for their hard work. I wish them all a happy Christmas, and

you, too, Minister. There is some good news in today's announcement on A levels and the 60% omission, which I have been pushing for. However, I have a 15-year-old constituent who has missed 18 weeks of face-to-face teaching in Lagan Valley, and his father is at pains to understand how that lost learning will be mitigated. Given that we have 60% omission at A level, why can we not have 60% omission at GCSE, where, actually, there is no equity across the subjects?

Mr Weir: The problem with reduction there is trying to get something that is equitable. The position on GCSEs was declared earlier through the unit omission. That means that the same units can be omitted across the board so that everybody is on a level playing field with that.

12.15 pm

It should be noted that, in trying to reach something that is equitable this year, perhaps the focus, at times, has been on the grading of A levels and AS levels. The generosity on grading will also take into account the 2020 standards for GCSEs. As I said, there will be further work on individual special circumstances. We need to make sure that the coverage at GCSE level enables pupils to progress to AS levels and A levels, so there has to be a level of grounding there.

Across the board for specific GCSE subjects, the particular units omitted have already been worked on, and schools have been working on those. If, at this stage, we were to say, "We can take further units out", although clear guidance was given to schools to try to, as much as possible, do things in the same order, we would be omitting some units that some schools might have dealt with extensively and others which they would not have dealt with. Therefore, it is not quite the same position. Again, we are talking about up to a 40% omission on GCSEs as well.

Mr M Bradley: Thank you, Minister, for your statement. Minister, can you clarify two points? Can schools and school leaders now choose which units they wish their pupils to be examined on? Secondly, can you confirm that no algorithms or z scores will be used to calculate a student's grade and that it is all now based on the student's performance? Is that the case?

Mr Weir: It is. The answer to both questions is yes. On A levels and AS levels, schools will make that choice. That is, in part, because there will have been different levels of disruption in schools, and because a large section of a year group may have been off when a particular component of a course was being covered. Schools will be allowed that choice and to concentrate on some of the things that have already been taught. Not every school will have taught things in the same order, so this will enable flexibility to be put in place. As I said, there may still be a very small number of students who want to do everything, and there will be an opportunity for them to do that.

On the issue of the calculations, if someone is sitting one paper, they will simply get the mark that they get, and the grade they get from that paper will not be adjusted by algorithms, which are a mathematical formula, and which were seen to be externally put in place, and that created great concern. Similarly, what is normal for a missed unit is that a z score is used, which can adjust where a pupil will be. The only adjustment that will be made is if someone

is doing, for instance, two papers and those papers are weighted differently, so you may get a situation where, to make up the 40%, two units are used. One unit would normally be worth 20%, and the second worth 30%. In those circumstances, the 30% unit will count 50% more than the 20% unit, if you understand what I mean. The marks that they get in the exam will be scaled up, if you like.

People can be assured that there will not be an intervention from above. A lot of problems and concerns were created because pupils expected to get a particular grade and then found that, as a result of whatever calculations had been put in place — this was particularly true for small cohorts — they got a different, often lower, grade than anticipated. Although, in some cases, it produced a higher one. The change means that a grade will be awarded purely on how a student performs in an examination.

Ms Brogan: I thank the Minister for his statement. Minister, much of the speculation and media interest in today's statement has centred on GCSE and A-level students, but I want to ask, on behalf of anxious BTEC students, what these arrangements will mean for them, given the massive coursework burden that they have had to shoulder despite months of disruption to their education.

Mr Weir: I am a little bit restricted in what I can say, as BTECs, and, indeed, the vocational side, come under the control of the Department for the Economy, although I suspect that there will be some read-across. We have been working with the Department for the Economy, but it is not my place to make an announcement on behalf of the Economy Minister. Clearly, there will be implications. Across the board, work has been ongoing on how BTECs are reflected, not just here but in other jurisdictions, to make sure that we have a fair reflection of the circumstances for BTEC students as well.

Mr Humphrey: I join the Minister in thanking all the staff in our schools across Northern Ireland for their work and dedication in this most difficult year.

Minister, I welcome the engagement; it is hugely important. You mentioned that no child in Northern Ireland should be disadvantaged across the United Kingdom. You also mentioned mitigations for students who have had to endure significant remote learning or, sadly, have been ill during COVID. I ask the Minister to confirm that he is looking at other scoping mitigations, on top of those that are already in place from CCEA, that would ease the already difficult circumstances that young people have found themselves in throughout the pandemic?

Mr Weir: Yes. On the special circumstances, I want us to have, broadly speaking, a level playing field across the UK. We need to give a good deal of thought to the mitigations, as there are things that can be put in place, which will facilitate students taking those examinations and protect their opportunity to do so. The individual measures that can be put in place will need to be examined.

Today's statement is about providing system-wide mitigations. They go a long way in covering individual circumstances, however, there will be those who will still be disadvantaged. It is important that a level of protection is put in place, and that will require further work. Rather than give something which is definitive and may end up being wrong, we want to work with colleagues across

different jurisdictions and exam boards to put in place, ideally, something to meet special circumstances. It is accepted by the Minister for Education in Westminster, in that, as much as possible, if we can reach a UK-wide position on special circumstances, that would be of advantage to all pupils. Depending upon what direction you go in, there is disadvantage in either direction if there is not parity across the board.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Minister for his statement and answers thus far. This has been an awful year for students, particularly first-year students in our further and higher education institutions. What consultations has the Minister had with the Minister for the Economy, colleges and universities on today's statement?

If students are being assessed on 40% of the course, is there a danger that they are taught 40% of the course, which limits their horizons for the next phase of their learning at colleges and universities?

Mr Weir: There is no perfect solution, but work has been ongoing, particularly with universities, to try to make sure that there is something in place that is acceptable on grading. While certain decisions lie within the remit of the Minister for the Economy, I will be working alongside her on those issues.

The Member makes a valid point about the level of assessment that is there. The aim would be to try to ensure that the full course is taught, however, there is a degree of danger that it will lead to a level of skewing of the course. To be fair, in all of these there is some level of difficulty with any potential solution. I suspect that it will mean that areas that will be directly examined will have a higher percentage level of concentration from the schools. That becomes a certain level of natural consequence. The aim is to ensure that the full course is covered, and we are trying to make the best of the situation.

I acknowledge that this has been a difficult year for everyone, particularly students. However, while there is hope on the horizon, we are not out of the woods yet.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for his statement and his answers thus far. There have been disproportionate adverse impacts on children's education as an outcome of the pandemic. The gap is widening. Children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and children with special educational needs are falling further behind. How do your proposals on exams address that? Can you confirm that the algorithm fiasco from earlier this year will not be repeated?

Mr Weir: I am very happy to confirm that. As much as we can get fairness and objectivity in the system, it can still depend upon somebody giving a subjective opinion or using a mathematical calculation which adjusts according to how one school does compared to another school. That is a problem that would be there with moderation and centre assessment grades (CAGs).

I can give the Member an absolute assurance on the algorithm. While I am sure that not many of us would be algorithm experts, no algorithm will apply z scores this year. It will be purely on the basis of what a student achieves directly on their own merits and marks, against a backdrop of generosity.

The Member is right about differential disruption. Ensuring a considerably reduced level of content goes a long way

to meeting a lot of those measures. As I said, I want to explore, hopefully on a cross-jurisdictional basis, how we can apply special circumstances for individual students. That would be in addition to the current provisions. As I am sure the Member is aware, there are already mechanisms whereby, if someone in a — let us call it — normal year has special circumstances through illness or whatever, provision can be made. Anything that we do this year will be on top of that. For instance, if someone is ill for another reason, we need to see how we can adapt that, particularly for those who missed out because of COVID.

Mrs Barton: Minister, you spoke about students not being disadvantaged if they wanted to go to universities in England, Scotland, Wales etc. As you will be aware, quite a few students in Northern Ireland still like to study at Trinity College Dublin. Have you had any discussions with the universities down there about what would be acceptable?

Mr Weir: I would have to get more detail on that. At the moment, while things are a bit unclear in the Republic of Ireland, the suggestion is that they will be doing all the Leaving Cert by way of examinations. We believe that a system that is, broadly speaking, acceptable to universities should be acceptable across the board. However, there will be further engagement as we move ahead, particularly with our colleagues in the Republic of Ireland.

There is a North/South Ministerial Council meeting on Friday, so I may be in a position then to raise that issue directly with my opposite number, Norma Foley. Unfortunately, the meeting is not in the beautiful city of Armagh. I say that just to make sure that Mr McNulty is paying attention. We will be doing the meeting via Zoom, but that will still enable that level of engagement.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you very much, Minister. I declare an interest as the mother of a young person who is going through their A2s shortly. You must feel for me.

Minister, you mentioned the COVID allowance or tariff. When will that be published? Will it, for instance, specify how many missed school days will be necessary for a pupil to receive the COVID grade tariff? Young people need confidence now, and if we can publish such specifications, it would help them.

Mr Weir: I understand that. That is one of a number of options, and probably the most likely option. The point that I am making about any tariff is that we want to make sure that it is, if at all possible, universal. I sympathise with you being the mother of an A2 student, but, at A2 and A level, about 20% of our cohort will do that from boards that are outside Northern Ireland, so we want to make sure that everybody is treated fairly. If, for example, we end up with a COVID tariff and that is the route that we go down for special circumstances — we will need to work with other jurisdictions — I do not want our results to be viewed with suspicion by employers or universities because they have a more generous tariff than elsewhere or — I am sure that this would be of grave concern — if we had a tariff that applied at a much lower level than other jurisdictions, that we would disadvantage our pupils in terms of grades.

There is work to be done between boards, with Ofqual and between jurisdictions to try as much as possible — it may or may not be 100% possible — to reach a common position across jurisdictions.

12.30 pm

Mr O'Toole: Given what the Minister has said about the need to introduce special circumstances and the fact that CCEA will be responsible for dealing with a vast and, I am afraid, inevitably chaotic process of appeals, first, is he confident that CCEA has the resources to deal with this unprecedented and Byzantine process that is going to be inflicted on it and the young people of Northern Ireland? Secondly, Minister, can you confirm that the upshot of your statement is that, if Gavin Williamson, who is widely thought to be an incompetent and chaotic Secretary of State in England, has to perform a U-turn on exams proceeding in England, we, in Northern Ireland, will simply follow what he has done?

Mr Weir: I always want to make sure, above all else, that our students are not disadvantaged. Obviously, at times, we will have to look at what happens in other jurisdictions. We cannot have Northern Ireland as an outlier. However, England's position on examinations has been made very clear. Some examinations went ahead very successfully in November, and we anticipate that the pandemic will not be at as great a level next summer as it was at that time. I should say, from a historical point of view, that, while being accused of being Byzantine is obviously a form of insult, that was a very successful empire for many centuries prior to its collapse [*Laughter.*] Members of the DUP are sometimes accused of harping back to the 17th century but there may be more classical civilisations that we could look to as well.

Mr Carroll: The Minister ended his statement by saying:

"Fairness to pupils is my priority".

He also stated that "Over-testing is not healthy" for pupils.

Can the Minister explain how it is fair or, indeed, healthy that post-primary exams will go ahead in the new year despite pupils being in the middle of a health pandemic, with many thousands having so much time off school and missing so much teaching, not to mention the serious concerns that exist around children's safety that his Department has still not addressed?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. For the second time today: post-primary transfer was not in the statement issued by the Minister. I have to remind Members that questions should relate to the statement. The Minister is at liberty to answer that question if he wishes, but he does not have to.

Mr Weir: At the broader level, we will always make sure that any examinations take place in accordance with public health guidelines. As the Principal Deputy Speaker said, post-primary transfer is not the subject of today's statement. However, from a health point of view, if we are talking about roughly 300,000 pupils being in each day, accommodating 10,000 on a particular day does not seem to be beyond the bounds of possibility. I want to make sure that all our examinations are as fair as possible. We have taken very far-reaching decisions today on reduction in course content and on grades, which will create a unique circumstance. It will mean that pupils in 2021 will be in a very different position from those in 2019. That is where an accommodation has to be reflected. Again, I thank the Member for his good wishes.

Ms Sugden: Thank you, Minister. Given the process that you have outlined, can we assume that students will perform better than would have been expected? How will this affect admissions to FE and HE, particularly for competitive courses? Does it also open up options for students who did not think that they would perform as well to apply to different courses? I ask that in the midst of the university admissions process. Lastly, how are we supporting teachers? This seems quite chaotic, and I understand that today's statement may be news to them. How will we support teachers through the next six months?

Mr Weir: There are a number of points there. Yes; it may mean that because there has been a shift in where the boundaries are. What it does mean is that those who are sitting exams in 2021 will be put in a very similar position, at least in terms of eventual outcomes, to those who sat exams in 2020. Some people will not have taken up university and FE places in 2020. They may have deferred entry or simply felt that, "I do not want to apply at this stage because I will not be getting the full university experience". It will mean that those who graduate in 2021 and those who graduated in 2020 will be on a level playing field with each other.

Ms Sugden mentioned teachers in particular. One of the advantages of this approach for teachers is that the changes in assessment will reduce their burden. I appreciate that, with every subject, there will be a range of opinions. However, teachers not having to make a central assessment of individual pupils will relieve some of the pressure on them. It will allow them not only to say what they feel students should get but to rank them. No matter how great the level of confidentiality, there will always be a concern among some teachers, who will look over their shoulder and ask themselves whether there will be any comeback if they do not give someone a certain grade. This approach will relieve that burden.

Also, because the choice will be made at a school level, that gives schools an opportunity to be flexible. This will not simply be imposed on schools. Other options involved a high-level reduction being imposed by CCEA on all schools. However, because of where we are in the school year, it would not have given schools that level of flexibility.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: No other Members have indicated that they wish to ask a question. That concludes questions on the first statement by the Minister of Education. I ask the House to take its ease for a few moments while we change the top Table.

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

Independent Review of Education: Terms of Reference

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order. The Minister of Education has indicated that he wishes to make another statement.

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): I would like to make a statement to the Assembly about the establishment of the independent review of education. Members will be aware of the commitment in 'New Decade, New Approach' (NDNA) to:

"establish an external, independent review of education provision, with a focus on securing greater efficiency in delivery costs, raising standards, access to the curriculum for all pupils, and the prospects of moving towards a single education system."

Indeed, there are a couple of other direct references to the review in NDNA.

Work to establish the review had to be suspended in March 2020 due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. I am keen to make further progress on establishing the review, and, to that end, I secured the Executive's agreement in principle to the draft terms of reference, which will now be published.

This is very much the start of the beginning. The real work lies ahead, once the independent panel has been recruited and the evidence gathering commences. However, the agreement in principle of the draft terms of reference is an important first step, and it signals the intent to have a wide-ranging review of our education system with a view to improving outcomes for children and young people.

We should not underestimate the task ahead. The review and the delivery of whatever recommendations it makes could radically reshape the design and delivery of education in Northern Ireland. Reform and transformation, however, will occur only with political and stakeholder agreement and wider community engagement, as well as the provision of adequate funding.

Education in Northern Ireland operates in both a congested and contested space, and change is inevitably a highly emotive issue. A non-political, non-sectoral and wholly independent review is an essential starting point. It is important that we approach the review with an open mind and without our own predetermined views on what its findings will be. We must also recognise that, although the education system faces many significant challenges, we are building from a position of strength. There are many areas of excellence in the current system. We can be proud of our school leaders, teachers and pupils. We have a well-trained and highly committed workforce delivering innovative practice, and our children and young people continue to achieve high levels of attainment. Those strengths need to be built on to ensure that they permeate the entire system, and challenges must be identified and addressed. We are all in agreement that, if we are to continue to deliver world-class education, we need to reform, modernise and transform. We should always strive to improve services and deliver better outcomes.

Indeed, a significant amount of work is already happening in the field of education transformation and reform, and it

is important that the review build on such work rather than try to stall or duplicate it. Members will be aware of the ongoing work of the expert panel on persistent educational underachievement, which is also an NDNA commitment. Further to that, my Department continues to work closely with the Department for the Economy on a strategy for 14- to 19-year-olds, and work is commencing on the delivery of nine workforce reviews linked to the teachers' pay agreement.

The review panel will need to be cognisant of a wide range of work across the Executive that links to improving outcomes for children and young people. All good education systems look continually at how they might improve the quality of provision, and all good schools want to improve further. There is now an opportunity to review education policy, services and provision strategically and to set out a clear vision of how education should be delivered in Northern Ireland in the 21st century.

The review's terms of reference have been agreed by the Executive and will now be published. The review will commence in 2021, once an independent panel can be appointed. That will be done via an open public appointments process to ensure that the panel is wholly independent, with an appropriate breadth of experience and range of expertise. The panel will work over a period of approximately 18 months, producing an interim report after 12 months. I am open to providing further time, if required and requested, to ensure that a quality piece of work is produced. The panel will be made up of a chairperson, a vice-chairperson and three panel members. Those roles will be remunerated. The agreed terms of reference set out the scope of the review and the expected deliverables from the independent panel.

The review is based around three core strands. Strand 1 will focus on the educational journey of children and young people and the outcomes that they achieve. It will consider all aspects of pupils' experience of education from early years to transition into careers. That will include a range of issues, such as transition and transfer at age 11, the experience of children with special educational needs (SEN) and the delivery of the curriculum, as well as many other important aspects.

Strand 2 will focus on support for settings and schools, including the issue of funding and local governance arrangements. That strand will wish to consider how we support our schools and teachers to best teach our children and young people. Again, it will cover many different issues, including the challenging roles of school leaders and teachers, the role of inspection and school improvement, and the role of technology in education to support learning, pedagogy and qualifications.

Strand 3 will then consider how the education system is designed, delivered and administered. The panel will wish to consider the barriers to effective delivery and areas of duplication or inefficiency. That will be a complex work area, with a focus on the core structural issues that may negatively impact on delivery and outcomes.

Although the terms of reference and scope of the review cover a wide range of areas, it is clear to me that there is one element that still requires further refinement, and that is to ensure that the review is ambitious enough to encompass a vision of change and puts in place the practical steps for learners' journey beyond school and into

further and higher education, fully preparing them for work and life.

To that extent, today's announcement is not the finalised position, and, given the critical involvement of the Department for the Economy, I will engage with the Economy Minister in the time ahead to see what additions are needed to the terms of reference. None of that will detract from the existing terms of reference but will add to them before the panel commences its work. Any additions will be brought to the Executive and then confirmed in a statement to the Assembly.

12.45 pm

I reiterate that nothing in the review will or should act as an obstacle or delay to the necessary reforms that may be made in the interim by my Department by itself or in conjunction with the Department for the Economy, such as the 14-to-19 strategy or the need to prepare our future workforce by embedding a digital spine in our young people's education. Nothing in the review should be allowed to impede progress or be used by anyone as an excuse to avoid difficult issues by attempting to kick the can down the road.

In addition to the three distinct strands, the panel will be asked to outline a clear vision for what education in Northern Ireland should aspire to be in the 21st century, the outcomes it should deliver, the appropriate indicators of success and the key actions required to make that vision a reality. It will be for the appointed chairperson to set the work plan and agree the methodology for engaging with stakeholders. However, I expect the review to be delivered in a collaborative manner with significant engagement in order to gather evidence and assess issues.

Education has a wide range of stakeholders, and it is essential that they have an opportunity to support and inform the review. I am keen that the voice of children and young people be central to the work of the review and that their views be considered on how education is currently delivered in Northern Ireland and how it might be improved. Parents and carers also have a critical role in shaping the needs of our education system and will be critical to ensuring that the review progresses successfully. Our school leaders and teachers will also be able to provide insight on current provision, gaps in services and barriers to improved outcomes. There should also be significant engagement with education sectoral bodies and trade unions, as well as wider representative groups.

While engaging with children and young people, practitioners, trade unions etc, it is vital that all viewpoints, all stages, all sectors and all school types, including special education, are involved. There will also be cross-departmental working, with many areas of government having a role in the delivery of education or in improving outcomes for children and young people. In particular, I expect close working with the Department for the Economy on matters relating to further and higher education and the preparation of young people for the world of work. Engagement at a political level is also vital. I see little value in taking time and spending money on delivering the review if its recommendations cannot be put into action. It is incumbent on all of us to work together to find solutions to the challenges that we face, build consensus on delivery of those actions and secure the necessary resources and commitment for educational transformation.

I firmly believe that everyone in the House wants the same things for our children and young people and our education system. We all want a system that provides children and young people with the absolute best start in life. We all want a system that develops children's personalities, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest and equips them to thrive in later life. We all want a system that is fair and open to all and provides appropriate support for those who need it most. We all want a system that values its workforce and provides them with the tools that they need to be effective. We all want a system that is sustainable, effective and joined up. Fundamentally, I believe that, despite our differences at times, we all want the same things for our children and young people, our workforce and our schools: it is just that sometimes we disagree about the method for obtaining those outcomes. It is as if we are at the start of a journey and we can all agree on where we want to go but have different opinions on the best route to get to that destination.

We must all approach the review with open minds. The review must be based on evidence, learn from best practice locally and elsewhere and be informed by the voice of stakeholders. The panel will operate with objectivity, and, once that review concludes, we, as the final decision-makers, must do so also. I look forward to the review commencing later in 2021 and ask Members to appreciate that it will take some months to run the recruitment process. I am sure that everyone in the House will support the work of the panel once it is in place.

Mr Lyttle (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): The time that was given to the Assembly to read the key statements on exams and now the fundamental external review of education was completely unacceptable. I hope that that will be dealt with by the Speaker's Office.

I, nonetheless, welcome this important statement on the independent review of education, a proposal that was made by the Alliance Party during the New Decade, New Approach talks. It is obviously a key opportunity to reshape an education system that is high on quality, low on equity; is in financial crisis; separates children and young people at the age of five; and trains our teachers separately. It is an opportunity for fundamental reform to put in place equal educational opportunity for children and have children learning together. When will the independent review start, when will it report and when will the fundamental reform commence?

Mr Weir: Going back to my remarks on timing, we are in a slightly different position in that there were a few detailed comments from, for instance, the Education Committee that we were able to take on board. On the terms of reference, the Member will be aware that, while the final decision on those lay with the Executive, we were in a position to give draft terms of reference to some sectoral bodies and the Committee for Education and to take on board some suggestions

In terms of the timescale, the aim is to move as quickly possible, but it will probably be a few months into 2021 before the panel is fully established. There will need to be a recruitment process with, first of all, expressions of interest by way of public appointment. Then there will need to be some way of ensuring that people are appointable, be it by interview or whatever. Appointments will then be made, and provision will then be made to support them.

The Member will be aware that, when it came to the expert panel, which was arguably a simpler process, we were in a position to make an announcement, I think, in June and to have the work start in September. There will not be the same time frame in this case, but the process will commence in 2021.

The Member asked about a time frame: again, to some extent, that will be up to the panel. We have given an indication that there should be a full report within 18 months and an interim report within 12 months. Initially, there were slightly tighter time frames, but one piece of feedback that we got from a range of the sectors was that that would, given the scope that would have to be encompassed by the panel, potentially be challenging to deliver. As I said, there will be an 18-month period to report, with an interim report after 12 months. Also, should the panel members feel that they need a little more time, there will be an opportunity to ask for additional time of up to six months, and that will be a call for the chair.

It is important that whatever emerges is got right. While it is critical that this is delivered, it is not a question of rushing something to meet a particular absolute deadline. I should indicate some of the issues that will be covered, as they will be of interest to the Chair and the Committee. If there are changes that can be made in education, it will not be a question of waiting for a report. If there are issues that we can get consensus on and work through, we need to make that progress in the meantime. None of this should be an obstacle to any level of change that can be brought about.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for his statement. Minister, I welcome your commitment to the review and particularly to the establishment of a panel on educational underachievement, which is very important and is a policy that I hugely endorse and support. Will 18 months for the deliberations be long enough for the panel to conclude its work and report?

Mr Weir: As I indicated, there needs to be a balance. We do not want to have something moving into the ether and never reporting, and we need to have a realistic time frame. The original time frame envisaged that a final report would be done within 15 months. There was considerable feedback from a number of those whom we consulted that that would be tight. The balance that we have struck is that there is an expectation of a final report within 18 months, but there is an opportunity for the panel, if it feels that there is further work that needs to be done, to request an extension. The request should come from the panel rather than either me, as Minister, or my successor in title trying to impose an additional time frame.

Ms Mullan: Minister, I welcome the work that your Department has done in bringing forward the commitments in 'New Decade, New Approach'. I share the concern about whether the in-depth review that we require will be achieved in that time frame, but I thank you for your answer.

You mentioned the Department for the Economy when you were talking about cross-departmental working. Do you agree that the Department of Health plays a vital role, particularly in our young people's well-being and ensuring that that is provided for in a modern-day education system?

Mr Weir: I take on board what has been said about the time frame. If difficulties arise because of it, I am sure that it could be amended. By the same token, however, there will be issues that all of us in the Chamber could debate until the cows come home. We cannot have something that is entirely open-ended. There will be a level of reflection, and, ultimately, as a process issue, we may have to alter it. We have to see how it works out.

I gave the specific example of the Economy Department, but other issues will come into play that will require cross-departmental support. The Member highlighted clearly the Department of Health as a key consideration. I suspect that, even tangentially, there will be other Departments that this will touch on. I want to see the panel engaging with the widest possible range of stakeholders. That will probably vary to some extent according to the subject matter that the panel is looking at. If it is looking at progression to further and higher education, the key focus will be the learner journey and the economy. If we are looking at support in the system for vulnerable children and children with special educational needs, Health will probably be the key Department because there will be cross-fertilisation. There may be issues that touch on other areas: if school transport is looked at, there could be a role for the Department for Infrastructure.

There is nothing that circumscribes whom or what organisations the panel can meet. The point needs to be made that it goes beyond the remit of the Department of Education. It is not simply within government: a lot of good work has happened at times on the ground through third-sector bodies and individuals. As well as those who are formally in education, the role of parents will be critical as we move ahead.

Mr McCrossan: I welcome the statement from the Minister. I welcome the review and the opportunity, on behalf of the SDLP, to engage with the panel on educational underachievement. It was very useful.

Minister, why is your Department and the Education Authority (EA) outside the scope of the review, considering how vital those organisations are to the effective operation of the education system? Surely DE and EA should have been part of strand 3. Is EA separate? If so, why? Surely it should have been part of the review, particularly given the trail of chaos to date in relation to aspects of its remit on SEN and other matters.

Mr Weir: First, there is a separate review of EA that is due about now. I think that this will involve all organisations. There is a clear reference to what the strands can contain, and, effectively, therefore, there is an expectation of what they can contain. It is put in a very permissive way so that if, in terms of the wider position as regards governance or anything else, the panel seeks to move beyond the definitions in the terms of reference, there is no bar on it looking at anything, including the Education Authority or, for that matter, DE.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for his statement; it is an important piece of work. The Minister rightly pointed out that a number of strategies are ongoing and are not mutually exclusive with the strategy. The best start to education is vital for any pupil. The Minister is aware that Northern Ireland has the lowest starting age in Europe. He is also aware that children born prematurely, underweight or with a birth date in May or June are at a developmental

and academic disadvantage. Can he update us on the call for a flexible school start age, or will that have to wait for the independent review to pick it up as a critical issue?

Mr Weir: I probably gave a couple of examples that had crossover with Economy, but I made it clear in the statement that, where changes can and should be made ahead of any report, particularly within the next year and a half of the Assembly's lifetime, they should be made.

The Member makes a valid point, particularly about premature babies. I am keen to look at what can be done and, from initial exploration, I think that it would require a legislative change. At the moment, the school starting age is set rigidly in legislation. If legislative action can be taken during this term to create a greater level of flexibility, I would be keen to see that happening. We need to scope out precisely how that can be done, but that is a very good example of something that can be changed and should not be put on the long finger until the report comes out. I share the Member's position on that.

1.00 pm

In order to make sure that the matter was looked at — I think that it was suggested in the Education Committee — there is now an explicit reference to flexibility in the final terms of reference. The Member makes a valid point.

Mr Newton: I agree with other Members that today's announcement is, indeed, a timely one. It is very ambitious and will undoubtedly be welcomed across the Chamber and throughout the education sector.

I note that, as others mentioned, this is the second New Decade, New Approach initiative that the Minister has announced. I will quote from the statement:

"This is very much the start of the beginning. The real work lies ahead once the independent panel is recruited and the evidence gathering commences."

What will be the most challenging aspect that the panel will face?

Mr Weir: There will be challenges across the board. Some issues will be more contentious than others. There will be challenges around the breadth of issues, which, by necessity, an independent review has to encompass. We are talking about the education of children from preschool up to and beyond secondary-school age. There is a wide remit to cover.

The other issue is that, while the panel will scope out what is needed to support particular aspects, it will also try to ensure that those are financially realisable. I cannot prejudge what will come forward but there may be certain proposals, it might be argued, that will create greater efficiencies and save money. However, some proposals will lead to additional expenditure. It will be about trying to make sure that we have a broader way forward that can also be compatible with what, ultimately, is affordable. We may all come with very different visions but, if any of us were given an extra £1 billion for education, an awful lot of problems could be solved. It is about a mix of what is available financially and the need for best practice in reform because the two go hand in hand.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I encourage the Minister to use his microphone in order to ensure that what he is saying is picked up by Hansard.

Ms Brogan: I thank the Minister for his statement. New Decade, New Approach outlined that an independent review would look at a number of aspects of the education system here, including special education. The Minister is aware that regulations and a code of practice are being consulted on for the new special educational needs framework. Is that new framework beyond the scope of the review? What impact will the independent review have on the new framework?

Mr Weir: I will try to speak into the microphone. I know that, at times, there may be some who feel that not hearing what I am saying may be a positive advantage. Nevertheless, for the sake of Hansard, I will make sure that I speak into the microphone.

Special education is a part of all of that. That goes back to one of the issues that has been raised. Work is ongoing in special education, and we should not wait for the review to report before those things can be put in place. As the Member outlined, the work on the SEN regulations and the code of practice is coming to a conclusion. There was a slight extension to the time frame to allow for discussions on those matters. While I will wait to see precisely what emerges from that, the only limitation on the speed and the extent to which it could be implemented would be the budgetary position, which has not as yet been determined for 2021-22. SEN regulations will, probably, be my top priority for next year's budget. It is important that they are implemented. We must ensure that, as well as providing protection and support for young people who have special educational needs, the SEN regulations and the code of practice have a positive long-term impact. A lot of it is about ensuring collaboration and cooperation and that, as far as possible, there are earlier interventions, which would be of benefit to the young people and the wider system.

Mr O'Dowd: I welcome the Minister's statement, with the caveat that the upcoming centenary of the state will remind us of why we have the educational structures that we have. There will be concern that some of those structures may find themselves under pressure, but we will wait for the review and give evidence to it. I welcome the fact that decisions are going to continue to be made in education, because reviews can delay progress. Will the Minister soon be in a position to announce the outcome of the 14-19 review, which has been going on for a very long time?

Mr Weir: There is further work to be done on that between myself and the Economy Minister. The Member makes a valid point that there should not be any delays. There is always somebody within the system — in any area — who, because the decision is not to their liking, will be keen to push it down the road. It is important that that does not happen on a range of decisions. There will be ongoing work to ensure that we reach a point, during 2021, at which we can have a full declaration on the 14-19 strategy. That will require further work with the Economy Minister. There will be an examination of how we impact on the learner journey, and that should not be delayed by this. We need to move ahead with finalising that.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for his statement. I warmly welcome any endeavour to improve education for our children and young people and for our teachers and school leaders. I would like to see a focus on improving education for children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. I did not see that referenced in the statement or the terms of reference. The scope

of the terms of reference should very much focus on improving education for those young people. Why does the ongoing review not marry with the review that is going on in the Education Authority? Surely, there should be a symbiotic relationship there. When will the Minister report on the independent review of this year's exams that was undertaken by Deloitte?

Mr Weir: There are about three questions there. I will try to remember them. Sometimes, with Mr McNulty, it is like the prizes going past on 'The Generation Game'. Yes, the idea is to have a symbiotic relationship with any of the reviews that are taking place. The point is that they should not obstruct other reviews but be cognisant of them. That relates not only to the Education Authority but to the wider context of where there is disadvantage in the system, which will be part of the review.

With regard to the terms of reference, the point is to have something that is relatively succinct in its nature but to have no bar to what the panel should look at beyond what is put down on paper. The Member also mentioned disadvantaged backgrounds. There is cognisance of the fact that we have a panel looking at educational underachievement, currently, and it is due to report in May of next year. The idea, as it is with other reports, is that, as the panel works, it is cognisant of what is happening elsewhere and what may well be reported elsewhere. Deloitte has carried out a review of the 2020 situation. As I understand it, the report is at draft stage. I anticipate that it will be published early in the new year.

Mrs Barton: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. We all want our young people to have the best educational experience possible, but I do not see any mention of the preschool sector in the review. Will it be included in the review, because it is extremely important? Children start to learn from the age of two.

Mr Weir: Preschool is considered. One of the bullet points refers to the preparation of children. The first bullet of point of strand 1 reads:

"The preparation of children for schooling in the early years, including childcare, pre-school and transition into primary school".

Preschool will therefore be a part of the review.

The Member is right about the critical nature of preschool. Without rehearsing other arguments, I recognise that we sometimes clash over what provision is put in place at certain points in the lifetime of pupils. Getting it right from the start, in the preschool area, is important in shaping our young people. That is not to say that, once children get to the age of five or six, things are abandoned. However, if we try to catch up at a later stage, and we have not had that focus on the preschool stage, there is a danger of children already being behind on the first day of P1.

Ms Armstrong: Minister, I will not ask what is contained in the document. As the person who wrote the definition of what was going into it, I am quite happy with what is there. However, I am disappointed that only your Department is looking at this review. 'New Decade, New Approach' clearly stated that there was to be a cross-departmental consideration of an independent review of education. You mentioned that you will work with the Economy Department. However, as mentioned earlier, all

Departments need to be involved, including Infrastructure, Communities and Health.

Who will be on the recruitment panel? Paragraphs 34 and 35 of the terms of reference state that the Department of Education will come up with a panel and that the criteria for that independent panel, including "experience, skills and personal qualities", will be specified. When will those criteria be published, and will the Executive feed into them?

Mr Weir: The aim is to advertise publicly early in the new year for expressions of interest, and we will list the criteria in connection with that. I thank the Member for all the work that she has done in this sphere. Had she written the terms of reference for this a year or two ago, it would have saved my officials an awful lot of work.

The Member makes the valid point that the review is cross-departmental. However, with any review or panel, one Department always has the lead role. Consequently, while the review will touch upon a range of other departmental subjects, the strongest place for an independent review of education is within the Department of Education.

The Member is right that the NDNA commitments are cross-cutting and apply across the Executive. That is why, for example, we sought the views of stakeholders on the terms of reference prior to moving forward with them. The principal point is that the review had to get approval from the whole Executive. Without speaking out of turn, I can say that the Executive welcomed this, and, for example, the Economy Minister suggested some changes, and the Justice Minister suggested a change in the use of language, which we were able to take into account. Although the Department of Education is leading on this, it is a wider Executive commitment, which is why it has been through the Executive and why, if there were to be any adjustment at a later stage, we would seek the Executive's approval for it.

Mr O'Toole: Minister, there is always a risk with these things that, if you prioritise everything, you prioritise nothing. The scale of what is described here is truly vast in its ambition. Although that is welcome, it is important that we see proper resourcing and that those who undertake the study are genuinely independent. In relation to that independence, the statement specifically says that open-mindedness will be key for all of us as we approach this review. Given that few internationally respected educationalists believe that selection at age 11 is a good idea, if they say that it should be reformed or abolished, will the Minister retain his open mind and change his approach?

Mr Weir: I am sure that I will retain the same level of open-mindedness as the honourable Member on the subject.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Minister for his statement. He knows that the British Government have reneged on certain financial arrangements and commitments under NDNA. What financial commitments has the Minister been given in relation to the review?

Mr Weir: The establishment of the panel has been scoped out. Its work can clearly be done within budget. For instance, the estimated cost for the 18 months is a little bit over a quarter of a million pounds. I know that we in the Government can have disputes at times over where

financial support should be allocated to, but this can be afforded and is well within budget.

1.15 pm

Mr Allister: I want to probe why the terms of reference have been considerably expanded beyond what is in 'New Decade, New Approach'. The document summarises the focus as being on:

“greater efficiency ... raising standards, access to the curriculum ... and the prospects of moving towards a single system.”

Within the terms of reference, however, as was just referred to, the transfer system is now subject to review. Was the Minister worked over in the Executive by the anti-selection brigade? Is that why the transfer test is in the review? Is the panel's independence called into question by virtue of the fact that its interim report goes secretly to the Executive and the Education Committee, although, no doubt, we will all hear about it on the BBC? Is that an indication that the Executive want to shape the outcome of the review rather than truly submit themselves to an independent review?

Mr Weir: I appreciate the point that the Member has made. First, I have not been done over in any way. The full review of education has to be comprehensive in nature. Different Members in the Chamber, including me, will have particular views on selection. The Member said that the norm is that an interim report will be produced, and that is the case in most sets of circumstances. The wider review simply reflects the need to cover a wide scope, if we are to have a proper review that covers all of education. Again, Members should not fixate on one particular aspect of the review over the wider context. If particular changes are recommended at any stage in the future, it will be for the House to determine what change happens.

Ms Sugden: The Minister talks about outcomes-based accountability and cross-departmental working. You would think that it was 2016, albeit without the five years still ahead of us. Minister, I welcome the review. Out of the context of a Programme for Government, however, I wonder how cross-departmental and outcomes-based the review can be. To truly affect outcomes, it has to dovetail with other reviews and policy across all Departments in areas such as childcare, social disadvantage, justice, trauma and civil responsibility. We could stand here all day and talk about the opportunities that education can create in those various areas. How realistic is it that a substantial and worthwhile review can be progressed without a Programme for Government, which realistically will not happen until after the next election?

Mr Weir: There will be some work done. It is not really for me to answer directly on the Programme for Government, as that lies with the Executive Office, but progress will be made on it. Whether in the Department of Education or across government, there is no doubt that we have all had to change course because of the COVID situation. As part of the short- and medium-term actions that can be taken, however, there is an attempt to establish a wider vision for education that goes beyond Assembly mandates. All those things will therefore be able to be taken into account.

The point that I made earlier is that we need to reach a wider political and societal consensus on as many issues

as possible, and that is why there needs to be consultation with the panel. There is no point in simply producing a report that gathers dust just because, “He said such-and-such, while she said such-and-such”, and, as a result, there is no common understanding. That is one of the major challenges that lies ahead. Earlier, I described the review as being the “start of the beginning”. Although a level of dovetailing with the Programme for Government and other things is clearly needed, we need to make a start on the review.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That concludes questions to the Minister on his statement. I ask Members who are leaving the Chamber to make sure that they sanitise their area. We will take a few brief moments as we change those at the Table.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Executive Committee Business

Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister of Justice, Naomi Long, to move the Further Consideration Stage of the Bill.

Moved. — [Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice).]

Mr Speaker: Members will have a copy of the Marshalled List of Amendments detailing the order for consideration. The amendments have been grouped for debate in the provisional grouping of amendments selected list. Members should note that the Marshalled List is dated 15 December, and both it and the grouping list supersede the ones that were issued for the debate that was scheduled to take place on 7 December. Members will have received printed and electronic copies of the documents, but additional printed copies are available in the rotunda, if needed for the debate — that is, the papers for 15 December.

There are two groups of amendments, and we will debate the amendments in each group in turn. The first debate will be on amendment Nos 1 to 8 and amendment No 13, which deal with additional protection for children and support for victims of domestic abuse. The second debate will be on amendment Nos 9 to 12 and amendment Nos 14 to 17, which deal with the implementation and operation of the offence and technical matters.

I remind Members who intend to speak that, during the debates on the two groups of amendments, they should address all the amendments in each group on which they wish to comment. Once the debate on each group has been completed, any further amendments in the group will be moved formally as we go through the Bill and the Question on each will be put without further debate. If that is clear, Members, we shall move on.

We now come to the first group of amendments for debate. With amendment No 1, it will be convenient, as I said, to debate amendment Nos 2 to 8 and amendment No 13. I call the Minister of Justice, Ms Naomi Long, to move amendment No 1 and to address the other amendments in the group.

Mrs Long: I beg to move amendment No 1:

New Clause

Before clause 26 insert –

“Information-sharing with schools etc.

A26.—(1) *The Department of Justice may by regulations make provision—*

(a) *enabling or requiring a relevant person to inform a designated person in relation to an education provider of an incident of domestic abuse concerning a child who is a pupil or a student of the education provider,*

(b) *for the purpose of or in connection with functions exercisable by a relevant person or a designated person accordingly.*

(2) *Here—*

(a) *a relevant person is a person of a description (or acting in a particular capacity) specified in regulations under this section,*

(b) *a designated person in relation to an education provider is a person of a description (or acting in a particular capacity) specified in regulations under this section,*

(c) *an education provider is—*

(i) *a school or a college,*

(ii) *a non-school body which provides pre-school education (or any facility or setting at which pre-school education is provided), or*

(iii) *any other body or facility which provides education or training of any kind (or any facility or setting at which education or training of any kind is provided),*

(d) *an incident is one whether alleged or proved,*

(e) *a child is a person under 18 years of age.*

(3) *A relevant person, as may be referred to in regulations under this section, must be a person who has functions of a public nature.*

(4) *Regulations under this section may include provision—*

(a) *describing what is to be regarded as an incident of domestic abuse concerning a child,*

(b) *concerning—*

(i) *pupils or students generally, or particular categories of pupil or student,*

(ii) *education providers generally, or particular categories of provider (or particular facilities or settings within different categories),*

(c) *stating who is to be regarded as a pupil or a student of an education provider,*

(d) *setting out circumstances in or reasons for which—*

(i) *a relevant person may or must give information to a designated person or a designated person may or must give information to a relevant person,*

(ii) *a different person (including of a description specified) may or must give information to a relevant person or a designated person,*

(e) *with respect to information—*

(i) *regulating or limiting the use or disclosure of information by a relevant person or a designated person,*

(ii) *specifying offences and penalties for unauthorised use or disclosure of information.*

(5) *Regulations under this section may include provision involving such further matters as the Department of Justice considers appropriate.*

(6) *Regulations under this section may include provision amending statutory provisions (as construed in accordance with section 1(f) of the Interpretation Act (Northern Ireland) 1954).*

(7) *Regulations under this section may not be made unless a draft of the regulations has been laid before and approved by a resolution of the Assembly.”*

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 2: Leave out clause 26 and insert –

“Protective measures for victims of abuse

26.—(1) The Department of Justice may by regulations make provision—

(a) enabling or requiring steps to be taken or measures to be imposed for protecting a person from abusive behaviour,

(b) for the purpose of or in connection with such steps or measures for protecting a person from abusive behaviour.

(2) Steps or measures which may be provided for in regulations under this section are not limited to notices or orders as referred to in this section (and nothing in the following subsections of this section is to the prejudice of the generality of what may be provided for in regulations under this section).

(3) Protecting a person from abusive behaviour is—

(a) protecting a person from abusive behaviour perpetrated by someone to whom the person is personally connected, or

(b) protecting a person from risk of abusive behaviour perpetrated by someone to whom the person is personally connected.

(4) What amounts to abusive behaviour is to be construed, or whether two people are personally connected to each other is to be determined, in the same way as is provided for in Chapter 1.

(5) Regulations under this section—

(a) may include provision to the effect that steps or measures are available on the basis of alleged as well as proven behaviour,

(b) must include provision to the effect that steps or measures—

(i) are for protecting persons who are at least 16 years of age, and

(ii) are to apply in relation to perpetrators or alleged perpetrators of abusive behaviour who are at least 18 years of age.

(6) Regulations under this section may include provision—

(a) about the giving of notices to perpetrators or alleged perpetrators of abusive behaviour (or for review or withdrawal of notices) by a police officer,

(b) setting out grounds for giving notices, conditions to be met before notices may be given or circumstances in which notices may be given (including matters to be taken into account before notices are given),

(c) setting out—

(i) what requirements, including restrictions or prohibitions, may be imposed by notices (and for how long and as to which places),

(ii) specifying information to be included in notices,

(d) allowing notices to impose requirements relating to, as well as relating to persons for whose protection notices are given, children of or residing with persons for whose protection notices are given.

(7) Regulations under this section may include provision—

(a) about the making of orders against perpetrators or alleged perpetrators of abusive behaviour (including orders extending, varying or revoking previous orders) by a court,

(b) setting out grounds for making orders, conditions to be met before orders may be made or circumstances in which orders may be made (including matters to be taken into account before orders are made),

(c) setting out—

(i) what requirements, including restrictions or prohibitions, may be imposed by orders,

(ii) conditions to be met for imposing electronic monitoring requirements in orders,

(d) allowing orders to impose requirements relating to, as well as relating to persons for whose protection orders are made, children of or residing with persons for whose protection orders are made,

(e) allowing orders—

(i) to apply for specific periods (or to have temporary effect),

(ii) to apply generally or to be expressly limited to particular localities,

(f) specifying—

(i) who may make applications for orders, whether notification of applications is required or circumstances in which applications may or must be made,

(ii) proceedings in which orders may be made or circumstances in which applications need not be made in such proceedings,

(g) in relation to proceedings as to orders—

(i) prescribing rules of procedure to be followed,

(ii) stating what evidence may be heard or must be considered,

(iii) making special measures available for the benefit of witnesses,

(iv) deeming proceedings to be either civil or criminal proceedings,

(h) enabling—

(i) rules of court, county court rules or magistrates' courts rules to make provision for procedures in relation to orders (so far as other powers to make rules cannot be relied on for this),

(ii) appeals to be made to a court against the making of orders or against decisions not to make orders (and for appeals to be final).

(8) Regulations under this section may include provision—

(a) imposing notification requirements on persons subject to orders,

(b) conferring on police officers powers exercisable in particular circumstances to take samples or images from or of persons believed by them to be subject to such notification requirements.

(9) Regulations under this section may include provision to the effect that—

(a) persons who are subject to orders that are not expressly limited to particular localities must comply with such orders—

(i) in all parts of the United Kingdom,

(ii) outside the United Kingdom if particular conditions in relation to having a residential connection with Northern Ireland, or being a national of the United Kingdom, are met,

(b) every other provision in such regulations, particularly with respect to breaches of orders, applies accordingly.

(10) Regulations under this section may include provision—

(a) conferring on police officers powers of arrest exercisable with a warrant or powers of arrest exercisable without a warrant—

(i) in relation to breaches or suspected breaches of notices,

(ii) in relation to breaches or suspected breaches of orders,

(b) requiring persons arrested for breaches or suspected breaches of notices or orders to be brought before a court within specified time limits,

(c) authorising persons arrested for breaches or suspected breaches of notices or orders to be detained in custody, pending being brought before a court—

(i) in specified circumstances,

(ii) for periods not exceeding specified limits,

(d) authorising persons brought before a court in relation to breaches or suspected breaches of notices or orders to be remanded in custody, or granted bail (with or without conditions attached)—

(i) in specified circumstances,

(ii) for periods not exceeding specified limits,

(e) specifying offences and penalties—

(i) for breaches of notices or for breaches of orders,

(ii) for breaches of notification requirements by persons subject to notices or orders.

(11) Regulations under this section may include provision regulating or limiting the use of, or controlling or requiring the retention or destruction of, samples or images taken from or of persons under such regulations.

(12) Regulations under this section may include provision—

(a) for the Department of Justice to—

(i) issue or publish guidance about the exercise of functions under such regulations (except judicial functions),

(ii) keep such guidance under review or revise such guidance in light of review,

(b) specifying who is to have regard to such guidance when issued or published or circumstances in which regard is to be had to such guidance.

(13) Regulations under this section may include provision involving such further matters as the Department of Justice considers appropriate.

(14) Regulations under this section may include provision amending statutory provisions (as construed in accordance with section 1(f) of the Interpretation Act (Northern Ireland) 1954).

(15) A draft of regulations under this section must be laid before the Assembly no later than the end of the period of 2 years beginning with the day on which Chapters 1 and 2 come into operation.

(16) Regulations under this section may not be made unless a draft of the regulations has been laid before and approved by a resolution of the Assembly.”— [Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice).]

No 3: Leave out clause 27 and insert —

“Eligibility of victims for civil legal aid

27.—(1) In the Civil Legal Services (Financial) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015, in regulation 10 (waiver of eligibility limits in proceedings relating to domestic violence or forced marriage)—

(a) after paragraph (1) insert—

‘(1A) This regulation applies to an application by a client for the funding of representation (lower courts) in proceedings for an order that is an Article 8 order within the meaning of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 if—

(a) the client is the respondent in the proceedings, and

(b) the Director is satisfied that—

(i) the client is or appears to be the victim of abusive behaviour perpetrated or apparently perpetrated by the applicant seeking the order, and

(ii) the applicant seeking the order is someone to whom the client is personally connected.’

(b) after paragraph (4) insert—

‘(5) The following apply for the purposes of paragraph (1A) as they apply for the purposes of Chapter 1 of Part 1 of the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2020 (to give meanings to certain expressions)—

(a) section 2 (as read with section 3(2)) of that Act,

(b) sections 4 and 5 of that Act.’

(2) Guidance under section 3 of the Legal Aid and Coroners’ Courts Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 must describe the basis, particularly as regards applicable information about the commission or alleged commission of an offence involving domestic abuse, on which the Director may be satisfied as mentioned in regulation 10(1A) of the Civil Legal Services (Financial) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015.

(3) An offence involving domestic abuse is—

(a) an offence under section 1, or

(b) an offence of any kind that is aggravated as provided for in section 15.

(4) The Director is as defined in the Civil Legal Services (Financial) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015.

(5) This section is without prejudice to—

(a) any power to make regulations under the Access to Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2003,

(b) the power to give guidance under section 3 of the Legal Aid and Coroners' Courts Act (Northern Ireland) 2014."— [Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice).]

No 4: As an amendment to amendment No 3, in clause 27(1), in inserted text (1A), after "funding of" insert "advice and assistance or".— [Miss Woods.]

No 5: As an amendment to amendment No 3, in clause 27(1), in inserted text (1A), leave out "(lower courts)".— [Ms S Bradley.]

No 6: As an amendment to amendment No 3, in clause 27(1), in inserted text (1A), leave out (a) and (b) and insert — "the Director is satisfied that—

(a) the client is or appears to be the victim of abusive behaviour perpetrated or apparently perpetrated by another party to the proceedings, and

(b) the other party to the proceedings is someone to whom the client is personally connected.",.— [Miss Woods.]

No 7: New Clause

After clause 27 insert —

"Proposals as to availability of civil legal aid

27A.—(1) The Department of Justice must lay before the Assembly a report setting out the Department's proposals for—

(a) making regulations under the Access to Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 for the prescribed purpose, or

(b) taking some different course of action for the prescribed purpose.

(2) A report under this section must be laid before the Assembly before the end of the period of 2 years beginning with the day on which this Act receives Royal Assent.

(3) The prescribed purpose is that of—

(a) reducing (including to nil), in specific circumstances, financial costs to be incurred by a relevant client with respect to receiving funded services in or in relation to qualifying proceedings to which an abusive person as well as the relevant client are parties, or

(b) preventing, so far as reasonably possible—

(i) qualifying proceedings from being initiated unduly against a relevant client by an abusive person by virtue of having access to funded services, or

(ii) qualifying proceedings to which both a relevant client and an abusive person are parties from being prolonged unduly by the abusive person by virtue of having access to funded services.

(4) Qualifying proceedings are—

(a) proceedings for an order that is an Article 8 order within the meaning of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, or

(b) proceedings on appeal arising from proceedings for an order that is an Article 8 Order within the meaning of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

(5) A relevant client is a client who is or appears to be the victim of abusive behaviour.

(6) An abusive person is someone—

(a) who is the perpetrator or apparent perpetrator of abusive behaviour of which the relevant client is or appears to be the victim, and

(b) to whom the relevant client is personally connected.

(7) A conclusion by the Director, when acting by virtue of regulations made under the Access to Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 for the prescribed purpose—

(a) as to whether—

(i) a person is or appears to be the victim of abusive behaviour, or

(ii) someone is the perpetrator or apparent perpetrator of abusive behaviour, or

(b) as to whether two people are personally connected to each other,

may be reached, particularly on the basis of applicable information about the commission or alleged commission of an offence involving domestic abuse, having regard to appropriate guidance given under section 3 of the Legal Aid and Coroners' Courts Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

(8) What amounts to abusive behaviour is to be construed, or whether two people are personally connected to each other is to be determined, in the same way as is provided for in Chapter 1.

(9) An offence involving domestic abuse is—

(a) an offence under section 1, or

(b) an offence of any kind that is aggravated as provided for in section 15.

(10) A reference in this section to a client or funded services, or to the Director, is to be construed in accordance with the Civil Legal Services (Financial) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015."— [Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice).]

No 8: In clause 28, page 14, line 36, leave out subsection (2).— [Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice).]

No 13: In clause 38, page 32, line 27, at end insert —

"(1ZA) Section 27 comes into operation at the end of the period of 12 months beginning with the day on which this Act receives Royal Assent."— [Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice).]

Mrs Long: Before turning to the detail of amendment No 1, I would like to highlight that, prior to and following Consideration Stage, there has been ongoing engagement with the Justice Committee to further develop, refine and improve a number of provisions in the Bill, including the clause on information sharing with schools. As a result, the amendments that I withdrew or did not move ahead of Consideration Stage have been further enhanced and will better serve the needs of all victims of domestic abuse. I thank the Committee for its constructive engagement on that. As a result of our collective collaborative efforts, we are able to bring forward further improved provisions in the Bill, strengthening how the new offence will operate and be reported upon, as well as the safeguards and protections that will be afforded to victims of domestic abuse and children who are affected by it.

As a result of the constructive engagement with the Committee, we are able to make a number of positive changes to the Bill. For example, amendment No 1, which is on information sharing with schools, has been widened to include preschools and is greatly expanded on through the framework of the enabling powers. In addition, the provision on protective measures for victims of abuse, which is the next amendment in this group, now includes a subsection providing that steps or measures to protect individuals are not limited to the notices and orders that are set out in that clause. The framework for the enabling powers in that clause has also been greatly expanded upon. That would enable other provisions for protective steps and measures to be made that are entirely separate from any domestic abuse protection notices and orders. I welcome the Committee's engagement and hope that it will allow us to positively progress those amendments today. There will, no doubt, be a lively debate on the legal aid clauses, and I ask the House to support my amendments on that.

I will now turn to the details of the amendments that I am bringing forward and advise the House of my position on the other amendments in this group that the Committee and individual Members tabled. Amendment No 1 relates to information sharing with schools in order to advise them that there has been an incident of domestic abuse the previous evening. The amendment allows for the expansion of the current provisions in the enabling regulation, making powers as well as a number of small textual refinements. New clause A26 will replace the current provision, which will be removed from clause 28 through amendment No 8. As I noted, the amendment builds upon, strengthens and improves the current provision in the Bill by more expansively setting out what can be provided for in regulations.

The amendment ensures that the regulations can set out who information can be shared with and to; what is deemed to be an education provider, including a school or college, providers of preschool education or any other body, facility or setting that provides education or training of any kind; who are pupils or students of schools; and who are education providers. That will include colleges or other bodies, facilities or settings providing education or training programmes. They will set out what a domestic abuse incident concerning a child is, the circumstances in which information can be shared and unauthorised disclosure of information as well as the offences and penalties that are associated with that.

The Justice Committee asked that preschools be captured in the Bill, including those that form part of a primary school as well as independent entities. Those are now provided for, with the Department of Education content that early-years education should be covered in the Bill. Importantly, the amendment now includes reference to preschool provision outside of a school setting, with a school already captured in the Bill.

Changes have also been made to the provisions to ensure that we can capture instances where a child or young person is educated somewhere other than at school, with around 30 such centres across Northern Ireland. That amendment, which the Committee is supportive of, ensures that the enabling powers are as robust as possible in what can be achieved via regulations and that we have

the necessary coverage in what is to be provided for through the scheme going forward.

1.30 pm

Amendment No 2 is a substitute amendment to clause 26 on protective measures for victims of abuse. Similar to the approach adopted for the information sharing with schools provision, it is intended to build on and expand the Committee amendment, setting out a more detailed framework for the underpinning regulation-making powers. This is another area in which further changes have been made in light of constructive discussions with the Justice Committee. The amendment provides that the regulation powers will enable the protection of a person from abusive behaviour and will set out steps or measures that can be taken in connection with this. As I have clearly set out before, my preference remains to reflect the detail of these provisions in the next Justice Bill, which is the miscellaneous provisions Bill. However, it is also vital that, in order for the enabling power to be effective, if it were to be utilised, it is as robust as possible.

While the amendment provides for the possible scope in the introduction of new domestic abuse protection notices and orders, following further discussions with the Committee, it now also ensures that we are not limited to that. Without prejudice to the detail set out in the clause on possible domestic abuse protection notices and orders, the amendment includes a new subsection providing that steps or measures to protect victims of abusive behaviour are not limited to the notices and orders covered in the clause. I thank the Committee for its intervention in that respect. Its deliberations have been an important part of ensuring that the enabling powers are as wide as possible and do not unnecessarily constrain us. This would enable other provisions to be made that are entirely separate from domestic abuse protection notices and orders in order to protect victims of domestic abuse, should that be considered necessary.

A further key change is that the amendment makes it explicit that requirements including restrictions or prohibitions for notices and orders would apply to children of or living with those for whom protection notices and orders are made. For the avoidance of any doubt, the provision now makes that explicit.

Before I turn to the detail of amendment No 2, Members will wish to note that I have today published for consultation proposals for new domestic abuse protection notices (DAPNs) and orders (DAPOs). The new notices, which will be issued by the police, aim to deliver immediate short-term protection from all forms of domestic abuse, whether physical or non-physical abusive behaviour. The intention is that they would be followed up with longer-term protection through domestic abuse protection orders granted by the courts. A domestic abuse protection order would provide flexible, longer-term protection for victims. The duration of orders could be from six months to one or two years but could be longer where that is deemed necessary and proportionate.

With regard to protective steps or measures, the amendment provides that this will apply in relation to abusive behaviour and those who are personally connected, as set out in chapter 1. With regard to the detail of the enabling powers, it makes it clear that any protective steps or measures can apply with regard to

alleged or proven abusive behaviour. Importantly, with regard to the protection that may be afforded, an offence does not have to be committed, and this could be based on the risk of abusive behaviour that is present. The new notices and orders would apply for the purpose of directly protecting those aged 16 or over, as well as associated children. Perpetrators or alleged perpetrators would need to be aged 18 or over. That reflects the concerns that the new notices and orders could criminalise young people for breach of the notice or order where no offence may have been committed. Furthermore, a lower threshold of, say, 16-plus could result in young people being removed from their home where, again, an offence might not have been committed. Both those age thresholds reflect the position on the domestic violence protection notices (DVPNs) and orders (DVPOs) that were passed by the House in 2015, as well as draft legislation in England, Wales and Scotland. It is also a position that is supported by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and accepted by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY).

The enabling powers provide that regulations can make provision about setting out the grounds for giving notices and orders, the conditions to be met and the circumstances in which they can be given. It is intended that, in the short term, the notices and orders would set out what requirements could be imposed on individuals with regard to requiring an alleged perpetrator not to contact the victim, not to come within a certain distance of their home, not to enter their home or in requiring them to leave the victim's home.

The operation of the prohibitions would be introduced, stabilised and mainstreamed ahead of any longer-term provisions that would enable positive requirements to be introduced, subject to the necessary funding being secured. That could include, for example, a requirement to attend behavioural change or substance misuse programmes or to be electronically monitored, with the latter most likely applying in criminal court cases.

The regulations also make provision that would enable domestic abuse protection orders to be made by the criminal, civil or family courts of their own volition during other court proceedings that would not necessarily have to be domestic abuse-related but where concerns relating to domestic abuse emerge during those proceedings. Applications could also be made to the court. The court would have the power to extend, vary or revoke the orders.

Notification requirements are provided for under the enabling power, meaning that the notices and orders will require individuals to notify the police of their name and address and any changes to that information while the measures are in effect.

There is a range of provisions associated with the breach of notices and orders — for example, that this would be an arrestable offence or could be dealt with by way of contempt of court. The provision on complying with the extent of the order will ensure that we can capture behaviour carried out elsewhere but which must also have a locus back in Northern Ireland.

I turn now to the amendments on legal aid: amendment Nos 3, 7 and 13. At Consideration Stage, I made clear my serious concerns about clause 27, which currently stands part of the Bill. Since that time, my officials and I

have had the opportunity to engage with members of the Justice Committee and with stakeholders to talk about those concerns in more detail. From those discussions, it is clear that we have a shared ambition to help victims who need help. That is the whole purpose of the Bill. It is important that our actions, particularly in such a technically and costly area as legal aid, are considered and evidence-based.

Clause 27 is running and running fast before we can walk. To put it another way, it is like trying to build a house without a clear design and solid foundations. Amendment No 7 is simply designed to put those foundations in place, while amendment No 3 focuses clause 27 in a way that will help victims more immediately while minimising unintended consequences.

The most serious of those unintended consequences in clause 27, as it stands, is that it is open to exploitation by abusers. That worries me greatly, and it should worry all Members. Through the current clause, there is nothing to prevent abusers masquerading as victims in order to access legal aid and using it to continue their campaign of tyranny through the family courts at public expense. That undermines the entire purpose of what was a well-intentioned provision. To be clear, the feature of the current clause that makes it dangerous in this way to victims is that it allows people to use the waiver to bring as well as to defend applications. If we are going to help all the people who need protection from the waiver, we will not be able to have the strictest of tests for identifying genuine victims. There will be people who will not have secured a conviction or court order against their abuser and may not have previously reported their abuse to the police. Those people may still need and deserve help. We need to set a test that those deserving people can pass. That means, however, that abusers could also manage to pass that test by trying to pass it dishonestly. We cannot allow those abusers to use the waiver to access public funds to drag their victims back into court repeatedly. The only way to avoid that terrible and perverse outcome is to limit the waiver to people who are defending applications by their abusers. That protects victims and locks the door on abusers trying to cheat the system.

Amendment No 3 focuses assistance on enabling victims to access legal aid to defend themselves in family proceedings initiated at the family proceedings court by the perpetrator or alleged perpetrator of domestic abuse. That is my reading of the Assembly's intention in clause 27, and it is what amendment No 3 tries to do: to support victims in a targeted way.

Cost is, of course, an important consideration. Legal aid is public money, and we all have a common goal of ensuring that scarce public resources are targeted to help those in greatest need. Budgets are under pressure, and there is no sign that the Executive's financial position will improve in the next few years. That makes it all the more important that any additional spend on legal aid is focused properly for the benefit of those most in need and for those who are victims of crime. Clause 27, as it stands, will cost many multiples of what is needed to support victims. By our calculations, the current clause could add up to an additional £14 million to the legal aid bill each year. Amendment No 3 would reduce that bill considerably by targeting support on those who have the greatest need of it: victims who are defending themselves in cases brought

against them by an alleged perpetrator in the family courts in a vexatious manner.

I know that, for some, amendment No 3 does not go far enough. It will certainly not solve all the problems that victims of abuse encounter in the family courts; no legal aid provision could. That is why I am also moving amendment No 7 and the ancillary commencement provision at amendment No 14. Amendment No 7 will place a duty on the Department to examine and report to the Assembly on what further protections would be useful for victims of domestic abuse involved in article 8 proceedings.

I remain to be convinced that a legal aid waiver is the most effective way to support victims of domestic abuse in the family courts, though I absolutely concede that such support is necessary. Amendment No 7, however, gives the Department an opportunity to examine the operation and the effectiveness of the waiver and to identify if and where it falls short in the support of victims who are in need and what else needs to be done to supplement that. It is about building solid foundations for the future, and so it complements amendment No 3. I am keen to ensure that the work on the report gathers and analyses appropriate evidence and involves key stakeholders. That is the best way to ensure the right outcomes for victims in the medium and longer term.

Legal aid is a complex and contested area of law, and it interacts in many different ways with the experience of people in contact with the civil courts. Because of how the issue has been introduced into the Bill, the detailed research work needed to fully understand the likely implications of the cost protections offered has not been able to be undertaken. Therefore, it simply does not make sense to hold firm to the very wide-ranging changes in clause 27, as it stands, with no clear idea of the impact that it would have. That is why I urge the House today to support amendment Nos 3 and 7 while rejecting amendment No 4 and, most critically, amendment No 6. Amendment No 3 ensures targeted help now while the foundations for a sustainable, evidence-based and affordable long-term approach to the problem is developed through the work that will be undertaken if amendment No 7 becomes law.

I turn now to the other legal aid amendments — amendment Nos 4, 5 and 6 — which essentially undo some of what is being done by amendment No 3 and largely restore clause 27 as it stands. I will resist the amendments to different degrees for reasons that I have outlined.

Amendment No 4 would broaden the waiver to cover advice and assistance. Advice and assistance is the most basic form of legal aid and is intended to provide limited legal advice on a point of Northern Ireland law: nothing more. It is not needed in these circumstances, and passing the amendment would create additional cost for no tangible benefit to victims. That is because the types of help offered through advice and assistance are already included as part of the service provided by a solicitor through representation in the lower courts. All the advice and assistance that a person needs in relation to their case, including access to mediation and other forms of support, are available through the waiver without the need for amendment No 4. It effectively duplicates payment for a service already included in the waiver.

Amendment No 5 is well intentioned and is designed to extend the waiver to the higher courts. I understand and sympathise with the intention and am concerned about rushing the provision without a clear understanding of its impact on victims. In particular, applying the waiver at this level will interact in a complex and ambiguous way with the other rules for the calculation of the contributions that people need to pay towards their costs. It could lead, for example, to quite high contributions being paid by people of limited means and very low contributions being paid by people of much greater means. In my view, victims of abuse would be better served by careful consideration of how existing and, if necessary, new protections can be used to protect those who need it. This is one of the issues that should ideally be explored through the report envisaged at amendment No 7. However, in the event that amendment No 5 is adopted, it may be that, as a result of the reports that we bring to the Assembly, we will need further legislation to address any issues of how it interacts. While I am not in favour of the amendment, I accept that there is merit in it. Therefore, while I will not support it, I will leave it to Members to judge for themselves whether they feel that it should stand part of the Bill.

1.45 pm

The vast majority of family proceedings start in the lower courts. Some 80% of cases are heard there. With increased access to legal aid, there should be less and less reason for people to need recourse to the higher courts, given that access to justice in the lower courts should be significantly improved. For the other 20% of cases, a better approach would be to use the existing discretion available to the director of legal aid casework around the application of the financial eligibility test to support those victims who need to defend proceedings in the higher courts and allow time for the work proposed in amendment No 7 to examine whether that or an alternative is the best long-term way of supporting victims. For those reasons, I will not personally support amendment No 5, but, as I say, I will leave it to Members.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for giving way. Can she outline how many times the existing discretionary power of the director of the Legal Services Agency has been used in the higher courts?

Mrs Long: I can give the Member an answer to her question because she has asked it before: it has not been used to date. That is the one the reasons why, in the legislation, we intend to define how that discretion would be applied in order that it can be used in future. With due respect to the Member, looking at what has happened to date is not really a good place to start. Looking at what happens from here on is what really matters. The importance of defining when that waiver is to be used in the higher courts is the part that is of most value. That is what we intend to do. The waiver has not been used to date due to the risk of appeal and challenge against it, because it is so poorly defined. It is the Department's intention to address that issue in response to the fact that it has been raised by a number of Members.

As I said, amendment No 6 is by far the most problematic of the three amendments. It seeks to broaden the scope of legal aid waivers significantly. It enables individuals not only to defend themselves but to initiate article 8 proceedings. The breadth of that application makes it

much easier for a perpetrator to access legal aid in order to continue their campaign of abuse by masquerading as a victim. That is not a hypothetical or potential side effect; it is a gaping hole in the provision that we can be sure a coercive and controlling abuser will seize upon. We cannot allow that to happen. Of course, my Department will provide guidance to the Legal Services Agency on the definition of a victim of domestic abuse that will try to reduce the risk. However, against the backdrop of a very broadly drawn legal waiver, as envisaged by amendment No 6, that risk cannot be removed entirely without defining very tightly, through guidance, the definition of a victim. That would mean some genuine victims of abuse being excluded from help. That, in my view, would be wrong. In the event that amendment No 6 is adopted, however, there may be no other safe course of action. It would therefore be far better to reject amendment No 6 while supporting amendment No 3. By taking that course, we would be able to focus support on helping genuine victims to defend themselves in family proceedings brought by their abuser in a vexatious and controlling manner. In tandem, the Department will, through amendment No 7, invest time and energy in examining whether and in what circumstances victims should be able to benefit from legal aid when initiating proceedings. I strongly commend that approach to the House.

Finally, on amendment No 13, I have been very clear that there are potentially large and currently unquantified risks associated with the introduction of the waiver, not least the possibility that it could have repercussive financial impacts here and in other UK jurisdictions. I have asked Members not to introduce commencement provisions that would lock us in to a course of action that we might all later come to regret. The amendment continues to take us down that unwise path. We have now decoupled the commencement of the abuse provisions from the commencement of the legal aid provisions. However, the amendment still requires that we commence the legal aid provisions, regardless of any advice that we receive and regardless of whether it is repercussive. I have received suggestions that if, following proper economic appraisal of the waiver provisions, it is considered too unsafe to allow them to come into effect, they could simply be repealed. This is an extraordinary approach to making legislation. It is also wholly unnecessary. I have given a commitment, and I give it again today —.

Ms S Bradley: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Long: Yes.

Ms S Bradley: Minister, I thank you for moving Further Consideration Stage. On amendment No 13, can the Minister at least recognise that, beyond these four walls, there is not much confidence in this place and that there is not much confidence among stakeholders that this commencement will happen unless it is in the Bill? I appreciate that the Minister has given assurances in other places. Can she give an assurance, however, in the House and for Hansard, that, for the remainder of her term, she will be held accountable for commencement happening?

Mrs Long: Had the Member not intervened, I was about to give such a commitment on the record in the House. I will do the work necessary to understand the impacts of the provisions, share the analysis that is produced and, if it is safe to do so, commence the provisions in good time.

That is a commitment made by an Executive Minister to the Assembly.

We must continue to work on the basis of trust. If we want to raise expectations of our standing in the community, we must be willing to trust one another when we make such commitments. I trust that that assurance will satisfy Members. To require an alternative approach that might needlessly tie up Assembly time and legislative drafting resources, in what is a very short term with a considerable amount of drafting pressure, is unprecedented and unnecessary.

Further to my commitment, there was already a case before the law lords that sets out, with clarity, that, where a Minister has legislation that requires commencement, that Minister cannot simply opt not to commence it. That was decided in a case before the law lords in 1995. A Minister is compelled to commence all parts of the legislation, other than where there is very good reason not to do so. Having very good reason not to do so would need to be something of the scale of the repercussive costs in the rest of the UK. If Members therefore do not wish to put their faith in me, they can put their faith in the law. It would be right, for the Justice Committee above all, to have faith in the law.

I am asking Members to accept my assurance and that of the law on that point and to reject amendment No 13.

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease until 2.00 pm, when Question Time will commence. The debate will continue after Question Time, and the next contributor will be the Chairperson of the Committee for Justice, Mr Paul Givan.

The debate stood suspended.

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Health

COVID-19 Vaccine: Roll-out

1. **Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Health to outline plans for the roll-out of a COVID-19 vaccine. (AQO 1360/17-22)

8. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Health for an update on the roll-out of a COVID-19 vaccine. (AQO 1367/17-22)

12. **Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister of Health for an update on preparations to administer COVID-19 vaccinations to those living within residential care settings. (AQO 1371/17-22)

15. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health for an update on plans for the roll-out of COVID-19 vaccination in North Down. (AQO 1374/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Mr Speaker, I intend to answer questions 1, 8, 12 and 15 together, so I ask for additional time for this response.

Northern Ireland has been planning for the deployment of the COVID-19 vaccine for many months and, along with the other devolved Administrations, will adhere to the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) advice on the prioritisation of the vaccine. JCVI advised:

“the first priorities for any COVID-19 vaccination programme should be the prevention of COVID-19 mortality and the protection of health and social care staff and systems. Secondary priorities could include vaccination of those at increased risk of hospitalisation and at increased risk of exposure, and to maintain resilience in essential public services.”

The model for vaccine deployment has been designed to be pragmatic, agile and flexible. Teams of vaccinators from a range of professional backgrounds have been trained. In addition to existing health and social care (HSC) staff and primary care staff, 870 individuals have now submitted application forms to help out as vaccinators during the vaccination programme.

Phase 1 of the programme officially began on Tuesday 8 December, with all four UK countries launching their vaccination programme. In Northern Ireland, the programme began at the Belfast Trust vaccination site, where vaccinators from across Northern Ireland were invited to receive the first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine. All the trusts intended to start vaccinating health and social care workers in the week commencing 14 December. However, in light of the planned delivery schedules of the vaccine in December and January, the staff programme will now have to be phased, starting with those who are at greatest risk or those who work directly with patients at the greatest risk. Ultimately, all health and social care workers will have the opportunity to be vaccinated, and that is expected to be within the first quarter of 2021. There will be seven trust vaccination sites operating in Northern Ireland. Those will be located at the Royal Victoria

Hospital; the Ulster Hospital in Dundonald; South Lake Leisure Centre in Craigavon; Seven Towers Leisure Centre in Ballymena; Foyle Arena in Londonderry/Derry; Omagh Leisure Complex; and Lakeland Forum in Enniskillen.

My officials have worked closely with the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) to develop a deployment model that will enable deployment in care homes and that takes into account the unique characteristics of the vaccine, including transport requirements. Teams from health trusts will vaccinate care home residents, working closely with local GPs under comprehensive health trust governance arrangements that are designed to ensure that the integrity and efficacy of the vaccine is maintained throughout. Trust mobile vaccination teams intend to visit all the homes over the next few weeks subject to dealing with any that have a current COVID-19 outbreak.

We are considering how the arrangements might be extended to include the over-80s living in the community. Due to the logistics of the strict handling conditions attached to the use of the Pfizer vaccine, it is very difficult to deploy the vaccine in a GP setting. However, every effort is being made to try to arrange either a trust-based or GP-based programme for the over-80s. From early January 2021, subject to the availability of a suitable vaccine, it is intended to roll out the programme through primary care-led vaccination clinics that will be responsible for the vast majority of eligible individuals of 50 years and over. GPs will work their way down through the eligible cohorts, starting with the oldest.

While the start of the vaccination programme is a highly positive development, I stress that it will be months before the vaccination programme is complete. We are entering an extremely challenging winter for the NHS in Northern Ireland. I cannot stress enough the importance of the population following the public health advice in order to drive down infections.

Ms Anderson: Minister, by common consent, the British Government have been somewhat shambolic in their handling of the pandemic since its outset. I cannot point to a single thing that they have got right. Given what you said about the vaccine, it is unfortunate that we have to depend on them for the supply of it.

In light of what the Minister said about the phased approach, can he guarantee that all healthcare and social care workers will have access to the vaccine within a clearly defined time frame, particularly the staff at Altnagelvin Area Hospital and domiciliary care workers, who have been under considerable pressure for a long time?

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

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her comments. However, as I am sure that she is aware, I do not agree with them with regard to the vaccine. If we had been left to procure the vaccine on our own, we would have had neither the buying power nor the financial capability to pre-buy seven different vaccines to the extent that we have, or been able to provide the accreditation or certification that the MHRA has provided to allow us to be part of the first delivery of vaccines across the world. We are now delivering them into care homes and vaccinating their staff and residents.

With regard to the delivery of vaccines, we have already received upwards of 50,000 of the Pfizer vaccine, which allows us to vaccinate just over 20,000 individuals. As I have said, the JCVI has set clear prioritisation for those who receive the vaccine, and at certain levels. Therefore, as regards whether I can guarantee access to the vaccine, yes, I can, because we are part of that UK pre-buying, which will see a massive number of vaccines being made available to us. Additional vaccines, once they have received MHRA accreditation and approval, will also be part of the additional programme.

Mrs Cameron: I want to put on record my thanks to the British Government for, first of all, bringing forward this incredible vaccine at this time, being the first in the world to do so, and ensuring that Northern Ireland is part of that supply, as is the rest of the UK.

When the vaccination programme has been completed in an individual care home, will restrictions on visiting be relaxed? How soon will we see that happen, given that many care home residents are, often, in the last years or months of their lives?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for that point. As we have made clear in the past, it is not the initial vaccination that is most important but the second one and giving it time for the efficacy to kick in. I can update the Member that, as of today, we have had vaccination teams across all five trusts and have vaccinated in up to 54 care homes. We have started with those that have the largest number of residents. That is just shy of 4,000 individuals, including care home residents and workers and the vaccination teams themselves.

While the vaccine provides a crucial tool to allow visiting to take place, we must ensure that not only do we get the first vaccination in place but we get the second one in place and encourage as many residents and staff to take up the offer of a free vaccine, which is delivered by the NHS and supported and paid for by the British Government.

Mr Easton: I, too, put on record my thanks to the UK Government for rolling out the vaccine; the first in the world to do so. Can the Minister outline plans for the roll-out of the vaccine in North Down and potential venues that are being looked at?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his request for a press release. I can give him the update that there will be no geographically specific priorities for an area. Those will stick strictly to the JCVI's accreditation and deliberations on who needs the vaccine most. As I said earlier, the venue that will be used in the Southern Trust area is the South Lake Leisure Centre in Craigavon. In the South Eastern Trust area, it will be the Ulster Hospital at Dundonald. That is where initial programmes will start. Care homes in the Member's constituency will also receive the vaccine for their residents and staff.

COVID-19 Vaccine: Training Costs

2. **Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister of Health how much has been spent on training for those administering the COVID-19 vaccine programme to date. (AQO 1361/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. Training for those who administer the COVID-19 vaccine is mostly completed online. The HSC Clinical Education Centre has

provided some one-to-one training under the service level agreement. To date, there have been no additional costs.

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his answer. What consideration is being given to review the policy that only nurses who retired after 2015 can be added to the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) register when, clearly, a sizeable number of qualified people who retired prior to that date could assist with the vaccination programme?

Mr Swann: The Member makes a valid point about the cut-off date for accreditation. If she knows of anyone, I will gladly take their contact details. I have been contacted by a number of GPs who find themselves in exactly the same position with the timeline. However, they can engage, and, after an hour or an hour and a half of online training, they can be part of the vaccination programme. If the Member knows of individuals, I am happy to take their details. We are encouraged by the high numbers of people who have come forward to be part of this important programme. To date, 870 people have come forward to go through a process to assist in what will, hopefully, be mass vaccination programmes across the entirety of Northern Ireland, including North Down.

Mr Gildernew: The Public Health Agency, in common with many agencies, has been greatly challenged by the significant demands of COVID-19. Will the Minister ensure that the lessons learned and experience gained over recent months is retained so that the Public Health Agency emerges from this crisis with greater and wider capacity?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question, although I am unsure how it links in with the substantive question from the Member for Strangford. However, I can answer that. There has been expansive investment in the PHA, not only in finance but in people, to ensure that it could complete all its duties over the period of the pandemic, including an impressive increase in the test, trace and protect system. It is now contacting well over 90% of individuals within a 24-hour period, and, to a lesser extent, within a 48-hour period, at a more effective level than other devolved Administrations. The strength of the Public Health Agency has been added to and improved and will continue to be invested in.

The First Minister and deputy First Minister and I visited our test, trace and protect system in the PHA building in County Hall, Ballymena, on Friday, and, as far as I am aware from their press statements and public statements, they were impressed with what they saw and the service being delivered.

Mrs Barton: I welcome the quality training that has been given to the vaccinators, which maintains our health service's high professional standards. How many vaccinators has the Department employed to administer the vaccine?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. As I said in answer to the original question, 870 people have come forward to be part of the vaccination programme. They are part of the initial wave of those who will receive the vaccine. Those 870 individuals have submitted application forms to help out as vaccinators during the programme. They will be supported by administrative workers, delivery workers, pharmacists and everybody else who is playing a vital role in making sure that we get the vaccine delivered in compliance with the strict delivery processes and management protocols.

Waiting Lists

3. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Health what action he is taking to address waiting lists. (AQO 1362/17-22)

Mr Swann: Mr Deputy Speaker, with your indulgence, I ask for extra time to address this question as it is an important subject.

Elective care waiting times were unacceptable before COVID-19, and, unfortunately, they will be even worse after COVID-19, because the need to redirect HSC resources to respond to the pandemic has had an inevitable and serious impact on waiting lists. The spread of coronavirus is continuing to cause serious disruption to our health and social care system, and it was unavoidable that elective care activity would reduce due to the need to redeploy staff to COVID-related activity.

In the wake of the first wave of the pandemic, I was clear that rebuilding services across all programmes of care, including elective care, while protecting staff and the public from COVID-19 was a key priority for the health service. Thanks to the huge efforts of our health service staff, much progress was made to restart elective care services.

During the first wave, our health and social care system delivered 12,150 new outpatient consultations in April, and there were 29,163 in October. Some 4,859 inpatient or day-case procedures were delivered in April compared with 13,301 in October.

Similarly, there were 39,907 outpatient reviews in April compared with 56,071 in October. Overall, there was over 73% more activity in October than there was in April. Our surge and rebuild plans were effective in keeping services going.

2.15 pm

Each trust surpassed its target for the period of July to September, but the pandemic has undoubtedly exacerbated what was already a crisis with waiting times. Given the reduction in the level of elective activity that can be delivered by trusts as they focus their efforts on responding to the pandemic, they have been utilising the local independent sector's capacity to support the delivery of core health service activities and the rebuilding of our services. During the period from 1 April to 15 November, approximately 3,500 patients had their procedures carried out in the independent sector, which was paid for by the health service.

In rebuilding services, trusts have taken into account new and innovative practices that were introduced during the first wave of the pandemic. For example, there has been a much greater use of technologies, such as telephone and virtual clinics. Outpatient appointments have, where possible and appropriate, moved to telephone appointments. In addition, a growing number of specialities are adopting virtual clinics, using videoconferencing. Embedding those recent innovations will be essential to maximising elective activity during the pandemic and in the future.

Waiting lists were a clear priority in New Decade, New Approach. However, those plans have been delayed by the pandemic, and I am conscious that public spending is likely to be very constrained next year and that all Departments will be facing serious funding pressures. Tackling waiting

lists will not be possible without sustained and substantial investment and additional staffing.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for his very detailed answer; it is obviously a subject that he is taking very seriously. I pay tribute to the Minister because, when I have raised matters on waiting lists or when procedures will take place, he has always been extremely helpful.

Minister, the picture that you have painted is a rather bleak one for those who are in the diagnostic area awaiting treatments, such as cancer patients and diabetes patients. From what you have said, Minister, I assume that you will be making a bid to the Executive for increased funding in the forthcoming days. If that funding becomes available, when might we expect to see waiting lists coming down so that they are approaching a level that one would see in a normal situation?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his pertinent question. With regard to bidding, I will be chancing my arm for as much as I possibly can get to tackle waiting lists. As I said, when I took up this post back in January, waiting lists were an Executive priority and there were additional moneys in New Decade, New Approach assigned to address them because, as an Executive, an Assembly and a society, we realised that they were too long.

Waiting lists have got longer, and we are looking at how we can reconfigure some of our services from day elective units in Lagan Valley, which I visited last week. The surgeons, the nurses and the rest of the staff there have exciting plans on how they can reconfigure the way in which we deliver services across Northern Ireland. One of the things that has come out of COVID has been a breaking down of silos that were not created intentionally or systemically but that grew over time. We have seen surgeons from Belfast being willing to travel to the South West Acute Hospital (SWAH) and take lists and patients with them to make use of our facilities that are in another part of Northern Ireland. We are no longer looking at simply working in trusts or trying to centralise services; we are looking at a regional approach. I am hopeful that, once we get through this pandemic, which I firmly believe that we will, the new working procedures and collaborations that we have seen across a number of specialities in a number of disciplines will make a serious dent in our waiting lists. Additional funding will be necessary to do that, because with that we can support more staff to deliver the services that we need.

Ms Sheerin: In the past, some have used the cross-border directive as a means of getting treated in the Twenty-six Counties because of the long waiting lists. Minister, what actions have you taken to ensure that that will still be available post-Brexit?

Mr Swann: That conversation is ongoing, not just between the Irish Government and us but, because some parts of this are devolved and some are centralised, between the Irish Government and Westminster. A three-way conversation with officials is ongoing. We will raise the subject again at the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council that is due to take place in a few days' time. We are fully aware of not only patients from Northern Ireland traveling to the Republic of Ireland but large numbers of patients from the Republic of Ireland coming to Northern Ireland for cataract operations and suchlike. We already have, as we touched on yesterday, a number of cross-

border working relationships: children's cardiac surgery is being performed in Dublin; and Altnagelvin provides support for cancer services and palliative care. Those will work regardless of Brexit. They are negotiated relationships with the Irish Government, and they will continue. We will continue to build on them by looking, for example, at how we can provide some kidney transplant and other organ transplant services for patients from the Irish Republic.

Ms Hunter: Does the Minister have an update on waiting lists in the Western Trust, which was recently identified as having some of the highest waiting lists in Northern Ireland?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. I do not have those statistics to hand today but I can certainly provide her with an update. We are looking at a more regionalised approach to waiting lists across a number of disciplines. I would like to see the same level of access to a procedure no matter where somebody lives in Northern Ireland. It should not depend solely on the capacity in one trust. As I said earlier, one of the things to emerge from COVID is greater collaboration. Surgeons and patients are more willing to travel, and we are able to deliver services to people when they need it, but it will not always be on their doorstep. As politicians, we often face that challenge in our health service, and campaigns are run by people trying to retain everything on their doorstep. Patients and health professionals are willing to travel, so the Assembly's support for the work that our health service is willing to do to tackle our waiting lists and support patients would be well placed.

Ms Bradshaw: I am led to believe that no neonatal cots are available at any hospital in Northern Ireland or, indeed, the island of Ireland. Will you, Minister, clarify whether that is the position? If it is, what urgent action is being taken to avoid transfers to GB?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. I am unsure of what exactly she means by "neonatal cots" or the point of time at which none was available. The departmental website details the number of available ICU paediatric beds, and I do not think that it has shown that they were completely full at any time. I am happy to take up that specific matter with the Member after Question Time.

We are able to transfer patients, especially paediatric patients, to the Republic of Ireland. We have built up a relationship, especially in critical care, so that, if need be, patients can move from North to South or from South to North. It is also important that patients can move from west to east because, as I am fully aware, when we need to send patients, including vulnerable children, for specialist surgery, it is important that we have access to skilled professionals in Birmingham hospital and Evelina hospital. Those working relationships are in place.

If the Member provides me with details, I will follow up on the specific issue that she raised about no neonatal cots being available on the island.

HSC Staff: Lost Wages

4. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister of Health when health and social care (HSC) trust staff will be reimbursed for pay lost due to industrial action that took place 12 months ago. (AQO 1363/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. The Executive have discussed this matter many times and sought numerous pieces of legal advice. I am pleased to report that the Executive agreed to my latest proposals at our meeting last Tuesday. The regional Business Services Organisation (BSO) has been instructed to make the necessary arrangements for the reimbursement of any deductions previously made to pay.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Minister for his answer. My question was tabled before last week's very welcome announcement. I may claim in the press that my question forced you to do it. Can he indicate whether those nurses will have that money in their wage packet before the Christmas break?

Mr Swann: The Member will not be the only one to take credit for my announcements. Like anything else, success and delivery have many fathers.

It is hoped that the payments will be made by the Business Services Organisation in time for the December payroll. BSO has done a tremendous amount of work since I gave it the direction to try to get that money in place. I can guarantee that, if it is not in the December payroll, the money will definitely be paid in January. Our intention is to get it out to as many as possible before Christmas. I thank and congratulate the Business Services Organisation for moving so swiftly to deliver it.

Mr Durkan: Does the Minister acknowledge the vital role that is played by student nurses and midwives who are working alongside paid — albeit underpaid — health workers in extreme circumstances? Will he reconsider the decision not to pay them for their priceless contribution at this time, when the situation because of COVID appears as perilous as ever?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That is yet another question that is clearly beyond the scope of the original question. The Minister may or may not choose to answer it.

Mr Swann: Thank you for your direction, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I often answer many such questions in here.

The Member said that a decision was made not to pay student nurses, but it is a regulatory requirement that nursing and midwifery students must complete 2,300 clinical placement hours in order to be able to join the NMC register. The emergency standards ended on 30 September, and students returned to supernumerary status. There are no plans at present to reinstate those arrangements. That is a UK-wide position. The Nursing and Midwifery Council has issued a joint statement, which was signed by the four UK Chief Nursing Officers, confirming the present position on keeping programmes on track and safeguarding supernumerary status. As Members will be aware, that decision was taken by the Nursing and Midwifery Council in order to meet its requirements for students to be able to complete the 2,300 clinical placement hours. It is not that we do not value greatly the work that they do and the commitment that they give to those roles, even in a training capacity, because we do. The statement was made by the Nursing and Midwifery Council regarding the supernumerary status of nursing students.

Mrs Cameron: Is the Minister concerned that nurses will be forced to strike again in future, given that, to date, there has been no movement on the safe staffing legislation?

Mr Swann: I do not see any opportunity that would move nurses to take strike action, because I do not recognise the statement that there has been no movement to date on safe staffing. There have been conversations about the terms of reference, and there has been engagement on workforce planning between my Department and the unions that are involved.

The Member will be fully aware that I and the Executive gave a commitment when we were able to bring our nurses and other healthcare workers off the picket line earlier this year that not only pay parity but safe staffing would be a priority for me, my Department and the Executive. That work is ongoing, and a number of avenues are being looked at — whether we follow the Scottish or the Welsh model, whether it requires legislation or a framework model, and what can be done in the time that we have left in the rest of the mandate to bring forward that legislation — to make sure that safe staffing and the rest of the framework commitments that the Executive signed up to are delivered.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Sinéad Ennis, but the Member may not get a supplementary question.

Care Home Visiting: Christmas Guidance

5. **Ms Ennis** asked the Minister of Health whether guidance on visiting residents of care homes over the Christmas period will be revised. (AQO 1364/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. On 10 December, my Department issued additional guidance on Christmas visiting arrangements in care home settings, and that is available on the [nidirect](#) and Department of Health websites. That additional guidance emphasises that care homes should recognise the right to a family life for those in their care. In particular, it acknowledges the importance that many people attach to seeing family and friends over the Christmas period.

2.30 pm

Care homes are asked to make particular efforts at this time to facilitate visiting, in line with the regional visiting guidance, by offering a range of options for visiting. They include indoor visiting rooms or areas, visiting pods, outdoor visiting and virtual visits that can take place in line with the care home's visiting policy. Visits into care homes are preferable to those out of care homes by the residents. Longer visits away from the home carry greater risk. Shorter visits, ideally, for a few hours, are, therefore, preferable if a visit away from the care home is to take place.

If a visit out of the care home is agreed, a number of measures to mitigate the risk of bringing infection back into the care home are identified. When away from the care home, the resident should be in contact with only one household bubble. Members of that bubble should strictly limit their contact with others in the two weeks before a visit from the care home resident. Other precautions, such as good personal hygiene and regular handwashing by everyone, should be maintained. On returning to the home, even if visiting away for only a few hours, the resident will have to self-isolate. The impact of that period of isolation on the resident, as well as on the care home's ability to accommodate such periods of self-isolation, should be

carefully considered by the resident, family, friends and care home staff in any discussions.

I recognise the need for families to come together at Christmas, but it is critical that we keep doing everything that we can to stop the virus spreading as we begin the process of vaccinating those who are considered to be most at risk from coronavirus.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That is the end of our period for listed questions to the Minister of Health. We move on to topical questions.

Care Homes: COVID-19 Rapid Testing Regime

T1. **Ms Bunting** asked the Minister of Health when he anticipates a move to a rapid testing regime for care homes. (AQT 841/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question regarding the support that we have given to care homes. We are managing 87 care homes that have had outbreaks. It is a challenging time for those homes and the residents in them, but I welcome today's indicator that we are beginning to see that number decrease. That has been brought about by the testing regime, in which we test weekly, that we have in place. Due to the weekly programme, we have seen a greater ability to identify asymptomatic residents and staff. Only 40 of the 87 confirmed homes are currently showing symptomatic residents. Our weekly testing programme has picked those up.

My expert advisory group on testing is keeping an eye on the mass testing programme that we have seen being piloted in parts of south-east England to make sure that we can use that testing to maximum efficiency and efficacy not only to facilitate support for the care home residents and staff but to allow safer visiting.

Ms Bunting: I am grateful to the Minister for his answer. The Minister will be aware that numerous people have underlying conditions that will prevent them from taking the vaccine, but they will remain vulnerable until an alternative is found. When does he envisage something being available to protect people who have underlying conditions and who remain vulnerable in these circumstances?

Mr Swann: We have been working closely with, and taking guidance from, MHRA and the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation with regard to what vaccines are suitable for certain cohorts. It is a welcome step that the Pfizer vaccine is suitable and can be used for care home residents and staff, because we can get it. That vaccination programme has been started. As I said, just over 4,000 people have been vaccinated since we received that accreditation. As each vaccine is accredited by MHRA, we look at the green book guidance to see what clinical groups it is suitable for and to ensure that we know what clinical groups it is not suitable for. That is the guidance and training that is given to all our vaccinators before they go out to deliver a vaccine.

School Pupils: Christmas Contact Tracing

T2. **Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister of Health to confirm, in light of the fact that some pupils in Northern Ireland will be in school on 21 and 22 December, who

will be responsible for contact tracing any pupils who test positive after that time, given that it is her understanding that the PHA's dedicated education contact tracing team will close for Christmas on 23 December at 4.00 pm. (AQT 842/17-22)

Mr Swann: The PHA's contact tracing team; the greater team will take over what has been the work of a very specialised cell to support principals and staff.

Ms Armstrong: Parents are not aware of how to report this, because children will be out of school at that stage. As a parent of a pupil, I ask whether any work will be done by the PHA and yourselves to make sure that that goes through the education system before children finish for Christmas.

Mr Swann: Specific guidance will be provided, I am sure, by the Education Authority to schools. However, I will ask and ensure that the PHA carries forward that communication, so that a clear line of sight and guidance is there and accessible. Any child who presents with symptoms of COVID-19 goes through the same process as an adult when it comes to identifying or accessing testing after that point, if they are not in school.

Care Homes: Capacity

T3. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of Health to state his advice for care homes that do not have the capacity to manage situations in which residents have to isolate for 14 days following an outside visit, which was a requirement that he stated in response to a previous question. (AQT 843/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. That is part of the guidance that we have given for care home visiting over Christmas. It is important for those individuals and families who are able to take someone out of a care home for a family visit during this special time of year that we take the same precautions when that individual returns to the care home, so there are additional pressures. That is what I said with regard to someone coming back into a care home as well. On returning to the care home, the resident will have to self-isolate. The impact of that period of isolation on the resident has to be taken into consideration. What may be a supportive and welcome three-hour respite over the Christmas period back in the family home has to be balanced with the challenges to that individual of the period of self-isolation that they will have to take part in when they return to the care home. That is why I said in an earlier answer that that should be carefully considered by residents, families, friends and care home staff. The more residents who leave a care home and return, the more pressure will be put on some of the care home facilities with regard to being able to provide that supportive self-isolation.

Mr McAleer: The Minister will be aware that visiting restrictions also remain in place in maternity wards, for example. Has the Minister any plans to review that in the coming weeks?

Mr Swann: Our visiting policies are kept under constant review, especially with regard to where we see the coronavirus spread across the community. Where we see increased community spread, we have to add additional restrictions on visiting capacity. Until we get into a place where we see a continued reduction in the number of

COVID cases that are active in our community, it is highly unlikely that we will see a massive change in any visiting policy for hospitals. We must remember, even coming up to Christmas, that the virus does not recognise the time of the year, the calendar or social events. We always have to take the same due care and caution, no matter what the time of year. That is what the Member's original question was about.

Organ Donation: Opt-out System

T4. **Mr Beattie** asked the Minister of Health, in an attempt to get away from COVID and to focus on some good news stories that, sometimes, get missed in all the doom and gloom, and maybe even to bring a smile to the Minister's face, to outline, following the end of the consultation process in February, the next steps in the process to bring an opt-out organ donation system to Northern Ireland, given that, come March 2021, Northern Ireland will be the only part of the UK without such a system. (AQT 844/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. I try to smile occasionally, but it is not easy, being an Ulster Unionist. *[Laughter.]* The Member will be fully aware of the work that was originally commenced on this issue by our party colleague Jo-Anne Dobson. It is something that we, as a party, have committed to in the past. That is why I was pleased to launch the public consultation on the introduction of a statutory soft opt-out system earlier this week. That consultation runs until 19 February. At that point, my Department will publish details of public engagement events that will take place in the new year to ensure that all stakeholders have an opportunity to hear about the proposals and submit responses. Legislation will be required to give effect to these proposals and, following the consultation period, it is my intention to bring a draft Bill to the Assembly at the earliest opportunity, subject to the advice of the Office of the Legislative Counsel and the agreement of the Executive, within the current mandate, if feasible.

I encourage everyone to read about the consultation and to submit a response on the Department's website. In the meantime, I urge everyone to discuss their wishes for organ donation with their family and friends. I look forward to the support of the Health Committee in bringing forward the legislation as expediently and quickly as possible.

Mr Beattie: I want to go on the record to recognise the work that was done by Jo-Anne Dobson. Sticking to the donation issue, further changes to blood donation deferral rules have been brought in to allow more gay men to donate. Will the Minister outline the changes to and the benefits of that?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. The changes were announced over the weekend. I made the decision based on advice from the Advisory Committee on the Safety of Blood, Tissues and Organs (SaBTO) following its consideration of a report by the For the Assessment of Individualised Risk (FAIR) steering group. The recommendation was to implement the introduction of an individual behaviour-based risk assessment that will allow some men who have sex with men (MSM) to donate blood if they have one sexual partner who has been their partner for more than three months. I am pleased to be able to introduce that change to the donor deferral policy

in Northern Ireland, which means that MSM in longer-term partnerships will no longer be automatically deferred from donating blood provided they have been with the same partner for the previous three months.

I want to see more people being able to donate blood. However, I also want to make sure that it is safe, and my decision to reduce the deferral period from 12 months to three earlier this year was also based on SaBTO advice. I look forward to seeing more donors on the Northern Ireland Blood Transfusion Service's register. Being a regular donor myself, I know the vital importance of giving blood. Every donation can save or have an effect on up to three lives. The more people we have who are eligible to donate blood, the better it is for all of us.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Question 5 has been withdrawn.

COVID-19: Christmas Restrictions

T6. **Mr Middleton** asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of what action should be taken regarding Christmas restrictions, given that, later today, Michael Gove will host a meeting between the four nations to consider the restrictions over the Christmas period. (AQT 846/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. He is right: the discussion with the three devolved nations, which will be chaired by Michael Gove, takes place this afternoon. As he will be aware, the announcement was made on a UK-wide basis by the UK Prime Minister, First Ministers and deputy First Ministers. That discussion is being supported by the decisions and recommendations of the four Chief Medical Officers from across the nations. As the Member well knows, I never comment before a discussion has taken place and a decision is made. We will wait to see the outcome of the meeting and what it recommends.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Minister for his response. I am going to put the question in a slightly different way. Dr Tom Black said that he believes that a four-week lockdown would be "logical". What is the view of the Minister and the Chief Medical Officer on whether additional restrictions are required before or during the Christmas period?

Mr Swann: I could nearly just say, "I refer the Member to my previous answer". However, he will be aware that where we currently see the spread of COVID, the infection rates are stable but still increasing slightly. The number of inpatients in our hospitals has not decreased at all over the last number of weeks. The two-week restrictions have seen a stabilisation of the numbers, but those are still too high. I do not think that the Member will be surprised to know that I will bring a paper to the Executive on Thursday with a number of recommendations. As I said, he knows me well enough to know that I will make those recommendations to the Executive so that they can have the discussion.

COVID-19: Christmas Restrictions

T7. **Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Health what his Department can do to encourage social care organisations to avail themselves of care home sick leave support funding in order that carers can receive some kind of financial support. (AQT 847/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Member rightly identifies one of the biggest frustrations for the Department and me. At the start of the outbreak and during the initial waves of the pandemic, care home owners needed help to give their workers financial support so that they were not impeded by having to take statutory sick pay should they either contract COVID or become a contact case.

We put financial supports in place that will help care homes to support their workers through what will be a challenging period of isolation. We have regular engagement with care home providers, and that is ongoing in a number of other areas, so I encourage all care home providers, owners and shareholders to take up the financial supports provided by my Department to ensure that their workers are supported during any period of illness when they have to take time off due to being either a positive COVID-19 case or a contact case. That is what the finance, guidance and support is there for.

2.45 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member can have a brief supplementary question.

Ms Anderson: One of my constituents contacted me today. There have been a number of cases across Derry, and they are being forced to take their annual leave and are not getting that kind of support. Can you do more to encourage the use of the supports? I know that you are encouraging the organisations, but we need to get that message across, particularly to carers.

Mr Swann: The Member's raising it here today and my answer will hopefully reinforce the message that the support and funding are there for a reason: to support the workers and the owners of care homes but, most importantly, to support the residents of care homes. The message has been loud and clear, and it is one that my Department will continue to make to care home providers.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That is the end of the period for questions to the Minister of Health. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments as we change those at the Table.

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

Infrastructure

Unadopted Streets and Housing Estates

1. **Ms Dillon** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline her Department's approach to the issue of long-term unadopted streets and housing estates. (AQO 1375/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): I thank the Member for her question. My Department manages the adoption of roads that are proposed for adoption through the private streets determination process that is undertaken as part of the planning process. Once planning permission is received, my officials work closely with developers and financial institutions to pursue the adoption of the development roads in a timely fashion. My Department has undertaken almost 1,100 private street adoptions in developments over the last five years, and progress has been made in adopting a significant number

of unadopted developments that emanated from the property crash in 2007.

The Member will also appreciate that the adoption of private streets in developments is a developer-led process and the majority progress to adoption without the need for intervention by my Department or Northern Ireland Water (NIW). I also fully appreciate the concerns of residents in unadopted developments and the difficult situations that some find themselves in. My Department continues to work closely with developers, NI Water, financial institutions and residents to get roads and sewerage infrastructure adopted.

I am committed to ensuring that developers provide road and sewerage infrastructure to a standard suitable for adoption in a timely manner and to impressing on developers the need to provide safe and adequate infrastructure for residents in the interim period prior to adoption.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Minister for her answer, but I refer more to the historical issue with unadopted roads, developments and streets. This is not a new thing since 2007, where you have the bond, and we have been able to resolve a number of those issues in my constituency. There is an inequality and a real-life issue for people every day. This has been going on in some areas for up to 50 years, when the old councils built the developments and did not do what needed to be done at that time. We have a responsibility to these people, and we need to start delivering for them now. There are no developers for them to go back to and nowhere that they can turn. The Executive really need to start to deal with the issues. Will the Minister engage with some of the residents in my constituency, particularly around Coalisland and Donaghmore, where a number of estates and streets have this historical issue?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. She is correct: there are historical unadopted roads and laneways in Northern Ireland that sit outside the private streets process. Article 9 of the Private Streets Order 1980 allows my Department to consider the adoption of some roads if the majority of the owners or frontagers request it and the road or street is first brought up to the required adoption standard. While I understand that there is a desire among frontagers on private roads and lanes to have improvement works carried out by my Department, the reality is that it is not feasible due to the current budget position and the many pressures faced by my Department. A scoping study was carried out in 2011 and found that there were over 620 kilometres of unadopted roads and laneways in Northern Ireland. At that time, the estimated cost to bring those up to standard was in the region of £300 million, which excluded any land purchase, required structures or utility works. This is an issue, but it requires huge resource.

Mrs D Kelly: Minister, I know that your Department is undertaking a planning policy review. Will that review include looking at some of the developer contributions to the adoption of roads, and will it ensure that there is a significant financial penalty for not doing so?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. She is right: my Department is carrying out a review of the Planning Act. The purpose of the review is to ensure that the objectives that were intended through that legislation are being met. It will also examine things that

can be retained, amended or repealed, and my officials are going out to consultation with councils, businesses, environmental groups and other key stakeholders. I am sure that the issue will be raised with them.

Mr Buckley: The Minister knows that I have long championed the issue in my constituency in relation to Birchwood Manor. I echo Linda Dillon's comments that it is an issue that, I know, the Minister finds unacceptable, but, to date, limited progress has been made on some of the outstanding issues across many constituencies. I thank the Minister for her Department's willingness since then to engage with residents and, indeed, with NI Water on road development. Will she agree that there is a need to engage with the banks to ensure that we can get a timely and satisfactory outcome and allow the residents to live in peace in their developments?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question and for his kind comments on officials' work on the issue. It is a complex issue, and my Department is working to address it with developers and with residents, as the Member rightly pointed out. He also correctly said that it is important to engage with the financial institutions as we try to resolve this difficulty.

Sewerage Upgrade: Saintfield

2. **Mr Harvey** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the sewerage upgrade in Saintfield. (AQO 1376/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. In 2019 and 2020, Northern Ireland Water and DFI Roads undertook measures to remove considerable amounts of storm water from the foul sewerage system. It was that excess storm water that, during periods of intense rainfall, was the cause of out-of-sewer flooding in Saintfield. DFI Roads has replaced a damaged storm culvert on Listooder Road, and Northern Ireland Water has undertaken repair work on sewer pipes in the same area. Additionally, the sewers in Old Grand Jury Road have been repaired by Northern Ireland Water, greatly increasing the resilience of the sewerage system during heavy rainfall.

NI Water conducted extensive CCTV and flow surveys for use in developing a drainage area sewer network model in 2019. The model build phase was completed in December 2019 and audited for use in 2020. The output of the model has been shared with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), which will come back to NI Water once it has completed its assessment of the data.

Mr Harvey: I thank the Minister for her answer. I appreciate that she is considering upgrades in all constituencies to allow the building of new homes to continue. Can she assure me that she will address the current infrastructure issues in Strangford, particularly in relation to flooding, which poses a health and safety risk?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. My Department has not identified any significant flood risk areas in the Strangford area. However, coastal areas and roads can be subject to large overtopping waves when strong onshore winds occur and sea levels are high. My Department has well-rehearsed emergency response plans that have been developed in conjunction with multi-agency partners, should there be a need to respond to flooding in the area. I am also aware that

owners of some of the isolated properties at flood risk have availed themselves of my Department's homeowner flood protection grant scheme, which is intended to assist homeowners to make their property more resilient to flooding.

Mr Nesbitt: The Minister may be aware that, elsewhere in the Strangford constituency, a major development at Rivenwood in Newtownards is under threat because of an unexpected £1 million bill for the developers due to a lack of sewerage infrastructure. Can the Minister detail how many planning applications are being withheld due to sewerage infrastructure being at or above capacity?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He raises an important issue and difficulty. While I do not have at hand the number of planning applications that are being impacted, I can advise the Member that there are 116 locations across Northern Ireland that are at or almost at maximum capacity, thereby curtailing their developmental potential. It is an issue of huge concern. It impacts on every constituency, and it impacts on every local development plan that is being developed by our councils. It will curtail the number of homes, schools and hospitals that we can build. The Utility Regulator has identified £2 billion of investment that is required for the next price control period. The issue affects every Department and community, and it is one that we must tackle.

Ammonia Emissions

3. **Ms Bailey** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what discussions she has had with the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in relation to a review of the planning application process to ensure planners have appropriate guidance on ammonia, including being led by science and data to mitigate ammonia emissions. (AQO 1377/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As the Member may remember from the recent Assembly debate on ammonia, I advised that I had written to the Minister for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs about the ongoing ammonia and nitrates deposition issues that we face, particularly as they affect the planning system. I highlighted the need for DAERA to urgently revise its current operational protocol on ammonia-emitting projects, which is used as the basis for DAERA's advice to planning authorities in its role as a statutory consultee. I also asked for an update on the current position with the ammonia strategy and how, in the interim, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency can provide the advice needed to enable planning applications for ammonia-emitting development that are currently on hold to be determined. Furthermore, I committed my Department to assisting DAERA in taking forward work on its proposed ammonia strategy, which, I understand, is to include a review of the operational protocol.

In his response to me, Minister Poots advised that work on the ammonia strategy is in its final stages of preparation and will be completed before the end of this year. When completed, it will be issued for public consultation. He also stated that, with regard to the ammonia-related planning consultations that have been delayed, they are currently under consideration and he will shortly be discussing them with his officials.

Ms Bailey: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive answer; it is heartening to hear. The Minister will be very

aware of the ongoing high risk to human health and the environmental damage that occurs the longer we do not tackle the problem. During the same debate in the Assembly, there was a commitment to consult fully the farming and agri-food sector. Has that happened, whether by you or someone in your Department?

Ms Mallon: As the Member has highlighted, that issue was discussed. My role in this is from a planning perspective. I am also conscious that, during the same debate, there was a discussion around implementing a moratorium on planning approvals. I can confirm that I have engaged with the AERA Minister directly. As yet, we have not gone out further afield. My view on this is that the urgency that is required is on the review and updating of the operational protocol by DAERA to ensure that it is able to respond to consultations in a way that is based on the most recent case law and the most up-to-date scientific data on the issue of ammonia.

Ms Flynn: Improving the guidance on ammonia has been mentioned. Can the Minister elaborate on whether there is any scope in the planning review to look at improving other environmental aspects of the planning system?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. As I outlined in the response to Dolores Kelly, the review of the Act is to ensure that it is meeting the intended objectives.

As I said, my officials are doing a targeted consultation exercise. I encourage people to engage with my officials and raise those issues so that we can explore what can be done, if not within the framework of the current review, certainly at a later date.

3.00 pm

Mr Muir: The Minister will be aware of Shared Environmental Services and the role that it plays. Will she outline when a review was last conducted of Shared Environmental Services?

Ms Mallon: The Member is correct to point out that Shared Environmental Services is a service that is shared across all the councils. It was developed when we moved to the two-tier planning system. I am not aware of a subsequent review of it. I am aware, though, that councils have been asked to increase their financial contributions to Shared Environmental Services given the increase in consultation responses and the work that it has to engage in. If there has been a review since the transfer of planning powers, I will certainly be happy to update the Member.

Mr Allister: Not for the first time, we have a passing of the parcel between two Departments, the victims of which are the many farmers who have been waiting for months or years for planning approvals. The situation is at its most farcical for those who want to replace old houses with more environmentally friendly houses with lower output, yet they are the very people who are failing to have their needs met. When will the Executive get a grip on that issue?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I think that he was present during the debate on the issue, so he will be well aware that the difficulty is that DAERA has not updated its operational protocol. That is causing delays in the determination of planning applications. If I recall correctly, around 19 planning applications are being held in the planning system pending determination. One of the key

issues in resolving the matter is for DAERA to complete the work that is indicated that it is undertaking. That will allow it to update its operational protocol and ensure that the most up-to-date responses are provided to applications and that they can be appropriately processed.

A5: Update

4. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the A5 road project. (AQO 1378/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I reiterate my commitment to the A5 and to tackling regional imbalance, connecting communities and improving road safety. Many communities can benefit from investment in the A5 project, particularly those in rural parts west of the Bann.

The project has been subject to three separate legal challenges since its inception in 2007. The most recent was in December 2017, when a new decision to proceed with the scheme, made in the absence of a Minister, was challenged, which led to the quashing of the statutory orders in November 2018. Since then, my Department has been progressing the necessary work to enable a fresh decision to be made.

In spring 2019, an addendum to the environmental statement of 2016 and other environmental reports were published for consultation. That resulted in a further public inquiry, which concluded in March. My Department received an interim report from the inspector in September. My officials have considered the issues raised and recommendations made in the interim report and taken legal advice. I will consider that legal advice, and all advice, carefully before deciding on the next steps for the scheme and the timing of the publication of the inspector's report. I assure the Member of my commitment to the scheme.

Mr McAleer: I am glad to hear of the Minister's commitment to the scheme, and I thank her very much for her answer. The Minister will be aware that the project is crucial to the west and, indeed, the north-west of the island of Ireland. Will she update us on any recent contact or consultation that she has had with her counterpart, Minister Ryan, in Dublin on the Irish Government's part funding of the scheme?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question and welcome the Irish Government's reaffirmation of their commitment in New Decade, New Approach to contribute £75 million to the project. I assure the Member that I have had useful discussions with the Irish Transport Minister, Minister Ryan, and the Taoiseach on delivering our shared commitments. In October, the Taoiseach announced that €500 million will be made available through the shared island fund to deliver on the Irish Government's commitment to build shared island infrastructure, which is underpinned by the Good Friday Agreement. That was very good news. That funding is intended to contribute to the delivery of key infrastructure initiatives, including the A5. I assure the Member that I am committed to working with my colleagues in the Irish Government to ensure that we deliver for our citizens. In fact, we are due to meet again at the North/South Ministerial Council on Friday, at which the matter will no doubt be raised.

Mr McCrossan: It is always a great honour to speak about the A5, as it is something about which I feel very strongly. The SDLP strongly supports its development. Minister, your commitment to the A5 has been a cast-iron one, and the people of West Tyrone are grateful to your office for making it such a strong priority. Many people are looking forward to seeing boots on the ground. Have you any indication of when that might happen?

Ms Mallon: As I indicated, my officials have obtained detailed legal advice on the report that we received. I will be considering that advice very carefully, along with all other advice, before announcing my next steps. It is not possible to give a clear time frame until that decision is reached. I assure the House, as I have said on multiple occasions, that I am committed to the project and am keen to see it progressed as far as possible during my tenure.

A6: Update

5. **Mr Middleton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the progress of the A6 upgrade. (AQO 1379/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. Construction work is progressing well on the two flagship dualling schemes on the A6 road, which are the Randalstown to Castledawson scheme and the Dungiven to Drumahoe scheme. Together, the schemes represent an investment of over £400 million to enhance the connectivity of the north-west, improve journey time reliability, reduce journey times and improve road safety.

COVID-19 disrupted or stopped many activities as a result of difficulties in the supply chain, social-distancing requirements and staff absences. I am pleased, however, to advise that the projects are on track. I was pleased to see at first hand the new 5-kilometre section of the Randalstown to Castledawson scheme that opened to traffic last week. That means that the entire 15-kilometre scheme is now open to traffic, although there are still works ongoing, and temporary traffic management will be in place for several months. The benefits of the scheme are already being realised and fully welcomed by the public. The scheme will be fully complete in the spring. The 25.5-kilometre Dungiven to Drumahoe scheme is expected to complete in 2022, largely as planned.

Finally, the delivery of phase 2 of the A6 Derry to Dungiven road project, which extends from Drumahoe to the Caw roundabout, is key and will depend on a range of factors, including future Budget settlements.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Minister for her response. I put on record my thanks to her Department and the contractor for working with residents on some local issues along the route of the scheme. I welcome that. Can the Minister give any clarity on whether the scheme is on budget? Are there any concerns about lack of funds to complete the scheme?

Ms Mallon: Funding has been set aside. Things moved rather quickly because of the COVID impact, so I made a bid for £14.8 million to the Executive and the Finance Minister. We increased the budget by that amount so that it could move ahead. From the advice that I have received from officials, I do not have any concerns in that regard. We are on track to meet all the targets and deadlines for delivery of the project, particularly around the time frame. That will be welcome news to the Member.

Ms Anderson: Minister, as you know, Chris Hazzard from Sinn Féin championed this in 2016 and secured the funding. I was glad to hear you talk about the Caw roundabout to Drumahoe as being crucial and key. What efforts are being made to take us through the statutory process before you get to the point of putting in the bid?

Ms Mallon: As the Member said, phase 2 of the A6 Derry to Dungiven road project extends from Drumahoe to the A2 Caw roundabout. That 7-kilometre section is estimated to cost around £200 million and forms part of the A6 flagship project. As the Member will know, parts of the work will encroach on the Mobuoy waste site, and the final design will need to take that into account. Delivery of that phase of the project, which is not part of the current Dungiven to Drumahoe construction contract, is key and will depend on a range of factors, including future Budget settlements. I look forward to the Member joining me in making representations to the Executive to secure the funding that is required.

Mr Beggs: The completion of the A6 will considerably improve the travel time between the north-west and Belfast, and, indeed, Dublin. Undoubtedly, that will have some effect on the viability of Derry city airport, where more people will choose to travel. When is that road expected to be completed, and how will that influence subsequent additional funding that continues to be passed to Derry city airport?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. As I indicated in previous responses, we are on track to meet the time frame for the A6. That section is due for completion in 2022.

In respect of City of Derry Airport, the Member may be aware that York Aviation was commissioned to carry out a study into the viability of the airport, and it will analyse all the surrounding factors. That report has been submitted to a number of Departments, given that the statutory responsibilities for airports cut across a number of Ministries. My officials are considering that, as will I with my Executive colleagues.

Ms Hunter: I welcome the progress so far on the A6, and I welcome the work from you and your Department. The route will have many major benefits for my constituents. My question pertains to an update on the section of A6 from the Castledawson roundabout to Dungiven.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. My Department is developing a new regional strategic transport network transport plan — a nice snappy title — which will set out future investment and improvement for our strategic transport networks in road, rail and bus, and it will reflect my commitment to improving connectivity for the benefit of our economy and communities across Northern Ireland. This will consider proposals for the further development of strategic road improvement schemes, including the Castledawson to Dungiven section of the A6, and how they might facilitate complementary improvements to promote sustainable travel choices, connect people and communities, and create thriving and liveable places. I intend to publish the draft regional strategic transport network transport plan for public consultation in late 2021, with a view to issuing the finalised plan in spring 2022.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for clarifying, because, for some time, we have been waiting for the subregional

transport plan. I have been in correspondence with her in relation to the continuation of the A26 in my constituency, which would connect Ballymena right through to Coleraine. Obviously it is very important.

The Minister did say late 2021. Is she saying that it will be published before the end of this year, or like most things, will it be pushed into 2021 in terms of the latter part of the year, so that it will not be published this year but will be published next year?

Ms Mallon: For clarity, I intend publishing the draft regional strategic transport network transport plan *[Laughter]* for public consultation in late 2021, with a view to issuing the finalised plan in spring 2022.

Belfast Bicycle Network: Update

6. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the Belfast bicycle network plan. (AQO 1380/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. My vision is for Belfast to become a cycle-friendly city where anyone can have the freedom and confidence to use the bicycle for their everyday journeys.

The bicycle strategy, published in August 2015 by one of my predecessors, set out the objective of building a comprehensive network for the bicycle. One of the elements of that was to develop bicycle networks for the main urban areas in Northern Ireland. The intention was that the first would be for Belfast. A public consultation on the draft Belfast bicycle network was held in 2017. Following consideration of the many responses — some of which were very detailed — a consultation report was published in 2018, during the period when the Assembly was suspended.

There was general support for the idea of a network but the consultation highlighted the need to look more closely at the north and west of the city, where levels of cycling were lower and where there was less walking and cycling infrastructure. My Department engaged Sustrans to carry out further work on an active travel feasibility study for north and west Belfast in 2019. A final report for those two areas was provided to my Department earlier this year. Some work has been undertaken to revise the proposed network in light of that, and I have asked officials to ensure that a final document is ready for publication in the new year.

3.15 pm

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for her update on the Belfast cycle network plan. As she said, the delivery of an easy-to-access, easy-to-understand Belfast cycle network is a key aim of the cycling strategy, but progress has been delayed for the reasons that she outlines. The Active Travel (Wales) Act 2013 places a legal requirement on local government to map and plan suitable routes for active travel and to build and improve their infrastructure every year. Is an active travel Act necessary in Northern Ireland to see substantive progress on our cycle network?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I do not know the answer; I do not know whether it is essential. One of the biggest challenges is changing the culture in government and outside of it. We have seen, during COVID, the success of active travel pilots, limited in

number though they are, and how citizens will embrace active travel if they are given the opportunity to engage in it safely. I reassure the Member that I have initiated policy changes in the Department and appointed a walking and cycling champion to ensure a culture change at the heart of my Department. I have also asked my officials to bring to me a submission so that I can consider the merits of active travel legislation. I have to operate within the reality that we do not have a significantly long period left in the mandate and that we have many other pressures, not to mention COVID and Brexit. I assure the Member that, where change can be made, be it through resource allocation or policy change, I am committed to exploring all avenues, including legislation.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): There is time for a brief question from Robbie Butler and a brief answer.

Mr Butler: I know that the Minister's heart is absolutely in getting people on bikes. Will she commit — I know that this is not her purview — to work with her Executive colleagues to ensure that there is no financial barrier to those who are disproportionately financially burdened in availing themselves of a bicycle to get them fit and tackle their mental health?

Ms Mallon: Yes, it is important that we have inclusivity and affordability at the heart of this. The truth is that so many families across Northern Ireland cannot afford to own a car and are reliant on public transport. They could benefit hugely from being able to access safe infrastructure for cycling and walking. It is an environmental issue for me, but it is also an issue of social justice. I remain committed to doing what I can during my tenure to bring about change in the lives of citizens across the North.

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

HGV Drivers

T1. **Dr Aiken** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what provisions are being made for local HGV drivers to allow them to operate in the EU after 1 January. (AQT 851/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He raises an important point. I am sensitive to the fact that discussions between negotiating teams are ongoing and the outcome will be determined by the British Government and the EU. Any outcome that places a limit on the number of hauliers permitted 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 in the North. I welcome the recent no-deal contingency arrangements announced by the EU, which are subject to UK reciprocity and confirm that hauliers will not require an ECMT permit. However, I have some concerns that hauliers will not be allowed to conduct cabotage or cross trade. My officials continue to stress to the British Government the importance of free movement for road hauliers on the island of Ireland.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Minister for her answer. Can she feed into the Joint Ministerial Council the fact that Northern Ireland haulage firms should be given a commitment that they will indeed be able to work unimpeded in Great

Britain, the EU and Northern Ireland, particularly under the provisions of the protocol?

Ms Mallon: I assure the Member that my officials stress at every opportunity the importance and uniqueness of the North and its situation and raise the concerns that hauliers rightly express to us. As a Department, we have regular engagement with the haulage sector, and I have written to Grant Shapps to raise those concerns directly. I raise them any time that I am on a Zoom meeting or a conference call with the British Government. I have also written to the Irish Government to highlight my concerns. I assure the Member that we will continue to avail ourselves of every opportunity to raise the issues and concerns of our haulage sector, given that it is so critical to our economy.

Taxi Drivers: Financial Support

T2. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given that she will be aware that a large number of taxi drivers have been unable to access her Department's financial support scheme, whether she will look at how the criteria could be amended to assist those who had the correct insurance cover and licence at the beginning of lockdown and who are now struggling to make a living. (AQT 852/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for raising the issue. The taxi driver financial assistance scheme opened on 13 November, 10 days after my Department was given the power to create a scheme. It closed two weeks later on 27 November. The scheme, which was agreed by the Executive, is designed to provide a contribution to the overhead costs, including PPE, that were incurred as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was designed in consultation with taxi industry representatives, who said that, while drivers were eligible for the self-employed income support scheme, they still had static and high overhead costs, not least their taxi insurance, which they struggled to pay. That is why the scheme was designed to make a contribution to overhead costs.

The scheme was set up as a means to help drivers with their ongoing overhead costs, but, in order to ensure value for money, it is dependent on actual expenses being incurred during 22 March and 30 September. That is because it is a retrospective scheme. I am aware of instances where taxi drivers who had continuous insurance were not able to obtain evidence of that. I am pleased to say that my Department has worked with insurance companies, which will provide a letter that we will accept as validation of that. I am also aware of a situation where many taxi drivers dropped their taxi insurance during that difficult period. I have said that I will continue to work with the sector to provide it with support during this time.

I remain disappointed that opportunities have been missed for taxi drivers' inclusion in the part B scheme run by the Department of the Economy, because they have been impacted by the restrictions on our hospitality sector.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will the Minister outline the rationale for the decision not to open the scheme to taxi operators? I am talking not about drivers but about operators. Will she give a commitment to meet the operators to discuss the circumstances that they now find their businesses in, which are most difficult during the COVID crisis?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. My officials and I have met the taxi operators. As part of the stakeholder engagement process for the financial support schemes, as I said, officials and I held meetings with taxi operators on 30 September and 27 October. Officials also met taxi operators on 20 October and 27 November. With regard to the available financial support schemes and sector eligibility, because taxi operators did not have premises they did not qualify for the Northern Ireland Executive support schemes for businesses. However, taxi businesses and operators who had premises could have availed themselves of one or other of the business support grant or loan schemes available. That was clear from the evidence and the information that they provided during the scheme's development stage. For those reasons, the scheme that I put in place is designed to assist taxi drivers who could not avail themselves of the existing schemes but still incurred overhead costs from March until September of this year. In addition, taxi operators advised that providing financial support directly to drivers would provide the operators with indirect support because we were helping taxi drivers to remain in business and in work.

A5: Time Frame

T3. **Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister for Infrastructure when we can expect construction to begin on the essential and long overdue A5 road scheme, given that although the public inquiry concluded in March 2020, we are still waiting for a decision. (AQT 853/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. It was raised in questions for oral answer by your party colleague and other Members. My Department received the report on the A5 in September. It raised a number of detailed issues that we had to get legal advice on. I will consider that legal advice and all advice carefully before I decide on the next steps. It is, therefore, not possible at this stage to provide you with a definitive time frame, but I assure you that I remain committed to the delivery of the project. It is a strategic road project and a key road safety project. It is also critical to tackling regional imbalance.

Mr Gildernew: Thank you for that answer, Minister. It is important that the Irish Government honour their commitment to co-fund the project. Will you comment on how much of the Shared Island Fund the A5 is expected to receive and whether you are considering multiple simultaneous phases of the project?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He is right to point out that the Taoiseach has announced €500 million for the Shared Island unit that is for North/South infrastructure projects. I have discussed the A5, the Narrow Water bridge and the other commitments in 'New Decade, New Approach' with my ministerial counterpart, Eamon Ryan, and with the Taoiseach. We are due to meet again as an NSMC this Friday, and I have no doubt that the A5 and the other commitments in 'New Decade, New Approach' will be discussed.

Road Safety at Christmas

T4. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, after thanking her for her hard work with the travel industry — in particular with Translink to keep people safe during the

pandemic — whether she has any measures in place to deal with Christmas road safety challenges such as drink-driving and drug taking. (AQT 854/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Member asks an important question as families prepare to make their way home this Christmas to bubble in line with government regulations. COVID-19 remains very much with us, and we are at risk, so we all must do what we can to protect ourselves and our families from the virus. I urge all travellers to plan ahead, wear a face covering, keep your distance and wash your hands. Today, I issued a statement urging those travelling, whether by private or public transport, to take care.

I have reminded drivers that my Department will carry out parking and moving traffic bus lane enforcement as normal to ensure that vehicles are parked safely and are not causing disruption in bus lanes and elsewhere.

As many of us will, hopefully, be able to enjoy time with our families safely, I want to warn very clearly that driving while taking drink and drugs is never acceptable. One drink can impair decision-making and cause a collision that can kill. I implore drivers never to drink or take drugs and drive — this Christmas or ever.

Finally, as your public transport services continue to operate throughout the pandemic and are available all over the Christmas period, I remind passengers, including post-primary children, that they must wear a face covering, because I am conscious that that is an issue that Members have been raising.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you, Minister. That was a comprehensive answer, but can you also advise whether the PSNI is providing additional resources to clamp down on drink-driving and drug taking?

Ms Mallon: The Member will know that, last month, I introduced a change in the law that will abolish a driver's right to request a replacement blood or urine specimen where a breath specimen is marginally above the legal alcohol limit. The removal of the statutory option is a much-needed update to road traffic legislation in Northern Ireland, and I worked closely and in collaboration with the PSNI on its delivery.

There is no excuse for drink-driving. I want to take a zero-tolerance approach to it, and I know that the PSNI is taking a zero-tolerance approach too. We will continue to work together to tackle drink-driving and to send a clear message that it is unacceptable and that it kills.

Cycle Counters: Investment

T5. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in light of the fact that Comber greenway usage has increased by more than 75% from April to November 2020, which is a welcome increase and an evidence base on which to target investment in walking and cycling along that route, not least through lighting, whether she will commit to investing in a new network of cycle counters on key streets, roads and greenways to enable further targeted investment in Active Travel across Northern Ireland. (AQT 855/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. It is something that we are actively exploring as part of our blue/green fund. The Member rightly mentioned the increase in usage figures for the Comber greenway. At

the recent Waterways Ireland meeting, we were reminded again of the exponential growth in the number of people embracing our greenways, so I want to do what I can to progress that.

I am a firm believer in “If you build it, they will come”. However, we always need an evidence base, and that is why we are looking at whether we can put more counters in places so that we can provide the evidence of what is happening. There is a quiet revolution of people embracing Active Travel and reconnecting with nature and with one another.

Mr Lyttle: Can the Minister provide an update on the budget allocation for Active Travel in the next financial year?

Ms Mallon: I wish that I could. I wish that I could say that we had seen a vast increase in the allocations to my Department to enable me to do so much more. However, I assure the Member that, even in the absence of that information, I remain committed to doing what I can to progress that agenda while I remain Minister for Infrastructure.

3.30 pm

Dangerous Trees

T6. **Ms Dillon** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, having previously discussed the issue of dangerous trees along roadsides, with the Minister outlining the Department’s official position, whether the Department will complete a scoping exercise into anything further that can be done, particularly because she has reported many dangerous trees, including those that have fallen across roads, and, given that, will the Minister commit to meeting with her and one of her constituents whose daddy was killed last year by a falling tree, leading to her campaigning to have the issue addressed. (AQT 856/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am very aware of the case that the Member has raised and the fact that she has made representations to me on the issue. The Member will know that there are complex issues around land ownership and legal responsibility in that regard. However, I am more than happy to meet the Member and her constituent to discuss what the Department is doing, our approach and what we can do working with other partners.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Thank you, Minister. Time is up. I ask Members to take their ease, please, while we change the top Table and prepare for the next item of business.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Executive Committee Business

Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill: Further Consideration Stage

New Clause

Debate resumed on amendment No 1, which amendment was:

Before clause 26 insert –

“Information-sharing with schools etc.

A26.—(1) The Department of Justice may by regulations make provision—

(a) enabling or requiring a relevant person to inform a designated person in relation to an education provider of an incident of domestic abuse concerning a child who is a pupil or a student of the education provider,

(b) for the purpose of or in connection with functions exercisable by a relevant person or a designated person accordingly.

(2) Here—

(a) a relevant person is a person of a description (or acting in a particular capacity) specified in regulations under this section,

(b) a designated person in relation to an education provider is a person of a description (or acting in a particular capacity) specified in regulations under this section,

(c) an education provider is—

(i) a school or a college,

(ii) a non-school body which provides pre-school education (or any facility or setting at which pre-school education is provided), or

(iii) any other body or facility which provides education or training of any kind (or any facility or setting at which education or training of any kind is provided),

(d) an incident is one whether alleged or proved,

(e) a child is a person under 18 years of age.

(3) A relevant person, as may be referred to in regulations under this section, must be a person who has functions of a public nature.

(4) Regulations under this section may include provision—

(a) describing what is to be regarded as an incident of domestic abuse concerning a child,

(b) concerning—

(i) pupils or students generally, or particular categories of pupil or student,

(ii) education providers generally, or particular categories of provider (or particular facilities or settings within different categories),

(c) stating who is to be regarded as a pupil or a student of an education provider,

(d) setting out circumstances in or reasons for which—

- (i) a relevant person may or must give information to a designated person or a designated person may or must give information to a relevant person,
- (ii) a different person (including of a description specified) may or must give information to a relevant person or a designated person,
- (e) with respect to information—
- (i) regulating or limiting the use or disclosure of information by a relevant person or a designated person,
- (ii) specifying offences and penalties for unauthorised use or disclosure of information.
- (5) Regulations under this section may include provision involving such further matters as the Department of Justice considers appropriate.
- (6) Regulations under this section may include provision amending statutory provisions (as construed in accordance with section 1(f) of the Interpretation Act (Northern Ireland) 1954).
- (7) Regulations under this section may not be made unless a draft of the regulations has been laid before and approved by a resolution of the Assembly.”— [Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice).]

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 2: Leave out clause 26 and insert –

“Protective measures for victims of abuse

26.—(1) The Department of Justice may by regulations make provision—

- (a) enabling or requiring steps to be taken or measures to be imposed for protecting a person from abusive behaviour,
- (b) for the purpose of or in connection with such steps or measures for protecting a person from abusive behaviour.
- (2) Steps or measures which may be provided for in regulations under this section are not limited to notices or orders as referred to in this section (and nothing in the following subsections of this section is to the prejudice of the generality of what may be provided for in regulations under this section).
- (3) Protecting a person from abusive behaviour is—
- (a) protecting a person from abusive behaviour perpetrated by someone to whom the person is personally connected, or
- (b) protecting a person from risk of abusive behaviour perpetrated by someone to whom the person is personally connected.
- (4) What amounts to abusive behaviour is to be construed, or whether two people are personally connected to each other is to be determined, in the same way as is provided for in Chapter 1.
- (5) Regulations under this section—
- (a) may include provision to the effect that steps or measures are available on the basis of alleged as well as proven behaviour,
- (b) must include provision to the effect that steps or measures—

- (i) are for protecting persons who are at least 16 years of age, and
- (ii) are to apply in relation to perpetrators or alleged perpetrators of abusive behaviour who are at least 18 years of age.
- (6) Regulations under this section may include provision—
- (a) about the giving of notices to perpetrators or alleged perpetrators of abusive behaviour (or for review or withdrawal of notices) by a police officer,
- (b) setting out grounds for giving notices, conditions to be met before notices may be given or circumstances in which notices may be given (including matters to be taken into account before notices are given),
- (c) setting out—
- (i) what requirements, including restrictions or prohibitions, may be imposed by notices (and for how long and as to which places),
- (ii) specifying information to be included in notices,
- (d) allowing notices to impose requirements relating to, as well as relating to persons for whose protection notices are given, children of or residing with persons for whose protection notices are given.
- (7) Regulations under this section may include provision—
- (a) about the making of orders against perpetrators or alleged perpetrators of abusive behaviour (including orders extending, varying or revoking previous orders) by a court,
- (b) setting out grounds for making orders, conditions to be met before orders may be made or circumstances in which orders may be made (including matters to be taken into account before orders are made),
- (c) setting out—
- (i) what requirements, including restrictions or prohibitions, may be imposed by orders,
- (ii) conditions to be met for imposing electronic monitoring requirements in orders,
- (d) allowing orders to impose requirements relating to, as well as relating to persons for whose protection orders are made, children of or residing with persons for whose protection orders are made,
- (e) allowing orders—
- (i) to apply for specific periods (or to have temporary effect),
- (ii) to apply generally or to be expressly limited to particular localities,
- (f) specifying—
- (i) who may make applications for orders, whether notification of applications is required or circumstances in which applications may or must be made,
- (ii) proceedings in which orders may be made or circumstances in which applications need not be made in such proceedings,
- (g) in relation to proceedings as to orders—
- (i) prescribing rules of procedure to be followed,

- (ii) stating what evidence may be heard or must be considered,
- (iii) making special measures available for the benefit of witnesses,
- (iv) deeming proceedings to be either civil or criminal proceedings,
- (h) enabling—
- (i) rules of court, county court rules or magistrates' courts rules to make provision for procedures in relation to orders (so far as other powers to make rules cannot be relied on for this),
- (ii) appeals to be made to a court against the making of orders or against decisions not to make orders (and for appeals to be final).
- (8) Regulations under this section may include provision—
- (a) imposing notification requirements on persons subject to orders,
- (b) conferring on police officers powers exercisable in particular circumstances to take samples or images from or of persons believed by them to be subject to such notification requirements.
- (9) Regulations under this section may include provision to the effect that—
- (a) persons who are subject to orders that are not expressly limited to particular localities must comply with such orders—
- (i) in all parts of the United Kingdom,
- (ii) outside the United Kingdom if particular conditions in relation to having a residential connection with Northern Ireland, or being a national of the United Kingdom, are met,
- (b) every other provision in such regulations, particularly with respect to breaches of orders, applies accordingly.
- (10) Regulations under this section may include provision—
- (a) conferring on police officers powers of arrest exercisable with a warrant or powers of arrest exercisable without a warrant—
- (i) in relation to breaches or suspected breaches of notices,
- (ii) in relation to breaches or suspected breaches of orders,
- (b) requiring persons arrested for breaches or suspected breaches of notices or orders to be brought before a court within specified time limits,
- (c) authorising persons arrested for breaches or suspected breaches of notices or orders to be detained in custody, pending being brought before a court—
- (i) in specified circumstances,
- (ii) for periods not exceeding specified limits,
- (d) authorising persons brought before a court in relation to breaches or suspected breaches of notices or orders to be remanded in custody, or granted bail (with or without conditions attached)—
- (i) in specified circumstances,

- (ii) for periods not exceeding specified limits,
- (e) specifying offences and penalties—
- (i) for breaches of notices or for breaches of orders,
- (ii) for breaches of notification requirements by persons subject to notices or orders.
- (11) Regulations under this section may include provision regulating or limiting the use of, or controlling or requiring the retention or destruction of, samples or images taken from or of persons under such regulations.
- (12) Regulations under this section may include provision—
- (a) for the Department of Justice to—
- (i) issue or publish guidance about the exercise of functions under such regulations (except judicial functions),
- (ii) keep such guidance under review or revise such guidance in light of review,
- (b) specifying who is to have regard to such guidance when issued or published or circumstances in which regard is to be had to such guidance.
- (13) Regulations under this section may include provision involving such further matters as the Department of Justice considers appropriate.
- (14) Regulations under this section may include provision amending statutory provisions (as construed in accordance with section 1(f) of the Interpretation Act (Northern Ireland) 1954).
- (15) A draft of regulations under this section must be laid before the Assembly no later than the end of the period of 2 years beginning with the day on which Chapters 1 and 2 come into operation.
- (16) Regulations under this section may not be made unless a draft of the regulations has been laid before and approved by a resolution of the Assembly."— [Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice).]

No 3: Leave out clause 27 and insert —

"Eligibility of victims for civil legal aid

27.—(1) In the Civil Legal Services (Financial) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015, in regulation 10 (waiver of eligibility limits in proceedings relating to domestic violence or forced marriage)—

(a) after paragraph (1) insert—

'(1A) This regulation applies to an application by a client for the funding of representation (lower courts) in proceedings for an order that is an Article 8 order within the meaning of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 if—

(a) the client is the respondent in the proceedings, and

(b) the Director is satisfied that—

(i) the client is or appears to be the victim of abusive behaviour perpetrated or apparently perpetrated by the applicant seeking the order, and

(ii) the applicant seeking the order is someone to whom the client is personally connected.'

(b) after paragraph (4) insert—

(5) The following apply for the purposes of paragraph (1A) as they apply for the purposes of Chapter 1 of Part 1 of the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2020 (to give meanings to certain expressions)—

- (a) section 2 (as read with section 3(2)) of that Act,*
- (b) sections 4 and 5 of that Act.*

(2) Guidance under section 3 of the Legal Aid and Coroners' Courts Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 must describe the basis, particularly as regards applicable information about the commission or alleged commission of an offence involving domestic abuse, on which the Director may be satisfied as mentioned in regulation 10(1A) of the Civil Legal Services (Financial) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015.

(3) An offence involving domestic abuse is—

- (a) an offence under section 1, or*
- (b) an offence of any kind that is aggravated as provided for in section 15.*

(4) The Director is as defined in the Civil Legal Services (Financial) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015.

(5) This section is without prejudice to—

- (a) any power to make regulations under the Access to Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2003,*
- (b) the power to give guidance under section 3 of the Legal Aid and Coroners' Courts Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.— [Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice).]*

No 4: As an amendment to amendment No 3, in clause 27(1), in inserted text (1A), after "funding of" insert "advice and assistance or".— *[Miss Woods.]*

No 5: As an amendment to amendment No 3, in clause 27(1), in inserted text (1A), leave out "(lower courts)".— *[Ms S Bradley.]*

No 6: As an amendment to amendment No 3, in clause 27(1), in inserted text (1A), leave out (a) and (b) and insert —
"the Director is satisfied that—

- (a) the client is or appears to be the victim of abusive behaviour perpetrated or apparently perpetrated by another party to the proceedings, and*
- (b) the other party to the proceedings is someone to whom the client is personally connected.",.— [Miss Woods.]*

No 7: New Clause

After clause 27 insert —

"Proposals as to availability of civil legal aid

27A.—(1) The Department of Justice must lay before the Assembly a report setting out the Department's proposals for—

- (a) making regulations under the Access to Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 for the prescribed purpose, or*
- (b) taking some different course of action for the prescribed purpose.*

(2) A report under this section must be laid before the Assembly before the end of the period of 2 years beginning with the day on which this Act receives Royal Assent.

(3) The prescribed purpose is that of—

- (a) reducing (including to nil), in specific circumstances, financial costs to be incurred by a relevant client with respect to receiving funded services in or in relation to qualifying proceedings to which an abusive person as well as the relevant client are parties, or*
- (b) preventing, so far as reasonably possible—*
 - (i) qualifying proceedings from being initiated unduly against a relevant client by an abusive person by virtue of having access to funded services, or*
 - (ii) qualifying proceedings to which both a relevant client and an abusive person are parties from being prolonged unduly by the abusive person by virtue of having access to funded services.*

(4) Qualifying proceedings are—

- (a) proceedings for an order that is an Article 8 order within the meaning of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, or*
- (b) proceedings on appeal arising from proceedings for an order that is an Article 8 Order within the meaning of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.*

(5) A relevant client is a client who is or appears to be the victim of abusive behaviour.

(6) An abusive person is someone—

- (a) who is the perpetrator or apparent perpetrator of abusive behaviour of which the relevant client is or appears to be the victim, and*
- (b) to whom the relevant client is personally connected.*

(7) A conclusion by the Director, when acting by virtue of regulations made under the Access to Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 for the prescribed purpose—

- (a) as to whether—*
 - (i) a person is or appears to be the victim of abusive behaviour, or*
 - (ii) someone is the perpetrator or apparent perpetrator of abusive behaviour, or*
- (b) as to whether two people are personally connected to each other,*

may be reached, particularly on the basis of applicable information about the commission or alleged commission of an offence involving domestic abuse, having regard to appropriate guidance given under section 3 of the Legal Aid and Coroners' Courts Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

(8) What amounts to abusive behaviour is to be construed, or whether two people are personally connected to each other is to be determined, in the same way as is provided for in Chapter 1.

(9) An offence involving domestic abuse is—

- (a) an offence under section 1, or*
- (b) an offence of any kind that is aggravated as provided for in section 15.*

(10) A reference in this section to a client or funded services, or to the Director, is to be construed in accordance with the Civil Legal Services (Financial)

Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015.”— *[Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice).]*

No 8: In clause 28, page 14, line 36, leave out subsection (2).— *[Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice).]*

No 13: In clause 38, page 32, line 27, at end insert –

“(1ZA) Section 27 comes into operation at the end of the period of 12 months beginning with the day on which this Act receives Royal Assent.”— *[Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice).]*

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): Before I comment specifically on the amendments before us, I, on behalf of the Justice Committee, acknowledge the early notice that the Department provided of its intention to bring forward a number of amendments at Further Consideration Stage, which was very helpful. I also welcome the officials’ engagement on the proposed amendments to the provisions that the Committee brought forward at Consideration Stage that were supported by the Assembly, and the constructive approach adopted to changes that the Committee requested to the text of the draft amendments before they were finalised and tabled for consideration by the House today.

I turn to amendment Nos 1 and 8, which, as the Minister outlined, replace the current provision in the Bill to enable the sharing of information between the police and schools for well-being as opposed to for child protection purposes. That will ensure that schools are in a better position to understand and be supportive of the child’s needs and possible behaviours as a result of being notified when a domestic abuse incident to which the police have been called out has occurred the previous night. Prior to Consideration Stage, the Minister advised the Committee that she agreed that there was considerable merit in a provision to enable information to be shared for the purpose of an Operation Encompass-type approach, and, if the Committee amendment were made, it was her intention to table an amendment at Further Consideration Stage to ensure that the provision was as robust as possible and fully provided for the necessary regulations to be brought forward. The Committee welcomed the Minister’s support for that provision and indicated that it would be happy to consider any amendments to improve it before the Bill completed its passage.

At its meetings on 26 November and 1 December, the Committee considered the amendments to leave out subsection 2 of clause 8 and to replace it with a new clause. Following consideration of the initial draft of amendment No 1, the Committee was content with widening the scope to cover instances where a child or young person is educated in centres other than schools but asked the Department to consider also including preschool settings; those in primary schools and other preschool settings. Officials undertook to consider that, in conjunction with Department of Education colleagues, and subsequently provided revised texts that covered that aspect as well. The amendment that is before us will now ensure that children and young people are better safeguarded against the short-, medium- and long-term effects of domestic abuse, regardless of whether they are being educated in a preschool setting, in school or in a centre other than a school.

Amendment No 1 also enhances and strengthens the provision that was brought forward by the Committee at Consideration Stage by providing increased detail and clarity to ensure that the provision will fully meet the intended purpose and that the enabling powers are as robust as possible. The Committee, therefore, welcomes and supports amendment Nos 1 and 8.

Amendment No 2 is intended to replace clause 26 with a much more detailed provision, building on and expanding the provision and setting out a detailed framework for the underpinning regulation-making powers. The initial draft of the amendment provided by the Department focused solely on covering domestic abuse protection notices and orders and left out the provision of measures other than court orders that is currently provided for in clause 26. The Committee believes that the flexibility that is provided by the inclusion of that is important and, therefore, asked the Department to reflect that aspect in the amendment that it was bringing forward. That has been done.

Committee members also questioned officials on the need for such detail to be included in the Bill and whether it was being too prescriptive; whether the text was modelled on the domestic abuse protection notices and orders that are being brought forward in England and Wales; whether the intention was still to legislate for those notices and orders in a Justice miscellaneous provisions Bill; and whether there was enough flexibility to take account of the results of the Department’s proposed consultation on that policy area. Officials confirmed that the intention was still to bring forward amendments during the passage of the Justice miscellaneous provisions Bill to provide for domestic abuse protection notices and orders and that the aim of the amendment was to build on and strengthen the provision now in the Bill and to ensure that it provides the required authority to enable the Department to take forward the notices and orders by way of regulation if there were unforeseen circumstances that prevented them being progressed in the miscellaneous provisions Bill. They also confirmed that account would be taken of the results of the consultation on the proposed protection notices and orders, which has just been launched, before legislative provision is made.

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): I thank the Chairman for giving way. I want to correct something that I said in my opening remarks, which was that I launched the consultation on DAPNs and DAPOs today. I actually launched it last week, so I was underselling what the Department had managed to do in the time available. I apologise for that. I hope that that corrects the record, Mr Speaker.

Mr Givan: I thank the Minister for that.

Questions were also raised about the different age thresholds for protecting persons and about perpetrators or alleged perpetrators in the amendment. Officials agreed to check the age thresholds that apply in other jurisdictions regarding similar notices and orders and to seek the views of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) on whether there was a need to address the differential. Following further information and clarification on that issue from the Department, which indicated that the Commissioner for Children and Young People and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) are keen to ensure that measures do not inappropriately criminalise young

people, given that there are other interventions to deal with abusive behaviour, protections would continue to be afforded where the alleged perpetrator is under 18 years of age through non-molestation and occupation orders.

In England and Wales, and in Scotland, domestic abuse protection notices and orders apply to alleged perpetrators who are aged 18 or over. The Committee agreed that it was content with the approach being adopted by the Department. Having received assurances on the range of issues raised, and with the change that we requested now incorporated, the Committee is therefore content to support amendment No 2.

Before turning to the Committee's amendment, I will address amendment Nos 3 and 7, which relate to clause 27 and the eligibility of victims for civil legal aid. As outlined at Consideration Stage, the Committee did not have an opportunity to consider the amendment on the eligibility of victims for legal aid, which is now clause 27, and therefore did not have a position on it.

Following Consideration Stage, the Department provided information to the Committee setting out its concerns regarding clause 27, which the Minister has already articulated, and the text of a draft amendment. Members discussed those in detail with officials at the meeting on 26 November and expressed concerns that the proposed amendment made significant changes to clause 27 and provided for a report to be produced, rather than a specific outcome, which appeared to undo what had been agreed by the Assembly at Consideration Stage. The Committee agreed that, if the Department brought forward a revised amendment, it would consider it at a meeting on 1 December. Discussions took place on 1 December on amendment Nos 3 and 7. Again, a number of members raised a range of issues and concerns regarding those amendments and indicated that they were not content with what was being proposed by the Department. The Committee subsequently agreed to note the departmental amendments. Individual members could bring forward further amendments if they wished to do so, and those would be considered during this debate.

The Justice Committee's amendment, amendment No 13, provides for clause 27 to come into operation 12 months after the Bill receives Royal Assent. As most, if not all, Members will be aware, the Committee initially brought forward an amendment to provide for clause 27 to be commenced at the same time as chapters 1 and 2 of the Bill. The Minister's clear opposition to the amendment made by the Assembly at Consideration Stage to insert clause 27, which deals with eligibility for civil legal aid, resulted in subsequent draft amendments provided by the Department. These appeared to delay or defer any implementation of the provision, which would be against the will of the Assembly. In light of this, Committee members were of the view that it was important to include more specific details on the commencement of clause 27, rather than leaving it to the Department's discretion. The Committee, at its meeting on 1 December, therefore agreed to bring forward the amendment that I have just described, which was amendment No 15 in the previous Marshalled List.

On the day before Consideration Stage, which was a Sunday, a joint letter was received from the Ministers of Justice and Finance asking me, in my capacity as Chairman of the Committee, to consider not moving that

amendment. The letter indicated that, while the Ministers were sympathetic to the aim of supporting victims of abuse involved in article 8 Children Order hearings, they were concerned that the potential financial implications of clause 27 could be significant.

When the Minister did not move Further Consideration Stage last Monday, on the basis that I had not given a commitment not to move the Committee's amendment, I made it clear to the House that I could not unilaterally change a decision of the Committee, even if I wished to do so. No doubt, if I did, the members of the Justice Committee would hold me to account.

With the correspondence coming at such short notice, it provided no opportunity to arrange a meeting of the Committee before Monday lunchtime, when Further Consideration Stage was scheduled to take place. However, in light of the deferral of Further Consideration Stage, an emergency meeting of the Committee was arranged for last Tuesday, and the Minister and permanent secretary were able to attend to provide further information and clarification of the financial concerns highlighted in the letter. I place on record my appreciation to the Minister and permanent secretary for being able to attend at such short notice.

The session was very useful as it provided an opportunity to explore the position and the financial concerns in more detail than had been provided in the letter received by the Committee and upon which the Minister had wanted the Committee's amendment to be abandoned.

During the evidence session, Committee members sought information on a range of issues, including the scope of the potential costs; the possible repercussive implications; the timescale for completion of the due diligence exercise; details of other court cases referred to by the Minister and the permanent secretary; the victims who would be eligible for civil legal aid under the Department's proposed amendment to clause 27; and the threshold or evidential test that would be applied. Potential ways in which to alter the Committee's amendment were also explored with the Minister, but she did not see any of those proposals as being a satisfactory way in which to proceed.

3.45 pm

Following that session, and before the Committee discussed what approach it wished to adopt, a representative from the Women's Aid Federation joined the meeting to discuss the civil legal aid eligibility clause — clause 27 — which is already part of the Bill. I place on record the Committee's appreciation of the work carried out by the Women's Aid Federation and by its representative, who made herself available to attend the Committee meeting, which, again, was called at very short notice. I reassure other groups that support domestic abuse victims that it was only the very tight timescale within which the Committee was considering the matter that prevented us from holding further discussions with them.

Women's Aid emphasised how pleased women whom they represent are that legal aid is being discussed and has been included in the Bill. The representative highlighted the fact that reform of legal aid has been promised in the past with little being achieved and that there is a fear that clause 27 will not be commenced. She provided information on a range of case studies in which

perpetrators are already using the system to continue to abuse, illustrating that the cost to victims is substantial and ongoing for a considerable period. She also provided further obvious reasons for why they would like to see the scope of provision being as wide as possible. She indicated that those women to whom she had spoken before coming to the Committee really wanted to see the issue fully addressed in the Bill.

Following the evidence sessions, the Committee spent a considerable amount of time discussing the additional information provided and the most appropriate way in which to progress the issue. I thank the members of the Committee for the time and effort that they spent on the matter. Although members were content to decouple the commencement of clause 27 from Parts 1 and 2 of the Bill, as provided for in the Committee's original amendment, which the Minister had indicated would prevent her from taking forward the rest of the Bill, including the new offence that everyone wants to see brought in as soon as possible, there was a range of views on whether an alternative amendment relating to the commencement of clause 27 should be brought forward.

Although some members did not feel able to support a further commencement amendment, others expressed the view that it was important to provide some certainty on the timescale for the commencement of the legal aid clause, particularly given the views expressed by, and the expectation of, victims. Concerns were also expressed that a number of differing figures and costs had been mentioned by the Department without a reference point, and it was clear that, until the due diligence exercise has been completed, it will not be possible to provide figures or information on the likely impact with any degree of accuracy. Although the Minister gave a commitment during the evidence session to commence clause 27 if the outcome of the due diligence exercise was satisfactory, the timescales for that to be completed were vague. The lack of evidence and firm timescales was a factor for members.

Mrs Long: I thank the Chairman for giving way. We could not give a definite timescale for how long due diligence would take, but I was able to reassure the Committee that it was my intention, if the due diligence exercise proved that there were no repercussive costs, to commence the offences and the legal aid provisions at the same time. That reassurance was also given in writing by me and the Finance Minister in our letter to the Committee.

Mr Givan: I thank the Minister for that. When I am speaking as a private Member, I will go into that more. As Members will appreciate, I am just setting out the context of how the Committee considered all those things.

The Committee subsequently agreed to withdraw its original amendment No 15 and table what is now amendment No 13, which, as I outlined earlier, provides for clause 27 to come into operation 12 months after the Bill receives Royal Assent. Members viewed that as a reasonable way forward to enable the Minister to progress the Bill while setting a timescale for the legal aid provision. It provides more than 12 months for the due diligence exercise to be completed. If the exercise indicates that there are no or minimal implications, the Minister can commence the legal aid provision. If the exercise indicates that the repercussive impact will be as she fears, members who support the Committee amendment have already placed on record during the Committee meeting — I am

sure that they will repeat it during the debate today — that they would support her bringing forward either a provision in the Justice Bill or a very short stand-alone Bill through accelerated passage to repeal the legal aid provision.

Although all Committee members were content to withdraw the original amendment, not all supported amendment No 13. I am sure that they will outline their reasons for that today. I will also expand on why I support the approach of the Committee when I speak as an individual MLA.

Following the Committee's decision to bring forward amendment No 13, the Minister wrote to the Committee indicating that she would resist the amendment. The Minister also repeated her undertaking that, if, after appropriate due diligence, the legal aid provisions are not deemed to be repercussive, she would accede to the Assembly's wishes and commence clause 27. She also stated that, by convention, a Minister's assurances on those matters are usually sufficient, and that she was disappointed with the approach that was adopted by the Committee. I reassure the Minister that Committee members have made it clear that this is not a matter of trust in her. No one knows what will happen over the coming months. Given that no specific timescales could be provided to the Committee with regard to the completion of the due diligence exercise, and with the end of the mandate coming in approximately 15 months' time, following which there may be a change of Minister, the Committee amendment provides reassurance that clause 27 will be commenced within a reasonable timescale but with commitments that, if there are significant repercussive impacts, support will be forthcoming to repeal clause 27. I ask Members to support the Committee amendment, which has been brought forward to balance and address the concerns of the Minister and the sector and to enable all of the provisions in the Bill to be enacted at the earliest opportunity.

That concludes my commentary in my role as Chairman of the Committee. I will now make some individual remarks. Obviously, I welcome the fact that we have reached Further Consideration Stage today. This issue was addressed briefly when the Bill was not moved. In respect of what was originally amendment No 15, which, subsequently, was withdrawn, and is now amendment No 13, the Minister, in her letter to the Committee, made it clear that it does not address the fundamental point that she made at the Committee session. The fundamental premise on which the Minister chose not to move Further Consideration Stage a week ago has, according to her, not changed, and yet Further Consideration Stage was moved today.

Mrs Long: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: In one moment, after I elaborate. That begs the question of why. The Committee carried out its role with efficiency and detailed scrutiny in the expectation that the Bill would receive Royal Assent before the end of this year. However, by not moving last week, that is now not possible; Final Stage will not take place until January. We have lost five or six weeks. The Committee carried out its work expeditiously, as it wanted to complete the Bill well in advance of Westminster, but we now have a six-week delay, which, based on what the Minister said, is entirely unnecessary.

I give way to the Minister.

Mrs Long: I am happy to clarify that my point was that the issue of commencing legislation that was fundamentally flawed and could lead to repercussive costs had not been addressed. I am able to bring forward Further Consideration Stage this week because it is no longer coupled to the commencement of the offences, which means that the entire Bill would not be destroyed.

I correct the Member on a further point that he made when he was elucidating on those points: Royal Assent was never going to be received this side of Christmas. Final Stage was intended for today, but Royal Assent would not have been forthcoming until January because of the delay between Final Stage and Royal Assent. There has been a one-week delay in the Bill's progress. That is regrettable, but I am glad that we are here today to conclude the proceedings as quickly as possible.

Ms Bradshaw: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: I will give way to the Member for South Belfast shortly.

I do not want to repeat myself, because we are making progress. These are more points of accuracy and completeness so that the record will show, when we have this in years to come, if people want to look back in order to have a full picture. So these are more points of accuracy, and I mentioned the responsibilities that I have in my role as Chairman to carry out the will of the Committee, even if I do not agree with the Committee. I made it clear earlier in my commentary that a letter was received very late on Sunday evening. Subsequently, the Minister was accusing me of having been the cause of the delay and, indeed, in not moving the Further Consideration Stage, said:

"I asked the Chair of the Committee not to move amendment No. 15, but he refused to give me that assurance this morning." — [Official Report (Hansard) Bound Volume 133, p457, col 2].

That was last week. I do not recall, at any stage, the Minister phoning me or sending me any text messages when it came to seeking that assurance. I do recall walking into the Chamber, where the Minister and Mr Frew were engaged in —

Mrs Long: A conversation.

Mr Givan: — a conversation. I took my seat, getting ready to make a point of order, and you, Minister, asked me about this while I wanted to deal with Assembly business. Yet you took that as a definitive response that I was not in a position to give you that response and that you would have to wait.

Mrs Long: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: You took that as the basis for then not moving the Further Consideration Stage and used it as justification for what you said in the House and, indeed, for what subsequently went out on Twitter. I would expect that, when you are seeking formal communication from me as Chairman, it would go beyond just me walking in on an exchange between you and this Member. That was the basis on which you proceeded to justify the action.

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for giving way. I am happy to place the exchange on the record, because I think that it is helpful to other Members to understand why. As you

know, the particular issue did not arise until the weekend, and therefore there was a very small amount of time for us to turn that around. I did write to the Committee Chair, and the letter was circulated to Committee members. For whatever reason, they could not meet on the Monday morning. That is not my business, nor is it for me to direct the operations of the Committee. However, when I asked the Chairman in good faith in this Chamber, face to face, which is an appropriate exchange between two professional individuals, I was told, "You'll see when you see." On that basis, I was not in a position to proceed with Further Consideration Stage last week.

Mr Speaker: I think that we are now getting bogged down in a "When I said what to whom in what circumstances" exchange, which is not adding substance to the debate.

Mr Givan: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will take your guidance on that. I have put on record how I felt it should have been done, as opposed to the approach that was taken. Again, on a point of accuracy, when Further Consideration Stage was not moved, the Department issued press releases saying that the legal aid amendments were Justice Committee amendments. They were not; they were tabled by Rachel Woods. Mr Frew added his name to them, but they were not Justice Committee amendments. The press release that went out in respect of that matter was inaccurate.

On the substance of legal aid and the associated costs, the Minister is right to raise concerns about setting parameters and wanting to make sure that there are no uncosted provisions. No Member would want to sign up to that. It is worth putting on the record, though, that if the Department is right that clause 27, as it appears in the Bill, could cost £14 million, then there is a very real issue for victims of domestic abuse. I do not accept that there is a basis in evidence to say that there is a gaping hole and that abusers would benefit from it. I know that my colleague Mr Frew will elaborate on some of those points. The basis of opposition has been predicated on this notion of helping abusers. Many of the people whom I have spoken to indicate that the abusers often have legal aid already, but that they do not. In that regard, I want to put on record my thanks to the members of the Women's Aid branch in Lisburn in my constituency, whom I met only a number of weeks ago after Consideration Stage, and the women from the Atlas Women's Centre, who are facing the very real problem of domestic abuse and from whom I heard first-hand about the challenges that they face. There is a real problem that, if it is £14 million, it is victims of domestic abuse who are having to pay for it out of their own pocket. The public, rightly, are concerned about that.

The Minister indicated that her amendment No 3, if unamended by amendment Nos 4, 5 and 6, would reduce that exposure to half a million pounds. It is, therefore, a very significant change from £14 million to half a million pounds. That is something that Members will have to bear in mind.

4.00 pm

In our approach to this, my party and I have recognised it as a real issue. It has been laid by other Members, and the Department has been responding to that, but this is a very real issue that we want to see addressed. We want to have it commenced. We accept that amendment No 7, which would enable a wider review to take place on contact

orders when it comes to legal aid, is something that we want to see. Our problem with amendment No 7 is that it suggests a two-year process that commits the Department to bring forward only proposals. It does not have an outcome other than the Department bringing forward proposals two years later. I regard clause 27, which is subject to the amendments being voted on, as a catalyst to ensuring that this is dealt with by the Department, because all the organisations that I have spoken to feel let down. They feel that promises have been made but not carried through. We need to ensure that they are. Clause 27 will ensure that amendment No 7 is enacted.

I will move now to the concerns on legal aid. The Minister and the Department will know that the Legal Services Agency has had its accounts qualified for years. I do not believe that, since it was formed, it has not had its accounts qualified for fraud and error. I read a report that the Committee received recently, and I saw that the agency's error on the lower confidence side of its estimates is £6.5 million, and, on the upper end, it is £10 million. It strikes a median and says that it believes that error in the Legal Services Agency amounts to around £8 million — around £2 million in underpayments and £6 million in overpayments.

We are in a place where victims of domestic abuse are asking for more support from legal aid but the Department is resisting because of the £14 million and has an amendment to reduce it to £500,000. Yet, according to a report that we have, the Legal Services Agency, in its own figures, is handing out around 11% of its total budget through error. I would love the Legal Services Agency to be able to put its house in order and to be efficient. If it was, we would have in the region of £6 million at least, without seeking additional funding for legal aid, that could go towards funding the provisions that the Assembly wants to make. The Department's case on protecting the public purse would be much stronger if the Legal Services Agency was able to put its house in order.

That, of course, takes us to those who already qualify for legal aid. Often, we hear from the public that those who are being prosecuted for criminal offences do not seem to have a problem in being able to fund and get legal aid for all the legal defence teams that represent them. We need to have a much broader review of the legal aid budget. The Minister's predecessor, Mr Ford, took forward the reform of standardised fees, and he faced significant resistance from the profession when doing so. I was Chair of the Committee at that time, and I supported him in that process. There is, therefore, a track record of seeking to reform legal aid. We need to listen very closely to what the victims of domestic abuse are telling us when they say that they need support. I want to see the wider reform of legal aid in its entirety, not just on contact orders. I would support the Minister's bringing forward proposals on a more holistic reform, but we need to have clause 27, subject to these amendments.

I assure the Minister that, whatever the outworkings of amendment Nos 4, 5 and 6, I will support amendment No 3. It gives a structure and framework. However, we reserve our position on amendment Nos 4 and 6. We will listen to what Members say in respect of them, and I know that colleagues from my party will elaborate on them. We will support amendment No 5, in the name of Sinéad Bradley and Rachel Woods.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Minister for her opening remarks. We concur with much of what the Chairperson said, particularly his remarks about the assistance that organisations, and individual victims, have given us. At the end of the day, it is all about those people.

As I outlined at the Committee meeting last week, we talk about "stakeholders". In this place, we really get into that language: talking about "stakeholders" and who you "engage with". The language becomes very similar. However, when we talk about "stakeholders" in this Bill, we mean victims and the many people who suffer terrible abuse. Most of those who will benefit from this Bill do not yet know that this is for them; they have not yet been a victim or do not yet know that they are a victim. We talk about people we have "engaged with", but we have not engaged with the many people on whose lives this Bill will have the biggest impact. We need to be conscious of that.

I place on record my thanks to Women's Aid, Cara-Friend, the Men's Advisory Project, The Rainbow Project, the Children's Commissioner and many others who have engaged with us and been really helpful. We are here to legislate, but we have to take advice from those who know what they are talking about. That is particularly so from a human rights perspective, and that is what this is about — human rights.

In group 1, amendment No 1 was very important for me. It was probably the most easily agreed amendment between the Committee and the Department. I appreciate the work that the Department did in enhancing this amendment. I place on record my thanks to the Departments of Justice and Education for working so well together to ensure that the amendment could come forward and that we could deliver something that will make a real difference in young people's lives. I said that in the original debate, so I do not need to go over it again. Nevertheless, it is important. We have focused on it over a number of years, and I want it placed on the record again. I thank Sinéad Bradley for her addition to it, with respect to preschool children, and for asking the Department to have that addition placed into the amendment, as it has further enhanced it.

In our schools and among our teaching staff, we have much to be grateful for. There have been many changes over the last number of years in recognition of what nurture is all about. This is another addition to nurture. Having this phrase in the Bill is important even for those who are not young but who are exposed to domestic abuse, as schools and teaching staff are aware that none of us knows what any young person coming into our teaching facilities has experienced at home. We must always be conscious of that. Therefore, amendment No 1 is extremely important for me, and I thank both Ministers for the work that they did, and for the speed with which they did it, to ensure that preschool children could be included.

Amendment No 2 relates to domestic abuse protection orders (DAPOs) and domestic abuse protection notices (DAPNs). Again, I see this as important. All members agreed, at the beginning of this process, that the current operation of non-molestation orders is pathetic. They do nothing for victims. We see victims repeatedly go for non-molestation orders, often at their own cost, because they are low paid and therefore just above the threshold for assistance. We see people go to court and get a non-molestation order for two weeks, only to be brought back to court by the perpetrator.

I have seen in my constituency office people in this circumstance, particularly women but also others, who are at their wits' end because they cannot afford to go back to court for another non-molestation order. These are instances of serious domestic abuse and violence. Perpetrators are allowed access to the victims repeatedly, because their victims are not in a position to protect themselves. For me, it is important that the PSNI can issue the notice so that it happens immediately and does not mean waiting for a court process. We need to ensure that the PSNI has the right training and understands how to use tools effectively to protect victims. Training will be referred to later in the debate.

I thank the Minister and the Department for meeting the Committee halfway with the DAPOs and DAPNs. There was some resistance to that, but the Department listened and understood why it was important to the Committee. The Committee understood the challenges that the Department faced, but the Department has now gone out to consultation. I am hopeful that not only sectors and stakeholders will engage with the consultation but the individuals who come to our constituency offices day and daily for help and who need the protective notices and orders to be put in place.

Amendment No 3 is the Minister's amendment on legal aid. I do not intend to repeat everything that the Chair said on legal aid issues, but the Committee debated the issue at great length and found it difficult to agree on. That was not because the Committee thought that victims should not have more access to legal aid, because that was the one thing that the Committee did agree on. Every member of the Committee believed that victims need additional access to legal aid, as they currently do not have enough.

Last weekend, I spoke to Women's Aid, a number of other organisations and legal professionals who do pro bono work for victims. I spoke to those legal professionals because they are a good source of information. They highlighted the fact that respondents are being repeatedly dragged through the courts and are being financially and psychologically abused. They also highlighted the fact that there are issues for applicants, as the Committee is well aware. I understand why Rachel Woods wants applicants to be included — so do I — but it would be better if it were done through the Department's amendment as it would give a fuller picture and limit the opportunity for it to be abused by perpetrators.

My biggest concern is not money. The Chair is right: money can be saved in legal services, and we need to look at how that could be done. There needs to be an overall review of legal aid that will show where money can be saved. The amendment is not about money; it is about protecting victims and ensuring that whatever is put in place will not create new victims. The Department has already outlined to the Committee that, if legal aid is widened for applicants, the definition of what constitutes a victim will be narrowed. From discussions with Women's Aid and others, we know that, if the definition is narrowed to only those cases with a conviction, very few victims will be able to avail themselves of legal aid, as there are very few convictions for domestic abuse and violence. Hopefully, what is about to be put into legislation will address some of that problem, but it will not address all of it because there are many issues. It is not just about what is in legislation; it is about the victims, and some

do not want to go through the process. There are many challenging issues in that area.

I put this on record because it needs to be heard by the public. People need to recognise that domestic abuse is not just something that goes on in private homes and is private business. It is a criminal act. It is the most heinous of criminal acts because it is carried out by someone who is supposed to love and protect a person, but they are abusing that person in the place where they should feel most safe. We need to say that, and the legal aid issue needs to be addressed in a more fulsome way.

I will support amendment No 5, which removes the lower courts. While I accept that this caused some issues for the Department, which it has highlighted, there is not a strong enough argument against it. It has been raised with me that some people cannot access legal aid for serious child access cases that go to the High Court.

We have not fully established whether that is because that is not there for them, whether it is just that they do not know how to access it or whether it is because of the challenges that the Minister outlined. I am not really sure, and that is the reason why I will support amendment No 5, which is in the name of Rachel Woods and Sinéad Bradley. We cannot take the chance that we will have cases moving from the lower courts to the higher courts without access to legal aid. It is important for that to be addressed.

4.15 pm

We will not support amendment No 6, and that is based on what I have already said about opening it up to applicants and our concerns around that creating new victims through the very fact that you will either allow perpetrators to be able to abuse this or you will narrow the definition of a victim so much that it will not be of any use to the people who need it most — that is, the many victims who are being dragged back through the courts repeatedly because of issues relating to access to their children.

Miss Woods: I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member not agree that the potential misuse of the waiver will be an issue only if the Department does not produce the relevant guidance and processes to prevent it happening and that everything that the Department needs to do is in subsection (3) of the Minister's amendment?

Ms Dillon: I agree that it is the Department's role to do that, but that is exactly where my fear lies. I fear that the definition of who constitutes a victim will be narrowed so much that we will almost, if not actually, be at the point where people are considered to be victims only if the perpetrator has been convicted, and that will rule so many people out. That is not where we want to be. It is certainly not where the Member wants to be, because she brought the issue of the legal aid forward. That is vital, and we know from listening to the organisations and victims how important access to legal aid is. I absolutely support the Member's intent around this. It is nothing but good, honest and proper intent to help those who most need it, but I fear that we will end up helping fewer people by widening the scope. That is not to say that, when the proposals come forward, we should not then widen the scope based on those proposals.

Sinéad Bradley said earlier that faith in this House and the faith of the organisations and victims in us to deliver for them is at an all-time low. That is faith in all of us.

Remember that: it is faith in all of us, including every member of the Committee, every MLA and Ministers, so, if we want to ensure that we deliver for them, we all have to do it. We should not put that responsibility on any individual, on any Committee or on a current Committee, because there will potentially be different MLAs on different Committees in the next mandate. However, I would like to think that we have placed this on the record today to ensure that it will be honoured by any Assembly and any Member who sits in the Assembly and that any future Justice Committee will look at whatever proposals are brought forward and understand why they are so important to the sector.

I can certainly speak for myself when I say that, regardless of whether I am on the Justice Committee or whether I am an MLA, I represent my party and my party's views. My party is well aware that I expect members of my party to deliver in relation to this on any future Justice Committee. It is not just for me as an individual but is absolutely for whoever comes behind me to ensure that this is delivered. None of us knows how long we will be here and no Minister knows how long they will be in post, so we need to ensure that, when we start something, we do it with the intent that those who come behind us will complete the job. By doing that, we will truly regain some belief in this House and in us as individuals.

Unfortunately, we are unable to support amendment No 13, and I had already given a commitment that we would not support the original amendment No 15, which was around linking the commencement. It is for the reason that I just outlined: we all have a responsibility to ensure that what is in the Bill is delivered. Again, I will give an absolute guarantee on the record that, as long as I am on the Justice Committee and as long as my party has members on the Justice Committee, what is in the Bill will be delivered. It will only be as good as its roll-out, and it will only be as good as how well the Committee scrutinises it. We have put a lot in the Bill — on the reporting and the independent oversight. That is extremely important, and I am glad that it is there. However, as a Committee, we have oversight of anything in the Department. We know what we have added to the Bill, why we added it and why it is important. We will therefore have a responsibility in relation to that. It is helpful to us that somebody independent will have oversight and to have the reporting processes in the Bill. That will give us the information that we need to ensure that we do the best with this Bill.

It is my hope that Members will support the amendments that we have asked to be supported. I am not asking Members to oppose the amendments that we oppose. That is not my argument to make. I outlined the reasons why we will oppose them, but I am certainly not asking Members across the House to follow our lead. I ask only that Members consider the points that I have made.

Ms S Bradley: First, I am not just happy but relieved that Further Consideration Stage has been moved today.

I will go straight to the first group of amendments. Amendment No 1 inserts a new clause on information sharing with schools. The version presented is comprehensive, well drafted and carries on the intent contained in the Justice Committee's earlier amendment. This amendment provides one of many opportunities to place on record my thanks to departmental officials, who

diligently listened to the views of Committee members and endeavoured to capture them in their amendments. It may also be an opportune time to thank the Bill Office, which assisted us in framing our thoughts on what we were trying to express in different amendments throughout the Bill. I am satisfied that the Committee has made a very robust contribution, as evidenced in the Bill at this stage.

In bringing forward this amendment, we recognise the ripple effect that domestic abuse can have on young lives. Children who are caught up in a domestic abuse incident of whatever form need support and protection. Without knowledge of an incident, school leaders and teachers will not know that the child may be in need of additional support or reassurance. The need to interpret any behaviours in the context of a potential cry for help needs to be flagged up at the earliest possible opportunity. Schools and teachers can and do offer a safe, steady and nurturing environment for our young people. It is in their interests to know when domestic abuse is an issue, and it is our duty to ensure that those same professionals are resourced adequately to deal with such reports. Amendment No 1 could be the lifeline that many young lives depend upon when domestic abuse becomes unbearable. I thank the Department and the Minister for following up on my request to add preschool education to this amendment. I very much welcome the amendment as a strong addition to the Bill.

Amendment No 2 is also a thorough and detailed development of the original intent. I have no doubt that, when operational, the protective measures for victims of abuse will provide significant reassurance to those who are unfortunate enough to become reliant on their outworkings. The breadth of regulations and provisions that can be derived from having this clause in the Bill are extensive. A period of two years for the operation of clauses 1 and 2 gives them an actionable time frame, and the House should also note that the regulations stemming from this clause cannot be made without the resolution of the Assembly.

I welcome the Justice Minister's proposals in amendment No 3, which seeks to honour the earlier vote in the House to make legal aid available to victims and survivors of domestic abuse who have been further victimised by their abuser through the court system. Regardless of the debate that will ensue on the issue, it is important to note that this is in the Bill. In supporting amendment No 3, I hope that it will stay in the Bill and that legal aid will become available to those victims. When the clause was added, there was widespread agreement that more work needed to be done to refine the parameters of the entitlement, and I believe that the Minister's amendment goes some way to doing that. That, however, is with the addition of amendment No 5.

During the many deliberations and engagements with stakeholders, the SDLP was left with a very clear understanding of the effect that vexatious claims in the family court system was having on victims. The relentless stories of abusers who were using the court system to retain control or power over their victim was and is disturbing. A common and recurring theme in those instances included an abuser who had entitlement to legal aid and a victim who did not. Victims who are in employment and in receipt of working tax credits, and perhaps also child tax credits and housing benefit, are

likely to be refused legal aid support, as those benefits, which we all know are not a disposable income, are treated as such. Their income calculation perversely excludes them from legal aid, and their need to respond to court cases brought by their abuser has the power to break them financially. The working-poor victims are people who want to work. Their workplace can be of critical importance to them as they set out to rebuild their life. Their job is the focus of their life beyond the abuse. It is the environment that builds their confidence and their contacts with normality. Their need and want to work offers much more than a financial income: it becomes a sanctuary for their mental health. Supporting those working-poor victims at this juncture offers them the opportunity to stay in work, and it represents the strongest method of using public money to help empower those individuals.

Ms Dillon: Will the Member take an intervention?

Ms S Bradley: I will, yes.

Ms Dillon: Does the Member agree with me that the fact that there will be a cost saved somewhere within the system is exactly why access to legal aid should not be about cost savings? We know that there are people who leave their job to be able to access legal aid because they can no longer afford to stay in work.

Ms S Bradley: I thank the Member for the intervention, and I agree. I go further: the social cost of not helping could be much greater, and we should explore that reality in more detail.

By not supporting them via the legal aid system, we may set victims on a downward spiral of becoming unemployed and more heavily reliant on the benefits system. It could be strongly argued that, by not supporting victims at that critical point, we are merely delaying the social cost, which will present in different forms at a later time. Early intervention through legal aid could offer a steady pathway to building a life beyond domestic abuse. The SDLP therefore welcomes the Minister's amendment and supports it, with that one further amendment being required.

Clause 27 sets out a clear principle in law that victims of domestic abuse who are being brought through the family courts by their abuser will be supported by legal aid. The clause as drafted, however, does not extend to the family care centre, which is where many cases are destined to end. Cases transferred by a judge or that are presented to the family care centre via a right of appeal could see many of those victims financially compromised at that point, where the support that they require will not be available without the addition of amendment No 5. Although I acknowledge and appreciate that a more thorough assessment of income is completed on application for legal aid at the higher court, and that it is more likely that a victim will receive support, albeit with a contribution, it is also true in those circumstances to note that the principle of support would be lacking in that clause. For all the reasons that I have outlined, I ask Members to consider supporting amendment No 5. I believe that it is of critical importance that, in our offer, we consent to support victims throughout the family court system.

Those who tabled amendment Nos 4 and 7 will know of my absolute support for wanting to move to that space and to support victims in that regard. Given the timeline of the Bill to date, however, along with the lack of consideration and

full and thorough debate that we have been able to have on the issue, I am not today satisfied that we have drafted or pinned it down well enough to commence at this stage. It is with regret that I say that we will not be supporting those amendments. Going forward, however, we will work with the Minister on amendment No 7 — proposed new clause 27A — to try to encapsulate what has been attempted to be achieved here.

I will move to the Committee amendment, which started out as amendment No 15 but is now being presented as amendment No 13.

On 7 December, the Minister did not move the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill because of concerns that had been raised by her with the Finance Minister on the Friday before. I will not go over all that, because the Committee Chair has accurately reflected the timeline. However, I will quote one thing from the letter:

"we are concerned that the potential financial implications of the legal aid provisions in the Domestic Abuse ... Bill could be significant, and in particular could have a ... repercussive effect."

4.30 pm

The clause that, the Minister said, could have that effect was clause 27, and it could continue to have that effect even if the Minister's amendment is approved today. In light of that new information, while it was vague, it was clear that both Ministers anticipated the possible difficulties that might be realised via clause 27 and that any of the proposed amendments on that day would have been compounded by the passing of the Committee's amendment No 15. Amendment No 15 would have seen clause 27, as was likely to be amended by the Minister on that day, commenced along with parts of the Bill that create the offence of domestic abuse. While the potential risks that the Minister referred to rest exclusively in clause 27, the coupling of commencement dates provided no space for the Minister to assess the likelihood or scale of the potential risk. Therefore, it was only proper that the Ministers' joint communication, which presumably took a day or two to be shared, used the words "could be significant".

For the benefit of Ministers Long and Murphy, I place it on record that their words of warning of potential chaos did not land lightly with me. I heard them, I valued them and I am every bit as eager as they are to urgently understand the likelihood and scale of any potential effect that may come into play. As a representative of South Down, I take seriously my role of respecting the view of the House, acting with caution and being responsible in any proposals or positions that I adopt.

Despite my disappointment and the disappointment expressed by many, on behalf of the SDLP I immediately entered into solution mode. Having heard the distressing accounts of domestic abuse conveyed to us all during the deliberations on the Bill, one thing was clear: stalemate was and is not an option. I appreciate all those across the sector who facilitated emergency calls and meetings with me on that day and the days that followed. I thank the Minister, who agreed to my request for an emergency meeting, and the Chair of the Justice Committee, who agreed to call an emergency meeting of the Committee. I thank the Bill Office, which assisted me in deliberations at

that time, and the representatives from across the sector who shared their views on the potential effects and on a way forward. In particular, I single out for thanks the family solicitor Sinéad Larkin and Sonya McMullan from the Women's Aid Federation.

During my discussions with stakeholders who had so generously given of their time throughout the development of the Bill, it was made clear that it served nobody if the Further Consideration Stage of the Bill was not moved. Therefore, I genuinely welcome the fact that it has been moved today. I put that down in no small part to the work that played out in Committee. It must be noted that the short but ambitious time frame for commencing the Bill has played a significant role in creating little room for full investigation. That may be a flaw in the process, as opposed to calling it a flaw to have to revise any established Bill.

Ahead of any vote on amendment No 13 and any outcome that might arise from that Division, I welcome the Minister's assurance following my intervention on the Floor of the House today. Likewise, I have satisfied myself that there is, as the Minister stated, an unambiguous legal duty on her to commence the Bill. I also repeat my assurance and place it firmly on record that the SDLP will listen to any warnings and, if they become factual, will support any revocation that may be required.

It remains our preference that the commencement of legal aid be stipulated in the Bill. However, the dilemma was this: could we stand by in good conscience and watch the Bill not moved today or at Final Stage? In particular, we should put that in a context where we all know that domestic abuse incidents are on the rise during COVID, particularly during lockdown. Let it be clear that everybody in the House agrees that domestic abuse is a criminal offence and we need it to be on the statute books as such. The SDLP, like others, is committed to realising that the commencement on legal aid will be realised. However, in a bid to ensure the passage of the Bill, we will not force the commencement issue in the form of amendment No 13.

Mr Beattie: Every conversation, every debate, every clause, every amendment and every amendment to an amendment to the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill have been had for the right reasons. Not one person has put something forward for the wrong reason; it has all been for the right reason. Today, at Further Consideration Stage, we are refining and balancing what is a really good Bill. We have done a fantastic job in the time frame to create what we have created. In many respects, the Chair and Deputy Chair of the Committee have expressed my views on many of the amendments. I am never one to stand and talk about an amendment for the sake of it when the point has already been put across. The points about amendment Nos 1 and 2 have been put across, and the Ulster Unionist Party will support them.

I want to mention one thing on amendment No 1, if I may. It is something that I picked up on and that resonated with me. It was, I think, during a debate in Committee when Mr Frew explained amendment No 1 in real terms. It really resonated with me given what we are trying to achieve. Amendment No 1 is about information sharing with schools. He talked about a child going to school having had no sleep, possibly being late, having no lunch when they turned up and being met by an angry teacher who

brought them in, not knowing that that child had possibly been involved in a domestic abuse incident the previous night. The opposite is that amendment No 1 may mean that that child, who is possibly already traumatised by what may have happened, will be met by an understanding teacher who will take them by the hand, lead them in and support them. The small vignettes that I got from Paul Frew and other members of the Committee really stayed with me and showed me that what we are trying to achieve in the Bill is absolutely the right thing. At the end of this, we will produce a Bill in January that will be fit for purpose and good for those who suffer the awful crime of domestic abuse.

Amendment No 2 has been explained in some detail. Amendment Nos 3 and 7 deal with legal aid, and we have spoken about legal aid and those amendments at length. Legal aid is complex. I get the sentiment where people say, "It is not about money, and it is not about how much we spend". The reality is that, unfortunately, if we are really honest, it is, in some cases.

By saying that, I do not mean that we are going to deny people legal aid. However, the reality is that we do not have the funding to go round, and we end up salami-slicing what we have, and some people will lose out. Nobody in this room wants to have to say, "You lose out, but you are going to get it". We have to be fiscally responsible.

I have raised the issue of legal aid long before now, as has the Chair, and the Minister knows that. We are close on three times the legal aid bill of Scotland, by head of population. In the European Union, we are second only to Norway in our legal aid bill. We have to be fiscally responsible.

Legal aid is complex. It is not just about savings; it is about understanding how we use the money that is available to us to make sure that we support the right people. Amendment Nos 3 and 7 do exactly that. They define it and they define it well.

Amendment Nos 4, 5 and 6 are to amendment No 3. The arguments on amendment Nos 4 and 6 have been eloquently made. I guess that I can add to it. Amendment No 4 talks about "advice and assistance", whereas in the original amendment No 3, it is just "representation". In amendment No 4, that is not defined, which is a little bit too loose for me. For me, "representation" covers that. Normally, the first meeting with a solicitor is free anyway, and he gives you advice, and you should get support. I am happy with amendment No 3, without having to amend it with amendment No 4, so neither I nor my party will be supporting amendment No 4.

We will be supporting amendment No 5. Again, it has been laid out quite well, and there is no point in my talking for the sake of talking.

We are not supporting amendment No 6 because there is an issue about the respondent. I have said before that we can all talk about people whom we have spoken to and we can all give vignettes — I have done it. I have spoken to people, women who have been domestically abused and who are being taken to court time and time again, and they do not have legal aid but the abuser does. It is a fine line and a fine balance, and we cannot support amendment No 6 for that reason.

I turn to amendment No 13, previously amendment No 15. I will be absolutely honest: I supported amendment No 15, which was to start legal aid when the Act came into force. I supported that, but we received new information from the Minister that there may be a serious financial implication to it, including a repercussive effect. That was new information. Had we brought amendment No 15 to the Floor a week ago with that new information, I would not have been able to support it; I would have voted against it.

The Committee, having met — how and when we met has been explained by numerous people — decided that we would remove amendment No 15, that there was a danger, and that the Minister needed time to do her checks and balances to make sure that we would not be given a legal aid bill in perpetuity that would have serious financial implications for our block grant and for all the other Departments that would have to chip in to help to fix it. Amendment No 13 says that, having agreed that the Minister needs time do checks and balances, we tell her, “OK, but you have 12 months”. I am not in that space to say to the Minister, “You have 12 months”; I am in that space where the Minister tells me that she has a problem with it. If I agree that we have a problem with it, I need the Minister to be given the time and space to deal with that problem.

4.45 pm

I have trust. I have trust in our Ministers, and I have trust in the Committee Chair, the Deputy Chair, Committee members and other people that they will do exactly what they say they will do. The Minister has said that if, having done the checks, there is no adverse effect, she will make sure that the amended clause 27 and new clause 27A will be commenced, and I believe her. I, therefore, support her in that.

The reality is that we do not know where we will be in 12 months. Nobody knows what will happen in 12 months. I think that the Chair said that, and he is absolutely right. I could go to the absolute extreme and say that, if we were to pass amendment No 13 and the change were put in place, but the Assembly then collapses in six months' time, we would have to pay out what could be an excessive amount of money. I do not feel the need to make that amendment, so, to me, it becomes superfluous to what we are trying to achieve here. As I said in the Justice Committee, we will not support amendment No 13. We will, however, make sure — I know that the Minister expects us all to do this — that she is held to her word and that she will bring in clause 27 and clause 27A, once she has done the checks and balances and assures herself that there will be no repercussive effects that will affect our block grant.

I will finish by saying that the work done by the Committee has been exceptional. As I said at the start, every conversation that we had was about making the Bill better — it really was. Some of the things that have been inserted in the Bill have taken me by surprise because I would never have thought of them. That is because there is a real diligence in the Committee. Right now, at the eleventh hour, what we need to do is unite and understand what we are trying to achieve with the Bill. What we are trying to achieve is good legislation that helps victims of domestic violence — that horrific crime. By not dividing on the

amendments, we will be sending out a good signal to those victims that we stand united in supporting them.

Ms Bradshaw: Before I move into my main speech, I just want to address a point that the Chairman of the Justice Committee raised about losing a week because of the vital information that the Justice Minister and the Finance Minister brought to the Committee. This summer, we in the Health Committee recognised how much work was ahead of us and what we had to deal with, so we had hardly any recess — we were closed for two weeks — unlike the Justice Committee, which decided to take off nearly the whole summer. If you had not taken those extra four or five weeks, you would be about three or four weeks ahead of where you are now.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to go back to the clause.

Ms Bradshaw: I thought that that was an important point, because nobody —

Mr Speaker: I know, but I suggested earlier —. Sorry, will you take your seat, please? I made the point earlier that we were digressing into a matter of who said what and when, and I do not want to continue in that vein. This is very important business, and it is being dealt with in a very moderate way this evening. I would like you to return to the Order Paper.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Many of the issues that are dealt with in the Bill have already been rehearsed, and they are extremely important. I want to focus specifically on amendment Nos 1 to 8 and amendment No 13. I will support amendment Nos 1 to 3 and amendment Nos 7 and 8. I am opposed to the amendments to amendment No 3, namely amendment Nos 4 and 6. I am also opposed to amendment No 13, which arises from those amendments.

Amendment No 1 is an extremely important addition to the Bill, particularly in the context of the time through which we are living. One of the most challenging aspects of the pandemic has been the necessary absence, either through school closure or self-isolation, of pupils from school, including preschool. That, of course, has an impact on development and education. It also has a particular impact on the ability of social workers and the authorities in general to detect signs of abuse in the home at the very moment when there is less ability to escape from that home. Amendment No 1 recognises the importance of all education providers being made aware of incidents of abuse, and, clearly, in the context of the Bill, that means domestic abuse. A new clause before clause 26 will enable or require:

“a relevant person to inform a designated person”

— at the “education provider”, which is not only a school but a college, any training facility or a preschool —

“of an incident of domestic abuse concerning a child”

in education or training with that provider. In our view, that renders a subsection of clause 28 unnecessary, as removed by amendment No 8.

Amendment No 1 is important as it ensures that the enabling powers are robust in what can be achieved via regulations. That is particularly important in relation to offences and penalties.

Amendment No 2 provides a consensus across the Department and the Committee on the explicit protection of people from abusive behaviour. I take this opportunity to draw attention to clause 26(2), which states:

“Steps or measures which may be provided for in regulations under this section are not limited to notices or orders as referred to in this section”.

For too long, the authorities’ abilities to respond to domestic abuse have lacked clarification. However, this clause has the potential to change that. The regulations that follow on will be vital scrutiny work for the Assembly.

Amendment No 3, is a carefully worded clause that enables access to legal aid for those who appear to be victims of domestic abuse behaviour and is designed specifically to ensure that this goes to the victims and not the perpetrators. It is important to have the wording exactly as it is in amendment No 3 and amendment No 7, precisely in order to ensure that legal aid is available to the right people in the right way.

It is my personal hope that we will be able to move early on in the debate to a much broader reform of legal aid, as has been mentioned, which will manage this and many other aspects of access to justice more comprehensively and efficiently. However, I share the Committee’s insistence that we have to make progress on it in the Bill. I emphasise that progress must be in support of victims, which is why amendment No 3 is written as it is.

Amendment No 4 is unnecessary and would increase the cost without any benefit for victims.

A similar issue applies to amendment No 5, in that it is simply unnecessary as the discretion already applies in the higher courts where the waiver has been used in the lower courts. This is why amendment No 3 is written as it is and replicates the protection already available for applicants for non-molestation orders. It enables fair consideration of what support is necessary and justified.

While amendment Nos 4 and 5 are, in my view, unnecessary, amendment No 6 concerns me most because it is blatantly counterproductive. The practical outworking would simply be to make it easier for perpetrators to access legal aid while masquerading as the victim. I urge Members to consider carefully whether that is what they really —.

Miss Woods: I thank the Member for giving way. I will repeat my earlier intervention. Does the Member agree with me that the potential misuse of the waiver is an issue only if the Department does not produce the relevant guidance and processes to prevent it from happening?

Ms Bradshaw: The Minister and her officials have been clear that they will take forward what the Committee has said. When they produce the guidance, they will take full account of what the Committee said on those issues.

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for giving way. She is correct in that we said that we would bring this forward. However, our concern about amendment No 6 is that, if we have to so delineate between victim and perpetrator, it could, for example, be necessary to go to court and make police reports against the abuser. We could end up excluding victims who have done neither, are entitled to the waiver but, until that point, have not taken any action against their abuser. The real risk is that, if we define

the victim narrowly, in terms of legal aid, we will deprive victims of legal aid but allow perpetrators to masquerade as victims.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you. Members need to reflect on the fact that none of the amendments has been consulted upon. Our focus should be on support for victims who bring forward serious issues and not for perpetrators pushing spurious litigation.

I will move to amendment No 13. It is highly irregular to put in place a specific time for the commencement of legal aid provisions when it is unclear how long preparations will take. It constitutes poor lawmaking and serves no useful purpose. We cannot apply these provisions until guidance has been developed by legal professionals, administrative and operational arrangements have been put in place, and relevant changes to IT systems have been completed. Most of all, it has been clarified by Ministers that attempting to pursue this could lead, in effect, to the Northern Ireland Executive, and thus the Northern Ireland ratepayer, having to cover additionally the cost of some legal aid in England and Wales. Again, none of that has been consulted upon, had the financial implications fully considered or been checked to see whether it is even competent. We would not draft initial legislation without having done all those checks, so why would we allow it to have been amended without having done them? The Assembly must see that amendment for what it is and reject it as fundamentally poor process and, potentially, bad law.

It is good that consensus has been reached on most points, and there is no question that amendment Nos 1 to 3 strengthen the Bill, enabling and requiring information to be provided to all education providers where necessary and appropriate, recognising and acting on the need to protect people from domestic abuse in the first place and not just punish the perpetrators after it has happened, and providing access to justice for all. We need to be careful, however, that we do not create bad law by not allowing guidance to be developed, administrative arrangements to be made and systems to be changed before new provisions, particularly around legal aid, come into operation.

It is for those reasons that I commend to the House the amendments appearing in the Minister’s name, but I urge Members to consider rejecting amendment Nos 4 to 6, as their focus moves away from the interests of the victims and of good law. While we have improved the Bill by adding legal aid provisions, Members must absolutely reject amendment No 13, as it has not been financially appraised and risks the same sort of lack of proper scrutiny that led to the whole RHI scandal. That does not bear repeating.

Mr Frew: I have enjoyed my time on the Committee. I have enjoyed my time scrutinising this Bill, and I very much believe that the members on that Committee made a massive and positive difference to the Bill. In a positive way, as best I can, I wish that the Department had been more forthcoming with its amendments so that the Committee could have done its work in good time instead of having the delays that the Member opposite just talked about.

I will commence by thanking the Department and the Minister for moving the Bill at this stage. Last week, it was

in doubt. I never thought that the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill would have been put in jeopardy and delayed as it was because of amendments that the Committee sought to put down in order to strengthen the Bill, and that really worries me. As I walked this journey with Committee members and the Assembly, I saw good things, positive things, scary things and things that puzzled me, and I will get to those later. What I have also seen is the curtailment of the democratic process, which horrifies me, and I will talk about that a wee bit later.

I will thank the Department for moving the Bill at this stage and the Minister, of course, for bringing forward the amendments early between Consideration Stage and Further Consideration Stage. That is what a Committee would expect, and that is what a Committee had sought during the summer months, but it was not forthcoming. I would ask the Member to reflect on that and look back on the history of the good work that this Committee has given to the Assembly.

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for giving way. I regret not giving way to the Member for Belfast South because I recall that she did ask.

The Member will know that at no stage did the Justice Committee — I am not sure of the exact turn of phrase — not do its work throughout the summer months. Quite the opposite; we did. Indeed, the Minister herself praised the Committee for the excellent work that has been carried out. I understand that there is this narrative that the Member has, rightly, picked up on from the Member for Belfast South. Her desire to defend her Minister is admirable, but let us not let facts get in the way of truth.

5.00 pm

Mr Speaker: We are going to end up opening up this debate again to what I consider to be a bit of nonsense, to be honest with you. We all know what we are dealing with here. Tremendous work has been done between the Department and the Committee. Everybody understands that sterling work has been done. The stakes are high. The objective is to get measures in place that will help victims of domestic abuse in our community. Let us go back to the task of doing that without any further immoderate suggestions of who did what when. I do not want to listen to that again for the rest of the evening. Thank you.

Mr Frew: I agree completely with your sentiments, Mr Speaker. I will move on.

I thank the Committee Clerk and staff for their excellent work over the months that we took to scrutinise the Bill. I also offer my thanks to the Bill Office for its sterling work and advice to the Committee. All of us, as a team, from the Minister and the Department right down, have made this a much better Bill for victims. I commend the democratic process and everybody who deals with that part of it.

I will go to the amendments. Linda and Doug mentioned information sharing with schools, which has always been a no-brainer. The Committee caught this very quickly and was disappointed that it was not in the Bill from the start. The Committee was therefore determined to ensure that its voice was heard. When we put down our amendment, we tried to give the Minister and the Department as much latitude as possible. I commend the Department and the Minister for bringing forward a very fulfilling, robust and thorough amendment on sharing information with

schools. As I have said, I welcome the fact that they came early to the Committee. When they came early, the Department could ask the Committee what it thought of the amendment. When we batted an amendment back to the Department, it was gracious enough to amend it before seeking to insert it in the Bill.

We have been able to include not only schools and colleges but, for those who are younger, nursery provision so that the package of care that needs to be provided to young people who fall victim to this heinous crime is complete. Children do not necessarily have to be the direct victims. If a child experiences or feels the aftermath of domestic abuse, without even realising it, it has a tremendous impact. It will affect them for the rest of their lives. Children who see it, and even those on whom it has an indirect impact, cannot get over it. This is therefore a very important piece of the Bill. As Doug rightly said, we need the child to be surrounded by caring, loving people. There is nobody better in that role than the teacher. It is vital that this amendment is passed and that the provision is included in the Bill.

Moving on to amendment No 2, I repeat what I have said about the Department and the Minister. Amendments were brought to the Committee quickly, and we were able to assist the Department. Mr Speaker, as you know, we are also there to assist the Department. We were very keen to ensure that we gave ultimate flexibility to the Minister and the Department. That is why we wanted the amendment not to be strictly about orders and, perhaps, to include something other than orders. The Committee and the House realise that there may well be problems with orders down the line: how effective they can be, how much impact they can have and how hard they are to get. There may well be different tools out there, now and in the future, that will lead to better protections for victims and their families. Again, it is a given that this provision needs to be in the Bill.

We then have the report. Amendment No 8 merely leaves out what we had inserted, which, because of amendment No 1, the new clause, is fine.

I now come to what is probably the crux of the matter: clause 27 and the proposed amendments to it. That is what led to the delay last week, which concerns me greatly, simply because the Minister sent the Committee Chair a letter on the Sunday, which she followed up with another letter on the Monday, seeking for him not move the amendment. The Chairperson does not have the power to make that decision without the Committee's backing and say-so. It was therefore very important that we, as a Committee, had the collective sense to meet. It was hard for me to take that the Minister did not move this stage of the Bill last week. She had her own reasons for that, and I respect her right not to move it. What we know, however, is that, seemingly, the Department of Finance had raised the issue on the Thursday, yet the Committee Chair received correspondence only on the Sunday. Although that might seem to Members to be a quick enough turnaround, what the Minister was then asking the Chair to do within 24 hours or less was not reasonable. We have to be fair with time and allow the collective body that is the Committee time to meet, assess and come to a collective decision, or not. That is what we were able to do last week.

After meeting the Minister, we did remove the then amendment No 15. We felt the need to table the

new amendment No 13, however. It brings about the commencement of clause 27 after a year in order to allow the Minister time to do due diligence around that aspect. I listened to the Minister speak about clause 27 in her opening address. She asked us to take her on trust. When did we ever make it about trust in this House? It is not about trust but about scrutiny. It is about democratic accountability. It has never been about trust, because trust is a personal issue for an MLA and between an MLA and a Minister. The House has never been about trust. It is about scrutiny, accountability and the democratic process, which we — every single one of us, MLA and Minister — should defend.

I will pick up on some of the things that the Minister said about clause 27 in her opening remarks. She said that there was nothing to prevent abusers using that clause. The first thing that struck me was that there is nothing to prevent abusers getting legal aid. We see it day in, day out.

Mrs Long: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: Yes, I will.

Mrs Long: The key point here — indeed, the Member's colleague the Committee Chairperson raised the issue of why amendment No 6 is problematic — is that, at the minute, there is a barrier to abusers getting legal aid. There is a financial barrier. It may not be the correct barrier, but it is a barrier to people's being able to get legal aid. The waiver would, in effect, remove any barrier to abusers getting legal aid, provided that they claimed to be a victim. One of two things would therefore happen: either more abusers would be able to get legal aid in order to do the very thing with which Mr Frew takes issue, which is to exert coercive control over their partner, or, alternatively, we would have to specify so tightly who a victim is that it could exclude those who have not previously taken legal action against an abusive partner. Neither of those is the desired outcome that any of us in the Chamber intends. That is the difference.

Mr Frew: That is the reason that the Minister tabled amendment No 3, which we welcomed and had asked the Minister to bring forward at the previous stage. A new clause was therefore proposed, and clause 27 now stands part of the Bill. The Member who proposed that can speak for herself if she wishes to make an intervention, but she welcomed the Minister's engagement at that time to try to make the Bill better and safer, and I support that engagement.

Before I move on to the actual wording of the amendment, one thing that I would say is this. The Minister states that she remains to be convinced that the waiver is the best way to support victims. Well, I can tell her now that it is not the best way to support victims, but it is an essential tool going forward that will assist victims. Here is the rub of this whole issue: why is clause 27 so important? When I was on my feet late that night — I think that I walked out of this Building at 2.15 am — I realised then, by the amount of engagement, messages and phone calls, even at that late hour, that we had completed something quite special. I had more correspondence on that one issue — clause 27 — than I had about the whole Bill. Now, I am not rubbishing the Bill; of course not. There is a lot of good work in this Bill, but that is the one issue that the Bill did not tackle. People out there are crying out for assistance, because this is one of the most harmful tools in the abusers'

hands. It struck me last week when Sonya McMullan from Women's Aid graciously came to see us at short notice. She said that sometimes the only relief that a victim gets is when their child turns a certain age. Is that not a horrendous prospect: that you are trying to raise a family, and you realise that you are going to be pulled through the courts year in, year out until your child reaches adulthood? Victims who have suffered a horrendous experience are now having horrendous experiences in court, of all places, and they then get to the point where they wish their child's life away to adulthood so that they can get respite. That is how damaging that aspect of domestic violence is. That is why we are determined to ensure that there are safeguards in place for victims in that regard.

It is not about access to justice. We are not trying to prevent people from gaining access to justice. We are just trying to level the playing field to allow victims that same right and to ensure that the resources and savings that they have worked hard for to raise their families do not dwindle over 10 years or more.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Member for taking an intervention. Maybe we can ask the Minister to speak with officials, because there is a bigger piece of work even than legal aid to be done here in relation to the family courts. I accept that the Department and our Committee have a heavy legislative workload and probably, realistically, very little room to do anything else, but I think that there needs to be preparatory work done now for the next mandate to see what we can do to address those issues in reality and totality, rather than just trying to address it in a piecemeal manner through legal aid and other means. We need to address it fully.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for that.

We have to remember the Department's position on clause 27. The Minister opposed clause 27. The Department opposed clause 27, and what the Department brought to the Committee after Consideration Stage was what is now amendment No 7, which proposes a report on access to justice and allowing a level playing field. What the Department was trying to do, then, after this House had made its determination at Consideration Stage, was to reduce that clause from one of action to one of reporting: a two-year report, no less. That basically means a delay that would have affected victims.

When members of the Committee said, "No, we're not happy with that, Minister", for the reasons that I have outlined, the Department was very good, went away, looked at it again and came back with another amendment. Let me be fair: amendment No 3, which relates to the eligibility of victims for civil legal aid and would replace clause 27, would restrict the provisions of clause 27 so much that, it seems, it would reduce the risk and everything else that the Minister is concerned about. She seems happy to move amendment No 3 but is not so happy to move the commencement order, which is amendment No 13.

5.15 pm

Before I go on to that, it is clear that amendment No 3 stifles clause 27, which reflects the will of the House, because of its restrictive nature and the safeguards that are in it. I know that this is a democracy, so it will be on the Floor that these things are decided. That is why the

Minister should have moved the Further Consideration Stage last week. It will be the House that decides which amendments it sees fit to go into the Bill and which it does not. I have grave concerns about amendment No 3, but I am happy to support it because of the concerns that the Minister has relayed and because it is a step forward. Clause 27 was vague so that the Minister and Department could amend it. However, amendment Nos 4, 5 and 6 expand amendment No 3. In Committee, the Minister said that clause 27 would cost £14 million. When I look at the £14 million cost, I do not see it as a burden; I see that as the amount of money that is coming out of the pockets of victims of domestic violence.

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for giving way. Of course, that is not accurate, because the £14 million estimate is based on the fact that people who do not currently receive legal aid would be in receipt of legal aid — not all those people would be victims — and that more cases would be taken because of the availability of legal aid and people choosing that route instead of mediation. The £14 million is not coming out of the pockets of victims; it is an additional cost burden that will be created by clause 27 if it remains unamended. It is not money out of the pockets of victims; it relates specifically to additional costs that would be created by having the waiver for victims and, potentially, perpetrators and the increase in the volume of legal aid cases being taken.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for her intervention, because that is an interesting point. What we, as a House, need to know now is this: what is the present cost to victims? The Minister cannot tell us that. She can tell us that the top line is £14 million if clause 27 stands and that, if her amendment is successful, that bill will be reduced to half a million pounds. Now, that is still a lot —.

Mrs Long: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: Yes, I will.

Mrs Long: The Member is incorrect. I cannot give him the cost to individual victims because, in some instances where legal aid is not granted, cases are taken pro bono, but I can certainly give him the differential in how the costs were anticipated. In the year to 30 June 2020, LSA issued 3,036 certificates for individuals to be represented in article 8 proceedings. According to Courts and Tribunal Service data, at least 7,876 individuals were party to article 8 applications in the same period, so there were at least 4,840 participants in such proceedings who were not in receipt of legal aid. The average cost of funding article 8 proceedings for the LSA is around £1,009 at the family proceedings court and £6,900-odd in the higher courts. Roughly 20% of proceedings take place in the higher courts. The costs are well defined. We cannot predict accurately what the cost may be in future, as this is a demand-led service.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for her intervention. I will have to look at Hansard because my mental arithmetic is not great. I thank her for that detail; I think that that is the first time that Members have received it. How long have we been looking at the Bill? How long have we been looking at clause 27? I rest my case in that regard.

This is a golden opportunity. When we put that clause in the Bill, the impact on victims' groups was mighty. If you were to speak them, they would tell you that they have been searching for a way of assisting victims in that regard

for years. I think that it has been 20 years since we last had a chance to do so in legislation. That is why it is so important that we have a commencement order. Victims' groups have waited so long, but they would tell you that they are willing to wait a wee bit longer if it means that we get good, secure law and that the Minister and the Department can satisfy themselves, through due diligence, that concerns about repercussion are not realised.

Amendment No 13 — the Committee amendment — which concerns commencement within one year of Royal Assent, affords the Minister and the Department an opportunity — a whole year — to get down to due diligence. There are many times when Departments have to use due diligence. I do not think that any of them have taken a year.

Mrs Long: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: I will give way if the Minister wishes.

Mrs Long: The point has been made already that the issue is not the time to do the due diligence; it is the outcome of the due diligence. Were we to do the due diligence and find out that this had repercussive costs, it would be in primary legislation that we had to commence these parts of the Bill anyway. That is the problem. We could walk out of here having placed something in the Bill that could be problematic. I know that the Member does not want to rely on trust, but we would have to trust the good grace of the Committee to find the time to work through an accelerated passage Bill to rescind that in the next year. Given the pressure of legislation in the next year, which you, Mr Speaker, will be aware of, that is taking quite a risk. It is not good practice to include things in legislation that you know may need to be rescinded. That is poor practice. We, as an Assembly, need to raise the bar in terms of the quality of the legislation that we produce rather than just the amount.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for her intervention yet again. It betrayed her stance throughout the whole Bill. Members can table amendments to any Bill as they see fit. The House will attest to that. If the House decides to pass an amendment or a clause, so be it. Ministers should obey the House. Ultimately, this is the place in which decisions are taken on legislation; it is not the Executive or a Minister.

Mrs Long: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in order for a Member to intimate that, at any time in these proceedings, I have suggested that I would defy the will of the House? I do not recall doing so at any stage of the proceedings. On the contrary, I have said that I would be bound by the proceedings of the House, even though it may be highly problematic.

Mr Speaker: That is my recollection of the nature of the discourse. Will you stick to the amendments?

Mr Frew: I will, Mr Speaker.

The commencement order is contained in amendment No 13; it was amendment No 15 last week. The Minister came to the House seeking preconditions before she would move Further Consideration Stage. If that is not stifling democratic accountability and debate, I do not know what is.

We move on —.

Mrs Long: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I asked for a ruling from the Chair on the matter during last week's proceedings. The ruling was that it was entirely in order for me not to move that stage of the Bill, and I gave my

reasons to the House as to why that was the case. It was not to stifle debate or discussion; it was to protect against an unforeseen consequence.

Mr Speaker: It is very unfortunate that the debate is descending — for part of the afternoon it has descended — to a place where it does not need to go. It is unworthy of the subject of the Bill that people are being personal and are throwing insults at others. I do not want to hear any more of it. Let us stick to the Order Paper. There are amendments on the Floor for discussion and debate. Members may be robust and make their arguments as they see fit, but they should do so respectfully. They should not interpret for other Members what they are thinking or suggesting. I say again today — I want to make a strict ruling on this — that I want Members to stick to the amendments. Otherwise, we will be here at midnight, and the public, who deserve a better service from MLAs, will not be served. I ask you, Mr Frew, to stick to the group of amendments that you are addressing.

Mr Frew: I will accept your ruling graciously, Mr Speaker, 100%.

I turn to the Minister's amendment No. 3. When she sought to come to the Committee about it last week, she said that she would give the information. The information was not contained in either of the two letters that she provided to the Committee. When we had a good chance, then, to ask the Minister at the Committee, I asked for all of the correspondence between the Department of Justice and the Department of Finance. That was last Tuesday, and we have yet to see any of that information.

The House is about scrutiny. A Minister or any Member can say that a clause is bad, but we need evidence and proof. The Committee or individual Members have yet to see the correspondence between the Department of Finance and the Department of Justice. Questions were asked of the Department of Finance, and we have not yet seen or read those questions with regard to repercussiveness. That is important, because the Minister says that, if clause 27 stands as it is now, it could cost the block grant £400 million. I must get that on record because that is a very serious issue. If that is correct, it would blow a wide hole in the Northern Ireland Assembly's budget. It would have been important for Members to see the questions that were asked of the Department of Finance, but they were not forthcoming.

We were grateful to the Minister for outlining that she is seeking legal counsel and hopes to have it before Christmas. That is good, timely advice, and, of course, it is privileged to her. That will help with the due diligence with regard to clause 27. I wish the Minister and the Department well in scrutinising that due diligence and getting through it in a timely fashion for victims of domestic violence. That aspect is so important. It is one of the most grievous tools in the hands of a perpetrator that they can use the court as a weapon to hurt and inflict pain on a victim of domestic violence.

The Minister has been gracious in giving us detailed costings today, and I look forward to reading them back in Hansard. That is important.

There is one other aspect that I would like to raise, and the Minister raised it in Committee last week. She maintained that, even though this is her Bill, given that she had got the Executive's support to introduce it, the Executive

parties should support the Bill: I agree with that. However, she thought that Members should be whipped to support amendments or vote against them if she saw fit or was resistant to them. I see that as having a grievous impact on the democratic process. I am here to make a Bill better, and that is why I have put my name to some amendments to clauses.

Mrs Long: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: Yes, I will give way.

Mrs Long: It would be helpful, if the Member is going to persist, despite being asked not to do so, in quoting or, more accurately, misquoting what I say, if I point out what I said.

I said that it is in Executive guidance on the handling of Bills that a Minister must write to Executive colleagues seeking their support to amend a Bill, to resist an amendment to a Bill or other such changes that are of a substantive nature to the Bill. It is for parties in the Executive to ensure that there is sufficient support on the Floor for those decisions of the Executive to be carried. At no time did I mention that parties should be whipped in any shape or form.

5.30 pm

Mr Speaker: Before you continue, Mr Frew, I will make a ruling. I am very tempted to suspend the session for as long as I think appropriate, if this continues. Every Member is entitled to have their say on the matter under debate, so long as it is within the scope of the topic, of course. I want you to return to the scope of the debate, without adding any narrative that reflects on any other Member, including the Minister. That is the ruling. I do not want to have any more crossed arguments between two Members. We have been sitting here for two hours, and six Members have spoken. That is not doing service to the matter that we are discussing. I do not want to have to repeat that again. Mr Frew, continue with your contribution.

Mr Frew: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. As I have outlined, it is important that the House supports the commencement of clause 27, in whatever shape it falls. Ultimately, it is the House that will make the decision as to what clause 27 will look like. It is important that there is a commencement order, because this is one of the biggest issues facing victims. They have been let down many times in the past. As my colleague Linda Dillon said, it is incumbent on every MLA to pass good, robust legislation that will make a difference to people's lives, not least the lives of the victims of domestic violence and their families. I plead with Members. Amendment No 13 is critical in providing assurance and confidence, and in giving victims the ability to protect themselves in a court of law. Court is a very scary place for most people. This would at least afford them a level playing field against their perpetrators and ensure that they have the same protection. If they have to battle in court from their child is four until he or she is 18, so be it, but at least they will have been afforded the protection of a level playing field, and their resources — their hard-earned money and savings — will not dwindle to zero, to niets. They will be able to provide a good life for themselves, their family and their children.

It is vital that we carry on our task to make the Bill even better. We all have an influence. I will support the right of any MLA to table amendments that we can scrutinise

and debate. As MLAs, we have good ideas. We see what happens to our constituents and to victims. We should be able to make an input into the decision-making process. We should be able to engage in debate, robust as it may be, in order to make the Bill better. I commend amendment No 13 to the House.

I support amendment No 1, which is one of the Minister's amendments. I also support amendment No 2, which replaces clause 26. I will support clause 27 in whatever guise it takes, because I believe that it is a win. It is a win, not for Members, political parties or Ministers but for the victims who have been trying, grievously, to change this for so long. They are within a whisker of success. Let us give that success to those people who have suffered grievously over the years; let us give them something; let us give them the assurance for which they yearn. I have met them; a lot of Members have met them. That is what this is all about. Most of this group of amendments is about clause 27. I plead with the House to support clause 27 and the commencement order. Let us get it done. Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

Ms Rogan: I do not wish to rehearse all that has already been said. I support amendment No 1, which is probably the simplest of the amendments that we looked at. We welcome the Minister's amendment on Operation Encompass. Our party has been stressing the importance of Operation Encompass from the beginning of the Bill's legislative process. My colleague Linda Dillon raised the issue at every Committee meeting. Linda insisted that it was a simple but effective tool that the PSNI could use in dealing with a domestic abuse incident where a child has been involved.

Operation Encompass is an information-sharing mechanism that allows the police to communicate with designated persons in a school to inform them of instances of domestic abuse that involve a pupil at that school. Domestic abuse has been identified as an adverse childhood experience and can lead to emotional, physical and psychological harm. Operation Encompass, or information sharing with schools, aims to mitigate that harm by enabling immediate support and helping to make a child's day better, with something simple, such as asking them, "Are you OK this morning?". Key to that is providing a secure and sympathetic environment for children.

The Chief Constable himself raised the subject of Operation Encompass when he gave oral evidence to the Committee in February. He advised that he wanted to see it brought to fruition here. In my constituency of South Down, a pilot on Operation Encompass is due to take place shortly. It has the potential to drastically improve the lives of many children across all types of school.

The Assembly approved the Committee's amendment at Consideration Stage, but, following discussion with the Department's officials, it became apparent that further work was needed. That has been done, and the amendment has been strengthened. The current amendment No 1 does this. The officials presented an overview of the amendment to the Justice Committee, and, following discussions, the Committee recommended expanding amendment No 1 to include preschool children within its remit. It is to the Department's credit that it moved swiftly and efficiently and ensured that preschools are included in amendment No 1. I support that amendment.

Ms Hunter: I thank the Minister for being here. I support this important legislation. I will focus my remarks on amendment No 1, which my party colleagues and I fully support. It regards sharing information with schools.

The impact that domestic abuse and violence in the home has on children and young people cannot be overestimated. As Barnardo's and the NSPCC stated in their helpful briefing prior to the debate, children are the hidden victims of domestic abuse. Experiencing domestic abuse in the home is considered an adverse childhood experience. Even if the child has not necessarily witnessed the abuse, growing up in a home where domestic abuse is happening impacts on a child's development and mental health in both the short and long term. Many children exposed to the raised voices, unspoken hostility and tension will develop signs of psychological distress and can be affected in all arenas of development — emotional, social and cognitive. It is crucial to raise in the Assembly the importance of being aware of the symptoms and developmental impact. Amendment No 1 takes a key and positive step in protecting children through liaison with teachers to give the full picture of what is really going on at home.

I welcome amendment No 1, and I thank my colleague Sinéad Bradley, our Justice spokesperson, for raising the issue of including preschools. I also thank the Committee for including them in today's consideration.

While this legislation and its implementation is welcome at any time, it seems more pressing than ever that we act now, given what we have heard in recent months about the rise in domestic abuse, as people have had to spend far more time in their homes as a result of the COVID-19 restrictions. In its report, 'Not just Collateral Damage', Barnardo's states that the long-term impacts of domestic abuse include the potential of youth offending, risk of harmful sexual behaviour, future cycles of abuse and, of course, a severe impact on mental health.

I am a passionate advocate for better mental health care and, more importantly, early intervention. In meeting after meeting that I have with mental health groups and charities, it is evident that what we see all too often is that nothing can compensate or substitute for a secure and loving childhood, free from abuse and fear. As elected representatives, we have a responsibility to do all that we can to protect the vulnerable in our society. Children and young people who grow up in homes experiencing domestic abuse are, of course, among the most vulnerable of all. I hope that this legislation will go at least some way to allowing us to do more to protect children and families who suffer domestic abuse in their home every day.

Ms Dolan: First, I will speak in support of amendment No 2, which replaces the original clause 26. It places a responsibility on the Justice Minister to make provision for domestic abuse protection orders and notices within 24 months of commencement in order to protect and support the victims of domestic abuse. Clearly, the whole Bill is about protecting and supporting the victim in one way or another, and domestic abuse protection orders and notices are one way of doing that. I commend the Department for facilitating the Committee's concerns about clause 26. The Minister intends to bring forward detailed primary legislation to provide for domestic abuse protection orders and notices. She therefore rejected the Committee's amendment at Consideration Stage. However, thankfully,

the Department has brought forward a substantial amendment, which we will support.

One particular element of the amendment that I support is that the regulations:

“must include provision to the effect that steps or measures—

(i) are for protecting persons who are at least 16 years of age, and

(ii) are to apply in relation to perpetrators or alleged perpetrators of abusive behaviour who are at least 18 years of age.”

The issue of age was raised with the NSPCC, and it was keen to ensure that under-18s were not drawn into the criminal justice system for breaching an order. The NSPCC wishes to see a more child-centred approach being taken where the perpetrator is a child under the age of 18.

Where a young person is experiencing abuse and a child is engaged in harmful behaviours, the response should be child-centred. It should seek to prevent further harm and promote rehabilitation that will challenge and change that harmful behaviour. However, it is vital not to wait until a young person reaches that point before interventions take place. I have already said in the Chamber, as have others, that the operation of the Bill needs to be accompanied by education for our children and young people on healthy and positive relationships.

The provision on compliance with the order, which will capture behaviour that happened elsewhere if the perpetrator has a base in the North, has also been expanded. Further revisions have been made to strengthen the provisions and make it explicit that requirements, including restrictions or prohibitions for notices and orders, apply to children of, or living with, those for whom protection notices and orders are made.

I am also in favour of amendment No 7, which is new clause 27A. The new clause places an obligation on the Department of Justice to lay a report before the Assembly, no more than 24 months after the Bill comes into play, setting out proposals for reducing the costs incurred by a victim of domestic abuse or:

“preventing, so far as reasonably possible—

(i) qualifying proceedings from being initiated unduly against a relevant client by an abusive person by virtue of having access to funded services”.

Domestic abuse does not discriminate against people because of their income, background or perceived social standing. However, the amendment will be beneficial to low-paid and low-income victims. At present, many victims may not qualify for legal aid because they are just above the current threshold but cannot afford legal representation. They are the working poor: those who earn enough to be just above the breadline but still face many financial struggles. It is important to put in place adequate support for these people, and I want that to be addressed as part of the clause 27A review. Access to justice is incredibly important for everyone who needs it. As was said at Consideration Stage:

“The success of legislation depends on its effective implementation.” — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 133, p142, col 1].

Therefore, I call on the Department to make its obligations, as outlined in these amendments, a priority.

Mr Dunne: I welcome the opportunity to speak at Further Consideration Stage. Considerable work has been done to get the Bill to this advanced stage, and I welcome the significant steps forward on such an important piece of work. We share the regret, as expressed by victim support groups, that the Bill did not reach Further Consideration Stage last week. It is important, though, that we get this legislation right. Today, I am glad that the Assembly has the opportunity to advance this important legislation.

We all share the aim of strengthening our domestic abuse legislation to better reflect how widespread this appalling abuse is across Northern Ireland, to better support victims of domestic abuse and to bring more offenders to justice.

I believe that that is the desire, and that was certainly reflected right across the House at Consideration Stage in November. We must remain committed to and focused on ensuring that the legislation fully covers all potential forms of abuse so that it can be dealt with effectively and efficiently, and the Bill rightly recognises that domestic abuse today can be so much more than physical abuse.

5.45 pm

The Bill also introduces important and timely measures to support children, who are so often innocently caught up in domestic abuse situations. Children can sometimes be the forgotten victims of domestic abuse and can be used and abused so tragically in unfortunate situations. Sadly, that is becoming an ever-growing problem in society. Since Consideration Stage, we have heard the shocking figures that were released by the PSNI to the BBC on 26 November. They showed that, since 2015, six women in Northern Ireland have been murdered despite previously reporting their violent partner to the police. That is a very alarming development, and that statistic, along with the revelation that domestic abuse now accounts for 19.1% of all crime recorded by the PSNI, is further recognition, if it were ever required, of the need to strengthen our domestic abuse laws. It also very much reinforces the need for action, which was so clearly and passionately presented at our Committee evidence sessions by many stakeholders, including victims and victim support groups, which are so often at the coalface of tackling this most cruel and horrific form of abuse.

I believe that amendment No 1, which will widen information-sharing with schools, including in preschool settings, is a positive step forward and something that should help to protect children who may have inadvertently become victims of domestic abuse. Education providers can now be much more than just a formal school arrangement, and the widened approach in amendment No 1 allows a level of flexibility to include a non-school body that provides education or training of any kind, including in preschool and college settings. Education settings can play a valuable role in supporting children and young people through what can be very difficult days. That information-sharing, however, will have to be carried out in a very sensitive and professional way in order to ensure that the child is not made to feel more vulnerable,

and that should help schools better understand the individual circumstances and needs of families that may be experiencing some form of domestic abuse.

The introduction of measures to protect a person from abusive behaviour, as outlined in amendment No 2, will be another positive step forward, and I believe that there is a desire for the PSNI to be required to deliver progress in the area. That desire for progress was also reflected at Committee Stage by various stakeholders, with many feeling that there was a need to strengthen protective measures for abuse victims beyond non-molestation orders, which many believe do not go far enough to protect vulnerable victims.

I also welcome the public consultation that the Minister launched earlier this month to enhance legal protections for domestic abuse victims and ensure short-term protection from all forms of domestic abuse. There has been considerable debate on the potential costs of legal aid. I welcome the commitment in amendment No 7 to a report on the availability and affordability of legal aid. Unfortunately, many victims of domestic abuse are unable to access legal aid. That can sometimes be as a result of complex financial arrangements with their former partner, and that can often deny the victim much-needed support through very difficult proceedings. That can sometimes result in the perpetrator getting better support than the victim; that is wrong and needs to be addressed. I welcome the long-awaited progress to date on such an important issue, and I trust that we will continue to see more progress made as the House seeks to further support victims of domestic abuse, many of whom, sadly, continue to suffer in silence.

Mr Speaker: As this is Nicola Brogan's first opportunity to speak as a private Member, I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption. I advise the Member that, if she chooses to express views that might provoke an interruption, however we determine that, she is likely to forfeit that protection. I call Nicola Brogan to speak. You are very welcome to the Chamber.

Ms Brogan: Is onóir mhór liom bheith ag labhairt anseo inniu. It is an honour for me to speak here today as a representative of West Tyrone. First, I take this opportunity to pay tribute to my predecessor, Ms Catherine Kelly. Catherine worked tirelessly for the people of West Tyrone. As an MLA, she stood up for the rights of children and young people throughout the North, and she campaigned for an overall fairer society. As an activist in West Tyrone, Catherine worked incredibly hard for the local community. Throughout her time as an MLA, she was at the fore, helping the most vulnerable in our society, so I thank her for all of her hard work and wish her the very best for the future.

As one of three Sinn Féin MLAs in West Tyrone, I am grateful to have the support and guidance of both Declan McAleer and Maoliosa McHugh alongside our MP, Órfhlaith Begley. I look forward to working closely with them, our Sinn Féin council team and all elected representatives in our constituency and, indeed, throughout Ireland. I am a proud Tyrone woman, and I am proud to represent the brilliant and diverse community of West Tyrone. I will do all that I can to ensure that its voice is heard in this Assembly.

My focus in the time ahead will be on working for the completion of the Strule educational campus in Omagh. It is an Executive flagship project that will help to regenerate Omagh town and will bring huge educational benefits for our young people. I welcome the fact that Arvalee School and Resource Centre is already on site as part of the first phase, and I look forward to having Omagh High School, Omagh CBS, the Academy, Sacred Heart College and the school that I attended, Loreto Grammar, on site soon. I also want to focus my efforts on ensuring that rural schools in West Tyrone are kept high on the agenda and are properly supported.

I will pay particular attention to the children in our education system with special educational needs. This is a matter that is close to my heart, and I think that we can do more to support these children and their parents, teachers, classroom assistants and coordinators to ensure that no child is left behind and that they are all given equal learning opportunities. As an MLA for West Tyrone, I will represent all of the citizens in this area, and I will champion the issues that will improve the lives of my constituents. I will work alongside all elected representatives to ensure the delivery of the A5 upgrade and the roll-out of adequate broadband provision.

Of course, however, the enormous cloud of Brexit hangs over all politics on this island and these islands. Already, in my constituency, there is a palpable sense of apprehension. Brexit was imposed on us against our democratically expressed wishes. Brexit will challenge everyone in this Assembly in the time ahead. The narrow, inward-facing agenda of the right-wing English Brexiters offers nothing to our people. As an Irish republican, I am committed to a very different society: an inclusive, modern, outward-looking Ireland that puts our workers and their families first and which is built on equality and respect for every one of our citizens, a society that celebrates and is enriched by its growing diversity. Society is changing, and politics is changing. I want to be part of that agenda for change for the people of Tyrone and the people of Ireland. As the MLA for West Tyrone and as a Sinn Féin activist, I will play a full and enthusiastic part in building a new, inclusive, tolerant and united Ireland.

I turn now to the very important issue of the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill. As the Sinn Féin spokesperson on children and young people, I urge Members to support amendment No 1. Domestic abuse incidents have a devastating effect on the lives of our young people, and I believe that this amendment demonstrates the importance of raising awareness of domestic abuse within schools and educational settings. None of us truly know what goes on behind closed doors. We cannot take for granted that all children have loving and caring homes. This amendment should act as a guide for staff in school settings to be mindful of that.

Domestic abuse is recognised as an adverse childhood experience (ACE), and we know that ACEs can have a hugely detrimental impact on a child, both during childhood and later in life. The impact of domestic abuse often follows children and young people into their school setting, where, of course, they spend so much time. That is why amendment No 1 is of such vital importance. It is intended to provide a smooth process to allow for the rapid exchange of information to a designated school staff member, which will help teachers and other school staff to

provide a more compassionate and caring environment for the children who most need it.

It will allow them to make positive interventions to improve a child's welfare and to help to mitigate the wider effects of abuse on those children.

It is of concern to me that amendment No 1 is relevant only to people who are in school up to the age of 18. Many of our young people with special educational needs stay in school until the age of 19. I hope that the PSNI will work closely with schools to fully support our young people with special educational needs. It is important to start the conversation with our young people to teach them what a healthy relationship looks like in order to break the pattern of domestic abuse being witnessed in the home. The education setting should work closely with groups such as Women's Aid, the Men's Advisory Project, NICCY and the NSPCC. In conclusion, I ask Members to support the amendment.

Miss Woods: I, too, am glad that we are here at Further Consideration Stage. From the outset, I give a warning that this will not be a short speech.

First, I acknowledge and commend the Department for its proposed changes to the Committee amendment that was made at Consideration Stage to deal with Operation Encompass, which is encapsulated in amendment Nos 1 and 8. At Consideration Stage, I, alongside other Members, mentioned that we needed to look at the inclusion of other educational settings that children and young people attend, such as preschools and nurseries. I am glad that, after raising the matter in Committee with the Department, the Minister is bringing forward the relevant provisions. To proceed with a legislative gap in Operation Encompass between children who attend a primary school that is in the big school or campus and those who attend nursery or preschool away from it would be a mistake. As all of us will know, not all preschools are attached to primary or post-primary schools, and there should not be an arbitrary distinction of where a call could be made by the PSNI after an incident for the sake of children's well-being. As we know, early years are a crucial developmental time for children, and I welcome the necessary detail in amendment No 1.

With regard to amendment No 2 — I raised this at Committee — I am still a bit uneasy about the approach taken to age limits. I recognise the view and position of the NSPCC and the Children's Commissioner on injunctions against perpetrators or alleged perpetrators who are under 18 years of age. I wholeheartedly agree that we should not criminalise young people. However, could the amendment leave victims who have suffered abuse perpetrated by someone of that age with no recourse to a protective order that would prevent contact by a perpetrator who is 18 years old or older? It begs this question: is there an intention to provide those victims with a different kind of protection, and, if so, what does it look like? I speak with reference to subsection (5)(b)(i) and (ii). It is my understanding that that wording means that a 16-year-old victim would not be able to access a protective order against their 17-year-old abuser. That means that a victim of abuse can get protection against a perpetrator who is 18 years old but not one who is 17 years old or perhaps the protection that is available to them will be different. For future consideration, why should that be the case? Does that distinction exist in the case of, say, non-molestation orders or any other form

of injunction that is available? If not, is there a particular reason why?

I reiterate that I fully understand the views of NICCY, and I agree that the criminal justice system should not be the first port of call for children and young people. I fully support looking at more effective and holistic approaches, but we cannot leave victims without protection; those are two very different things. A protective injunction against an alleged perpetrator of domestic abuse is not simply a case of criminalising a young person. The measures and mechanisms that could be developed could be developed in a way that prevents criminalisation entirely, but leaving the gap in protection is a concern.

As the Department ably demonstrated in its rationale for lowering the age of the parental responsibility exclusion, a person who is aged 16 or 17 can be prosecuted for domestic abuse, join the armed forces and get married with parental consent, and I point out that they can also work full-time and leave their family home if they wish. Why a person aged 16 or 17, who can do all those things — it must be stressed that they can be prosecuted for domestic abuse via the Bill as it stands — cannot be subject to a protective injunction to prevent them abusing their victim is baffling. I ask the Minister to outline how those victims will be protected, especially in the case of a young couple. I would appreciate the Minister outlining in her summing up on this group of amendments what protections will still exist, what the Department will do to develop effective and holistic approaches for addressing abusive behaviour among our children and young people and whether it will commit to working with children's organisations to ensure that the best possible system is in place.

6.00 pm

With regards to victims and survivors' access to legal aid, I would like to speak to amendment No 7 and then move on to amendment No 3 and the amendments listed in my name and in Sinéad Bradley's. I am glad that she, too, saw the merit in not excluding the lower courts. I would like to place on record the origins of amendment No 7 and proposed new clause 27A.

Following Consideration Stage and the addition of clause 27, which was opposed solely by the Minister and her party, the Department's initial response was to ignore the will of the House and attempt to change the entire purpose of clause 27; from giving victims access to legal aid to simply producing a report on victims' access to legal aid. As I, and other members of the Committee, made clear to officials, that was not what the Assembly voted for at Consideration Stage, and the Department's proposal appeared to fly in the face of the Assembly's rules on admissibility at Further Consideration Stage. I, and other members of the Committee, welcomed the suggestion of a report to investigate and bring forward possible solutions to the issue of victims and survivors of abuse being dragged through the courts and having their finances drained by their former abusers. However, a report would be of little use and bring little comfort to those who would encounter such horrible circumstances between now and when any such proposals are fully implemented. Therefore, I was relieved when the Department eventually departed from its initial position on clause 27, which I had always stated was not a comprehensive solution but

something that could make a real difference until more detailed measures came into place.

That is the origin of amendment No 7 and proposed new clause 27A. It was initially drafted by the Department to prevent clause 27 coming into force, to prevent victims and survivors from getting access to the legal aid waiver, and to kick the can down the road. Let that be known to the House. I fully welcome the provision in the Bill to conduct a review into the availability of legal aid for victims of abuse, but not as an alternative to clause 27. It is not an either/or situation, nor should it be. A report about the issue in a few years' time would never have sufficed, compared with a limited measure that deals with the issue.

There is another very important point to make about amendment No 7, and proposed new clause 27A, which is apparent from the debate and came to light at the Justice Committee on 1 December. That is the convenient role that amendment No 7 plays for the Minister and her Department in their attempts to gloss over the deficiencies of amendment No 3. Amendment No 7 and new clause 27A is the crutch that officials have lent on, and it is the one that has been relied on today in attempts to mask the problems with amendment No 3.

The argument is that, if victims are missing out, it will be captured in the report, and the Department will bring forward proposals to fix that. However, amendment No 7 does not and cannot justify the shortcomings of amendment No 3 in any way. It is not a credible position to claim that you know that something will not work for victims but that you will keep an eye on it for a year after it comes into effect and then suggest some solutions. I do not need to remind the House that we will have gone through an election by then and entered a new mandate.

First and foremost, I urge the House to reject the idea that amendment No 3, as drafted, is palatable or acceptable, in spite of its shortcomings, because of amendment No 7. That is not a credible position. In fact, it is an insult to the very people who will be unable to access the waiver if amendment No 3, as drafted, is made. Yes, I support new clause 27A. Yes, that is exactly the kind of provision that we need to critically assess the operation of clause 27 and how victims can be protected further anyway. Yes, that work needs to commence urgently. Ideally, we should not have to legislate for that; it should already be being done.

Mrs Long: Will the Member give way?

Miss Woods: I will.

Mrs Long: As the Member is well aware, I agree that we do not have to legislate for it. Of course, the point that I made at Consideration Stage was that we should do it by regulation. It is all well and good for Members to talk about what should be being done, but we know that it is not happening. In my role as Minister, over the last number of months, I have been trying to ensure that that happens in future. I cannot rewrite history.

It could have been done by regulation. That would have been a simpler, faster process and allowed a more agile response when we saw the uptake of any changes that were made, but the House made the choice that it wanted to legislate for it with primary legislation. I accept that, so we are now trying to ensure that there is sufficient flexibility to respond to new gaps that may be there. It is not correct to say that we expect that amendment No 3 is

deficient. We know that with these things, in test and trial and error in the courts, we often find gaps or loopholes. It is for those that we wish to report and bring forward subsequent corrections.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for that intervention. I appreciate that, in responding to the gaps, we must plug them. That is why I am supporting clause 27A. None of this is an excuse for the problematic approach that is evident in amendment No 3.

Before I go on to discuss amendment No 3 in detail and address my amendments, I want to remind Members that clause 27 is about helping victims and survivors of abuse in family proceedings, and it is confined to the orders listed in article 8 of The Children (Northern Ireland) Order, namely, child contact orders, occupation orders, prohibited steps orders and specific issue orders only. This must be reiterated as, for some reason, it keeps causing confusion.

It is also important to state again that clause 27 is about victims and survivors. It is about helping them financially; helping those working people and single parents who are pushed into poverty because of legal fees. That is what clause 27 is about, and it should not be forgotten in the debate. Victims and survivors should be front and centre when Members decide how they will vote on these amendments. Whilst I appreciate that the Minister and others are concerned with costs and risks, as I am, there is a balance to be struck between these issues and how we best support victims. I do not agree with the approach that has been taken in amendment No 3. The proposed new clause 27 is all about limiting costs and risk to the detriment of the very people that the Bill seeks to help.

Mr Carroll: Will the Member give way?

Miss Woods: I will.

Mr Carroll: Does the Member agree that, if her amendments do not pass, in reality, there will be a piece of legislation that says that you can get justice if you can afford it?

Miss Woods: I thank the Member for that intervention. Again, this is something that we need to look at. Sinéad Bradley spoke at length in Committee about the unfairness of a system where there are those who can afford justice and those who cannot. These are the people that we are trying to encapsulate with this amendment on legal aid and child contact — people who are just over the line but cannot get access to legal aid.

Mrs Long: Will the Member give way?

Miss Woods: I will.

Mrs Long: Does the Member accept that the characterisation by Mr Carroll that you can access justice only when you can afford it stands at odds with what other Members have said on the issue of how high our legal aid bill is compared to other jurisdictions? For that reason —.

Mr Speaker: Sorry, Minister. You are straying into a debate that is unnecessary. The Member made a comment, and, whatever the veracity of the substance, it does not require an answer from you at this time.

Miss Woods: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Amendment No 3, as it stands, will create an arbitrary distinction between victims, simply because they are either taking a case or defending one. The Minister's amendment will mean

that only victims that are the respondent to proceedings will be granted access to legal aid through the waiver of the financial eligibility limit. Those who have to appeal decisions or initiate proceedings to protect themselves and their children will not have access to the waiver. That is unfair and unnecessary.

When I asked officials, on 1 December, to confirm whether, under the Minister's proposed amendment, the waiver will only assist victims who are being taken to court by the perpetrator and will not help victims who need to take a case against their former abuser, even on appeal, they confirmed that this, indeed, is the case. The Department and the Minister may think that it is acceptable to make a distinction around access to legal aid through the waiver between a victim who is defending a case and a victim who has to initiate proceedings to protect themselves and their children. I do not. All victims and survivors of domestic abuse should be able to access the financial eligibility waiver for the purposes listed above. That was the purpose of clause 27, and there should be no distinction between victims simply because they are taking or defending a case. Amendment No 3, as drafted, means that the very people that clause 27 should help will no longer benefit.

I am speaking here of the single mum who requires an occupation order to prevent an abusive partner from returning to the home, or the victim or survivor who needs to appeal a child contact decision to prevent further abuse by the perpetrator. All those people would miss out under the Minister's amendment No 3 and new clause 27, and that is simply not good enough.

As a consequence of or linked to the condition that the victim must be only a respondent to proceedings, the Minister's amendment also includes a stipulation that legal aid will be granted only for representation and will not be granted to a victim for advice and assistance from a solicitor. According to officials, this would not be required if the client were only a respondent to the proceedings, but it was unclear whether advice and assistance covered legal costs for attempted mediation between parties or even pre-proceedings.

Mrs Long: Will the Member give way?

Miss Woods: I will.

Mrs Long: I can clarify that point, Mr Speaker. Advice and assistance does not extend to mediation, and the clause to which the Member refers would not extend to mediation. Furthermore, all the advice and assistance that a person would require that would be covered by the waiver is included with advice and assistance, so this, essentially, double counts advice and assistance, both as part of the waiver and then as a separate clause.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for her intervention. I am still unclear about the duplication, so we are just putting it in the Bill as it was in clause 27.

The absence of the provision for advice and assistance is yet another attempt to restrict the scope of clause 27 and to reduce costs, with the effect that victims and survivors of abuse will see less and less benefit from the waiver or, indeed, its actual uptake, which has already been affected by the changes previously made to legal aid. I do not agree with that approach.

The other major problem with —

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for giving way. It is correct that it is a cost-saving measure; it is not correct to say that it would have any impact on victims because, as I already stated three times, I think, during the debate, the issue of advice and assistance is already covered in the waiver. Therefore, victims would receive nothing in addition to what they would receive under the waiver, but solicitors may be paid a second time for providing the same basic advice and assistance.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for her intervention. I am unsure about the solicitors being paid for a second time. Surely that would have to come from the Legal Services Agency and would need to be looked at through its processes to make sure that that did not happen.

The other major problem with amendment No 3 is the issue of limiting the waiver to the lower courts. That will mean that the most vulnerable victims and those who have suffered through multiple cases of long-drawn-out proceedings — the very people whom clause 27 speaks to and tries to help — will lose out. This was again confirmed by departmental officials on 1 December when I asked them whether the waiver would no longer apply to any case in the higher courts, even when a case has started in the lower courts and the victim could be granted legal aid through the waiver. That would effectively be taken from them if their case were referred upwards. According to officials:

“When the case is referred from the family proceedings centre to the family care centre or to the High Court, the waiver would no longer apply.”

That is according to the Minister's amendment. Cases that are referred to the family care centre or to the High Court are the very cases that involve the most vulnerable victims and survivors of abuse. Cases are often referred because a victim is struggling with their mental health, for example, or because of what the courts term an “implacable hostility” between partners or the two parties involved. Officials confirmed that, with regard to such complex cases moved to the higher courts that involve serious allegations of offences or where a party to the proceedings may be suffering from serious mental health issues, the waiver would not apply. That leaves the most vulnerable without access to the waiver — again, the very people whom clause 27 seeks to help. In my view, that is totally wrong. We cannot leave these people behind. They are victims and survivors of abuse, with most complex needs, and they should have access to the financial support that is available through the waiver.

When I pressed the officials on this point, their response was:

“We would need to look at what other protections might apply in respect of the representation higher and the ongoing proceedings, but the principle would be that the person is not less favourably treated when the proceedings transfer to the higher courts than they are under the existing scheme.”

Mr Speaker, needing:

“to look at what other protections might apply”

is not good enough for Members here at Further Consideration Stage, and nor will it help victims when the Bill and these provisions come into effect.

Without anything in the Minister's amendment to state what other protections will apply, the only conclusion that we can reach at this stage is that victims will be less favourably treated when the proceedings transfer to the higher courts. That is yet another reason why amendment No 3 as drafted falls short.

6.15 pm

In short, my amendments solve the problems that I have outlined with amendment No 3 and the Minister's proposed new clause 27. They are a victim-focused, victim-centred way of looking at the issue and balance the concerns about costs and other risks. They are also interlinked, and I hope that Members read them as such. Amendment No 4 is linked to amendment No 6 and returns the scope of the waiver to cover the costs of legal advice and assistance for the victim not only in attempted pre-proceedings. If amendment No 6 were made, victims and survivors could access the necessary financial support to get the help that they need from legal professionals prior to initiating proceedings. As any solicitor will tell you, advice and assistance are key in complex law cases, particularly those that involve article 8 orders. People just do not go and take out a child order without giving it serious consideration. It is a really big deal, and they need a lot of advice and assistance to get them there. Victims and survivors of abuse should have recourse to financial support for that and should not be excluded from the waiver.

Amendment No 5 removes the restriction of the waiver to the lower courts, thereby granting victims access to legal aid in the higher courts. For all the reasons that I have just outlined, that is essential to ensure that the most vulnerable people do not miss out. I would like to say again that the family care centre is treated as a higher court. I do not accept the argument that widening the scope to the higher courts is not needed because a different financial eligibility test applies. There will still be victims and survivors who will miss out. Nor do I accept the assertion that the director's current discretionary powers — again, I highlighted those earlier and asked the Department for examples of their use, only to be told that they have never been used — might provide a solution and therefore that we do not need to widen the scope to the higher courts.

Mrs Long: Will the Member give way?

Miss Woods: I will.

Mrs Long: To clarify: the advice given was that they have never been used in these circumstances. That is an important distinction. In terms of what we would bring back to the Committee, the purpose of providing advice and guidance to the LSA is in order to allow those powers to be used in these circumstances.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for her intervention. I do apologise. These are the circumstances that we are discussing, and it has been clarified that the powers have not been used in these circumstances. I do apologise, and I put that on the record.

In fact, that discretionary power and clause 27 are not mutually exclusive, so the House can approve amendment No 5 and the Department can still work with the Legal Services Agency to develop a better system to support victims using the discretionary powers, if that is required. Without amendment No 5, we have no baseline from which to work, no safeguard and no guarantee that people will

not be disadvantaged when their case moves to the higher courts.

Amendment No 6 effectively removes the condition that the victim has to be a respondent in the proceedings. As I have explained, that restriction is inherently flawed from the perspective of victims who need to seek orders in order to protect themselves and their children. It is illogical and unfair to suggest that, for example, the same victim or survivor would be granted access to legal aid only if the case was taken by their former abuser and not if they needed to appeal a decision that allowed that same perpetrator an opportunity to further the abuse. I do not accept the argument that that condition effectively deals with the issue of fraud or perpetrators posing as victims in order to get access to legal aid through the waiver and initiate proceedings. If someone is determined to misuse the waiver, they will do so. Limiting its scope to clients who are only respondents in proceedings will not prevent that. If a perpetrator were determined to misuse the system, they could also do so by claiming to be a victim when defending a case, in line with the Minister's amendment. The Minister's proposed solution to stop a perpetrator claiming to be a victim does not solve anything in that regard —.

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for her generosity in giving way. The issue that we are trying to stop with that is people initiating cases in order to maintain unwanted contact with a former partner; so, an abusive partner repeatedly going to court to initiate legal action against a partner who no longer wants that contact. The issue of someone pretending to be a victim to gain a waiver to defend an action does not fulfil that criteria and does not have any relevance to this discussion. The purpose of limiting it to respondents is to ensure that only those who are brought, unwillingly and repeatedly, to court by a former partner would have access to the waiver and that we would not, essentially, be opening the gate to fund abusers who might use legal aid to bring more cases against their estranged partners.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for her intervention, but I think that people will bring those cases anyway, as a form of abuse. It happens now and will continue. This aims to level the playing field when it comes to financial eligibility for legal aid.

The Minister's proposed solution to stop perpetrators claiming to be victims does not solve anything; it just limits the opportunities for it to occur. In doing so, it limits victims' ability to access legal aid when they need it. The way to deal with the risk of perpetrators abusing the legal aid waiver is not to limit the scope according to which court the case is heard in, or to limit the scope to whether the client is a respondent as opposed to having initiated proceedings. These risks can be managed effectively through careful consideration of how a client's eligibility is assessed. What is applicable information? That is for the Department to provide, as outlined in the Minister's amendment.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Member for giving way. She has been very generous with her time.

This is at the heart of one of the concerns that I raised. If we place such tight limits on who is a victim, we know that, with the best will in the world, victims will be limited to those in relation to whom there is a conviction or those who are almost in that situation. We will create a bigger

barrier for victims. I accept that this is not perfect, which is why clause 27A is so important. I spoke with organisations that represent these people and asked them how we could help the largest number of victims. I asked how we could give the most help to victims and whether it was by limiting who a victim is or limiting this to respondents, which was the Committee's initial intention. They said that we should not limit who a victim was because, potentially, that would limit the number of people who could access this.

Miss Woods: I thank the Member for her intervention. Mr Speaker, I told you that this would be a long speech.

I will address Ms Dillon's point. The Minister's amendment creates an arbitrary small group of potential victims, and we see that through the financial details that have come forward. It is up to the Department to ensure that its guidance and checks are in place. I agree with the argument put forward by officials that these detailed eligibility proposals do not belong in primary legislation but should be developed in close consultation with those in the sector and with victims and survivors themselves. That is the best way to prevent the misuse of the waiver. If the Department spent time consulting the PSNI, the PPS, the public prosecution unit, social workers, solicitors, education authorities, health professionals, support organisations and victims and survivors, it would be able to develop the necessary guidance and processes that the Legal Services Agency needs to ensure the swift, sensitive approval of valid applications and the effective prevention of the abuse of the waiver. That is already provided for in amendment No 3, clause 27, which states, under subsection (2):

"Guidance under section 3 of the Legal Aid and Coroners' Courts Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 must describe the basis, particularly as regards applicable information about the commission or alleged commission of an offence involving domestic abuse, on which the Director may be satisfied as mentioned in regulation 10(1A) of the Civil Legal Services (Financial) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015."

Although this provision could be strengthened to ensure that it does not result in a rigid tick-box exercise, the Department will have the freedom and licence to develop something that works well for victims and limits the misuse of the waiver. The House has a simple choice to make: vote for amendment No 3 as drafted, knowing full well that it falls short in helping victims; or pass amendment Nos 4, 5 and 6 and allow victims the access to legal aid that they need, with no artificial or unfair distinction between them. Passing these amendments will not prevent the Department from developing the necessary guidance and processes that the Legal Services Agency needs to prevent the abuse of the waiver. I am deeply disappointed by the level of fearmongering and by the derisory responses to my attempts to get more support for victims into the Bill and deal with the issues that arise from the waiver.

All of what the Minister claims may happen if perpetrators claim to be victims in order to access legal aid and bring cases against their former victim, thus increasing the number of cases, costs and so on, will happen only if the Department does not put anything in place to prevent it. Everything that it needs to prevent it is in amendment No 3, in subsection (3) of the proposed replacement clause

27. I therefore ask Members to support the amendments standing in my name — amendment Nos 4 and 6 — and amendment No 5, which Sinéad Bradley and I tabled. That will ensure that the legal aid waiver can be accessed by those who desperately need it.

I turn now to Committee amendment No 13 on the commencement of legal aid. This is my first opportunity to place on record how disappointing it is that we are having this debate today when it could have happened last week. The Bill will now not get to Final Stage and receive Royal Assent until the new year. That is frustrating for everyone who has a stake in the legislation: those who have worked very hard to get to this point and the victims and survivors who need it.

I understand the serious concerns around repercussiveness that emerged at the eleventh hour. I, of course, do not in any way endorse the risk that Northern Ireland's block grant could be reduced in order to cover the cost of legal aid in other jurisdictions. I made that very clear last week in Committee. That is simply unfair and unjust. What amendment No 13 is really about, however, is ensuring that victims and survivors get the access to legal aid that they need, and that is why I support it. Amendment No 13 would never have come about if the Minister and her Department had been constructive and engaged with us properly about how the legal aid provisions would work.

The Minister and her Department have continually sought to stymie the provision, by voting against it and seeking to remove it, dilute it or alter it. They are now attempting to restrict it so that very few would benefit from it. At times, I have been made to feel belittled in my attempts to get the provision into the Bill and to work out some of the issues arising from it. Indeed, on a separate amendment, I was told that it was unusual for such an amendment from a Back-Bench MLA or MP to end up in legislation, even though it is the right of every Member to seek to amend and improve Bills.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. Again, that goes back to my point about stifling debate and democratic accountability, and that is a very dangerous place to be in.

Miss Woods: I thank the Member for his intervention.

Mr Speaker: Sorry, but will the Member take her seat a wee second?

The Member may have missed discussions earlier in the debate. I do not want subjective interventions or unnecessary commentary that adds nothing to the subject that we are debating. I therefore ask you now to return to the subject matter in hand. Thank you.

Miss Woods: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will.

Since the legal aid provisions were added, the only thing that I have heard is about cost implications, and it is the same in the Chamber today: risks and costs, costs and risks. What about the risks faced by victims and survivors of abuse? What about the cost to them of having to fight legal cases against their former abuser? What kind of message is it to send out to victims of abuse that, according to the Minister, the Bill was agreed to by the Executive only because there were no cost implications? To suggest that the Executive's budget is off limits to measures that will help victims and survivors of abuse is not good enough. It is also unrealistic.

Mrs Long: Will the Member give way?

Miss Woods: I will.

Mrs Long: The issue was not that there would be no cost implications but whether those cost implications would be able to be contained within the Department and its budget and whether we would be able to manage any such cost implications. I am quite sure that, had we sought additional funding, as we have for other measures, we would have been able to consider that in the round with the Department of Finance.

Costs from the Bill as it stood, however, were something that, we believed, we could contain within the budget that was set by the Department, and that is what is expected of every Minister, because the Department of Finance has limited resources, and money taken from one Department will inevitably impact on the same victims whom we are funding through another Department.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for her intervention. The Committee therefore has a job going forward in its budget scrutiny to reallocate budgets to appropriate places.

The lack of sensitivity to the actual issue, and the emphasis on costs, is misplaced. This is about victims, and that is why I found the Minister's comments last week about "RHI on steroids" to be deeply regrettable and unfortunate. There was never any need to make comparisons with a botched subsidy scheme that benefited many privileged people in society. Throughout this entire process, I have been fighting for and seeking to help some of the most vulnerable.

The opposition to amendment No 13 can be summarised in a very clear and succinct way. It boils down to the fact that there was always a desire to retain the option of never commencing or implementing the provisions with regard —.

6.30 pm

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

Mr Speaker: Sorry, Minister. Look, Rachel Woods, I have already tried to draw your attention to an intervention that I had to make a while ago. I do not want to return to it. If I have to return to it where you are interpreting the Minister's, or any other Member's, opinions or reasons for doing things or taking certain actions, I will not allow you to continue your contribution.

Mrs Long: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On at least three occasions now in the Chamber, I have given my assurance that that was not my intention. Is it in order for a Member of the House to essentially accuse a Minister at the Dispatch Box, giving their time to the Assembly Chamber, of lying to the House? That is essentially what has just happened.

Mr Speaker: I will reflect on the precise wording that has been used. I have made it clear that I am not prepared to listen to much more of this this evening. I have made it clear to the Member, who I can tell you has sailed very close to the wind, that I am not prepared to allow it to continue. Stick to the Order Paper, stick to the clauses, stick to the amendments, and we will all get through this in a more moderate way.

Miss Woods: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

The Minister claims that this is about repercussiveness, but the Committee was provided with little evidence to back up the assessment of potential risks and so many questions remain unanswered. Why have the figures and estimated costs fluctuated so much? How can it be claimed that something might cost over £1 billion, then £400 million and then £500,000? How have those projected costs been calculated? What is the breakdown of the figures? Where is the referencing? I would like to know what assumptions have been made in the numbers. If there are differences between legal aid systems here and in other UK jurisdictions, how would this be allowed to develop, given the risk of repercussive costs? How many legal challenges have there been in relation to differences across regions? What effects —.

Ms Bradshaw: Will the Member take an intervention?

Miss Woods: I will.

Ms Bradshaw: The whole reason why the Minister did not move the motion last week, and why we have reached this position, is that she wanted her departmental officials to have time and space to do the due diligence and work out those figures. That is why the precise figures are not here at present.

Miss Woods: I thank the Member for her intervention. I do not have the figures. The Committee has not been provided with the figures. There are so many questions that have still not been answered to an adequate level of detail. We do not have a sufficient assessment —.

Mrs Long: Will the Member give way?

Miss Woods: I think that I have been very generous with giving way throughout. I would like to finish —.

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

Mr Speaker: That is not a point of order.

Mrs Long: It is a point of order.

Mr Speaker: Sorry, Minister. It is not a point of order.

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

Mr Speaker: It is not a point of order.

Mrs Long: You have not heard it. It is a point of order.

Mr Speaker: It is not a point of order. I am moving on. I am going to ask Rachel Woods to finish her remarks fairly quickly, and certainly without any interpretation of anyone else's contribution or their motivation or reason for putting forward propositions. I remind you that, if I were a victim of domestic abuse watching or listening to this debate, I would be quite disturbed by some of the behaviour of a small number of Members. Let us not abuse this debate any longer. Continue your remarks, Miss Woods.

Miss Woods: Thank you, Mr Speaker. You will be glad to know that I have only a couple of lines left.

In the absence of such, I consider the Committee amendment which decouples the commencement of the legal aid provisions from the new offence and gives the Department 12 months to carry out the due diligence that it needs to do in order to properly implement it to be a significant compromise.

Mr Givan: Will the Member give way? It is on your amendment.

Miss Woods: I will.

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for this. I missed her closing commentary on her amendment No 6. As I said I would at the start, I have been listening very carefully to reach a position on amendment Nos 4 and 6, and I just want some clarity on amendment No 6. I commend the Member, because she has pursued this vigorously and it is an important debate. Miss Woods, in your view, does your amendment No 6 address the concerns being raised about the abuser benefiting from legal aid? In effect, what amendment No 6 is doing is removing (1A)(a) and restricting this to respondents in proceedings.

Miss Woods: I thank the Member for his intervention. Yes, that is what it does. However, it also ties in with subsection (3) in the Minister's amendment No 3, which clarifies the departmental guidance and sets out the criteria that the Department can use to assure itself that perpetrators cannot pose as victims in order to access legal aid. Therefore, it ties in with subsection 3 of the Minister's amendment.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. I ask for clarification on amendment No 6 and whether it would interact very well with a victim who has to take a case to appeal. Does it mean that that person would not be ruled out of receiving the assistance that they had enjoyed previously in a lower court? Is that correct? Am I reading that correctly?

Miss Woods: I thank the Member for his intervention. That is correct. That is why I said at the start that all three of the amendments that are tabled in my name should be read together in order to square that circle.

Therefore, in finishing, I fully support the Committee's amendment. I believe that we should take the opportunity now rather than wait more years to be told what we know. We must do all that we can in this place to give hope to those who have little left.

Mr Speaker: Order, Members. I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting for 10 minutes until 6.50 pm for a comfort break. The sitting is, by leave, suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 6.36 pm and resumed at 6.50 pm.

Mr Speaker: The sitting is resumed. I call Gerry Carroll.

Mr Carroll: My comments will be brief. For the benefit of the House, I will not criticise, undermine or call into question the motivation of the Minister, even though I disagree with some of the points and the amendments that she is advocating. It is my duty, as an MLA who is not in the Executive, to criticise all legislation, including the Bill that is before us.

I speak in favour of all amendments in group 1 except for amendment No 3 from the Minister. I am very glad that amendments have been submitted by private Members that would strip away the more restrictive elements of the Minister's proposed provisions for legal aid. I have been troubled, as others have been, by the language that has been used to justify the limitations. They seem to focus primarily on affordability. I was shocked last week to hear the Minister referring to the potential costs as "RHI on steroids". I have not been provided with a figure to back up such a claim. I believe that the figures that were provided

by the Minister earlier today were nothing close to those concerning RHI.

Mrs Long: Will the Member give way?

Mr Carroll: I will.

Mrs Long: The comment was specifically in respect of the repercussive nature of this in the UK. It was not about the cost of legal aid, which is a justifiable cost and part of the safety net for those who are on low incomes; it is about the potential repercussiveness. The best estimate that we have been able to achieve in terms of the Committee and the time available is around £400 million. That was the contrastive message that I made when I referred to it as being like RHI on steroids, which was also a botched scheme that led to significant potential costs being carried by the block grant.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for her clarification, but it was an unhelpful comment last week. If the scale of domestic violence is such that it costs anything like £650 million in legal aid, the first response should not be, "The money isn't there"; it should be, "This is a massive issue in our society. Let's put the investment into tackling it and ensuring that people have the support to do that".

Ms Dillon: I thank the Member for giving way. I agree with you: the £400 million, £600 million or whatever it is is crazy money, but that is in relation to the repercussive nature, which would mean that it would not be spent on victims of domestic abuse here; we would, effectively, have money taken out of our block grant, which would go to England, Wales and Scotland. It would not be for here. That is where the issue arises. I agree with the Member that we should not be looking at how much it costs; we need to look at how we protect those people. We, as an Executive, could not take on the responsibility of looking after victims of domestic abuse across the water.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Member for her intervention. They were not my comments; I am putting on record my views on them. The same arguments around affordability creep in to justify limiting legal aid to the lower courts.

In my view, that would be an unnecessarily blunt and restrictive approach. Claims that support already exists in the higher court were, helpfully, challenged earlier today by Rachel Woods when she enquired as to how many times that support had been accessed. I believe that the answer was none. Therefore, claims that legal aid that can be accessed for the higher courts would, essentially, double the budget for such support were also dashed because, obviously, you cannot double none.

That is why I will be supporting Rachel Woods and Sinéad Bradley's amendment No 5 to widen the scope of legal aid provision. We do not — and nobody should — support a hierarchy of victims that arbitrarily divides people, denying some of them access to vital funding and support. The cost to society of not breaking down barriers for victims to report domestic abuse and to seek support and escape from it is, obviously, massive. Consequently, it takes more investment to overcome because services that support those women need additional funding down the line. The Assembly should be focused wholeheartedly on providing whatever support it can to those who need it now. If it saves money down the line that is all the better.

I will also support amendment No 6. The arguments for it have been well made by Rachel Woods already, and

I will not take up time to repeat many of them. However, I will say that the idea that we should not support the amendment because it might allow access to aid for those who would wrongfully claim it is not one that I could go along with. For me, it echoes the mantra that, in order to prevent benefit fraud, we should stop benefit provision for many people. Again, that is a blunt and restrictive response to making sure that victims of domestic abuse have access to aid whenever they need it.

Ms Dillon: Will the Member give way?

Mr Carroll: I will, yes; go ahead.

Ms Dillon: I agree with the Member's comments that, if this was just about cost, that is exactly what you would be saying. Victims of domestic abuse are not responsible for those who fraudulently access legal aid. However, what do we do about the new victims who are created by those who abuse the system? It is not the fact that they get the money; getting the money is one part of it. How do we protect the victims or potential victims of those who, then, misuse it? That is where my concern lies.

Mr Carroll: It is a fair question. I do not have a prescriptive proposal. Rachel Woods made some suggestions, and a lot of the responsibility for that falls to the Minister. Provision needs to be put in place — or as much as is possible — to ensure that that does not happen.

The Minister has, correctly, endorsed amendments that would guarantee regular reporting to make sure that the Bill does what it is intended to do. It would allow her and her Department to make adjustments to provisions where necessary. Here today, at the beginning of making this law, we should ensure that we are making every support and aid available to victims. If funding issues are identified, as the Minister suggests, by way of reporting, there should be adequate opportunity to address and correct them.

We have a chance here today to support women and children who are victims of domestic abuse by properly funding access to justice. Concerns about the legal aid budget will be dwarfed by the impact on many other Departments' budgets if we do not tackle the issues now. It is worth emphasising that my party — I am sure that others do also — stands with groups such as Women's Aid on the issue, which is to say that provision should be as wide-ranging as possible. Indeed, we share their fears that some elements of the Bill will not be commenced. Therefore, I will support Committee amendment No 13.

The Minister has appealed to Members to trust the Department to ensure that the Bill is commenced and, if we cannot, to support the law. I do not mean any slight on the Minister or the Department, but it is worth saying that any cursory reading of the Committee minutes on the subject of the Bill would paint a picture of Committee members being told that certain things were not possible in the Bill. However, those things are now written into the Bill and have been endorsed by the House.

Therefore, with respect, I will support, as I stated, the amendments guaranteeing that commencement is written into the Bill. I support all the amendments in this group, apart from amendment No 3.

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister of Justice to make a winding-up speech on the first group of amendments.

7.00 pm

Mrs Long: I thank Members for their contributions to the debate and to the Bill. I thank the Chairman, Paul Givan; the Deputy Chair, Linda Dillon; Sinéad Bradley; Doug Beattie; Paula Bradshaw; Paul Frew; Emma Rogan; Cara Hunter; Jemma Dolan; Gordon Dunne; Nicola Brogan; Rachel Woods; and, finally, Gerry Carroll. I also take the opportunity to congratulate Nicola Brogan on an excellent maiden speech, and I welcome her to the Chamber officially now that she has made her speech. I am sure that she will not get such an easy passage on the next occasion that she speaks. Nevertheless, it is always good to see someone choose a debate as important as this in which to make their first contribution to the business of the Assembly. I very much welcome the fact that she selected this debate.

A number of positive changes are being brought forward in this group of amendments. Amendment No 1, along with amendment No 8, will see a more robust enabling power to help us to introduce information-sharing powers through the introduction of an Operation Encompass model. That will give schools an early indication of where there has been an incident the night before, thus ensuring that children can be better supported. I thank the Committee, particularly Linda Dillon and Sinéad Bradley, for its work on this matter, and colleagues in the Department of Education for their assistance. Linda and Sinéad campaigned to get Operation Encompass included in the Bill, and Sinéad asked that nursery schools specifically be included. That was a wise and timely intervention.

I will take this opportunity to provide Emma Rogan with an update on the roll-out of the pilot in her constituency, which she referred to. The operationalisation of Operation Encompass is being considered and progressed via a multi-agency task and finish group. The group includes officials from a local domestic and sexual violence partnership; the Departments of Education, Health and Justice; the police; and the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland. The Down sector of the Newry, Mourne and Down District Council area has been selected for a pilot study catchment zone. It was selected on the basis of schools in the south-eastern area having undertaken training through the Women's Aid Helping Hands programme. That raised awareness around domestic abuse, and it included an Operation Encompass-model approach, which provides a good basis for a pilot study where consent will be sought for involvement. Obviously, any further roll-out will need to take account of the findings of that pilot, but it is a very important first step in rolling out additional support, particularly to children who are vulnerable after being subjected to or witnessing domestic abuse in the home.

Similarly, amendment No 2 strengthens the enabling powers that would allow us to bring forward the domestic abuse protection notices and orders currently being consulted on. It also ensures that, if that power were to be used, it would not be limited to those notices and orders, and other measures could be considered. Jemma Dolan asked about the opportunity to move that forward in the miscellaneous provisions Bill and about how we intend to do so. I have been clear in my intention to provide for new protection provisions in the future miscellaneous provisions Bill. Given the complexity of the issue, I believe that primary legislation is the correct place for that to be

brought forward. As Mr Gordon Dunne acknowledged, on 7 December, I published consultation proposals and set out, in detail, the way forward. That is also being discussed with our voluntary and community sector partners. Given the timing of the consultation, other work pressures and the target date for the introduction of the miscellaneous provisions Bill, these measures will be brought forward as amendments ahead of Consideration Stage. We will do so at the earliest possible juncture to ensure that the Committee has the opportunity to scrutinise those amendments as fully as we wish them to do. I trust that the Justice Committee and the House will support me in developing and progressing those measures in due course.

On the issue of notices and orders, Rachel Woods asked about individuals who are under 18, what protections will be given to young victims and how young perpetrators could be handled. The approach taken reflects the approach adopted in the domestic violence and protection notices and orders that the House approved in 2015, as well as the approach adopted in the rest of the UK, including England and Wales, where there are similar age thresholds for the application of the offence.

The NSPCC has indicated that a threshold of 18-plus is better than the alternative of 16-plus. The Children's Commissioner also accepts the rationale for that threshold. A threshold below the age of 18 would mean that children could be criminalised for breaching an order where an offence may not have occurred. There would also be concerns about making a young person homeless in the absence of an offence having occurred. There is also a need to ensure that, in all that we do across the justice system, we adopt a child-centred approach as far as that is possible, taking account of the needs of victims as well as addressing abusive behaviour.

Youth Justice Agency officials have also advised that any response should be commensurate with the young person's age, maturity, needs and understanding. Where a young person is experiencing abuse and a child is engaged in harmful behaviours, the response should be child-centred, seek to prevent further harm and promote recovery. Youth Justice Agency staff are also trained to recognise and respond to issues of domestic abuse whether a young person is a victim or a perpetrator. They are required to negotiate the procedural and process requirements of safeguarding systems as they impact on children and adults, while supporting service users to engage with a range of support requirements and safety plans. Specialised interventions are delivered as part of any community or court order disposals, often in collaboration with other statutory and voluntary organisations.

For those who display harmful behaviour, there should be a coordinated approach by the health and social care trusts, the police, the public protection arrangements in Northern Ireland, the Public Prosecution Service, victim support services and youth justice bodies so that relevant professionals from the sector can understand the risks that the young person may pose to other young people. That coordinated response should include working with the young person whose behaviour has been harmful and those working with the young person who has been harmed. Consideration should also be given to whether a young person who abuses others should be the subject

of a child protection case conference if that young person is considered to be at risk of continuing to harm. Furthermore, non-molestation orders or protection orders will continue to be available for 16- and 17-year-olds.

I have also sought to set out for Members the risks associated with the amendment on legal aid that was introduced at Consideration Stage. I want to be absolutely clear that my reference to RHI was to do with the potential repercussiveness, not legal aid costs themselves. Legal aid is a vital part of the social safety net that allows everyone equal access to justice. It is important. I defend it, and we should protect and guard it. That requires us to make such changes to legal aid as are properly thought through and developed with good policy intent. I am hopeful that the improved provision proposed as amendment No 3 and the supplementary commitment to develop new and better forms of protection provided by amendment No 7 will provide that sensible basis on which to progress the ambition that we all share, which is to protect victims of domestic abuse in the best way we can.

I put on record my thanks to Doug Beattie for his sensible and sensitive comments about the need to consider how we target resources and, crucially, where the money will come from to fund new commitments. It comes from budgets that support victims in other ways, so what we implement in one place in the House has implications for budgets in another. We must all, with good intent, be conscious of where the money comes from and how it is spent, in order to ensure that it is targeted at those who are most in need.

Giving effect to the waiver and developing further protections through the amendment No 7 mechanism will require extensive evidence-gathering and engagement work. I look forward to working with Members, with the Justice Committee and, most importantly, with victims of abuse as, together, we develop policy proposals that can make a genuine difference to people's lives.

The provisions envisioned in amendment No 4, and amendment No 5, to some degree, are unnecessary. They step on the toes of existing protections and interact ambiguously and, at times, illogically with existing statute. In the event that they are adopted, remedial amendments to legal aid statute will be required to ensure that they function correctly and do not give rise to contested, unfair or unclear outcomes. I trust that the Committee will work constructively with us in the Department in that regard, should that eventuality arise. In reality, however, I want to make the case around amendment Nos 4 and 5, because they are different.

Amendment No 4 does not add anything for victims. Amendment No 5 attempts to do so. There may be better ways in which to achieve that, but it at least attempts to do it.

Therefore, whilst I will oppose amendment No 4, I will not push amendment No 5 to a Division, because I do not believe that it is necessary.

In respect of amendment No 4, I want to set out —

Ms Dillon: I thank the Minister for taking an intervention. I just want clarity around one issue in relation to this. The officials told the Committee, if I recall, that mediation services are not provided in cases of domestic violence and that that is the intended course of action in relation to

domestic abuse also. Is mediation ruled out in these cases anyhow? I just want clarity around that.

Mrs Long: It is not that mediation is ruled out. The question is how people view the issue of advice and guidance, and that does not equate to mediation. That has been slightly over-egged in the discussion, and I hope to set out clearly what we are actually talking about.

In respect of amendment No 4, it is important that we understand exactly what the waiver does. People can get all the advice and assistance that they need to defend proceedings under a representation lower certificate. A victim does not need a separate certificate for advice and assistance if a vexatious application is issued against them. They need something more tangible — representation at court — and that is what the waiver covers. In this way, the waiver is directly analogous to the non-molestation waiver that also extends to representation only. There has been no request to extend that waiver in those purely protective measures, and it would therefore be illogical to extend the waiver to advice and assistance in matters regarding issues such as contact.

The Access to Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 says:

“‘representation’ means representation for the purposes of proceedings and includes—

(a) all such assistance as is usually given by a solicitor or counsel in the steps preliminary or incidental to any proceedings;

(b) in the case of civil proceedings, all such assistance as is usually so given in arriving at or giving effect to a compromise to avoid or bring to an end any proceedings”.

I hope that that provides clarity for Ms Dillon and, indeed, others that giving effect to a compromise — essentially, finding mediated outcomes — is covered within the waiver. There is therefore no need for the extension of the waiver to cover advice and assistance. I ask Members to resist this amendment because it costs money, yes, but it delivers nothing additional to victims, who are at the heart of what we are here to do this evening.

With respect to amendment No 5, I want to specifically address the question that has been asked about the higher-tier courts. Miss Rachel Woods asked how often waivers have been used and, as I have said, they have been used. They simply have not been used in these circumstances. However, these protections have been deployed in divorce and ancillary relief proceedings, public family law proceedings and a variety of other contexts. It is not true to say that waivers have not been used. I propose and commit to ensure that discretion can be deployed in a clear, structured and public way to ensure that victims of abuse have access to the representation that they need to protect themselves from their abusers in private family law cases in higher-tier courts. The director of legal services can use his existing discretion to provide appropriate protection in these cases, and I have already made it clear that I intend to task my Department with developing a framework that ensures that that is done in a structured way that gives clarity to everyone about the support that is available and how it can be accessed.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for giving way. Are all the waivers that the Minister outlined different from what is

in England at the current time? If they are, why is the Minister concerned about the repercussiveness of further measures?

Mrs Long: I am concerned about the repercussiveness of further measures because we have not had time to do due diligence on the legal aid provisions, and that is why putting a commencement date in the Bill would be foolish. It could end up in a situation where, having done that due diligence, if it proved to be repercussive, we would have to go ahead and commence. I have said, both at the Committee and in the Chamber, that it is not the case that every deviation from what happens in England and Wales will lead to repercussive implications. However, how we do that is critical in avoiding repercussive implications, and because of the manner in which the amendments have been brought, we have not been able to secure the adequate knowledge and due diligence to be certain that that will not be the case.

It is not simply to say that there will be no repercussive implications; it is to say that we will be able to look at them as we proceed with the Bill. I also repeat that it is my intention to commence the abuse offences and the legal aid provisions at the same time, provided, of course, that the due diligence that is done on this matter comes back and tells me that there is no repercussive implication. That is the will of the House, and I am bound by it.

7.15 pm

I want to set out my concerns about amendment No 5, but, as I indicated, it is not my intention to divide the House on that. However, I ask Members to reflect on what I say about amendment No 5, because it has consequences. It is unnecessary and could bring confusion and delay. First of all, two very different financial eligibility tests exist for funding before the lower and higher courts. A waiver is, basically, a very simple but crude tool. It works well for high-volume decisions with relatively low value where speed is the main consideration, and, therefore, it is appropriate in the lower tier.

Higher court cases are less frequent and much more expensive for clients and the legal aid fund. In those circumstances, a much more considered approach that gives regard to the individual circumstances of the applicant and the case is required. That is what representation higher discretion allows for, and, with both provisions in place, there is a risk that an applicant will be unsure of what their entitlements are, unclear about what information they need to provide in order to access their entitlement and, critically, will be left wondering whether, if they are to be granted a waiver, they might have been better off with another form of protection. Having two schemes in place to do essentially the same thing does not help people. It adds confusion and muddies the water in what is an already very complicated situation.

Additionally, linking article 8 applications to other family proceedings in the higher courts will, effectively, bring the waiver into play in cases other than article 8 applications and thereby expose the legal aid fund to an uncertain cost pressure. However, as I said, despite those reservations, I do not intend to resist amendment No 5; I will simply leave it to Members to consider the arguments that I set out.

Finally, on this group of amendments, Rachel Woods mentioned occupation orders a few times in her

contribution. I want to be clear for the avoidance of doubt: you cannot get an occupation order under the waiver that she is proposing or under my amendment. The Member is, I think, confusing occupation orders with residence orders, which would come within the vires of the Bill.

I will return to amendment No 6, which is a much more serious problem. It carries with it a significant risk of failing vulnerable victims of abuse by facilitating their further abuse. If we adopt amendment No 6, we will discover later that we voted to make more public funds available to abusers to drag their victims through the courts. Let us be clear about this: a respondent to proceedings cannot drag anyone to the courts. It is only the initiator who can take that course of action. Therefore, saying that you will fund respondents at this time but not initiators ensures that we can prevent abusers dragging their family through the courts. We cannot and must not allow that to happen, so I ask Members to oppose amendment No 6.

I thank the Chairman, Mr Paul Givan, and members of the Committee again for their support in their scrutiny of the Bill. The Chairman raised a number of key points that I want to address, because I think that they are most pertinently addressed under amendment No 6. Mr Givan and others made a very real point about victims who are already subjected to a situation where a perpetrator gets legal aid due to their means and the victim does not get it because of their means, and we all acknowledge that that can incentivise such vexatious article 8 proceedings.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Long: I will, yes.

Mr O'Dowd: For my own mind, I just want to clarify some of the language that has been used during this and previous debates. There have been references to perpetrators and, quite rightly, references to victims. Will the Minister clarify what she means by "perpetrator"? Are we talking about suspects? A suspect is not a perpetrator until they are convicted in a court of law. Alternatively, is the perpetrator that she is referring to in this case someone who has already been convicted of domestic abuse and is continuing that abuse through the court system?

When we are passing criminal legislation, it is important that we understand that our job as legislators is to make law that protects, strange as it may sound, the suspect and the victim. The suspect may or may not be found guilty, but, once they are found guilty, they are a perpetrator.

Mrs Long: The issue here is that this is not about criminal proceedings, so this would not affect those who are accused of a crime. The issue here is perpetrators of domestic abuse who may not have been found guilty of a crime but who are, nevertheless, perpetrators of domestic abuse or violence against a partner and who would be able to argue that they are a victim and use the waiver to further abuse their partner by dragging them through the courts repeatedly. I am not referring to those who are before the courts on charges of domestic abuse, because that is dealt with in a completely different set of circumstances. I am referring to perpetrators only with regard to civil legal aid and family proceedings.

On that point with amendment No 6, my concern is that, regardless of means, a perpetrator who claims to be a victim of abuse will be able to claim the waiver and use

legal aid to repeatedly return the victim to the courts. Amendment No 6, therefore, expands the availability to perpetrators to exercise coercive control in that way. If we are to act to reduce that form of abuse, as I believe Members intend, we should not allow an additional route for perpetrators to be created. The only alternative means to prevent such abuse, as the Deputy Chair of the Committee, Linda Dillon, rightly explained, would be to define a victim more strictly in some way. Indeed, her colleague Mr O'Dowd suggested that, for example, a conviction for domestic abuse would absolutely define a perpetrator in law.

However, were we to say that a victim coming before the courts, seeking legal aid in family proceedings, would first have had to secure a conviction against their partner to be able to get this legal aid waiver for their civil proceedings, we would be limiting the scope of the waiver way beyond the intention of the House. Therefore, I believe that it is important that we have flexibility so that, where there may be other lower-level evidence of domestic abuse in a family, those victims would still be able to claim the waiver on domestic abuse. Where we have no alternative, if amendment No 6 goes ahead, we would have to be much more stringent in how we defend abuse. Indeed, Rachel Woods said that it was a matter for the Department to draw up such rules and regulations to ensure that that would not happen. However, the unacknowledged consequence of that is that genuine victims would be excluded from the waiver.

It is important that we make this wide enough to capture potential victims of domestic abuse but narrow enough to exclude those who would use it to perpetrate abuse on a partner. The way to do that is only at this stage to cover those who are initiating or are respondents to proceedings and not those who are initiating. Amendment No 3, however, allows us to develop proposals for circumstances where victims often rightly need to obtain legal aid — and they will — to commence proceedings in future.

Paul Givan and others queried further the £14 million and where it comes from. I think that Paul Frew asked whether it would not better come out of the legal aid fund than out of the pockets of victims. I want to take a minute to explain where the figures came from. In the year to 30 June 2020, the Legal Services Agency issued 3,036 certificates for individuals to be represented in article 8 proceedings. According to Court Service data, there were at least 7,876 parties to article 8 applications in the same period. That means that there were at least 4,840 participants in such proceedings who are not in receipt of legal aid in the year to 30 June 2020. The average cost to the LSA of funding article 8 proceedings is £1,009.14 at the family proceedings court and £6,973.59 in the higher courts. Roughly 20% of cases take place in the higher courts. Under the provisions currently in the Bill, the proposed waiver would come to apply in most article 8 cases. Based on those numbers, the cost of funding an additional 4,840 participants each year would amount to some £10.6 million annually. In addition, the availability of legal aid to fund article 8 work to people who previously would have been financially ineligible can be expected to generate extra applications to the court, as I have just described.

Each case that comes before the courts will also be complicated by allegations of abuse, on which the courts will need to make findings of fact in the course of the

proceedings. That will add delay and further costs to the system. In combination, these effects might be expected to add a further 10% to 20%, or £2 million to £4 million, to the total cost of funding article 8 proceedings. Therefore, these effects have the potential to increase the annual cost of article 8 cases from the current level of around £8 million to as much as £22 million per year; i.e. an extra £14 million, with no available means of assessing where it will fall within that range.

Importantly, the great majority of these costs will arise from an inability to target support on victims of abuse who are seeking to defend themselves against abusive partners. Much of this potential cost could only be avoided by giving the LSA the means in legislation to target support where it is needed. Legal aid is a scarce and important resource. Given that it is used to ensure access to justice for vulnerable people in some of the most trying circumstances that they will ever face in their lives, it is critical that we focus it carefully on those who need its help, and I believe that the current provisions fail to do that. Therefore, with respect to the savings and estimates that were provided to the Committee and where they come from, it is not just from funding people who are not victims; it is also by not funding litigation that would otherwise not occur. I hope that that answers Mr Givan's question.

Paul Givan and Doug Beattie also made reference to legal aid spending more generally, and I remain committed to addressing the two audit qualifications in the latest LSA accounts. The LSA is actively taking forward a range of measures to address those qualifications, and I welcome the Comptroller and Auditor General's recognition of the progress that has been made in addressing those audit qualifications. I also note that the Comptroller and Auditor General has commended the work on fraud and error, which has a number of different strands, and knows that it will take time to develop. Landmark progress was made with the introduction of the legal aid management system during 2019 and 2020. However, other elements of the work programme continue to span a number of financial years. We remain focused on this work and on driving down the levels of fraud and error because it is absolutely the case that we care about the impact of the spending of public money and ensuring that it is directed to those who are most in need.

I have already indicated that, in our report, we will look specifically at the need for support for those victims who may need to initiate article 8 proceedings. I believe that there is scope to do that within what I have suggested in the amendments that have been brought forward.

Finally, with regard to amendment No 13, I have given a commitment to the Assembly that I will commence these provisions in good time, following the completion of a due diligence process to understand their impact, provided that it is safe to do so. I will share the analysis that informs the decision with the Committee, and I am happy to face scrutiny in the House in due course with regard to the decision to commence or not to commence the provisions. Therefore, amendment No 13 is wholly unnecessary. Its only effect is to replace a straightforward mechanism with a deeply cumbersome one, which, if needed, might eat up valuable Assembly resources and time in what remains of this mandate.

Miss Woods stated that the Department had failed to provide the Committee with any estimate of the

costs or reason why they have varied with regard to repercussiveness. As my colleague Paula Bradshaw rightly stated, that is because due diligence has not yet been completed. A fulsome explanation of that, the crudeness of the estimates that we were able to provide and all of the other attendant issues was provided to the Committee. I am happy for those Members who are interested to read Hansard rather than to detain Members further tonight by repeating it into the record.

In addition, if it becomes clear that those provisions are not safe, we will need action by the Assembly to prevent exposure of financial risk, or, worse still, to prevent further harm to victims. That uses up that scarce resource to which I have referred. I have indicated in writing and, today, many times in the House that I intend to commence the legal aid provisions of the Bill, unless there is a repercussive implication. However, to be tied in law to do so, irrespective of the outcome of that due diligence, is bad law, and I urge Members to oppose it.

I have also given an undertaking to the Committee that, should those provisions prove to be repercussive, I have heard what members said about the outcome of legal aid and the provisions that they wish to make, and we will return to the Committee with such proposals that will allow us to implement the intent of those measures safely without exposing us to repercussive costs. Once again, I ask Members to accept those assurances and those contained in the law lords ruling of 1995 and vote against amendment No 13.

7.30 pm

I understand why many victims and many who work in the sector are concerned that we will not deliver what is promised in the Chamber. They are not the only people who doubt us in that matter. This discussion first started in 2016, yet it is now 2020 and there were three years of delay while victims and others were unable to access justice in a way that was intended. I understand, therefore, the desire of the Assembly to do whatever is possible to help victims who are facing appalling and devastating cruelty and threat. I share that desire, and I am confident that every Member of the House does also. That is why I made this my first Bill when I came into office and why I have driven the matter hard throughout the year. It is a great disappointment to me that it has become a contested issue, because it is, in fact, one that I think that, at the core, we are all united around. If people support the amendments that I have indicated that I will support and oppose those that I have indicated that I will oppose, I am confident that we will, in a responsible, measured and properly targeted way, find the best support possible for victims.

Mr Givan: Minister, thank you for giving way. Forgive me for taking you back to amendment No 6, but it is about something that I asked the proposer of the amendment. I know that you are about to conclude, but I would like you to assist me in reaching a final view.

The key issue that I am looking at with amendment No 6 is an attempt to address the concern that you have raised that abusers would benefit. I am trying to point out where that is in amendment No 6, which, to my reading, does nothing but remove that a client is the respondent in proceedings. It retains in legislation that the Director of Public Prosecutions has to be satisfied about what a victim

of abuse is and retains the guidance in new clause 27(5) in your amendment No 3, which would provide the outline of all that. How does an abuser still slip through the net in that context?

Mrs Long: Mr Speaker, I addressed that issue a few moments ago, but, if you will indulge me, I am happy to repeat it. An abuser would be able to slip through the net because of the rules that we put in place to guide the discretion that the Legal Services Agency can apply. Those could be very stringent, in which case they could also exclude victims and perpetrators. We could, for example, say that you are entitled to the waiver only if the person who is calling you to court has a conviction or an arrest record for domestic abuse.

As members of the Committee and Members of the House will be aware, there is a multitude of reasons why those who are subjected to domestic abuse do not take proceedings to court, do not report incidents to police and are fearful of doing so. Although we want to break that down, there will be those, for example, who will have sought advice and guidance from Women's Aid but who have opted not to report the abuse that has taken place to the police. For us to leave it so wide that we were unable to restrict it would mean that an abuser, by making a call to an organisation, could claim that they were not the abuser but the abused. As it is about the initiation of proceedings, we could end up with abusers being able to use legal aid to drag their partners through the courts.

That happens already, and you made that point very clearly in your contribution. At the minute, it is constrained by people's access to legal aid, which is constrained by means. The difficulty is that the amendment would remove that barrier and, therefore, people who wish to torture a partner would be incentivised to take legal aid and do it at the public's expense. By removing the requirement to fund other than respondents, we are saying that anybody being taken to court against their will or wishes by a partner in family proceedings and who claims to be a victim of domestic abuse will be able to access the waiver, but anyone initiating proceedings would not because you cannot drag people to court if you are a respondent. However, we have also said, in the other amendments, that we will bring forward an alternative provision that will allow for cases where a genuine victim needs to initiate a case in the courts to do so in a way that will be much more tightly regulated — I accept that — but will exclude the possibility of large numbers of abusers being able to abuse that particular waiver. That is the core issue around all this. The removal of respondents from this is something that I have raised with practitioners and others. Whilst all recognise that there can be very good reasons why someone has to go to court and initiate proceedings if they are a victim of abuse, most recognise that it can be dealt with in a different way, but opening the waiver to those who initiate abuse will essentially make the situation worse and not better.

In conclusion, as I have said, I understand the reservations that members of the public have around trust in this place. I also understand the desire of the Assembly to do whatever is possible to help victims, and I share that. I believe that the best way to do that is to support those amendments that I have indicated that I will support and to oppose those that I oppose. We can then work together to make proposals in this Bill that will make a real

and tangible but also a positive difference to the lives of victims. It is victims of abuse who are at the heart of all that we have done in the Chamber today. On that note, I conclude my remarks.

Mr Speaker: Thank you to all Members for their contributions. We will move to the voting.

Amendment No 1 agreed to.

New Clause

Amendment No 2 made:

Leave out clause 26 and insert —

“Protective measures for victims of abuse

26.—(1) The Department of Justice may by regulations make provision—

(a) enabling or requiring steps to be taken or measures to be imposed for protecting a person from abusive behaviour,

(b) for the purpose of or in connection with such steps or measures for protecting a person from abusive behaviour.

(2) Steps or measures which may be provided for in regulations under this section are not limited to notices or orders as referred to in this section (and nothing in the following subsections of this section is to the prejudice of the generality of what may be provided for in regulations under this section).

(3) Protecting a person from abusive behaviour is—

(a) protecting a person from abusive behaviour perpetrated by someone to whom the person is personally connected, or

(b) protecting a person from risk of abusive behaviour perpetrated by someone to whom the person is personally connected.

(4) What amounts to abusive behaviour is to be construed, or whether two people are personally connected to each other is to be determined, in the same way as is provided for in Chapter 1.

(5) Regulations under this section—

(a) may include provision to the effect that steps or measures are available on the basis of alleged as well as proven behaviour,

(b) must include provision to the effect that steps or measures—

(i) are for protecting persons who are at least 16 years of age, and

(ii) are to apply in relation to perpetrators or alleged perpetrators of abusive behaviour who are at least 18 years of age.

(6) Regulations under this section may include provision—

(a) about the giving of notices to perpetrators or alleged perpetrators of abusive behaviour (or for review or withdrawal of notices) by a police officer,

(b) setting out grounds for giving notices, conditions to be met before notices may be given or circumstances in which notices may be given (including matters to be taken into account before notices are given),

(c) setting out—

(i) what requirements, including restrictions or prohibitions, may be imposed by notices (and for how long and as to which places),

(ii) specifying information to be included in notices,

(d) allowing notices to impose requirements relating to, as well as relating to persons for whose protection notices are given, children of or residing with persons for whose protection notices are given.

(7) Regulations under this section may include provision—

(a) about the making of orders against perpetrators or alleged perpetrators of abusive behaviour (including orders extending, varying or revoking previous orders) by a court,

(b) setting out grounds for making orders, conditions to be met before orders may be made or circumstances in which orders may be made (including matters to be taken into account before orders are made),

(c) setting out—

(i) what requirements, including restrictions or prohibitions, may be imposed by orders,

(ii) conditions to be met for imposing electronic monitoring requirements in orders,

(d) allowing orders to impose requirements relating to, as well as relating to persons for whose protection orders are made, children of or residing with persons for whose protection orders are made,

(e) allowing orders—

(i) to apply for specific periods (or to have temporary effect),

(ii) to apply generally or to be expressly limited to particular localities,

(f) specifying—

(i) who may make applications for orders, whether notification of applications is required or circumstances in which applications may or must be made,

(ii) proceedings in which orders may be made or circumstances in which applications need not be made in such proceedings,

(g) in relation to proceedings as to orders—

(i) prescribing rules of procedure to be followed,

(ii) stating what evidence may be heard or must be considered,

(iii) making special measures available for the benefit of witnesses,

(iv) deeming proceedings to be either civil or criminal proceedings,

(h) enabling—

(i) rules of court, county court rules or magistrates' courts rules to make provision for procedures in relation to orders (so far as other powers to make rules cannot be relied on for this),

(ii) appeals to be made to a court against the making of orders or against decisions not to make orders (and for appeals to be final).

(8) Regulations under this section may include provision—

(a) imposing notification requirements on persons subject to orders,

(b) conferring on police officers powers exercisable in particular circumstances to take samples or images from or of persons believed by them to be subject to such notification requirements.

(9) Regulations under this section may include provision to the effect that—

(a) persons who are subject to orders that are not expressly limited to particular localities must comply with such orders—

(i) in all parts of the United Kingdom,

(ii) outside the United Kingdom if particular conditions in relation to having a residential connection with Northern Ireland, or being a national of the United Kingdom, are met,

(b) every other provision in such regulations, particularly with respect to breaches of orders, applies accordingly.

(10) Regulations under this section may include provision—

(a) conferring on police officers powers of arrest exercisable with a warrant or powers of arrest exercisable without a warrant—

(i) in relation to breaches or suspected breaches of notices,

(ii) in relation to breaches or suspected breaches of orders,

(b) requiring persons arrested for breaches or suspected breaches of notices or orders to be brought before a court within specified time limits,

(c) authorising persons arrested for breaches or suspected breaches of notices or orders to be detained in custody, pending being brought before a court—

(i) in specified circumstances,

(ii) for periods not exceeding specified limits,

(d) authorising persons brought before a court in relation to breaches or suspected breaches of notices or orders to be remanded in custody, or granted bail (with or without conditions attached)—

(i) in specified circumstances,

(ii) for periods not exceeding specified limits,

(e) specifying offences and penalties—

(i) for breaches of notices or for breaches of orders,

(ii) for breaches of notification requirements by persons subject to notices or orders.

(11) Regulations under this section may include provision regulating or limiting the use of, or controlling or requiring the retention or destruction of, samples or images taken from or of persons under such regulations.

(12) Regulations under this section may include provision—

(a) for the Department of Justice to—

(i) issue or publish guidance about the exercise of functions under such regulations (except judicial functions),

(ii) keep such guidance under review or revise such guidance in light of review,

(b) specifying who is to have regard to such guidance when issued or published or circumstances in which regard is to be had to such guidance.

(13) Regulations under this section may include provision involving such further matters as the Department of Justice considers appropriate.

(14) Regulations under this section may include provision amending statutory provisions (as construed in accordance with section 1(f) of the Interpretation Act (Northern Ireland) 1954).

(15) A draft of regulations under this section must be laid before the Assembly no later than the end of the period of 2 years beginning with the day on which Chapters 1 and 2 come into operation.

(16) Regulations under this section may not be made unless a draft of the regulations has been laid before and approved by a resolution of the Assembly.”— [Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice).]

New Clause

Amendment No 3 proposed: Leave out clause 27 and insert –

“Eligibility of victims for civil legal aid

27.—(1) *In the Civil Legal Services (Financial) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015, in regulation 10 (waiver of eligibility limits in proceedings relating to domestic violence or forced marriage)—*

(a) *after paragraph (1) insert—*

‘(1A) This regulation applies to an application by a client for the funding of representation (lower courts) in proceedings for an order that is an Article 8 order within the meaning of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 if—

(a) *the client is the respondent in the proceedings, and*

(b) *the Director is satisfied that—*

(i) *the client is or appears to be the victim of abusive behaviour perpetrated or apparently perpetrated by the applicant seeking the order, and*

(ii) *the applicant seeking the order is someone to whom the client is personally connected.’*

(b) *after paragraph (4) insert—*

‘(5) The following apply for the purposes of paragraph (1A) as they apply for the purposes of Chapter 1 of Part 1 of the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2020 (to give meanings to certain expressions)—

(a) *section 2 (as read with section 3(2)) of that Act,*

(b) *sections 4 and 5 of that Act.’*

(2) *Guidance under section 3 of the Legal Aid and Coroners’ Courts Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 must describe the basis, particularly as regards applicable information about the commission or alleged commission of an offence involving domestic abuse, on which the Director may be satisfied as mentioned in regulation*

10(1A) of the Civil Legal Services (Financial) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015.

(3) *An offence involving domestic abuse is—*

(a) *an offence under section 1, or*

(b) *an offence of any kind that is aggravated as provided for in section 15.*

(4) *The Director is as defined in the Civil Legal Services (Financial) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015.*

(5) *This section is without prejudice to—*

(a) *any power to make regulations under the Access to Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2003,*

(b) *the power to give guidance under section 3 of the Legal Aid and Coroners’ Courts Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.”— [Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice).]*

Mr Speaker: As amendment Nos 4, 5 and 6 are amendments to amendment No 3, we need to dispose of them first before returning to amendment No 3.

Amendment No 4 proposed: As an amendment to amendment No 3, in clause 27(1), in inserted text (1A), after “funding of” insert “advice and assistance or”.— [Miss Woods.]

Question put, That amendment No 4 be made.

Some Members: Aye.

Some Members: No.

Mr Speaker: Before I put the Question again — I am obliged to say this — I remind those Members present that it would be preferable if we could avoid a Division.

Question, that the amendment be made, put a second time.

Some Members: Aye.

Some Members: No.

Mr Speaker: Before the Assembly divides, I remind Members that, as per Standing Order 112, the Assembly has proxy voting arrangements in place. Members who have authorised another Member to vote on their behalf are not entitled to vote in person and should not enter the Lobbies. I also remind Members that social distancing should continue to be observed while voting is taking place. Please be patient at all times and follow the instructions of the Lobby Clerks.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 25; Noes 56.

AYES

Ms Bailey, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Carroll, Mr Clarke, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Newton, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Carroll and Miss Woods.

NOES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Ms Brogan,

Mr Butler, Mr Catney, Mr Chambers, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Mr Stewart, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms Armstrong and Ms Bradshaw.

The following Members' votes were cast by their notified proxy in this Division:

Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Newton, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford and Mr Storey.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Beggs, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

Mr Lyttle voted for Ms Armstrong [Teller, Noes], Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw [Teller, Noes], Mr Dickson, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn and Mr Muir.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Brogan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan and Ms Sheerin.

Mr O'Toole voted for Ms Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Mallon, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin and Mr McNulty.

Question accordingly negated.

Amendment No 5 made:

As an amendment to amendment No 3, in clause 27(1), in inserted text (1A), leave out "(lower courts)".— [Ms S Bradley.]

Amendment No 6 proposed: As an amendment to amendment No 3, in clause 27(1), in inserted text (1A), leave out (a) and (b) and insert –

"the Director is satisfied that—

(a) the client is or appears to be the victim of abusive behaviour perpetrated or apparently perpetrated by another party to the proceedings, and

(b) the other party to the proceedings is someone to whom the client is personally connected."— [Miss Woods.]

Question put, That the amendment be made.

8.00 pm

Mr Speaker: I have been advised by the party Whips that, in accordance with Standing Order 113(5)(b), there is an agreement that we can dispense with the three minutes and move straight to the Division. I remind all Members to follow the instructions of the Lobby Clerks on the need for social distancing.

*The Assembly divided:
Ayes 25; Noes 56.*

AYES

Ms Bailey, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Carroll, Mr Clarke, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Newton, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Carroll and Miss Woods.

NOES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Ms Brogan, Mr Butler, Mr Catney, Mr Chambers, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Mr Stewart, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms Armstrong and Ms Bradshaw.

The following Members' votes were cast by their notified proxy in this Division:

Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Newton, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford and Mr Storey.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Beggs, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

Mr Lyttle voted for Ms Armstrong [Teller, Noes], Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw [Teller, Noes], Mr Dickson, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn and Mr Muir.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Brogan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan and Ms Sheerin.

Mr O'Toole voted for Ms Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Mallon, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin and Mr McNulty.

Question accordingly negated.

Mr Speaker: We now return to amendment No 3.

Amendment No 3, as amended, made: Leave out clause 27 and insert –

"Eligibility of victims for civil legal aid

27.—(1) In the Civil Legal Services (Financial) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015, in regulation 10 (waiver of eligibility limits in proceedings relating to domestic violence or forced marriage)—

(a) after paragraph (1) insert—

'(1A) This regulation applies to an application by a client for the funding of representation in proceedings for an order

that is an Article 8 order within the meaning of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 if—

(a) the client is the respondent in the proceedings, and

(b) the Director is satisfied that—

(i) the client is or appears to be the victim of abusive behaviour perpetrated or apparently perpetrated by the applicant seeking the order, and

(ii) the applicant seeking the order is someone to whom the client is personally connected.’

(b) after paragraph (4) insert—

‘(5) The following apply for the purposes of paragraph (1A) as they apply for the purposes of Chapter 1 of Part 1 of the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2020 (to give meanings to certain expressions)—

(a) section 2 (as read with section 3(2)) of that Act,

(b) sections 4 and 5 of that Act.’

(2) Guidance under section 3 of the Legal Aid and Coroners’ Courts Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 must describe the basis, particularly as regards applicable information about the commission or alleged commission of an offence involving domestic abuse, on which the Director may be satisfied as mentioned in regulation 10(1A) of the Civil Legal Services (Financial) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015.

(3) An offence involving domestic abuse is—

(a) an offence under section 1, or

(b) an offence of any kind that is aggravated as provided for in section 15.

(4) The Director is as defined in the Civil Legal Services (Financial) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015.

(5) This section is without prejudice to—

(a) any power to make regulations under the Access to Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2003,

(b) the power to give guidance under section 3 of the Legal Aid and Coroners’ Courts Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.”—
[Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice).]

New Clause

Mr Speaker: Amendment No 7 has already been debated.

Amendment No 7 made:

After clause 27 insert –

“Proposals as to availability of civil legal aid

27A.—(1) The Department of Justice must lay before the Assembly a report setting out the Department’s proposals for—

(a) making regulations under the Access to Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 for the prescribed purpose, or

(b) taking some different course of action for the prescribed purpose.

(2) A report under this section must be laid before the Assembly before the end of the period of 2 years beginning with the day on which this Act receives Royal Assent.

(3) The prescribed purpose is that of—

(a) reducing (including to nil), in specific circumstances, financial costs to be incurred by a relevant client with respect to receiving funded services in or in relation to qualifying proceedings to which an abusive person as well as the relevant client are parties, or

(b) preventing, so far as reasonably possible—

(i) qualifying proceedings from being initiated unduly against a relevant client by an abusive person by virtue of having access to funded services, or

(ii) qualifying proceedings to which both a relevant client and an abusive person are parties from being prolonged unduly by the abusive person by virtue of having access to funded services.

(4) Qualifying proceedings are—

(a) proceedings for an order that is an Article 8 order within the meaning of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, or

(b) proceedings on appeal arising from proceedings for an order that is an Article 8 Order within the meaning of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

(5) A relevant client is a client who is or appears to be the victim of abusive behaviour.

(6) An abusive person is someone—

(a) who is the perpetrator or apparent perpetrator of abusive behaviour of which the relevant client is or appears to be the victim, and

(b) to whom the relevant client is personally connected.

(7) A conclusion by the Director, when acting by virtue of regulations made under the Access to Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 for the prescribed purpose—

(a) as to whether—

(i) a person is or appears to be the victim of abusive behaviour, or

(ii) someone is the perpetrator or apparent perpetrator of abusive behaviour, or

(b) as to whether two people are personally connected to each other,

may be reached, particularly on the basis of applicable information about the commission or alleged commission of an offence involving domestic abuse, having regard to appropriate guidance given under section 3 of the Legal Aid and Coroners’ Courts Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

(8) What amounts to abusive behaviour is to be construed, or whether two people are personally connected to each other is to be determined, in the same way as is provided for in Chapter 1.

(9) An offence involving domestic abuse is—

(a) an offence under section 1, or

(b) an offence of any kind that is aggravated as provided for in section 15.

(10) A reference in this section to a client or funded services, or to the Director, is to be construed in accordance with the Civil Legal Services (Financial)

Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015.”— [Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice).]

Clause 28 (Guidance about domestic abuse)

Amendment No 8 made:

In page 14, line 36, leave out subsection (2)— [Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice).]

Mr Speaker: We now come to the second group of amendments. With amendment No 9, it will be convenient to debate amendment Nos 10 to 12 and 14 to 17. I call the Minister of Justice, Naomi Long, to move amendment No 9 and address the other amendments in the group.

Clause 29 (Guidance on data collection)

Mrs Long: I beg to move amendment No 9: In page 15, line 21, leave out paragraph (c).

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 10: Leave out clause 30 and insert –

“Training within relevant bodies

30.—(1) Each of the following must provide such training on the effect of this Part as it considers appropriate for its personnel—

- (a) the Police Service of Northern Ireland,
 - (b) the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland,
 - (c) any additional public body that has functions within the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland which the Department of Justice specifies in connection with this section in regulations.
- (2) The Department of Justice must provide such training on the effect of this Part as the Department considers appropriate for—
- (a) staff within the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunal Service,
 - (b) staff of any additional agency of the Department that has functions within the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland which the Department selects in connection with this section.

(3) A body which must under this section provide training is to do so—

- (a) at least annually, and
- (b) as something to be undertaken as mandatory—
 - (i) by such of the relevant personnel or (as the case may be) staff as have responsibilities for dealing with cases involving domestic abuse, and
 - (ii) for the purpose of ensuring the effective discharge of their responsibilities in relation to such cases.

(4) The Department of Justice must—

- (a) publish a statement setting out information held or obtained by the Department about the level of participation by the relevant personnel or (as the case may be) staff in training provided by a body in accordance with this section, and
- (b) do so—

(i) before the end of the period of 18 months beginning with the day on which Chapters 1 and 2 come into operation, and

(ii) annually thereafter.

(5) Regulations under this section are subject to negative resolution.”— [Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice).]

No 11: Leave out clause 31 and insert –

“Independent oversight of this Part

31.—(1) The Department of Justice must appoint a person—

(a) to—

(i) report to the Department on the person’s assessment of the effectiveness of this Part, and

(ii) make recommendations to the Department in relation to the operation of this Part, and

(b) to advise, and make recommendations to, the Department on the content and review of guidance under section 28.

(2) A report under this section must be completed—

(a) before the end of the period of 2 years beginning with the day on which Chapters 1 and 2 come into operation, and

(b) annually thereafter.

(3) A report under this section—

(a) must be sent to the Department of Justice by the person appointed as soon as practicable after the report is completed, and

(b) must be—

- (i) laid before the Assembly by the Department, and
- (ii) published by the Department,

as soon as practicable after the report is received by the Department from the person appointed.

(4) An appointment under this section is for the person appointed to act independently of the Department of Justice.

(5) The first appointment under this section must be made before the end of the period of 1 year beginning with the day on which this Act receives Royal Assent.

(6) The preceding subsections of this section cease to have effect at such time, which must not be before the end of the period of 7 years beginning with the day on which Chapters 1 and 2 come into operation, as the Department of Justice may by regulations specify.

(7) Regulations under this section are subject to negative resolution.”— [Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice).]

No 12: Leave out clause 32 and insert –

“Report on the operation of this Part

32.—(1) The Department of Justice must prepare a report, covering the reporting period, in relation to the following categories of offence—

- (a) an offence under section 1 (including as alleged to be aggravated as referred to in section 8 or 9),

(b) an offence of any kind that is alleged to be aggravated as referred to in section 15.

(2) A report under this section must set out this information—

(a) the number of—

(i) offences under section 1 as recorded by the Police Service of Northern Ireland on the basis of allegations made to them (including as recorded by reference to police districts),

(ii) files submitted by the Police Service to the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland in respect of offences within each of the categories,

(iii) cases prosecuted by the Public Prosecution Service for offences within each of the categories,

(iv) convictions in cases prosecuted by the Public Prosecution Service for offences within each of the categories (particularly where such offences are proved to be aggravated as referred to in section 8 or 9 or (as the case may be) in section 15),

(b) the average length of time, for offences within the categories as a whole—

(i) from recording of cases by the Police Service on the basis of allegations made to them,

(ii) to disposal of cases at court (disregarding appeal processes).

(3) A report under this section is to include, so far as available—

(a) information about the level of participation by persons in training provided under section 30,

(b) information about—

(i) how court business is arranged so as to ensure the efficient disposal of cases for offences within the categories as a whole,

(ii) the experience at court of witnesses (including witnesses who are children) in cases for offences within the categories as a whole.

(4) A report under this section is to include, in addition—

(a) any views that the Department of Justice considers appropriate to give in relation to the operation of this Part (including the Department's assessment of the effectiveness of this Part),

(b) information about—

(i) any issuing, review or revision of guidance by the Department under section 28,

(ii) any steps taken by the Department for raising public awareness (particularly awareness of victims) of matters relating to domestic abuse in Northern Ireland,

(iii) any activities undertaken by the Department in supporting the operation of this Part,

(iv) any further things that the Department considers appropriate.

(5) A report under this section must be—

(a) laid before the Assembly by the Department of Justice, and

(b) published by the Department,

as soon as practicable after the report is completed by the time and in the form determined by the Department.

(6) As for the reporting period—

(a) the first reporting period is the period, of not less than 2 years and not more than 3 years beginning with the day on which Chapters 1 and 2 come into operation, determined by the Department of Justice,

(b) each subsequent reporting period is the period of 3 years coming after the previous reporting period.

(7) The preceding subsections of this section cease to have effect at such time, which must not be before the end of the period of 10 years beginning with the day on which Chapters 1 and 2 come into operation, as the Department of Justice may by regulations specify.

(8) Regulations under this section are subject to negative resolution.— [Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice).]

No 14: In clause 38, page 32, line 27, at end insert –

“(1A) Section 27A comes into operation on the day after the day on which this Act receives Royal Assent.”— [Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice).]

No 15: In clause 38, page 32, line 27, at end insert –

“(1B) Section 31 comes into operation on the day after the day on which this Act receives Royal Assent.”— [Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice).]

No 16: In clause 39, page 32, line 33, leave out “Family” and insert “Civil”.— [Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice).]

No 17: In the long title, leave out from “and prevent” to end and insert –

“regulate the conduct of civil proceedings in particular circumstances; and make provision for connected purposes.”— [Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice).]

Mrs Long: This amendment relates to the data collection provision at clause 29 of the Bill. It removes the reference to the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service. I consider that to be legislatively inappropriate, given that the court service is an agency of the Department and would otherwise require the Department to give guidance to a part of itself. I can, however, reassure Members that the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service is an integral part of the discussions that are being held with the PSNI and the Public Prosecution Service around the operationalisation of the offence and information that is to be gathered.

Along with those entities, the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service will be made aware of the information that is to be provided and what is expected from it. The absence of a legislative reference will in no way diminish that position.

8.15 pm

Members may ask why that approach differs from the approach in the training clause — clause 30 — and it is important to remember that the provision in clause 29 is permissive and states that I may issue guidance. There is no duty on me to do so and that would involve my Department advising itself, which is illogical. The requirement in relation to the training provision is

quite different as it places a duty and obligation on my Department to do something.

Turning to amendment No 10, we are all in agreement on the need for and importance of training for those who are involved in the operationalisation of the new offence. That will be key to ensuring that the offence works as intended and can be seen to be as effective as possible. I indicated at Consideration Stage that I had concerns about clause 30, which, as it stands, would require me and my Department to ensure that sufficient mandatory training is made available to police and criminal justice agencies on an annual basis. As I have advised previously, neither I nor my Department can interfere in the operational independence of those organisations. It is not for the Department to dictate to other independent entities on their operational procedures and requirements. Indeed, if I did so, I would be stepping outside my ministerial powers.

Amendment No 10 instead places the duty on the PSNI and the Public Prosecution Service, given their status as operationally independent bodies, rather than on the Department. The amendment also provides that the duty would apply to any additional public body, which could be specified by the Department in regulations, that has functions within the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland. The duty for training NICTS staff remains with my Department due to its agency status. It would, however, still be named in the Bill.

The amendment also places a duty on my Department to provide training to staff of any additional agency of the Department that has functions within the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland and which the Department selects in connection with that section. The requirement would be to provide such training as is considered appropriate for those who have responsibility for dealing with cases involving domestic abuse and to ensure the effective discharge of those responsibilities in relation to those cases.

From the outset, I have considered that the core agencies that will deal with the new offence are covered. It is important that the provisions focus on those organisations with key responsibility for criminal proceedings on domestic abuse and aggravated offences. That will also ensure that operational partners are equipped to investigate the new offence, bring forward prosecutions and facilitate convictions. Although the training will be mandatory and annual, ultimately responsibility for it and its effectiveness needs to rest with the operational bodies and should be determined on the basis of operational need. I thank the Committee for agreeing on the approach that is set out in the amended provision.

On training, there is also a requirement to report on the level of participation for the organisations covered, which is included in the training provision itself in clause 30 and the reporting provision in clause 32. Work is being progressed by the PSNI and the Public Prosecution Service in conjunction with our voluntary and community sector service partners on the form that that training will take. That training will make use of operational guidance, which will supplement the guidance that my Department is developing under clause 28 in conjunction with our voluntary and community sector partners. Provision in relation to reporting on training is also provided for in subsection (3)(a) of the clause that deals with reporting on the operation of Part 1 for completeness.

Amendment No 11 builds upon and further refines the Committee amendment that relates to independent oversight. The structure of the clause has been refashioned in part, thereby recasting the provisions. Those related to guidance have been refined to refer to making recommendations:

“on the content and review of guidance”.

Provision is included that a report must be prepared that contains an assessment of the effectiveness of Part 1 and includes recommendations on its operation. A report is to be prepared annually, with the first one to be completed within two years of Chapters 1 and 2 coming into operation. There is merit in that, given that it will take a period for the new offence to bed in and for numbers to be meaningful.

The amendment also makes provision on the laying of the independent person's report at the Assembly and for the clause to have effect for a minimum period of seven years from the day on which Chapters 1 and 2 come into operation. Where the Department brings forward regulations, the functions may cease after that period.

Amendment No 15 provides that clause 31 will come into operation on the day after Royal Assent, enabling the appointment process to be established ahead of the new domestic abuse offence coming into operation. As I noted at Consideration Stage and during my previous discussions with the Committee and Chair, I am reassured that that function does not need to entail an entirely new entity; rather, it is a function that could be undertaken by, for example, the Criminal Justice Inspection or any new victims of crime commissioner. In that respect, there have been helpful discussions with the Chief Inspector of Criminal Justice in Northern Ireland.

Amendment No 12 builds on clause 32, with changes largely to refine some of the language around criminal proceedings so that it more closely aligns with practice. The reporting period is also somewhat broader to reflect that the offence will not be introduced at the start of a financial year, thereby assisting with the period for data collection. Reference is now also made in relation to the domestic abuse offence and data by reference to “police districts”. The provisions in relation to guidance have also been refined to refer to:

“issuing, review or revision of guidance”.

given that the guidance will have been developed through a multi-party task and finish group involving statutory and voluntary sector partners ahead of the offence coming into operation. Provision is made that there are ongoing reporting requirements, with each reporting period three years after the previous one.

The amendment also provides that the reporting requirement would no longer apply if regulations to that effect were brought forward, with the earliest that those could be brought forward being 10 years after the domestic abuse offence comes into operation. It is considered that, at that point, the offence will be well bedded in and that reporting should take the same form as for any other offence. Of course, this would have to be reviewed further at that point. That aside, information and data would continue to be made available on key offence statistics, such as is currently the case in relation to a wide range of offences.

The last three amendments are technical, albeit important. Amendment No 14 provides that clause 27A will come into effect the day after Royal Assent is secured. Amendment No 16 allows for the short title of the Bill at clause 39 to be amended on foot of changes to the Bill at Consideration Stage. The previous reference to “Family Proceedings” in the short title will be replaced by “Civil Proceedings”, of which family proceedings are a part. A similar change is made to the long title by way of amendment No 17. That will refer to regulating:

“the conduct of civil proceedings in particular circumstances; and make provision for connected purposes.”

Again, that is in line with the changes that have been made to the Bill.

That concludes my remarks on the amendments being considered in this group, and I look forward to hearing from Members.

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): Amendment Nos 9, 10, 11, 12 and 15 all relate to provisions that were introduced by the Committee at Consideration Stage. The Department provided the Committee with its proposed text of those amendments, and the Committee requested a number of changes to ensure that the provisions retained their original purpose and intent. The Department responded positively to the Committee requests, and we therefore support the amendments today.

In relation to amendment No 9, the main change to clause 29 is to remove the reference to the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service. The Department highlighted that the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service is part of the Department, and it is considered legislatively inappropriate to retain the reference given that it would require the Department to give guidance to itself. Officials provided assurance that the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service is fully involved, together with the PSNI and the PPS, in the discussions on the operationalisation of the offence and the information to be gathered, and that it will be made clear to the Courts and Tribunals Service what is expected from it and the information that is to be provided. Although the Committee is of the view that the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service has an important role to play in ensuring that appropriate and robust data is collected to fully and properly assess the operation of the new offence and that it is consistent across the various criminal justice agencies, of which it is one, in order to allow for the tracking of cases and analysis at each stage of the process, it accepts the reason for removing the specific reference in the provision, given the assurances already provided by the Department and provided again by the Minister today.

Clause 30 currently places a duty on the Department to ensure that sufficient and appropriate training is made available to allow for the effective operation of the legislation. The training is mandatory for all those involved in the disposal of domestic abuse cases in policing and criminal justice agencies, and it must be provided annually. The Department must publish the uptake of training by each relevant organisation at the end of each annual reporting period, given its importance to the effective operation of the legislation. The need for such training to fully understand coercive control and the needs of

the victim was emphasised by an article in the ‘Belfast Telegraph’ last Friday. I welcome the confirmation from the Police Service that it is developing a new extensive domestic abuse training package for all front-line officers. Members had sympathy with the Minister’s point that it would be more appropriate to place the duty for training their personnel on the police and the PPS respectively, rather than on the Department. At Consideration Stage, I indicated that the Committee was content for the wording of the provision to be tidied up to reflect that. Amendment No 10 does that.

When the Committee considered the first draft of amendment No 10, members were concerned that the Department had removed the requirement to publish the uptake of training by each relevant organisation annually and the provision for training for criminal justice agencies other than the Police Service, the Public Prosecution Service and the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service to allow for the effective operation of the Act. The Department has now reinstated both those requirements to the Committee’s satisfaction, and we are therefore able to support amendment No 10.

I turn now to amendment No 11, which would replace clause 31. Following discussions with departmental officials, the initial wording of the amendment has been revised to reflect more accurately the intent of clause 31(1)(b). In the Bill as it stands, it is for the independent person to:

“review, report and make recommendations in relation to the operation of Part 1”

of the Act. The amendment makes it that the independent person should:

“advise, and make recommendations to, the Department on the content and review of guidance under”

clause 28. The Committee is therefore satisfied with amendment No 11. It also welcomes amendment No 15, which would enable the Department to establish the process to appoint the independent person ahead of the offence coming into operation.

The wording of amendment No 12 builds on the existing provision in the Bill and refines some of the language to align it more closely with criminal proceedings and practice. The Department initially proposed that the amendment should provide for the reporting requirements in clause 32 to cease after nine years rather than remain open-ended. That was removed at the Committee’s request, however.

Amendment No 12 now provides that, after the initial report, each reporting period is three years after the previous one. There is also provision for the reporting requirement to come to an end, at the earliest, 10 years after the offence comes into operation. That can be done only by way of regulations subject to negative resolution, which will have to be considered by the Committee. If regulations are not brought forward, the reporting requirement will continue indefinitely. The Committee is of the view that that is a pragmatic approach to adopt and is therefore content with amendment No 12. The Committee supports amendment Nos 16 and 17, which make changes to the short title in clause 39 and to the long title to reflect properly the changes that have been made to the Bill.

Speaking briefly in my role as a Member, I commend Nicola Brogan on her maiden speech. I always admire a Member who decides to introduce a degree of controversy. On this occasion, we decided to let it go, but, next time, Members may wish to have that debate. I have no doubt, given the way in which she spoke, that she will be able to acquit herself very well and articulate her position. She is a Tyrone woman. I am a Lisburn man born and bred, but my family are all from Tyrone, so we have that commonality at least. I wish her well in her time in the Assembly.

At Final Stage, I will commend all the relevant organisations and individuals in more detail. I put on record again my thanks to our Committee staff and to the Bill Clerk who advised the Committee. I also thank Assembly staff for the support that they gave the Committee to get us to this stage. I will elaborate on all of that at Final Stage.

It is likely that this is the last chance that I will get to engage with the Justice Minister before we break for recess. At least, I am sure that the Minister hopes that it is the last time that we talk before Christmas. A Member kindly offered to provide marriage counselling. I always take the view that, in relationships, it is usually better that they work it out themselves. In any relationship, it takes somebody to take the first step, so let me be the first. In all sincerity, I wish the Minister well over the Christmas period. I thank her for the engagement. At times, I know that it may have appeared to be hostile, and perhaps that is how it feels for others. Iron sharpens iron, however, and the democratic process has brought forward better legislation, even when, at times, it might have seemed difficult to get to that point.

At Christmas time, we remember the new birth, and I know that the Minister is familiar with the Good Book. There is a verse in it that talks about there being:

“a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing”.

I know that the Minister would wish to embrace at this stage, but, because of COVID-19, we are not able to do that. I do wish her a peaceful Christmas, and let us hope that we have a good new year.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

8.30 pm

Mr Speaker: On that note, I advise Members that we are organising a hybrid carol service in the coming few days. The Member might be invited along if he continues to behave himself. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Dillon: I do not know how to follow that.

Mr Speaker: Just stick to the amendments.

Ms Dillon: I will keep my remarks very brief.

I concur with the Chair. Obviously, we will say more at Final Stage. I place on record my appreciation of the hard work of the Committee, the Minister and her officials and, obviously, the Committee staff and the Bill Clerk, who has shown great patience with all of us, I can tell you. Everybody has worked very hard, because we believe in the Bill. The Chair talked about Christmas. We know that Christmas is a particularly difficult time for those who suffer domestic abuse. Our thoughts will be with those

people over the Christmas period — those who are stuck in their homes with their abusers and potential abusers.

I will not go into any detail. The Chair has covered the detail around these amendments, so there is no need to go into that any further. I will say, however, that they are extremely important amendments. They may not be as contentious as some of those in the first group, but they are really important to the Committee. The first group was about trying to get the abuse Bill right and making sure that we have an offence on the books that will deliver for victims. This group is about ensuring that the Bill's roll-out and training are right and that it is implemented in the best possible way so that it actually delivers for victims, and then reporting on it to ensure that, where there are gaps — and there will be gaps — they are addressed. We have worked really hard on this, but we know that it is not perfect. Nobody in the Chamber will believe for one second that it is going to be perfect. The reporting and the independent oversight will therefore be important for what we do next, because I know — I believe that it is the feeling of the Committee, certainly, and everybody else in the Chamber — that this is not the finish for us. This is only the beginning. Domestic abuse has not even begun to be dealt with; the offence is only one small part of it. Whatever Committee you are on, you will be playing a role in dealing with this. Whatever part or role you play in the Chamber, you will have your part to play, because this is only the beginning of how we start to deal with domestic abuse.

We talked earlier today, and in previous debates, about the importance of education. I want to say again, and to place it on the record, that education is obviously vital in respect of the training of those who will be rolling this out; education on what a healthy relationship is. We do not want people to be found guilty of this offence. We want them not to commit it in the first place. Education is the only way that we will stop that from happening. We need to educate young people on what a healthy relationship is. The conversation about telling young women how to look after and protect themselves needs to stop. We need to say to the potential perpetrators or abusers in the future, “You watch how you behave. You stop doing what you’re doing”. Not, “Look after each other and keep those who may become victims safe”. Stop the people who may become the victim-makers. I really think that education, from all angles and whatever way we can do it, is important. Operation Encompass, as we talked about earlier, is part of that, because we know that the perpetrators of the future are the victims of yesterday. They are caught up in a cycle that nobody has protected or saved them from or intervened in. I hope that, as an Assembly, that is what we will do.

I hope that, when this offence is being reported on in the future, the numbers of people who are using this in the courts do not go up. They will go up initially; that is obviously the way it will happen. It is a new offence, so they will go up, but I hope that, when we are reporting, at some point we see the figures start to come down, because we have not just taken a very narrow approach and dealt with this as a criminal offence; we have decided that we are going to make a real change here, and that we are going to make it for the people who need it most.

Ms S Bradley: Like the Member who spoke previously, I will keep my comments brief. I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for Justice for succinctly outlining

the Committee position. It was a fair and thorough assessment.

The Committee teased out many things along the way. Training, oversight and reporting were three issues that made it into the debate. Members of the House, and members of the Committee, know that there were long conversations about many other issues on the fringes that, for one reason or another, did not progress to this stage. Ultimately, these three important tools sit within the framework that is the offence of domestic abuse. That was the key objective at the initial stages of the Bill.

It is important that much of the conversation about issues that we did not manage to progress or get to this stage have not been completely sidelined. They still can come into play.

With regard to training, the Scottish model is the perfect example that shows how important it is to get that right.

I turn to oversight. The Bill, though good, has, ironically, not had the best process. That has to be admitted by all. We were all very eager to see the Bill across the line, but that created very narrow windows of opportunity for us to scrutinise the fine detail and to come to the House fully informed, as we should do. The oversight role is the tool that can say, "Some of these things have been carried into the Bill on a promise". If that is the case, we need somebody who will ask, "Has everything that was intended come to fruition?". That is why, particularly at this late stage, the oversight role starts to have more importance than originally foreseen, even though the intention was good.

Reporting is also important. We cannot anticipate every eventuality. Therefore, we have to have in place a reporting mechanism, because it will be the critical tool that will tell us whether we need to have additions or amendments to the Bill. It will also tell us where resource should be directed to make the Bill as good as it can be.

I do not want to appear like Scrooge, skipping over Christmas, but my mind runs to Final Stage. I do not want there to be any obstacles in the way of the Bill. I hope that Members' conversations and actions this evening assure the Minister that there can be no stalemate. We need an offence of domestic abuse on statute as quickly as possible.

Mr Beattie: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I was not going to speak but, since I am now on my feet, I will do so. This Bill has not had a laboured process, but it has had a hard-fought one. We have focused a little on legal aid, but there is so much more to the Bill.

In this group of amendments, we had real success with training, as we have made sure that training is annual and mandatory and that it will be registered. We will know what is taking place and whether it is working. That was done through collaboration. The Committee identified what it believed needed to happen and engaged with the Minister and her officials. The Minister came back with an amendment to our amendment. That is a good process; it is the right process. I see merit in the way we have gone about this.

Yes, people have got tetchy on certain issues, but that is because those issues are important to them; they are not tetchy purely to be obstructive. They have a buy-in to this process, and that is why it feels as if they are being tetchy.

However, if you stand back a little and look at what we are trying to achieve, you will see that this is a high-stakes game. The word "game" is the wrong one to use.

However, this is high-stakes because, if we get it wrong, the people who are experiencing domestic abuse will suffer: men and women and their children, teenagers and younger. It is high-stakes, and we must remember that. We are drawing near to the end of the process, not just here today but as we come to Final Stage. I honestly believe that the work that has been put in, by the Committee, the Assembly and the Minister and her staff, means that we can be proud of what we produce. It will help people who are in extremely difficult positions. My party and I will support the second group of amendments.

Ms Bradshaw: My party will support all the amendments in this group. Thank you.

Mr Speaker: Paul Frew, follow that [*Laughter.*]

Mr Frew: Mr Speaker, you put me under so much pressure.

The second group of amendments exemplifies exactly the relationship that we should have between Committee, Minister and Department. It is the best model for acceleration that we could ever have, by which I mean that the Bill would have been unthinkable 10 years ago. If someone had said 10 years ago that we would legislate for coercive control, no one would have thought it possible. I am talking about MLAs, people in the street, victims groups and the judiciary. We are at the cusp of making history. The Minister, the Department, the Committees and Members should feel a sense of achievement at progressing the Bill in the way that we have. At Second Stage, I encouraged Members to consider tabling amendments as they saw fit, because MLAs are on the ground, they have constituents, they see victims daily, and they know what needs to be achieved through legislation.

I am satisfied with the content, context and calibre of the amendments on data collection, training, independent oversight and the reporting of that operation. Why are those aspects so important to this Bill when they are maybe not so important to other legislation? It is simply because, for the first time, we are legislating for coercive control, and that is vital. Other jurisdictions have had to do the legislation twice. I suspect that some jurisdictions may have to do it three times. I am not saying that the Bill is perfect, but the reporting mechanisms, data collection and independent oversight mean that we will get the best stab at it. If we have to amend the Bill, we can do that, with the confidence of knowing that provisions on data, information and oversight will be in place. We — the Minister, the Department, the Committees and the Assembly — will be able to move forward together with confidence to ensure that the Bill is even better and protects even more victims.

Linda Dillon made a valid point about the seismic change that must take place to get the message out to perpetrators. I agree 100%. We must not only protect the victim but change ways and rid society, as far as is possible, of the scourge of domestic violence and coercive control. The Bill is our best stab at that, and it should give us a sense of achievement and satisfaction. However, we must never lose sight of the people at the heart of this. They are the victims, their families, the fathers, mothers and children of the victims, who feel and walk this journey with their relatives every day. Those people are worried

sick about the victims of domestic violence and coercive control and the abuse that they suffer. They have tried their best to support their families through thick and thin, and at times they felt completely and utterly helpless.

The Bill is also for Women's Aid, the Men's Advisory Project and all the organisations — too many to mention — which society needs. I wish it was not so, but they are much needed. They do sterling work. The Bill is for them. It is to help them, to arm them and to support them in the work that they do in supporting victims. This is a good day. We can move on with confidence, get to the Final Stage as quickly as we can and deliver for the victims of domestic violence and coercive control.

8.45 pm

Ms Rogan: Since the beginning of the process on the Bill, the need for adequate training and resourcing has been a core theme. We all agree that the legislation provides a drastic step change in our approach to tackling domestic abuse by ensuring that the new domestic abuse offence more accurately encapsulates the horrors of domestic abuse, but, in order for the legislation to be effective, it is crucial that we get the training aspect right. Given that the new offence relates to a course of behaviour, this will require the exercise of judgement by the police when they gather evidence and when they attend incidents of domestic abuse. Therefore, a clear understanding and recognition of the behaviours associated with non-physical abuse is of paramount importance. This will be new to many of these officers, but if we are to properly protect victims from abuse, a huge amount of responsibility will fall to those officers, and it is crucial that they are properly supported in their efforts.

Through our discussions with officials, it became apparent that this clause would need to be strengthened. I believe that the Minister's amendment No 10 does that, and I am happy to support it. It will ensure that, legally, training must be provided to personnel in the PSNI, the PPS and any other body that has functions in the criminal justice system in connection with this offence, including the Courts and Tribunals Service and any other agency of the Department of Justice. It will ensure that such training must be provided at least annually and that it is mandatory.

Amendment No 11 is about independent oversight. Independent oversight of the implementation of the legislation will bring a wide range of benefits that will be of such importance from when the legislation is rolled out until it is fully embedded. It will make it mandatory for whoever is responsible for the independent oversight to report annually on the implementation of the legislation. As has been said, this is new and we are trying to get it right at this stage. Other legislators in other jurisdictions are going at it time and time again, but we are trying to get this right and to get it done first time. Further still, it will provide crucial oversight on the content and review of guidance, the importance of which has been, and presumably will be again, emphasised by other Members.

Independent external oversight has a number of advantages, including being able to review the operation of the legislation in great detail to ensure that it is operating as it is expected to, and, when it is not, the recommendations will play a crucial role in making interventions, where necessary. It can help to monitor and review performance and can ensure the accountability of

the Department and the agencies involved in dealing with domestic abuse incidents and prosecutions. It can collect, disaggregate and widely publish data that will help to spot emerging patterns and trends, and it can build confidence among the organisations that support victims of domestic abuse.

I note the Minister's intention to begin the work with a view to the introduction of a victims of crime commissioner, who may well carry many of the same functions as an independent person with responsibility for the oversight of this legislation. However, we cannot wait until a commissioner is in place. We have no timeline for that yet and whether it will be before we review the operation of the legislation. Nonetheless, independent oversight and a victims of crime commissioner should complement each other rather than duplicate each other's work, and I welcome that.

Mr Lynch: A Cheann Comhairle, you will be glad to know that I will keep my comments as short as possible. I will specifically address my remarks to amendment No 10.

As a member of the Policing Board, I have a particular focus on the PSNI, which will play a vital role in the new legislation. The new domestic abuse Bill will mark a step change not only in how we deal with perpetrators of abuse but in how we protect victims. Police officers, who are often the first responders to incidents and who are responsible for gathering and collating evidence, must be adequately supported in their efforts. If a perpetrator physically lashes out, that can often leave marks, bruises, cuts and scars. However, many forms of abuse that are part of the new offence are more difficult to spot as perpetrators' behaviour is often subtle and covert. Therefore, police, prosecutors and judiciary must have a clear and thorough understanding and recognition of the behaviour associated with non-physical abuse. That is precisely why training will play an important role in the effectiveness of the implementation of this legislation. That point has been raised time and time again by our party, many other parties, victims, victims' organisations and many other stakeholders, so I am glad that we are able to allay those concerns by including amendment No 10.

Police officers, prosecutors and judiciary are very capable of making this legislation a success. However, they must be supported in their duties. Amendment No 10 will ensure that training must legally be provided in the PSNI, the PPS, the Courts and Tribunals Service and any other body that has functions in the criminal justice system in connection with domestic abuse. We all want to see this legislation being successful, not least for those who will be on the front line protecting victims and tackling perpetrators, so it is only right that we equip personnel with the right tools and the knowledge to do so. I commend and support amendment No 10.

Miss Woods: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this positive group of amendments. I will be brief as much of what I wanted to say has already been covered. I concur with the comments of the Chair, the Deputy Chair and other members of the Committee, all of whom have helped to get us here today. Crucially, I thank the Minister, her Department, the Committee staff and the Bill Clerk, who have all done a fantastic job in working with us. I express my immense thanks to my researcher, who has done an amazing job for me.

Amendment No 9, which is on the training requirement, is crucial to the Bill, especially when it becomes an Act. I have pushed for this for months. In my view, training for the PSNI, PPS and the judiciary is critical to the effective implementation of this legislation. As I said at Consideration Stage, this has been fundamental to the effective roll-out and adoption of the Scottish legislation, the so-called gold standard. Amendment No 9 changes the former Committee amendment, now clause 30, to put the onus on the PSNI, PPS and Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service to provide appropriate training for their personnel and staff to allow for the effective discharge of their responsibilities. Whilst this differs from what the Committee amendment had done, placing a duty on the Department, I still think that it holds merit. I am glad that this now forms part of the Bill at Further Consideration Stage and has the backing of the Committee. Other wording has tidied up the clause, which I also welcome.

Again, I raise the fundamental issue that goes hand in hand with training: the sufficient allocation of resources so that training can happen in the fullest and most appropriate way for staff in those organisations and bodies. Again, I urge that all members of the criminal justice system also be trained fully in this new offence, including the judiciary, just as happened in Scotland, where the Judicial Institute commissioned training for all judges and sheriffs. Indeed, the courses also gave participants an insight into the impact of criminal behaviour on victims and children. Before the Scottish Act came into force, newly appointed sheriffs and summary sheriffs had received specific training on the issue of domestic abuse as part of their mandatory induction course. Specific training on domestic abuse issues has also been incorporated, as appropriate, into other training courses, focusing on family cases, vulnerable witnesses, courtroom technology and sentencing. I would welcome our rolling this out as a matter of urgency and as best we can in much-needed legislation.

I welcome the Department's changes to amendment No 12 and the fact that reporting will not end automatically, as previously envisioned, but that the Assembly will now have a scrutiny and oversight role in determining when this requirement will cease. Originally, the Department had drafted this with a sunset provision, and I understand that there may be a future scenario in which these monitoring and evaluation exercises are no longer required, but it should not happen automatically. I welcome the Minister's adopting part of the amendment on reporting that I brought at Consideration Stage, including the requirement on aggravation, as outlined in clauses 1, 8, 9 and 15.

Amendment No 14, which covers the work on the report and the proposals on the availability of legal aid for victims and survivors, will commence straight away, and that is also very welcome.

To finish, I reiterate to those people whom we are trying to legislate for and protect that, if you are at risk of abuse or are a victim of domestic abuse, please reach out. Please make a call or contact someone. Contact the amazing support organisations that are there, be it the police, a health professional or your GP, or somebody whom you trust. If it is an emergency, please call 999. Please do not continue to suffer in silence.

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister of Justice to conclude and make her winding-up speech on the second group.

Mrs Long: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will refer back to where we are with this. As Members are aware, amendment No 9 will remove the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service from the bodies that are advised about data collection, given that doing so would simply be a reiteration of the Department advising itself, which would be a bit of a legislative oddity.

Amendment No 10 deals with training, and responsibility for that will now sit with the correct organisations. I particularly appreciate Seán Lynch's contribution as a member of the Policing Board. It is right that the Policing Board should have its role of scrutinising operational policing recognised.

Amendment No 11 allows for an independent oversight function to provide annual reports and make recommendations to the Department on the effectiveness of Part 1 of the Bill. Amendment No 12 provides for a departmental report on the operation of Part 1. The report will provide a range of data and information that relates to its operation.

When taken together, the amendments ensure that we can effectively consider both how the offence is operating and any changes that may be needed. Members are aware that any legislation may not necessarily work exactly as was anticipated once it is in operation. It is therefore important that we are able to consider the impact of the offence, how it is being implemented and what changes, if any, are needed in order to refine it.

Amendment Nos 14 and 15 deal with commencement, while amendment Nos 16 and 17 adjust the long and short titles of the Bill to better reflect the amended Bill.

In conclusion, I thank all Members who have participated, not just in the debate on the second group of amendments but in all the debates on the Bill. I thank them for engaging on the issue. That engagement with justice partners, the Committee, voluntary and third-sector partners, and, most of all, the victims who came forward and spoke directly with me and the Committee about their experiences — it is hugely important that they did so — has helped shape the Bill for the better, for them and for the victims who have not yet been able to access protection under the current law.

The legislation is hugely important to me and to Members of the House, but, most of all, it is important to those who are affected by domestic abuse. I thank my departmental officials, Committee members and officials, your own staff, Mr Speaker, and other Assembly staff for facilitating what have often been quite long and time-consuming debates.

As we all turn our minds to Christmas — we have even had something of a Christmas ceasefire, which is quite retro, making it feel like the 1980s — I wish the Chair and the Committee a very peaceful and safe Christmas. I hope that Santa is generous to them and their loved ones and that they get some good rest, because we will have plenty more legislation in 2021 from where this Bill came.

As we think of Christmas, I also remember those for whom home is not a safe place. I think about those for whom Christmas is not a time of peace, rest and joy and assure them that we will return to complete the Bill's passage at the earliest stage possible in the new year. In the meantime, I appeal to those who suffer in silence to speak up, to seek help and to seek protection. You are not alone. You deserve protection, and the police are there,

along with our statutory and voluntary partners, to help at Christmas, just as they are at any other time of the year. Do not wait: make the call, take that step and keep you and yours safe this Christmas, and at all other times.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Minister, for your concluding remarks.

Amendment No 9 agreed to.

Clause 30 (Training)

Amendment No 10 made:

Leave out clause 30 and insert

“Training within relevant bodies

30.—(1) Each of the following must provide such training on the effect of this Part as it considers appropriate for its personnel—

- (a) the Police Service of Northern Ireland,
- (b) the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland,
- (c) any additional public body that has functions within the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland which the Department of Justice specifies in connection with this section in regulations.

(2) The Department of Justice must provide such training on the effect of this Part as the Department considers appropriate for—

- (a) staff within the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunal Service,
- (b) staff of any additional agency of the Department that has functions within the criminal justice

system in Northern Ireland which the Department selects in connection with this section.

(3) A body which must under this section provide training is to do so—

- (a) at least annually, and
- (b) as something to be undertaken as mandatory—
 - (i) by such of the relevant personnel or (as the case may be) staff as have responsibilities for dealing with cases involving domestic abuse, and
 - (ii) for the purpose of ensuring the effective discharge of their responsibilities in relation to such cases.

(4) The Department of Justice must—

- (a) publish a statement setting out information held or obtained by the Department about the level of participation by the relevant personnel or (as the case may be) staff in training provided by a body in accordance with this section, and

(b) do so—

(i) before the end of the period of 18 months beginning with the day on which Chapters 1 and 2 come into operation, and

(ii) annually thereafter.

(5) Regulations under this section are subject to negative resolution.”— [Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice).]

Clause 31 (Independent oversight)

Amendment No 11 made:

Leave out clause 31 and insert

“Independent oversight of this Part

31.—(1) The Department of Justice must appoint a person—

(a) to—

(i) report to the Department on the person’s assessment of the effectiveness of this Part, and

(ii) make recommendations to the Department in relation to the operation of this Part, and

(b) to advise, and make recommendations to, the Department on the content and review of guidance under section 28.

(2) A report under this section must be completed—

(a) before the end of the period of 2 years beginning with the day on which Chapters 1 and 2 come into operation, and

(b) annually thereafter.

(3) A report under this section—

(a) must be sent to the Department of Justice by the person appointed as soon as practicable after the report is completed, and

(b) must be—

(i) laid before the Assembly by the Department, and

(ii) published by the Department, as soon as practicable after the report is received by the Department from the person appointed.

(4) An appointment under this section is for the person appointed to act independently of the Department of Justice.

(5) The first appointment under this section must be made before the end of the period of 1 year beginning with the day on which this Act receives Royal Assent.

(6) The preceding subsections of this section cease to have effect at such time, which must not be before the end of the period of 7 years beginning with the day on which Chapters 1 and 2 come into operation, as the Department of Justice may by regulations specify.

(7) Regulations under this section are subject to negative resolution.”— [Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice).]

Clause 32 (Report on the operation of this Act)

Amendment No 12 made:

Leave out clause 32 and insert

“Report on the operation of this Part

32.—(1) The Department of Justice must prepare a report, covering the reporting period, in relation to the following categories of offence—

(a) an offence under section 1 (including as alleged to be aggravated as referred to in section 8 or 9),

(b) an offence of any kind that is alleged to be aggravated as referred to in section 15.

(2) A report under this section must set out this information—

(a) the number of—

(i) offences under section 1 as recorded by the Police Service of Northern Ireland on the basis of allegations made to them (including as recorded by reference to police districts),

(ii) files submitted by the Police Service to the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland in respect of offences within each of the categories,

(iii) cases prosecuted by the Public Prosecution Service for offences within each of the categories,

(iv) convictions in cases prosecuted by the Public Prosecution Service for offences within each of the categories (particularly where such offences are proved to be aggravated as referred to in section 8 or 9 or (as the case may be) in section 15),

(b) the average length of time, for offences within the categories as a whole—

(i) from recording of cases by the Police Service on the basis of allegations made to them,

(ii) to disposal of cases at court (disregarding appeal processes).

(3) A report under this section is to include, so far as available—

(a) information about the level of participation by persons in training provided under section 30,

(b) information about—

(i) how court business is arranged so as to ensure the efficient disposal of cases for offences within the categories as a whole,

(ii) the experience at court of witnesses (including witnesses who are children) in cases for offences within the categories as a whole.

(4) A report under this section is to include, in addition—

(a) any views that the Department of Justice considers appropriate to give in relation to the operation of this Part (including the Department's assessment of the effectiveness of this Part),

(b) information about—

(i) any issuing, review or revision of guidance by the Department under section 28,

(ii) any steps taken by the Department for raising public awareness (particularly awareness of victims) of matters relating to domestic abuse in Northern Ireland,

(iii) any activities undertaken by the Department in supporting the operation of this Part,

(iv) any further things that the Department considers appropriate.

(5) A report under this section must be—

(a) laid before the Assembly by the Department of Justice, and

(b) published by the Department, as soon as practicable after the report is completed by the time and in the form determined by the Department.

(6) As for the reporting period—

(a) the first reporting period is the period, of not less than 2 years and not more than 3 years beginning with the day on which Chapters 1 and 2 come into operation, determined by the Department of Justice,

(b) each subsequent reporting period is the period of 3 years coming after the previous reporting period.

(7) The preceding subsections of this section cease to have effect at such time, which must not be before the end of the period of 10 years beginning with the day on which Chapters 1 and 2 come into operation, as the Department of Justice may by regulations specify.

(8) Regulations under this section are subject to negative resolution."— [Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice).]

Clause 38 (Commencement)

Amendment No 13 proposed: In page 32, line 27, at end insert

"(1ZA) Section 27 comes into operation at the end of the period of 12 months beginning with the day

on which this Act receives Royal Assent."— [Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice).]

Question put, That amendment No 13 be made.

Some Members: Aye.

Some Members: No.

Mr Speaker: Clear the Lobbies. The Question will be put in three minutes.

Before I put the Question again, I remind Members that, if possible, it would be preferable to avoid a Division.

Question put a second time.

Some Members: Aye.

Some Members: No.

Mr Speaker: Before the Assembly divides, I remind Members that, as per Standing Order 112, the Assembly has proxy voting arrangements in place. Members who have authorised another Member to vote on their behalf are not entitled to vote in person and should not enter the Lobbies. I also remind Members to ensure that social distancing continues to be observed while the Division is taking place. Clear the Lobbies.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 25; Noes 44.

AYES

Ms Bailey, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Carroll, Mr Clarke, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Newton, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Frew and Mr Givan.

NOES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms Bradshaw, Ms Brogan, Mr Butler, Mr Chambers, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Mr Stewart, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms Armstrong and Ms Bradshaw.

The following Members voted in both Lobbies and are therefore not counted in the result: Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Mr O'Toole

The following Members' votes were cast by their notified proxy in this Division:

Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Newton, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford and Mr Storey.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Beggs, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

Mr Lyttle voted for Ms Armstrong [Teller, Noes], Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw [Teller, Noes], Mr Dickson, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn and Mr Muir.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Brogan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan and Ms Sheerin.

Mr O'Toole voted for Ms Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin and Mr McNulty.

Question accordingly negatived.

Amendment No 14 made:

In page 32, line 27, at end insert

"(1A) Section 27A comes into operation on the day after the day on which this Act receives Royal Assent."— [Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice).]

Amendment No 15 made:

In page 32, line 27, at end insert –

"(1B) Section 31 comes into operation on the day after the day on which this Act receives Royal Assent."— [Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice).]

Short Title

Amendment No 16 made:

In page 32, line 33, leave out "Family" and insert "Civil".— [Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice).]

Long Title

Amendment No 17 made:

Leave out from "and prevent" to end and insert –

"regulate the conduct of civil proceedings in particular circumstances; and make provision for connected purposes."— [Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice).]

Mr Speaker: That concludes Further Consideration Stage of the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

I would like to add my thanks to those expressed earlier. I thank all staff in the Business Office, Usher Services, Hansard, Assembly Broadcasting, Sodexo and the officials in the Speaker's Office.

I ask Members to take their ease before we move on to the final item in the Order Paper.

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

Committee Business

Report on the Evidence received from Local Councils on the Impact of the United Kingdom's Exit from the European Union

Mr McGrath (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the evidence from local councils to the Committee for the Executive Office in its report on the Evidence received from Local Councils on the Impact of the United Kingdom's Exit from the European Union [NIA 58/17-22]; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to urge the UK Government to provide clarity on the implementation of the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland to allow local councils to prepare for the post-transition period.

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

Mr McGrath: As part of its scrutiny of cross-cutting Brexit issues, the Committee for the Executive Office sought evidence from local councils on the issues that they are facing as a result of the UK's exit from the EU. All 11 councils provided written and oral evidence. The Committee's report presents that evidence. It does not make recommendations or come to any conclusions. It simply provides an opportunity for debate and to highlight the difficulties being faced by councils. All evidence received was set against the backdrop of COVID. Councils' readiness for the post-transition period has been hugely affected by the pandemic, with a number referring to the cocktail of COVID-19 and Brexit as the perfect storm. Brexit presents a wide range of fundamental challenges for local government, collectively as a sector and individually as authorities. The addition of COVID-19 to the mix has, in simple terms, made matters worse.

Committee members were presented with a detailed picture of the issues being faced by councils, particularly as a result of the lack of clarity on agri-food, fisheries, customs checks, tariff levels and cross-border arrangements. The issue of the lack of clarity on funding was raised, and not just on the funding needed to allow council officers to carry out new duties but on EU funding for the delivery of projects and programmes.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGrath: It is very early on, but, yes, go ahead.

Mr Stalford: I appreciate the Member's giving way. Does he acknowledge that, for 90% of the time that it was a member of European Union and its predecessor organisations, the United Kingdom was a net contributor to the funds of the European Union?

Mr McGrath: I thank the Member for his intervention. This is the Committee part of my contribution. I am sure that

such interventions will have more relevance when I get on to my personal remarks later.

Ms Anderson: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGrath: For balance, yes.

Ms Anderson: Does the Member not agree that the British Government rebate ensured that we in the North were net beneficiaries of the EU and that the constituency that we should care about is our own?

Mr McGrath: The ping-pong begins, and, I am sure, it will continue for the rest of the debate. I will take no more interventions, as I know that I will not get any extra speaking time.

One of the main messages from councils was that the protocol needs to be implemented in a way that recognises our unique circumstances, in particular the reliance of our economic model on fast and efficient supply chains within the UK and the island of Ireland. On Tuesday past, we got some clarification on the operation of the protocol. We got agreement in principle on entry points, specifically for checks on animals, plants and derived foods; on export declarations; on the supply of medicines; and on the supply of some food products to supermarkets. We also got clarification on the application of state aid under the terms of the protocol.

Many of those issues were raised by councils. Clarification has come at the last minute but is to be welcomed. Time pressures and resource issues still remain, however, and uncertainty still exists in some areas. There is no doubt that the agreement in principle delivers significant measures to support GB to NI trade. By the UK Government's own admission, however, they do not deal with each and every instance of a new procedure that the protocol may create.

The lack of a definition of "goods at risk" was highlighted by councils as an area of considerable concern. According to the UK Government, the agreement in principle will mean that goods that can be shown to remain in Northern Ireland and the UK's customs territory will not be subject to tariffs. Tariffs will be charged on only goods destined for the EU or where there is uncertainty over, or genuine risk of, onward movement. The UK Government have also confirmed that there will be no requirement for export declarations for NI traders moving their goods from Northern Ireland to Great Britain. A number of councils told us that businesses are not prepared for the end of the transition period, so, hopefully, the agreement in principle has given them some certainty and gone some way to reducing the panic over huge increases in administrative processes and the introduction of tariffs.

As was pointed out by some councils, the protocol keeps Northern Ireland in the EU single market only for goods and not for services, so service-sector businesses here are still waiting to find out what lies ahead for them and whether a deal will be struck with the EU. Hopefully, they will get some certainty in the not-too-distant future.

9.30 pm

Council areas that border counties in the Republic of Ireland highlight particular challenges, and they fear that they will bear the brunt of Brexit. Cross-border travel and movements between NI and Ireland are extensive and, for many people, a systematic feature of everyday life.

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People make cross-border journeys for a wide variety of reasons, including employment, study, shopping, visiting friends and family, or as tourists. Particular reference was made to the impact of Brexit on farms and businesses that straddle the border, which include waste shipments, cross-border working and commuting, and the dependence on EU migrant workers. I am sure that Members from border areas will elaborate on those concerns.

Funding was identified by 11 councils as a fundamental issue. Following the transition period, the UK will no longer have access to EU structural funds. That is the funding that councils depend heavily on to deliver projects and programmes that bring huge benefits to our communities. In a recent spending review, the Chancellor set out plans for the UK shared prosperity fund, which is designed to replace EU structural funds. He did not commit to fully replacing the funding that we receive from EU sources, and he suggested that funding levels would ramp up over time until they eventually represented full replacement of the EU income, but he did not repeat his commitment for the individual devolved areas. We need certainty on how the fund will operate here. I hope that the Executive will make every effort to get that clarity as soon as possible. A number of councils also had concerns about the lack of clarity on the role that councils will play in the management of funding schemes and highlighted the potential for job losses within their ranks.

I would now like to make a number of points in my capacity as an individual MLA. Many now accept that Brexit is a disaster. Whether it is a border down the Irish Sea, the threat of a border on the island of Ireland, the impact on the Good Friday Agreement, businesses not knowing what will happen next, community groups not knowing what their future will look like or, as we have highlighted, the real impact on councils, it has been, and looks set to be, an unmitigated disaster. Some promised £350 million per week extra for the National Health Service. They argued that we were taking back control. One has to wonder if they knew what they were playing at. In the best of times, departure from the EU would be disastrous and have a significant impact on life here. To be fair, an idiot would see that one coming. However, in the midst of a global pandemic, the impact is increased tenfold. There will be a future relationship with the EU — there has to be — but the shape and tone of that relationship stands unknown, even at this late stage.

I feel sorry for councils across the North. They are having to deal with the uncertainty of Brexit and the added results of COVID placing a hit on their incomes and reserves. They are indeed facing some challenging times. They hear about a shared prosperity fund, but the detail is lacking. They do not know if they will get the finances that they have become used to and whether with a reduction of finances comes a reduction in the services that they can provide. With this reduction in the service that they can deliver to the communities in their area, they are the ones that will be impacted. We still do not know if the shared prosperity fund will be allocated by the Barnett consequential formula or if it will replace what was previously given. The use of the Barnett consequential would be a bad move for us, as we have always benefited from EU funds well above other parts of the UK. Will farmers get access to the single farm payments? Will there be tariffs for our fish producers selling into the EU? I am certainly not a fisherman, but even I know that there

is not much point in having the ability to catch fish if you cannot sell them. However, as long as we were taking back control, that was all that mattered to some.

It is welcome that the Finance Minister has agreed to engage with the council leaders via the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) and the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) to listen intently to the concerns that they have. That will hopefully allow us, in Stormont, to articulate and problem-solve the many issues that they face and that I have highlighted. I am an MLA in South Down, which is now an interface with the EU. It is critical for businesses and groups in my constituency that they get clarity. They need to know what will happen next. The farmers in my constituency and the fishermen at two of the North's harbours need to know what will take place next. Warrenpoint Harbour in my constituency will take on extra importance and workload, but it needs to know what will happen next. The uncertainty is killing it.

As I said at the start, Brexit is bad. It will be disastrous, and no amount of spin will make it any better or more palatable. Some in this place advocated it. You must now be honest with the people, the businesses, the community groups and the councils in Northern Ireland, who will all suffer, and explain to them the virtues of your stance. I wish you well in trying to spin your way out of that one. You have let the people of Northern Ireland down. You have contributed to the creation of problems that will close many businesses and wreak havoc on many lives and communities, all in the midst of a global pandemic and all in the interests of supporting narrow-minded, blinkered English nationalism.

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

Mr McGrath: If it were not so serious, I would call it sad.

Mr Clarke: I have to say that the first seven minutes of the Chairman's remarks were probably quite useful; the last three, however, were quite disappointing. The first number of minutes reflected broadly what some of the councils would have to say.

When we set out on this journey, we did so because we wanted to have a round-table discussion. However, because of conditions, that was not allowed. I have to say with regard to the rant that we have just heard from the Member opposite on his perspective of the issue that the same could be said with regard to some of the councils, depending on where they came from. That is what I feared when we set out on this journey and took evidence from those councils.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Clarke: I will, indeed.

Mr Stalford: I would never want to be one to accuse the Chairman of the Committee of engaging in hyperbole. However, apparently, those of us who advocated Brexit should have had the vision to know that COVID-19 was coming down the line and that it would make the outcome of the referendum worse. I have many talents, but not the gift of such foresight. Even at DUP headquarters, we do not have a crystal ball.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Clarke: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I agree with the point that my good friend has made.

Even after listening to the councils — I interacted with only a few because the pattern was the same — we had questions from Members on the Benches opposite continually barraging the witnesses on funding. However, let us be clear: the funding was never guaranteed if we had stayed in Europe. I am sure that the Member for Foyle will rant again about funding, as she has done here tonight, and put her own spin on it. I will remind her when I am on my feet that there may be different conditions for Northern Ireland, but the UK did it as a bloc, and the UK was a net contributor.

Mr Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Clarke: Yes, go ahead.

Mr Robinson: Will my colleague agree that it was a useful exercise to hear the different views of all the councils, particularly my own Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council?

Mr Clarke: It has not gone unnoticed that, without fail, my colleague would refer to his council. Indeed it was useful to listen to some of the councils. I represent South Antrim. Both councils from my area, Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council and Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, were very balanced. I listened to the representatives of Mid and East Antrim, who actually have a port in their council area. They were very proactive. They said that they have good relationships and are working daily to get clarity on those issues.

Broadly speaking, with regard to the motion and the report, no one could disagree that clarity would be useful. However, the chief executive of Mid and East Antrim struck the best tone of them all, because her approach is not the negative doom and gloom of the Committee Chairman. Hers is the pragmatic view that Brexit has happened and that we have to get on with it and do what is best for Northern Ireland.

Ms Sheerin: Will the Member give way?

Mr Clarke: I will indeed.

Ms Sheerin: When the Member refers to the remarks that were made by the chief executive of Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, will he accept that she said that she did have a good relationship with the British Government and had sent correspondence to Michael Gove, and that she then conceded that it had not been listened to? The council did not want border infrastructure at Larne, and that has now happened.

Mr Clarke: Yes: the chief executive might have said that. What I am saying is that she has a good working relationship and is getting the clarity and answers that she requires. Both she and the mayor of the borough said that at our meeting.

Therefore, unlike the Member opposite, I do not see this as a disaster. If I want to feel sorry for anyone, it is the Chairperson of the Committee for his representation of all this. The councils have come at it with a much better approach.

Indeed, I spoke to a senior officer of another council who said that she was disappointed with the Committee's approach on that day. They had put an awful lot of

preparation into it, but they thought that the Committee's focus was entirely wrong, particularly Martina Anderson's continual barraging of the councils on the funding issue. The councils were very clear, like most of us on these Benches, that the funding window that we have is for a limited time. It is not guaranteed. If we had stayed in Europe —.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to my friend for giving way. I worked for Mr Allister when he was a Member of the European Parliament between 2004 and 2007.

As far back as 2004, the direction of funding in Europe was moving away from western Europe towards eastern Europe. Everyone could recognise that the funds coming to this part of the United Kingdom and to countries in the west of Europe as a whole were of a diminishing value.

Mr Clarke: The Member for Foyle is leaving Europe kicking and screaming. That kicking and screaming about Brexit still continues every week, but the fact is that we are leaving. We are not going back, Martina. We are leaving on 1 January, and it will be a new dawn for Northern Ireland.

Mr Sheehan: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak here tonight. It was a very useful exercise to bring councils to the Committee. The evidence that we received was quite repetitive insofar as many councils raised the same themes and issues. The message from most councils to the Executive Office Committee was crystal clear. Most are alarmed at the lack of preparation and communication as we approach the cliff edge on 31 December and the end of the transition period.

Last week brought some clarity about the protocol, but even that announcement contained further uncertainty. The supply of medicines has been put on the long finger for a year, chilled meats for six months and SPS checks for three months. In reality, all that has been achieved is that the blockage has been pushed further down the pipe. As a result, many businesses will continue to face uncertainty and anxiety. New schemes for trading and movement of goods are being introduced without businesses getting clarity about new rules, IT systems and so on. There is a trader assistance scheme, a UK trader scheme and a movement assistance scheme, which all deal with different aspects of movement. Surely throwing all those schemes at traders so late in the year will cause only more confusion.

In this whole debate, those in favour of Brexit often blame the EU for whatever problems arise. We hear that regularly, even in the midst of the ongoing negotiations. One constant theme that most of the councils brought up concerned the lack of preparedness for Brexit at the end of the transition period. That cannot be blamed on the EU. The EU is not responsible for what is happening here at the minute. The only thing that can be blamed is Brexit. The British Government —.

Mr McGrath: Will the Member give way?

Mr Sheehan: Sure.

Mr McGrath: The Member makes a point about the lack of clarity and the lack of preparedness. Does he agree that it is farcical that a council in Northern Ireland has employed staff, and, at this stage, it does not know where the funding will come from to pay for those staff and what work they will have to do? The council knows that it needs the bodies, but it does not know what they will be doing. If

that funding does not come through, the additional money to pay for those staff will have to come from the ratepayer, which means that the public purse will be hit once again.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Sheehan: I thank the Member for that intervention. I could not agree more. It is just another example of the type of chaos that we are facing as a result of this calamitous Brexit exercise.

As I was saying, those issues cannot be blamed on the EU. The British Government and the Department for the Economy have responsibility for preparing businesses for the changes that are coming, and they have failed miserably thus far.

Councils in border counties, where a lot of trade is carried on with the South, face particular difficulties. Trade in the Newry, Mourne and Down District Council area, for example, faces great uncertainty. Services trade amounted to over £3 billion, yet we know that services are not covered by the protocol. Service providers in border areas are at the mercy of whatever divergence may happen from next year onwards. The council argued that the South is an important stepping stone into other global markets. It stated:

"It is therefore important that there are no bureaucratic or financial barriers to the market in the South of Ireland."

That exemplifies the difficulties faced by businesses, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises here in the North of Ireland.

9.45 pm

I want to move on to the shared prosperity fund, which the Chairperson mentioned earlier. Councils were almost unanimous in saying that they had no information about that fund except that it is supposed to replace the funding that comes from the EU. However, the shared prosperity fund will not become operational until 2022, which will result in a loss of £77 million of spending power in the meantime. Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council flagged the risk to jobs and the loss of skills that there will be if funding for various projects ceases until 2022, because people will go looking for other employment and those skills will be lost.

The picture that the report paints for us is very disturbing. Business preparedness in the North is less than half what it is in the South. Cross-border supply chains and labour markets are under threat, and uncertainty and anxiety are the order of the day.

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

Mr Sheehan: I beg your pardon.

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

Mr Sheehan: Certainly, yes.

Creating chaos and confusion throughout this process has been a particular feature of the British Government. Our response to the report should be a realistic and

cooperative effort to mitigate the destructive effect that Brexit and its surrounding uncertainty —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member's time is up.

Mr Sheehan: — may have on council services and the local economy.

Ms Armstrong: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important issue. I thank the Committee staff and the representatives of the local councils who contributed to the report and thank the Committee itself. I do not sit on the Committee, but I sit on the Committee for Communities, and we look regularly at the impacts on councils, which is why I wanted to contribute this evening.

The report will help to inform us of the reality that faces our councils as a result of Brexit. I think that we can all agree at this point, whether you are a Brexiteer or a Remainer, that Brexit is a mess. No one is getting what they want, and the outcome will leave us worse off and more peripheral with fewer rights and less influence.

Things were already looking tough for our councils, and then bang: COVID came along in 2020. From dealing with SOLACE and NILGA through the Committee for Communities, I say that the outlook for our councils is extremely severe. The pandemic has put financial pressures on them that they did not expect, and, added to the Brexit problems, we are looking at a catastrophe. It will not just be our councils that pay for that; it will be our ratepayers.

We can take a bit of comfort from the fact that the UK and the EU are still talking. At least they appear to have worked out some of the details with the protocol, for instance, with the grace period for supermarkets that we have heard about, and thankfully the law-breaking elements of the Internal Market Bill were dropped.

The report highlights a plethora of issues with Brexit and what it brings to local government. My time is short, so I will just hit the themes. For instance, Northern Ireland's agri-food sector is a credit to us, but ensuring that we have access to the same markets and compliance will be a challenge. Much of that will fall to our local government and environmental health departments. One particular concern relates to food labelling and whether Northern Ireland producers can meet the requirements post the transition period. All of that needs to be ironed out, and what we need for that are good local partners in local government.

The transition period is definitely coming to an end on 1 January. That will hit businesses like a sledgehammer, and we need our local government to be there to provide the support. Will they be able to cope with that? I do not know. I asked the First Minister earlier this week about the common framework and how much businesses knew about it. Our councils do not even know about how to give local businesses information.

Our councils are in financial difficulty. On the Committee for Communities, we are extremely concerned about the impact that COVID has had on our councils and their ability to deliver economic regeneration and employer support and to help our community to come back from COVID. If they are to build back better, we need to consider how our councils can work as an effective partner with this Government. On top of that, the Brexit impact is hitting

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them, and they have made their concerns very clear. As others mentioned, they are worried about funding. The shared prosperity fund is extremely concerning. Why, in Northern Ireland, do we have no details about it? Are we the poor relative who will get the scraps off the table? Worse still, it might not replace the funding that our councils will lose out on. The complexity of reams of red tape and costs will harm businesses, so we need our councils to support them. It will cost jobs. We need light-touch regulation and clear information campaigns with answers. We need goodwill between the EU and the UK to iron out any issues. It is also vital that good communication exists between the Executive and councils to help to get messages out and engage on the problems that may arise.

The protocol is not perfect. It is the result of the UK seeking the hardest Brexit possible, which brings friction. The backstop was a much better situation. I think that some regret the decision not to accept the backstop and the outcome of decision. For the good of our councils, this place and citizens across Northern Ireland, we need stronger councils. We need to support them more and fund them better in our next Budget period. I am very grateful to the councils that fed into the report. They provided confirmation of what we were all concerned about.

Ards and North Down Borough Council, which covers part of my constituency, highlighted the uncertainty about the fishing industry. I am grateful for today's decision that Northern Ireland vessels can land fish at Northern Ireland ports —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask the Member to draw her remarks to a close.

Ms Armstrong: — without EU sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) checks. At least that is one piece of clarity, but we need to provide an awful lot more. We need to build bridges, not borders.

Mr Stalford: There is an irony in this: we will all tear the back out of each other over Brexit, but we will all vote to pass the motion anyway. I suppose that that is just the nature of what the debate has become. At this time of feasting, it is not surprising to be served up the latest course of misery by the Chairman of the Committee, although I do not think that we will choose to swallow it on this occasion.

Speaking as a former councillor and someone who served for 11 years on Belfast City Council, I very much appreciate the effort and time that the various councils put in to presenting evidence to our Committee. It was welcome participation from the 11 councils, and they made useful contributions. I absolutely agree with some of the themes raised by Members thus far. Communication has been poor. People need to be better informed of the approaches that not only the devolved Government here at Stormont but the national Government at Westminster intend to take. Communication could be improved.

As mentioned by the Member who spoke previously, one of the areas that the Committee has been examining is that of common frameworks. It could be a new role for the British-Irish Council (BIC) to oversee the implementation of common frameworks and how they operate within these islands. Up to now, the British-Irish Council has not really had a very significant role. Maybe the Government here could take that forward. BIC incorporates not only the four UK nations but the Crown dependencies, the Isle of Man

and, obviously, the Government of the Republic of Ireland. Everyone in these islands is embraced under the aegis of the British-Irish Council, and the common frameworks will be the practical way in which the outworkings of this situation are applied. As a Committee, we might want to investigate that.

I acknowledge and accept the concerns that have been put on record in relation to funding issues. As I said in my intervention, I worked for three years for a Member of the European Parliament. One of the areas that I worked in was helping groups to access funds, including by helping them to fill in funding applications to get those funds drawn down.

Mr Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stalford: Certainly.

Mr Clarke: The Member makes an interesting point about drawing down funding. Does he agree that it would be useful to see how the labour expended doing that is converted into money that comes to Northern Ireland?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Stalford: Thank you, sir.

Yes, I absolutely agree with that. In my experience, one of the problems that those groups always identified was the three-year funding cycle. It takes a year to get a project up and running. It then takes a year to have the time to deliver the project. The next year is spent trying to source the funding to keep the project going. That was a consistent problem with programmes that were being delivered by the European Union.

Another problem was that funding was diminishing. There is no point in denying that. With new member states joining the European Union that were in greater need of investment than we were, the money was inevitably moving from the west of Europe to the east, and particularly to the former Soviet bloc and Warsaw Pact countries. Let us not convince ourselves that the decision to leave the European Union will reduce us to beggary, because that is simply not true.

I would also welcome further details of and more information on the shared prosperity fund. It is important that the Government at Westminster provide that information, because it is essential that groups know how to apply for funding, how to access it and what the conditions will be for spending it. Again, I am speaking from experience, but it would be good if our community groups were not laden with the burden of regulation and monitoring that was imposed on many of them in order to receive European Union funding. If people are engaged in community work and practice, they should be doing that and not constantly filling in monitoring forms. If we can deliver the funds directly and more speedily to bring more benefit to local communities, that will be an improvement on the present situation. I hope that everyone will accept that.

Mr McGrath: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stalford: Ten seconds.

Mr McGrath: The Member speaks about the three-year funding cycle, but many groups in Northern Ireland have an annual funding cycle, which comes from the Executive

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and not from Europe. Some of our local authorities ask for more monitoring forms to be filled in.

Mr Stalford: I suggest that the Member take that up with his party's Minister in the Executive. I am sure that she will be able to raise the issue for him. If you are going to stand up and criticise the Executive, at least acknowledge the fact that you are in it.

When it comes to worries about freedom of movement of people, I will say that the common travel area existed before either the Republic of Ireland or the United Kingdom was a member state of the European Union —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Stalford: — and I have every confidence that that will continue into the future, unless the belligerence of the EU prevents it.

Ms Anderson: As we listened to the 11 councils, some Executive Office Committee members clearly understood that EU laws, policies and functions touch on almost every aspect of life in the North. It is bad enough that councils have to deal with the COVID pandemic, but the Brexit transition and the post-transition outcome, whatever the shape of that is in 16 days' time, have resulted in an intensification of the significant financial pressures that councils are under.

The councils that represent the majority of people who voted to remain in the EU clearly understand the disaster of Brexit. For instance, in my own city of Derry and in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area, 78% of people voted Remain, because they knew that there was no good Brexit. They clearly understood that and did not want to see a hardening of the border in Ireland. From listening to the representatives of those councils that represent areas in which a majority of people voted Leave, it was clear that the penny was starting to drop. The councils that represent farmers and rural dwellers now know that Brexit will rob their pockets and wallets and will have an adverse impact on their livelihoods. Many of them were promised by Brexiteers that the British Government would foot the Brexit bill. They were promised that they would not lose EU funding, because the British Government would replace it. In fact, they were told that there were going to be great benefits from leaving the EU.

Let us see how all of that is going. There is a harder border down the Irish Sea. Blood-red lines, which were to guarantee regulatory alignment, were ignored. Instead, there has been clearly defined regulatory divergence.

On top of that, officials from the Department of Finance informed the Executive Office Committee that farmers will see a reduction of £34 million from what they had been receiving in EU funds over the next three years. Therefore, the promise of EU funding being replaced by the British Government was simply not true.

10.00 pm

There is more. The Committee was informed that the North is a net beneficiary of EU funding and gains €3.6 billion every few years. Out of that sum, €750 million is received from EU structural funds. Brexiteers told councils, groups and organisations that the British Government would replace that funding. However, the British Government announced a fund of only £220 million for Britain and here,

which will result in a pittance of an allocation compared with what we received by being a member of the EU.

The North will not be leaving the EU on the same basis as Britain. There will be divergence on SPS checks, as the North will be aligned with the EU, not with Britain. Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council and Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council raised issues about agri-food and labelling. Businesses will have to start printing labels bearing the identification marks of the North — another diversion from Britain — in order to ensure that goods that are sold here in the North continue to follow EU rules, not Britain's rules. Councils also know that agri-food products moving from the North to Britain for onward travel to the EU will, in some cases, need to be accompanied by additional supporting health documents. Agri-food products that are subject to border control posts and checks, which Minister Poots is building, will have to enter the North via designated points of entry, such as Warrenpoint, Larne and Belfast. Councils highlighted the impact of delays at ports. They are working up contingency plans because of the disruption to their supply chain. Therefore, the South of Ireland has become a more attractive alternative supply chain route.

Mid and East Antrim Borough Council is concerned about the free flow of medicines to pharmaceutical companies here, which are very reliant on just-in-time deliveries. Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council is concerned about the transfer of waste shipments entering the EU —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask the Member to draw her remarks to a close.

Ms Anderson: — and is looking to the South of Ireland for alternative routes. Brexit is, without doubt, an unmitigated disaster, and all who advocated it should hang their heads in shame.

Ms Sheerin: Brexit is a strange phenomenon in that it has not even happened yet but, as it has been talked about so much, it already feels like a historical event. We have discussed the pros and cons in the Chamber to the point where any of us could predict what other Members are likely to say on the issue. For instance, I know that the Members across the Benches are bored talking about it. They campaigned for it, but they do not want to defend it.

The engagement with the 11 councils was interesting in that the ideological positions, Brexiteering and showboating that we have become used to and been subjected to until this point were largely abandoned. We had councillors and chief executives forgetting about political point-scoring and, instead, giving us honest and frank accounts of the real, practical implications of Brexit for the people they serve and the issues that they need resolution to now. As well as that, every meeting was different. The specific interests of every region came to the fore, depending on the demographics and geography of the area and how close they were to the border. All of the things that are a factor in how much Brexit is going to impact you, and who exactly within your constituency is going to be impacted, became evident in these sessions.

What remained the same in all meetings — you could call them consistent themes — were the feelings of frustration, the need for information, the worry, the uncertainty, the various attempts to make preparations with one eye closed and the confusion about the consequences of all of this for us. The only consistent thing about Brexit has been its

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inconsistency. That was seen clearly even in the meetings with councils that are considered to be pro-Brexit. The Member across the Floor referred to the remarks of the chief executive of the Mid and East Antrim Borough Council. She told us that they had sent correspondence to Michael Gove and that they felt listened to by the British Government. However, almost in the same breath, she told us that one of their main priorities was maintaining the status quo at the port of Larne. Then she conceded that there is going to be border infrastructure here, which is not consistent with what the UK had committed to or what she wanted. It is obvious that, whilst they sent correspondence, that correspondence has been one-way.

It will not surprise Members that I want to focus on my constituency of Mid Ulster. With respect to funding, I must declare an interest: I have sat as a social partner on the Mid Ulster local action group (LAG) board for the distribution of rural development programme (RDP) funding since 2014. I know first-hand that the question of future funding, and the uncertainty about whether the current scheme would be able to conclude, is a massive worry for us. It is something that comes up every month at our meetings. This programme delivered £10 million to local groups in our district over six years, including community halls, play parks, small rural businesses and GAA clubs. Those are facilities at the heart of their communities, providing employment and services to local people.

The presentation from Mid Ulster District Council addressed the concerns about the UK's so-called replacement, the shared prosperity fund, which is something on which we do not have the detail that we would like.

Mid Ulster is a border council area, and a no-deal scenario poses significant issues for the cross-border management of waste. That may not be very glamorous, but it has a real impact on people's daily lives.

Another issue mentioned by Mid Ulster council was our fishing industry at Lough Neagh. That community has been hit very hard in 2020 and still has not been awarded the COVID-19 relief package promised by the AERA Minister in the summer of this year. Some 80% of the eels caught at Lough Neagh are exported to Holland and Germany, so the importance of the EU market does not need to be explained. Moreover, Lough Neagh eels have a protected geographical indication (PGI) status, which is an EU indicator that needs to be maintained in order to ensure the continued import of glass eels to complement the current stock.

Mid Ulster council also referred to the worries of migrant workers in the area who, at the minute, are unsure of their future. We see issues with the time frame of the EU settlement scheme. Insufficient notice has been given by the British Government of its closure in June.

Fermanagh and Omagh District Council area, which relies on the agriculture industry, focused on the worries experienced by the farming community. I talked at length about this before in the Chamber. I come from a farming family and understand farmers' worries about the single farm payment and whether that funding will be supported by the British Government.

I finish by saying that, while the opportunity to hear from local councils was welcome and the engagements were

useful, an awful lot of it seems futile, in that our local interests and the things that we have expressed have not been listened to by the British Government.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member should bring her remarks to a close.

Ms Sheerin: All this is unnecessary and has been brought about by people who have shown that they do not care about the North of Ireland.

Mr O'Toole: We are days, and, in a sense, hours, away from the end of the Brexit transition period.

It is worth saying first of all, as I did earlier this week, that when we look at some of what we are facing into with the COVID-19 pandemic, it remains deeply unforgivable that the UK Government refused to extend the transition period in the midst of this unprecedented global health pandemic. I invite Members to take a step back and think about the transition period not being extended, in the midst of some of the scenes that we are seeing. It is really unforgivable and unconscionable. It should have happened. The Assembly voted to ask for an extension, but it was not granted.

There is a lot that I could say about Brexit, the Assembly and what has been inflicted on us. Brexit is a lot of the reason why I am here. Four and half years ago, before the Brexit referendum, when I was still a UK civil servant — it was a previous life; it feels like a long time ago — I was getting the District line tube home from my job. An old copy of the 'Metro' newspaper lay on the seat next to me. I picked it up, because it was quite strange looking. There was a wraparound advertisement on it. If you looked closely at the small print, you could read that that advertisement was paid for by the Democratic Unionist Party, despite the fact that no one on that tube train could vote for them, unless they lived in Northern Ireland but happened to be visiting London.

I say that not to score petty political points but to draw attention to the extraordinary situation that we face as a society and as an economy, where we have been placed in extraordinary danger and risk. I am afraid that that has happened — I do not mean to be too pointed as we approach the festive season — in large part because of the actions of one of the bigger political parties in the Chamber, which worked with the Leave campaign to deliver the result and, once it was delivered, to insist on the hardest possible interpretation of that result. That meant that the UK was bound to leave the ambit of the European single market and customs union and that, sadly, checks would have to happen somewhere, whatever your political or constitutional view about checks on the Irish land border, which, obviously, I am not in favour of. Even if I was indifferent to that, it would be logistically nearly impossible to enforce a customs and regulatory border on the island of Ireland.

We have been placed in this tragic and difficult situation by the actions of successive UK Governments, for whom, I am ashamed to say, I worked at times. We are where we are now. We are hours away from the end of the transition period. We have some reassurance about the application of the protocol, a protocol that exists only because of the actions of the UK Government and those who enabled them over the past four years. We have some mitigations, which are welcome. I welcome the fact that we have some clarity on the movement of goods between Britain and

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Northern Ireland and that we have positive signs that we can make some of the protocol provisions work for our economy. I hope that everyone in the Assembly, from whatever constitutional perspective or whatever opinion on Brexit, seeks to make those arrangements work.

However we make the arrangements work, the sad truth is that Brexit will damage our economy. It will damage not only our economy in Northern Ireland but economies across all parts of these islands — the UK and Ireland. I say it as an Irish nationalist, but I do not want to see —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): May I encourage the Member to mention the report that is being debated?

Mr O'Toole: I will, certainly, Mr Deputy Speaker. The report mentions that many councils drew attention to the profound difficulties created by Brexit. Since you have asked me to mention what the councils said, I will come back to some of the issues that were listed in previous contributions: waste management, migration, fisheries and disruption to cross-border trade. An innumerable list of difficulties has been created, unfortunately, by this pointless —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): May I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close?

Mr O'Toole: — damaging project, which has done absolutely nothing for people here, in Britain or in any part of Europe. A grotesque tragedy has been inflicted on people here, and those who are responsible for inflicting it should — with respect to the festive season — hang their heads in shame. I am afraid that they will not.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Chair, the Committee and the staff of the Executive Office Committee for this useful report. Our councils are at the fore of working with communities and businesses in local areas, and it is really important to hear from them about the impact of Brexit as we come to the end of the transition period. Many of the themes highlighted in the report will be familiar to us all: loss of funding, the lack of readiness of businesses, the physical infrastructure that is necessary and the impact of the ongoing lack of clarity on future trading arrangements.

The Joint Committee agreement last week on aspects of the protocol is to be welcomed. Of course, like the rest of the negotiation, it has taken a long time to get to a stage at which there is any clarity. What has now been agreed to is what the British Government signed up to in the withdrawal agreement last year, so getting to the point of clarity only now is difficult to justify. Detail is needed on what has been agreed.

It is also clear that, while the grace periods for qualifying goods and SPS checks offer some short-term relief, there is now a need to use the time to ensure that what comes afterwards is workable, as much as is possible, for businesses. That will require real and meaningful engagement by the British Government with businesses here and with the Executive to reach a definition of qualifying traders and goods. It will be important that the so-called long-term regime referenced in the Command Paper recognises our highly integrated supply chains, particularly in the agri-food sector.

The Committee report highlights the concerns of councils about both those issues. Schemes will be put in place, including the trader support scheme. The operation of that

scheme will be important to ensure that businesses can cope once the grace periods end.

The British Government and the Department for the Economy need to ensure good communication with businesses to ensure that, once arrangements are agreed, they can be operationalised by businesses. There is much to do in that regard given the very poor levels of preparedness among businesses currently, which is, in part, as the Chair of the Executive Office Committee said, due to the lack of bandwidth that businesses have this year due to COVID.

10.15 pm

There are those in the Chamber who do not agree with the protocol, and, as Kellie Armstrong and Matthew O'Toole referenced, it is an imperfect, least-worst option to mitigate the worst impacts, but it is the reality, and it needs to be made to work. I am sure that the majority of us recognise that it will work best in the context of a comprehensive free trade agreement between Britain and the EU, so it is vital that it comes to a speedy and positive conclusion in a very short while. It is quite ridiculous that, 16 days out from having a new trading reality, businesses and communities here do not yet know what it will be.

Brexit has been impacting on us for the last four years. Businesses have lost out on or put off investment opportunities. Researchers here have faced a chill effect. Citizens from other EU states who lived and worked here and were part of our communities have made the decision to leave due to uncertainty. However, the true impact will only be felt after January, which is why it is vital that all efforts are put in now to achieve an agreement on a free trade arrangement in the next couple of weeks.

The loss of EU funding is also highlighted in the report. Lots of concerns have been raised with me, with the Economy Committee and, I am sure, with all Members about the impact of the loss of funding and the lack of clarity on the shared prosperity fund. Even with what was published on the shared prosperity fund in the spending review a couple of weeks ago, there is still a lot to be desired in terms of what will be available and how it will be administered, and I agree with the sentiments in the report that there needs to be close cooperation with councils and other organisations here on the shared prosperity fund. However, it remains deeply concerning — it should be concerning for everyone in the Chamber — that the British Government have sought to retain the financial powers clauses in the Internal Market Bill and give themselves the power to allocate funding over the head of the Assembly and the Executive.

Issues impacting on cross-border businesses and workers have also been highlighted in the report, and, recently, there has been significant criticism by groups here of the lack of engagement by the British Government on the frontier worker permit scheme. That permit scheme has now opened, and we really need to see further engagement and information disseminated about it.

I have touched on only a small number of issues highlighted in the report, but it is a very useful overview of the issues. The Executive Office Committee has done an important piece of work in compiling this report and giving us the opportunity to discuss it in the Chamber this evening at this really important time, just a fortnight away

from the end of the transition period. There are some things that need to be taken for action from the report. For example, the communication between the Executive —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask the Member to draw her remarks to a close.

Dr Archibald: — and councils is one area. We all need to recognise — I suppose that we all do recognise it — that the lack of overall clarity has impacted on the extent of communication, but, going forward, we really need to see a joined-up and collaborative approach.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call junior Minister Gordon Lyons to respond to the debate. You have up to 15 minutes, should you wish to use them.

Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I recognise the lateness of the hour and also recognise that that is a time limit rather than a target, and I will try my best to make sure that I do not go anywhere near it.

It is fitting that, at the end of the year, we finish off in this place with a debate on Brexit, though I do not think that we have heard any change of position. I do not think that anything has been said that has not been said before on these issues. Scripture tells us that there is nothing new under the sun, and we have certainly been reminded of that tonight.

However, I would like to thank the Executive Office Committee for its work on this report and, more generally, its work on EU exit matters. When Minister Kearney and I have come before the Committee, there have always been lots of very incisive questions. This is an issue that concerns many, and I thank the Committee for the work that it has done. I also thank councils right across Northern Ireland for the work that they have been involved in. I am well aware, as other Members will be, of the incredibly difficult time that it has been over the last nine or 10 months as a result of COVID and the pressures that that has put on councils. I thank them for their work, for everything that they continue to do and for giving their time to respond to the Committee report.

Councils raised a number of issues in their submissions. During the previous debate in the Chamber, which was on the Bill, I was able to take some time to read them. A great variety of issues was raised, and there are answers to some of those. Issues were raised around travel, tourism, EU nationals and frontier workers and the protocol, some of which we have had clarity on for quite some time and some of which we are now getting a bit more clarity on. However, I completely understand that more is needed.

The motion calls on us to note the evidence and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to push the Government so that clarity can be provided for councils and for all of us. We in the Executive Office have constantly been calling for that. We have some of that clarity, as I said, but, of course, there is more to do. There remain a significant number of areas where definitive guidance is not yet available, but we are committed to engaging with councils to ensure that they are able to continue to provide services to the households and businesses in their area.

Let me take this opportunity to thank councils for the role that they have played in operational readiness planning. They play a vital role in delivering key services that cut

across all Northern Ireland Executive Departments. For that reason, they have been integrated into our operational readiness planning structures and working closely with our Departments. Again, I recognise the impact that the pandemic has had on their ability to prepare.

Mr O'Toole: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. He mentioned the impact of the pandemic. Earlier this year, when we moved a motion calling for an extension to the transition period, the DUP did not support it. Does he now think that, in light of what has happened since and the extreme difficulties that we face, including tonight, the transition period should have been extended after all?

Mr Lyons: I have already answered that question at the Committee, and I am happy to answer it again. No, I do not think that it should have been extended. The constant kicking of the can down the road would have caused more uncertainty for businesses and councils. I know that he does not share that view, but he asked me for my party view, and I think that that explains it for him.

Councils raised issues in relation to cross-border workers. Although the responsibility for frontier workers and EU settled status lies with the UK Government, the Executive have kept a watching brief on these issues. The Citizens' Rights (Frontier Workers) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020 will come into operation on 1 January, and they provide that EU nationals who, by 31 December of this year, are working or self-employed in the United Kingdom but living elsewhere will be able to continue to work here in the UK for as long as they remain a frontier worker.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Earlier, the phrase that people "should hang their heads in shame" was used. As far back as 2017, the stated position of the UK Government was that any EU citizen residing in the UK would have the absolute freedom to remain in the UK. That statement was made by Theresa May in 2017. Does the Minister agree with me that what is shameful is frightening people who have come here, made their home here and are making a very positive and valuable contribution to society here?

Mr Lyons: I want to make it very clear once more to people who have come and made their home here that they are welcome here. I agree with the Member that it is absolutely disgraceful that, when that position has been made clear for so long, there are still those in our society who want to imply that they are not welcome or that they will have to leave their home, which is here. I hope that we can give some reassurance to EU nationals living in Northern Ireland that they, of course, can continue to live here.

A number of councils expressed concern about their ability to move waste across the border for processing. DAERA, as the Department responsible for waste, has provided assurance that cross-border movements of waste will continue without interruption on 1 January 2021 and that businesses can continue to move waste under the present processes without any changes being required. Some issues were mentioned in relation to the uncertainty about specific transport requirements for the cross-border carriage of waste products.

Transport remains challenging, but it is hoped that some of the transport issues may be resolved if there is a transport agreement as part of a wide-ranging agreement on the future relationship. If, however, that does not transpire, alternative arrangements, including potential bilateral

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agreements, can be negotiated to secure our essential interests. There is a lot of work going on on operational readiness, and plans are being put in place to ensure the continuity of supply of critical goods, such as medicines, to our citizens. We are liaising with HMG to ensure that our needs are taken into account in the UK Government's wider contingency plans for the movement of critical goods from the EU to the UK.

Business preparedness is another issue that was raised, and we have been consistently engaging with businesses on the steps that they should now take. That guidance and engagement can cover only the arrangements that are currently known, however. Of course, I recognise that the continued uncertainty around the future relationship is an issue. I think that we are united in the House about making sure that we get that free trade agreement. I hope that the will is there to do that.

We also have the Trader Support Service that is now in place, and it is important that that service be tried and tested before the end of the transition period in order to ensure its reliability and to satisfy business confidence. Again, that is something that we have been highlighting to the Government.

International trade will continue, and it is important to our economy. I understand that Invest NI and InterTradeIreland have met individual councils to provide guidance and support on a wide range of issues, including customs, goods, trade, tariffs and tax.

There are also issues around data adequacy arrangements. That is something else that we are raising with the Government. Of course, I hope that Members can see the common theme coming through of the issues that the councils raised with the Committee being issues that are raised with us elsewhere. We are seeking that clarity and assurance, and we will continue to do that. In all our engagements on the negotiations themselves, we have continually stressed that every effort should be made to reach a future relationship agreement with the EU that reflects the social, economic and environmental interests of our citizens and businesses.

I assure the Committee, the Assembly and local government that the Executive have highlighted and will continue to highlight the impact of not having the outstanding clarity that is needed for our authorities, businesses and citizens. The Executive will urge the UK Government to provide that clarity so that we can get the outcome that we all desire.

In closing, my party has often said that Brexit brings with it opportunities. I know that that is not a view that is shared in the Executive Office or in the Assembly more widely. As we get to the end of this year and the end of the transition period, however, and as we get, I hope, to the end of the nightmare that has been COVID, I hope that we can all agree that there is an opportunity for us to reflect a little bit on what has gone on over the past number of years. I hope that we can move beyond some of the division. I recognise that there is a huge amount of work still ahead of us. There is a lot of work to do on issues in the protocol to get the answers and the clarity that we are still seeking. There is therefore lots of work that is outstanding, but I hope that we, regardless of our views on Brexit — we have all heard this evening the disagreements that exist across the

Chamber — can commit ourselves to working together in the new year to get the best outcome for our people.

I got involved in politics so that Northern Ireland could be the best place that it could possibly be. I want us to work together to ensure that we maximise what we have in Northern Ireland, including our greatest resource, which is our people, so that we can all legislate here in a way that means that people can live in peace and have prosperity. As we move into next year and the one hundredth anniversary of Northern Ireland — I will be celebrating that, but I recognise that others will not be — I hope that we can look to what comes next so that we can build Northern Ireland into the place that we all want it to be.

10.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker, as we are heading towards Christmas and as this is the last debate of the year, I want to take a little bit of time to thank you and the other Deputy Speakers for the work that you have done.

Mr Stalford: You are welcome. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Lyons: I also thank Mr Stalford for his humility. Importantly, I also thank the staff in the Business Office, and all those who work in the Building, for enabling us to carry on our work in the way that we have. It is important that we are here representing our constituents, and that would not have been possible had it not been for the work of the staff. I thank them.

It is just left for me to wish everybody a Merry Christmas. I hope that everybody has a happy and prosperous 2021 and one that is not as socially distanced as 2020.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I also want to put on record my appreciation to all the staff who are still here at this late hour and who have worked so hard over the last period.

Mr Beattie (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): I will wind it down as quickly as I can. As the last person to speak on the Floor before we break up for Christmas, I am not sure that people want to hear me speaking for too long. I am like the cool-down act. The stars have been in and said all the words, and the people are slowly drifting out of the building while this guy gets up and tries to tell some jokes to keep people interested. I guess that that is just the way that it is going to be.

The most important thing is to thank everybody for their contributions to this really important debate that gave councils a voice in the Assembly that they do not always get. The most important thing is the hard work that is being done by our councils at this time in what are really difficult circumstances. I thank the Ministers as well for coming here, and certainly the junior Minister for his contribution to the debate. It is 22:30 hours, 10.30 pm, and not the 2.00 am that I had to do on the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill. If I was allowed to talk for longer, I might just keep you here longer, but I am not.

It was interesting that, as soon as the Chair got up and started speaking, five words in he was bombarded by Christopher Stalford with, "The UK are net contributors", and Martina Anderson batting back with, "Yes, but what about the rebate?". That typified the point that we all have views on Brexit. We all had a position when this whole thing started, but we have moved on. Even look at this

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evidence that we took from the councils: they gave us that evidence not even knowing about the protocol that was coming in, and even that has moved on. There is no harm whatsoever in batting backwards and forwards and having a strong position on something.

Colin gave his brief, and he gave a very good summation as far as the Committee was concerned. In his personal contribution, he said that it was an absolute disaster — Brexit was a disaster. If his name was Donald Trump and it was a tweet, there might be a wee thing underneath it saying that it was a contested view and that some people do not think that it is a disaster. Some people genuinely do not, and we have to accept that. There are difficulties there, and you cannot not argue the difficulties.

Trevor Clarke talked about the actual engagement with the councils. It was incredibly important that we spoke to them and got their points of view. They were very open and candid, and some Members talked about that. They did mention funding issues, and there are funding issues. That came up time and again. Trevor focused on something that was not raised an awful lot, which is that some councils are working really hard to get the best out of it and to get opportunities. There will be opportunities. Even in the worst places in the world — I have been in a few of them — trust me, there are opportunities to be had. Some people here and some councils will be looking for those opportunities, so Trevor was right to raise them.

Pat Sheehan talked about how important it was to talk to the councils. It was an important exercise, and he is absolutely right that the themes and issues were talked about over and over again. It was the same one. It could virtually have been the same council in front of us raising the same issues over and over again. He focused on the hard work of some councils that do not know what is going on. We have to take our hats off to that. If we are sitting here not knowing what is going on, you can imagine what it is like in the councils when they do not know what is going on, and the departments in councils that do not know what is going on. Pat was right to raise that. That is another theme.

He raised the issue of lack of preparation and information and how some issues are being kicked down the road. He also mentioned the time frame between the transition and the derogations coming into effect. He is right: there is a can being kicked down the road, but some of it is absolutely necessary, as our councils and businesses need that time to prepare. It is not ideal.

We then had the recurring blame, blame, funding, funding, funding, blame, blame, blame game again. It is not going to help us, but it is right to point out if we think that somebody has done something wrong. The services, the prosperity fund, and the lack of information are all things that Pat raised and which are happening time and time again and were mentioned time and time again.

Kellie Armstrong thanked the Committee for holding the event. You are welcome. She focused on the difficulties that lie ahead for councils, including councils' environmental health services. She talked about the common frameworks and the Northern Ireland fisheries. Interestingly, the councils did not really engage on the Northern Ireland frameworks; it was not something that they spoke up about. Christopher mentioned that when he talked about a role for the British-Irish Council on the

common frameworks. It may not be a perfect idea, but it is worth exploring. They need to have the proper structures, but it is certainly something to be explored to help all these islands and the people in them. Christopher mentioned the poor communication, and, of course, it was poor.

After Christopher Stalford came Martina. They are like a double act. Martina Anderson fought Brexit all over again, focusing on the funding gaps for farmers, fisheries and divergence from some EU rules: we will be following EU rules not British rules. It felt like an EU wet dream at some stages. It is a fair point to put across because some people are looking at this and saying, "Actually, you lot made a real mistake, and I am going to take advantage of that mistake". That is the world that we live in, and I do not have a problem with that. At the end of the day, we are going to have to make it work.

Emma Sheerin said that some of the councils talked about the realities, even some that were pro-Brexit. She talked about the reality of what they have to face. It is absolutely right. My council area was pro-Brexit, but it is having to deal with issues that it could not have foreseen all those years ago when we were going through the referendum. There is consistency of confusion, and we have to remember that. Emma focused on her constituency of Mid Ulster and funding for community facilities and the cross-border management of waste: all the realities that we have to deal with.

Matthew O'Toole talked about the extension to the Brexit transition period. It did not happen, we did not get it. We might say that we should have got it, but we did not. We are where we are, and we have to move forward. Yes, there will be damage to the all-island economy, but we have to mitigate that damage.

Caoimhe Archibald talked about the delays in the protocol. All that time waiting for the protocol and it was sitting there, and we pretty much got what we thought we were going to get with just a few caveats. As far as I am concerned, as an Ulster Unionist, I did not want Brexit, but we have Brexit. I did not want to leave the EU, but we are leaving the EU. I do not want the Northern Ireland protocol. I did not want any borders. I did not want borders North/South, and I did not want borders east-west. I wanted to talk to my friends down in the Irish Republic with no change whatsoever, and I will do, and I will talk to my friends in England, Scotland and Wales with no change whatsoever, but within the psyche, I suppose, that we are looking at a border down the Irish Sea.

People need to understand those fears, because those are the same fears that some people had two years ago that there would be a hard border between North and South. That was a genuine fear, and we addressed that. We cannot now just bat away other people's fears about a border east and west.

Mr O'Toole: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. It is worth putting that on the record and, in a sense, agreeing with what he said. It is really important that, in the context of the protocol, we acknowledge the real fears that people have. Clearly we will have —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I remind the Member that we are running out of time.

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Mr O'Toole: We will have difficulties, but the key thing is that we work together to make that protocol work and to do better going forward, as the Minister said himself.

Mr Beattie: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. In my naivety, I gave way to the Member, and I should not have done. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for your time.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Your time is up.

Mr Beattie: It was a really good debate, and I thank you all very much for that. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the evidence from local councils to the Committee for the Executive Office in its Report on the evidence received from local councils on the impact of the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union (NIA 58/17-22); and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to urge the UK Government to provide clarity on the implementation of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland to allow local councils to prepare for the post-transition period.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I advise Members that, in light of the lateness of the hour, Ms Paula Bradshaw has agreed not to speak on her Adjournment debate tonight on post-primary education provision in South Belfast. The Whips have agreed that the topic can be rescheduled at a future date, and the Minister of Education is content to postpone his response.

Mr Stalford: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. This will be the second time, and it should go on the record that Ms Bradshaw has been very reasonable with the House, but, as a constituency colleague and as it is an issue that affects my constituency, I am very keen that this matter is taken as an Adjournment debate at the most early and convenient opportunity.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): As you well know, that is not a point of order, but you have put it on the record.

Adjourned at 10.42 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Wednesday 30 December 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Executive Committee Business

Trade and Cooperation Agreement between the United Kingdom and the European Union

Mr Speaker: Having been given notice by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister under Standing Order 11, I have summoned the Assembly to meet today for the purpose of debating a motion on the trade and cooperation agreement with the EU.

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

That this Assembly takes note of the trade and cooperation agreement between the United Kingdom and the European Union.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours for the debate — it is actually three hours; we will have to correct that. We have three hours for the debate in total. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. Four amendments have been selected and are published on the Marshalled List. The Assembly should note that all of the amendments are mutually exclusive so, if an amendment is made, the Question will not be put on any subsequent amendments. For example, if amendment No 1 is made, the Question will not be put on amendment Nos 2, 3 or 4. If amendment No 1 is not made, I will put the Question on amendment No 2 and so on. In accordance with the flexibility given to me by the Business Committee, an additional hour has been added to the total time for the debate, which is three hours.

I call the First Minister to open the debate on the motion.

Mrs Foster: As Members will be aware, the United Kingdom and the European Union have reached agreement on the terms of their future relationship. The text is extensive and will require careful legal scrutiny by our policy officials and legal advisers over the coming days and weeks. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, it is not the beginning of the end but, rather, the end of the beginning.

We formally left the European Union on 31 January 2020 but the transition period will formally end at 11:00 pm on 31 December. The European Union (Future Relationship) Bill, which enables the United Kingdom Government to ratify and implement the agreement, was published yesterday and was introduced to Parliament today.

That provides limited time for the Executive and the Assembly to fully scrutinise the implications of the agreement and the proposed Bill. Whilst that is regrettable, the Executive felt it was important that the Assembly had

the opportunity to have its say on what has been agreed, and that is the purpose of today's debate.

Members will be well aware that, for various reasons, all parties in the Executive have held different views on the decision to leave the European Union and on the impacts and potential benefits that that decision will inevitably bring. Whilst acknowledging those differences, it is equally important to recognise that, as with Members in the Chamber, we have been unified in our commitment to secure the best possible outcome for our communities, businesses and citizens. We have been clear in our engagement, both with the United Kingdom Government and the European Union, that that can be best achieved through a comprehensive future relationship agreement that minimises the impact on our society, businesses and the economy and that allows Northern Ireland to prosper.

The UK and the EU have heralded the agreement as an unprecedented zero-tariff, zero-quota deal. However, it is much wider than a trade agreement and covers a wide range of areas from transport to security. However, there will be significant changes for all businesses trading between the United Kingdom and the European Union. For Northern Ireland, there is the added complexity of the interaction between the agreement and the protocol, with the Joint Committee decisions on the protocol only being formally agreed on 17 December. While providing clarity, the lateness of both the agreement and the Joint Committee decisions on the protocol presents an enormous challenge for our businesses and society in preparing for the end of the transition period.

There are many challenges that lie ahead in rebuilding our economy following the events of the past year, and we recognise the different sensitivities across the House and our communities. The challenge and the opportunity is great. We can acknowledge that there are fundamental differences across the parties in the Executive and between Members here today, but the Chamber must fulfil its obligations to challenge and scrutinise the Executive. However, ultimately, our focus must be on working together to support our businesses and communities.

Since January, we have faced significant challenges with both Brexit and in managing the COVID pandemic. Mr Speaker, let me acknowledge the wonderful news this morning about the approval of the Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine. It is a tremendous testament to the world-class strength and brilliance of our United Kingdom scientists and means that our wider vaccination programme will roll out across Northern Ireland next week.

The Executive's priority for Brexit was to ensure that the needs of Northern Ireland were understood and reflected in the future relationship with the EU. That was particularly important given that we are the only region of the UK that will have a land border with the European Union. While it will take time to fully scrutinise the agreement, our focus will be on the degree to which it addresses our concerns and how we influence implementation to fully reflect our unique circumstances.

At this point, I want to focus on a few aspects of the agreement that are particularly important. First, on trade, the agreement is for a zero-tariff, zero-quota deal on qualifying goods which goes beyond any trade deals that the EU has previously agreed with third countries. However, whether a good will qualify will depend on rules of origin and the significant detail that is set out in the annexes to the agreement. That will require detailed scrutiny for the impact on our local industries and economy, and an assessment will also be required on the interaction between what has been agreed on trade and the application of article 5 of the protocol on goods "at risk" moving into the EU single market.

The agreement appears to provide greater recognition of the unique position of transport here. Similarly, on justice and security it is welcome that the deal preserves operational capability on law enforcement and criminal justice, most importantly with the Republic of Ireland. Key measures enabling the continued exchange of criminal records and sharing of DNA, fingerprints, vehicle data and passenger details are crucial to ensure operational effectiveness and public safety. It is also welcome that the agreement provides for effective extradition arrangements and enables bilateral cooperation between member states.

This is a complex agreement and implementation will be a challenge and will need to be carefully monitored to ensure that no unintended consequences occur. We have experienced at first hand the benefit of our involvement in the Withdrawal Agreement Joint Committee (WAJC) and of our officials in the specialised committee, and it will be essential that we are represented in the governance structures of both agreements as we move forward. We will be pressing the United Kingdom Government for that level of access, and I have raised the issue as late as yesterday.

This is the start of a new era in the relationship between the United Kingdom and the EU, and, in Northern Ireland, we will want to maximise the opportunities that the new arrangements will provide for our local economy. We need to be prepared to work together to advance the interests of Northern Ireland in this new relationship, irrespective of our political views.

I want to make a few comments as DUP leader. As part of our consideration of the deal, we are mindful of the fact that Northern Ireland will operate in line with the protocol imposed upon Northern Ireland; a protocol brought about by the skewed view of the interpretation of the Belfast Agreement. We have consistently opposed the protocol and voted against it in the House of Commons. We warned the May and Johnson Governments about treading that path, but, sadly, they have decided to impose it on the people of Northern Ireland.

I note some of the commentary of those unionists and architects of the Belfast Agreement who continue to peddle

untruths about October 2019. The outline deal of 2 October 2019 did not, of course, propose an all-Ireland regulatory zone with Irish Sea checks. The key element of the 2 October deal was the consent protection; divergence from the rest of the United Kingdom on standards and sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) measures could only happen —.

Dr Aiken: Will the First Minister give way?

Mrs Foster: No. I want to finish the speech.

Divergence on SPS could only happen if there was a cross-community vote in the Northern Ireland Assembly. The consent protection was removed and, therefore, we could not support such an approach as it would risk divergence from the rest of the United Kingdom. That was made clear immediately and is a matter of public record. Those are the actual facts, Mr Speaker, as opposed to the alternative version that we have heard peddled recently.

Our guiding principle throughout the period of exit negotiations has been that Northern Ireland's place within the internal market of the United Kingdom must not be undermined and that Northern Ireland must continue to enjoy unfettered access to and from Great Britain. Whilst we accept that the agreement brings about zero-tariff and quota arrangements between the United Kingdom and the EU, thus removing many goods from attracting tariffs between GB and Northern Ireland, the fact remains that the agreement does not assist Northern Ireland in the context of having to operate under the Northern Ireland protocol. So, in another place today, my parliamentary colleagues will vote against the agreement, and, to be clear, we do so on a point of principle and not because we supported a no-deal option. A free trade deal is better than no deal, but, for Northern Ireland, this deal does not undo the detrimental aspects of the protocol.

Understandably, many in Great Britain will be able to support these agreements today, as applied to Great Britain, but, sadly, for Northern Ireland, we will be governed by the arrangements in the protocol.

Mr O'Toole: Will the First Minister give way?

Mrs Foster: No. While Northern Ireland will remain in the United Kingdom's customs territory, and we are out of the common agricultural policy (CAP) and the common fisheries policy (CFP), we will be aligned with the EU for manufactured goods, food and animal products, alongside other EU-imposed restraints. The removal of the so-called cliff edge on 1 January will be welcome, but more work will be required to ensure that we can maintain free-flowing business supply lines from Great Britain into Northern Ireland. To that end, we will continue to work with the Government to mitigate those damaging practical outcomes flowing from the protocol. We have been engaged in that process over the Christmas holidays.

Ultimately, we will test and judge all these issues on the basis of how they operate in practice and whether they deliver the unfettered access that we were promised as far back as the joint UK/EU report of December 2017. There will need to be further urgent work undertaken by the UK Government to deliver for Northern Ireland, particularly on those matters where a final outcome has not yet been secured. Government need to be bold and, where necessary, prepared to act unilaterally to bring about those outcomes that underpin our full place in the most important internal —

Mr Speaker: The First Minister's time is up.

Mrs Foster: — market for us, that of the United Kingdom.

Dr Archibald: I beg to move amendment No 1:

Insert after "Assembly":

"asserts our opposition to leaving the European Union; calls for the full implementation of the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland to mitigate some of the most negative impacts of Brexit; and"

Mr Speaker: You will have 10 minutes to propose the amendment and five minutes to make a winding-up speech.

Dr Archibald: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this important debate. Politically, and in every other way, this year has been dominated by the coronavirus pandemic. However, for the past five years, one issue — in fact, one word — has dominated our political discourse, and that is Brexit.

12.15 pm

There is, of course, no mandate for the Brexit that is being foisted upon the people of the North. Our wishes have been ignored by a detached and disinterested British Government — successive British Governments, in fact. The Assembly has not consented to Brexit, and Sinn Féin will not be giving its consent to an LCM on the Tory Brexit agreement. Likewise, Wales and Scotland are not giving their consent to what is essentially a hard Brexit. It is a bad deal for us all. As Manufacturing NI said, it is the first trade deal that makes trade more difficult than the status quo.

Brexit is an agenda that was driven by narrow, English nationalist motives and a harking back to the halcyon days of an empire long gone. Its casualties are our businesses and economy, the rights of young people and citizens, our European funding, and workers across Britain and the North. The trade deal that was agreed on Christmas Eve may mark a new chapter, but Brexit and its consequences will be with us for the foreseeable future. To be abundantly clear, there is simply no good Brexit. There is a trade deal, which is better than none, and a protocol to provide some mitigation from the worst impacts, but it remains a fact that we are enjoying less favourable circumstances in our trade, relationships, ease of movement and funding than we enjoyed as members of the EU. How anyone can celebrate that is beyond me.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Dr Archibald: No, I do not get an extra minute.

For many businesses, organisations and individuals, what becomes reality on 1 January remains a confusing mess. There is a lack of preparation time, as the British Government ran down the clock until the last minute, and threw spanners in the works with the IM Bill along the way, which hindered progress. It means that there is just one week between a deal being agreed and it becoming effective. Businesses, like the rest of us, are still digesting the details and their implications.

The protocol that was agreed with the withdrawal agreement provides some protection. It ensures no hardening of the border across this island, which ensures that all-island supply chains, which are vital in some sectors, can continue. However, Brexit brings the gift

of friction, and that friction is in the Irish Sea. It will, undoubtedly, bring with it difficulties and complexities for business. No one has argued that the protocol is some silver bullet, but imagine how much worse it would be if there was no protocol and we were looking at a regulatory border across the island — in the middle of those vital supply chains. Those arguing against the protocol need to remind themselves why there is a protocol. It is because of Brexit — a Brexit that most of them championed.

The agreement on the protocol that preceded the trade deal provides some relief, through the grace periods, for businesses, but we need to see real effort from the British Government and their agencies in ensuring that those periods are utilised and that, when they end, the difficulties are minimised. We need the trader support service to do what its name suggests and support those businesses that are trading between here and Britain. We need to see considerable resources in place to make sure that that happens. The Department for the Economy and its agencies need to step up and ensure that all businesses of all sizes, including our small and microbusinesses, have access to the information and support that they need, and that the practical realities of trade are communicated effectively.

Of course, it seems to have come as a surprise to some DUP Ministers that their Departments are facing a loss of funding as a result of Brexit. No one could have seriously believed that the British Government were going to fund us to the same extent that the EU did with its considerable funds. Whatever those on the other side of the Chamber might argue, we in the North have been a net beneficiary of EU funding. We have benefited considerably, much beyond our Barnett consequential, from EU funding. Our farmers, universities and community and voluntary sector rely considerably on EU funding, and are now depending on the much-mooted shared prosperity fund, but they are still unclear as to what that funding picture will be and how it will be administered.

We effectively left the EU in January of this year — something which, for ideological reasons, some across the Chamber welcome — but, come tomorrow night, when it is a practical reality, many here will feel sadness and loss. Those people who considered themselves European, as well as British or Irish, and who valued their rights and entitlements as EU citizens, face a loss of some of those. Ironically, it is the Irish Government who have stepped up and offered some continuation of those rights. They are going to fund ERASMUS for our young people so that they can continue to benefit from that important opportunity to work and study across the EU. They are going to continue to ensure that citizens here can continue to access the European health insurance card.

We are lucky that, to date, our interests, those of our citizens, economy, businesses and peace agreement have been championed by the EU, but we need to have our voices heard in the future. All the sectors mentioned — farmers, universities and community and voluntary sector — need to input in the future where EU regulations will continue to apply. We need to see real, effective North/South collaboration to ensure that that happens.

The protocol provides protection for the all-island economy and North/South cooperation. We need to build on that. There are huge opportunities to build on relationships across this island, with access to the EU, which must be

capitalised on, in particular, as we plan recovery from COVID-19 and take the necessary action to address the climate emergency.

For those citizens who value their EU citizenship, there is a route back to the EU through a unity referendum. That is a debate and conversation that continues to grow.

Go raibh maith agat.

Dr Aiken: I beg to move amendment No 2:

At end insert:

“; and calls on the United Kingdom Government, in view of the very serious impediments to the Northern Ireland economy being created by the trade and cooperation agreement and the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, to apply safeguard measures as laid out in article 16 of the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland for a period of at least one year.”

Mr Speaker: The Member has 10 minutes to propose amendment No 2 and five minutes to make a winding-up speech.

Dr Aiken: I call on all parties across the Assembly to join us in calling for the UK Government to do what they need to to put the people of Northern Ireland first and apply the safeguards laid out in the protocol because of the forthcoming depression that is likely to occur.

We call on both the UK and EU Governments to recognise that the so-called trade and cooperation treaty does not make Northern Ireland's position easier and the severe implications of the imposition of this unequal protocol treaty, and to agree to derogate from the requirements to introduce many of its provisions for at least a year. The reasons and need for that are becoming abundantly and overwhelmingly clear.

There are many flaws in the trade and cooperation agreement, not least that its provisions were to have ameliorated the worst aspects of the Northern Ireland protocol. Whereas the threat of tariffs have been removed for now, the non-tariff barriers are of such a degree that they will significantly distort business, agriculture, trade, security and not least how democratic accountability is provided for the people of Northern Ireland. Sadly, we have already heard from some that the Northern Ireland protocol needs to be made to work, as if it were some form of safeguard to the Belfast Agreement, when that is patently not the case.

On Friday, with the imposition of the Irish Sea border, we will be in a place apart; a new place that, as we approach our centenary, some in the Assembly will welcome as some sort of precursor of an economic island entity, ignoring totally the reality of the massive impact on our economy, people and democracy. These are the only factors that we, as MLAs, should focus on.

Indeed, who better to explain this than the DUP's own very recent best friends, the Conservative European Research Group (ERG), that stated only yesterday that:

“The Protocol provides for continuing direct jurisdiction of the European Commission within Northern Ireland and binding European Court of Justice (ECJ) jurisdiction.”

Somehow, Boris Johnson stretched the truth again today by stating that the ECJ would have no role in the United Kingdom. Just who is he kidding? Neither the primacy of the European Commission or the ECJ is capable of being challenged by this Assembly.

I turn specifically to the trade and cooperation agreement (TCA). Let us take, for example, the bizarre rule that, through the TCA, goods going from GB to the EU, including the Republic of Ireland, will not be subject to customs rules for up to six months. Yet, in Northern Ireland, because of the Northern Ireland protocol, we are part of the EU customs zone, and customs formalities will apply to all goods moving from GB into Northern Ireland from Friday.

We will also have to apply controls over regulated goods, such as chemicals, food, automotive and medicines. EU requirements on approval, labelling and packaging will have to be met before those goods can be placed on the Northern Ireland market. That is particularly the case for product labelling and country NI identification marks, controls that few of our businesses are ready for, or are likely to be, for well over a year.

In agriculture and agribusiness, we have been told, by no less a figure than Michael Gove, that our sausages are safe for a maximum of six months. Taking aside the flippancy of his remarks, they highlight that, under the TCA, less generous provisions have been made for the UK than, for instance, between New Zealand and the EU.

The level of special sanitary and services checks that will have to be made on our major supplier of food — our own nation — are significantly more than those that are required of our Antipodean friends, again adding costs, and may significantly reduce supply. We are also seeing significant disruptions to our parcel trade right when, due to COVID, the e-economy has never been more important due to customs requirements that are not being required elsewhere in our nation.

The requirement for a level playing field to be maintained, whilst the stated aim of Brexit was to allow the UK to diverge, will also create a significant problem in that EU subsidiary state aid rules, to which we in Northern Ireland must remain aligned under the protocol, will negatively impact our ability to compete in the UK internal market and associated opportunities to fully benefit from inclusion in future UK free trade agreements. We can already envision support for our aerospace industry being challenged by the EU, along with the very necessary additional support that we will have to give to our airports and air routes as our competitors at Dublin Airport will have additional duty-free benefits that we will not.

This is not the best of both worlds. It is not even the least worst option. It is an EU/Boris Johnson-created potential economic depression. It is a potential disaster in the making, the full implications are only beginning to roll out, and we as an Assembly have no say in them. Before Christmas, I asked the First Minister at Question Time whether she or the deputy First Minister had raised these issues at the Joint Committee and, further, whether she had asked for article 16 to be triggered. She stated that that was the role of the EU and UK representatives. That is a failure of leadership. At this very point, we should all be pointing out the dangers ahead. As we in the UUP have pointed out time and again, this shows the massive

democratic failure of the protocol. On the most important question on our economy post COVID, we have absolutely no say: none. The only role that the Assembly has and that Executive Ministers have is to nod through and accept legislation and regulations set elsewhere. If that is not a definition of undermining the principle of consent as set out in the Belfast Agreement, I do not know what is. We as an Assembly, regardless of constitutional hue, must have a mechanism to call a stop to actions that we can already see are leading directly to serious economic, societal —

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Dr Aiken: No.

— and environmental difficulties that will persist and will severely impact on an already much-COVID-damaged economy. Until we achieve the ability for Northern Ireland and its Executive to call for the triggering of article 16 to protect us from the forms of the imposition of the protocol, we should all, as Members of the Assembly, clearly call for the UK Government to trigger it today. The safeguards need to be implemented to secure our economy and to help us through these extraordinarily difficult times.

I ask the Assembly to support our amendment.

Mr Middleton: I beg to move amendment No 3:

At end insert:

“but regrets that, while a free trade deal is better than no deal, for Northern Ireland this agreement does not undo the detrimental aspects of the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland; and calls on the Northern Ireland Executive to continue to work with the United Kingdom Government to mitigate those damaging outcomes flowing from the protocol.”

Mr Speaker: The Member will have 10 minutes to propose amendment No 3 and five minutes to make a winding-up speech.

Mr Middleton: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate today.

Just a few months ago, a survey conducted by the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce found that only 7% of traders thought that they understood what the trading terms would be once the transition period ends. Throughout this process, businesses have been consistent in their calls for clarity. Unlike many Members, business accepts that the result of the referendum was very clear and that there was a democratic process that brought about the UK leaving the European Union. Our First Minister, other Ministers, MLAs and colleagues, including me, have engaged with those businesses and listened to their real concerns throughout our constituencies.

The UK-EU agreement reached on Christmas Eve removes a cliff edge relating to tariffs and quotas for the whole of the United Kingdom in trade with the EU. This has, of course, been welcomed by many. Whilst we accept that the agreement brings about zero-tariff and quota arrangements between the UK and the EU, thus removing many goods from attracting tariffs between GB and NI, the fact remains that the agreement does not assist Northern Ireland in the context of having to operate under the Northern Ireland protocol. Ultimately, the agreement is intended to mitigate some elements of the protocol that pose a serious risk to local business. However, it does not override the fact that the protocol, by allowing divergence

in regulations between different parts of the UK, can never provide the standstill certainty or security that many of our businesses need and deserve. As my party leader said, additional work will be required to ensure that we can maintain free-flowing trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. That position is reflected in the amendment that we have tabled, and we urge Members across the House to support it.

12.30 pm

A free trade deal is better than no deal, but, for Northern Ireland, the deal does not undo the detrimental aspects of the protocol. As I said, there will be a need for further urgent work to be undertaken by the UK Government to deliver for Northern Ireland, particularly on the matters for which a final outcome has not yet been secured. The Government need to be bold and, where necessary, prepared to act unilaterally to bring about outcomes that underpin our full place in the most important internal market for us: the internal market of the United Kingdom.

For our part, as a party, we will continue to work with the business community to strengthen Northern Ireland's economic position post Brexit and, indeed, post COVID. In the coming period and in the aftermath of COVID-19, it is important that we work to strengthen Northern Ireland's position. We are committed to working with our business and industry representatives to help them as we collectively try to rebuild our economy, and that will involve working with the Government to mitigate the damaging practical outcomes that flow from the protocol. The DUP has consistently opposed the imposition of the protocol and continues to believe that it will damage rather than promote prosperity across the Province. Let us not forget that the driving force behind the protocol was an inaccurate and hyped-up argument about the sanctity of the border and the Belfast Agreement.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Would he agree with me that, when we refer to the Belfast Agreement, some Members see it as the law of the Medes and the Persians: cast in stone and irrevocable? That is all well and good until it comes to the principle of dual consent. Apparently, those who have argued for dual consent in this place for 30 years now suddenly believe in majorities getting their own way.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Member for his contribution. It is important, I completely agree with it, and I will touch on it more in a few moments.

Again, let us not forget the driving force behind the protocol. We have seen play-acting and amateur dramatics on the border and heard inflammatory and divisive language, with regular Brit-bashing in the Chamber. Is it not ironic that the very people who used the border to their advantage during the terrorist campaign are those who now say that they are acting in the best interests of those who live here? The majority of people in Northern Ireland will understand that that is just not the case. In reality, businesses and families in Northern Ireland will judge any deal not by those notions but through the lens of everyday prosperity.

Our guiding principle has been that Northern Ireland's place in the internal market of the United Kingdom must not be undermined and that Northern Ireland must continue to enjoy unfettered access to GB. The extent to which arrangements impact in practice on trade, jobs,

incomes or the choices in the supermarkets will be the true test of what has been agreed.

Finally, as has been mentioned, the measures are ultimately temporary. The NI Assembly will eventually have to have its say. The Government need to be prepared to act unilaterally to underpin our place in the UK market. The arrangements flowing from the protocol are, of course, temporary, and the Northern Ireland Assembly will have the opportunity to revisit the protocol and vote on it in four years' time. We remind everyone involved and the European Union specifically that, unless arrangements have the support of unionists and nationalists in Northern Ireland, they will ultimately fail. On that basis, on-the-ground implementation must not in any way disadvantage the people of Northern Ireland or our place in the United Kingdom.

In closing, I urge Members across the House to support the amendment that has been tabled by the DUP, listen to the many voices out there in the public domain and support those in our communities.

Ms Mallon: I beg to move amendment No 4:

At end insert:

“; rejects Brexit, in line with the democratically expressed view of the people of Northern Ireland; notes that this deal will mean new barriers to trade and other negative consequences for Northern Ireland’s economy and society; and calls for the implementation of the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, positive efforts to make arrangements work for all the people of Northern Ireland, and for this Assembly to decline legislative consent to the British Government to impose the European Union (Future Relationship) Bill, their inferior trade deal and their Brexit against the will of the people of Northern Ireland.”

Mr Speaker: The Member will have 10 minutes to propose amendment No 4 and five minutes to make a winding-up speech.

Ms Mallon: Here we are in Christmas week, and, as democracy takes no break for holidays, it is right that we have come back here today to debate and, through our amendment, have the opportunity to vote on this significant and far-reaching issue, just as the other devolved Administrations are doing. Brexit and its fallout, including the trade deal that was heralded over the weekend, will have far-reaching consequences for all of us on this island, especially for us in the North. Our young people especially will live with the Brexit factor for years to come.

I will be clear today; the SDLP wanted no part in Brexit, and, importantly, nor did the people whom we represent. We believe that the future of the island is best served by being at the heart of the European project, not on the sidelines or, even worse, with our nose pressed up against the glass of the EU. I make this pledge today to the people of Northern Ireland on behalf of the SDLP: now that we have been forced out of the European Union against our will, against the democratically expressed will of the overwhelming majority of our people, we will, for as long as it takes, campaign for our return to full membership of the European Union. That can happen through another UK referendum, which will happen sooner or later, and it will be propelled by the experience and the realisation of the Welsh, Scottish and Irish people that their political future was, in the years between 2016 and 2020, forged

by a narrow English nationalism that was facilitated by the DUP and allowed to override the needs and wishes of the rest of us. The referendum result will be undone by the generations not yet old enough to vote, but it will be undone, and the SDLP will be part of the great undoing. It can also happen through the reconciliation and realignment of Ireland as a political entity. It was Mark Durkan, when he was MP for Foyle, who secured the written clarification from the then British Government Brexit Secretary, David Davis, subsequently confirmed in a European Council declaration that Northern Ireland is the only part of these islands that can rejoin the European Union without an article 49 negotiation. Just as the SDLP was at the heart of that important act, we will continue to be at the heart of that movement too.

There is no good Brexit. The SDLP never wanted any Brexit. However, it was important for our business community that Brexit was accompanied by a trade deal. In partnership with the trade bodies, we are working through the deal that was published at the weekend, and we will continue to work with them to ensure that Northern Ireland as a region benefits, where possible, from the incoming arrangements.

The fact that three of the five Executive parties were always opposed to Brexit and recorded that opposition in votes in the Chamber says a lot about what Brexit means for Northern Ireland. As for the other two parties, it is not clear where the UUP stands on Brexit, and, as for the DUP, just a few months ago, it was feted by Boris Johnson, the ERG, the Tory media and the shady financial backers of its famous London newspaper Brexit ads. Boris Johnson has lied to the DUP so often, so publicly and so consistently that it is painful. The truth, regardless of the deflection tactics, is that this is a self-inflicted wound. Brexit, the Northern Ireland protocol, the trade deal, the sea border — all of it belongs to the DUP, lock stock and barrel. It tries to deny it and pass responsibility on to others, but the people of Northern Ireland are not stupid. The businesses of Northern Ireland are not stupid. The trade unions, civic society, the third sector and all who stand to lose out are not stupid. It would be good if the DUP would stop acting as if we were stupid.

As an example, Invest NI will lose out on approximately £90 million a year as a direct consequence of Brexit. Invest NI, whose job it is to attract new businesses and support existing ones in the North and which is at the heart of the Department for the Economy, will take a massive Brexit hit. That means that our constituents and the businesses that employ our people and offer a route to post-COVID recovery will lose out. Those are the outworkings of the DUP's position on Brexit. That is the reality of its Brexit in Northern Ireland.

The DUP will today, in Westminster, vote against the EU-UK trade deal: what an irony. It also now, via our amendment, has the opportunity to withhold consent in this House — all parties do. Today, the SDLP is moving its amendment because, just as Scotland and Wales have had their say on whether the trade deal is acceptable to their people, so should our Assembly.

For three years, we were denied an Assembly and a Government, but, today, we have an Assembly and an Executive, and we must make our voice heard. We must allow the voice of our citizens to be heard to oppose a British-imposed Brexit on the lives of people across

Northern Ireland. The SDLP is asking this Assembly to reaffirm our rejection of Brexit and to decline legislative consent to the British Government to impose the European Union (Future Relationship) Bill, which will bring new barriers to trade and negative consequences for our society and our economy. This inferior trade Bill does not protect the interests of our economy or our people in the way that Northern Ireland deserves.

Professor David Phinnemore of Queen's University Belfast points to the thinness of the agreement in areas such as services, on which our economy relies. He summed up the challenge clearly when he remarked:

"The substance of arrangements does little to address the disruption that Brexit will cause for cross-border cooperation."

While we recognise and have long called for the full implementation of the protocol, the Northern Ireland protocol remains as it is.

While the SDLP recognises that there are aspects of the deal that are helpful and welcome, many provisions are limited and many of the challenges that Brexit has threatened for years will now impact on our society and economy. This Assembly must recognise the magnitude of this moment, and the seriousness of the context in which we will now be forced to live. The days and weeks ahead will present new challenges, and we all must rise to them for our citizens because we all know the hard, cold truth that London simply is not interested in our interests. A deal will always be better than no deal, but the SDLP never, ever said that any deal will be acceptable. This Assembly should not accept the imposition of an inferior Bill or deal that leaves Northern Ireland worse off and our people with a future less than they deserve.

I understand that Scotland and Wales are to reject this deal. They are to reject the future that Boris Johnson and his cronies in Number 10 want. We should also make clear our rejection of a narrow, isolated future, not on our own behalf but on behalf of those whom we represent.

The European Union, as an ideal, is about bringing people together. On one level, it is as simple as that. This year, in the SDLP, we lost our spiritual and political leader, John Hume. John believed that our membership of the European Union was a key factor in bringing about peace to this island we share. He said:

"Membership of the EU has ... obliged people to work together in promoting common interests within the EU."

The EU has also helped to promote better relations between North and South as people discover their common interests.

The SDLP had always argued against the erection of new borders or new barriers anywhere across these islands. That is why we, uniquely among parties in Northern Ireland, registered to campaign against Brexit. It is why we proposed remaining in the European single market and the customs union. We have proposed solutions that will mitigate the damage caused by withdrawal from the EU because we understand the economic impact of new trade friction points, but we also understand the psychological impact of new land or sea borders on people and communities. The sad truth, a constant in our political history, is that all of this was entirely avoidable.

One beacon of light this week, however, in the wake of the Brexit trade deal, was the clarification from the Irish Government that they will continue to facilitate third-level students here to access the ERASMUS programme no matter the colour of their passport. I want to say that the SDLP welcomes the efforts of the Irish Government, in particular their work to protect our island from a hard border. While this deal is less than we deserve, we do recognise the effort that has been made for people across Ireland.

We have to live with this trade deal because we have no choice, but there should be no celebration in this moment for either side. As a party, the SDLP has a strong history of bringing our people and communities together, and we in the SDLP will keep on working, keep on talking and keep on doing proper, mature politics to reconcile our people, to free them from poverty, prejudice and injustice and put them back at the heart of the European project.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the next Member, I remind all Members that they have up to five minutes to speak.

Mr Dickson: I am a European, and no one will take that away from me. I rise as Alliance Party economy spokesperson, and I welcome the opportunity to speak on this debate. The Alliance Party will support amendment Nos 1 and 4 and oppose amendment Nos 2 and 3.

12.45 pm

I do not think that it could come much later, but this has been another page in the history books of what has been a dire and difficult year. It is a moment of sorrow and reflection at what we are ultimately losing after being on a roller coaster that people and businesses boarded in 2016 or, indeed, even earlier.

In the Chamber today, someone has already quoted Churchill, and I will also do so:

"If you destroy a free market you create a black market."

There is no such thing as a good Brexit. It builds on outdated notions of a nation state and is designed to put up walls, causing friction and distancing ourselves from the largest trading bloc in the world. It demotes the United Kingdom in terms of diplomatic influence, leaving us as a more isolated, medium-sized economy in a world of large trading blocs.

It really did not need to be this way. For example, we could have left the political structures but stayed in the single market and/or the customs union, but, instead, we now have a mess of red tape, barriers and bureaucracy for businesses and individuals. Indeed, we have more rules today than those which we are leaving behind.

In regards to the protocol, it is to be welcomed that we have a grace period and increasing clarity, but ongoing flexibilities and support will be vital. We do not want to put up barriers to trade anywhere, but that is exactly what this type of Brexit and the UK Government have chosen to do. The protocol is the outcome of such choices, and we must make it as frictionless as possible.

Unfortunately, the agreement leaves behind our participation in a range of activities, such as the European structural and investment funds. Alliance has serious concerns about the shambolic and half-hearted plans, for

example, for the shared prosperity fund that is supposed to replace them. We still have little information on the amount of funding, the design of the programme and who will manage it; all while groups that are funded via the European social fund, for example, are telling us that they need information and certainty now.

It is regrettable and also welcome that the Irish Government have had to step in to prevent Northern Ireland citizens from losing some of their rights, from European health insurance to participation in the ERASMUS+ programme. I hope that there is further scope for participation in other programmes, such as the European Solidarity Corps, if the UK continues its disinterest in continuing these key initiatives that many of our people, businesses and voluntary organisations directly benefit from in Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker, this is, indeed, where we are. Unfortunately, this process has shown the limits of our influence, not least of all to one particular political party in this Chamber, despite all its vaunted promises. Nevertheless, we have to work with what we have. Perhaps there is one silver lining: with suitable flexibilities, streamlining and, crucially, certainty, Northern Ireland may indeed be at an advantage to the rest of the United Kingdom and Ireland in terms of goods. I would like to see that work continue, particularly through our Department for the Economy. However, it has been mentioned that services are to be excluded from this, which, in a service-based economy, will represent huge barriers to our businesses and customers. I hope that we can make progress on this and the considerable benefits that could be realised with proper participation in a single market. People living on the border well know the nuisance of roaming charges, for example, and the United Kingdom Government should now be taking action to ensure that those charges will not return.

I do not think that anyone here can be happy with the Brexit that we have, for many different reasons. It is clear that it will harm Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom and that this deal is far from what our economy and society need. The Brexit process is far from over, and those who think that today will end the debate are living in cloud cuckoo land. We will be debating the impacts and the problems of this Brexit and its consequences for many years to come. My party will work to continue to build bridges, not borders. That is what the Alliance Party stands for in this community. We will be working towards the closest relationship possible with the European Union, and we will work to mitigate, as far as possible, the social and economic damage that Brexit threatens.

Mr Storey: I am glad to take part in today's debate. The First Minister opened the debate by quoting one of our nation's greatest prime ministers Sir Winston Churchill, and the Member who spoke previously, Mr Dickson, also quoted him. I will follow in that vein. It was Sir Winston Churchill who said that:

"A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty."

We have heard in the Chamber today all the woes, all the ills, all the concerns and all the difficulties that will beset us as we leave the European Union, but let us remember that we do so not because there was a democratic deficit but because the United Kingdom voted so to do.

We have heard a lot today about the principle of consent. As my colleague rightly said in an intervention, all of a sudden, the principle of consent has almost been consigned to history by the references to the Belfast Agreement. Let us remember —.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Storey: Yes.

Mr Stalford: I asked Ms Mallon to give way, but she chose not to. Ms Mallon referred to "Scottish people, Welsh people and Irish people": does my friend think it is telling that she could not find it within her to refer to "British people"? What does that say about her vision of the future?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Storey: That is the case. I will say again as I have said before in the House, when will we have respect for Northern Ireland? As we stand on the verge of celebrating our 100th anniversary, there are still derogatory comments like "the North". That is Donegal and Malin Head, because "the north" in Northern Ireland is Rathlin. Let us have some respect. Let us show respect to Northern Ireland. What we have seen over the last days is an attempt to undermine the democratic principles. Ms Mallon said that there will be another referendum: "We will undo what has been done". What if that referendum gives us the same outcome? Will they then accept the democratic wish of the people of the United Kingdom?

Most Members will know that I do not read a lot of books. I have plenty of books, but I am not the world's greatest reader. However, some time ago, I read 'Clean Brexit'. In that book, reference was made to some of the great events that took place over two centuries and changed the political landscape of these islands. In 1846, there was the repeal of the Corn Laws. In 1931, the UK left the gold standard. In 1945, after the Second World War, our nation was on its knees. Out of the ashes of that terrible time in our nation's history, the National Health Service became a reality, national insurance became a reality and free compulsory secondary schooling became a reality. In 1979, we had the Thatcher revolution, which gave to this nation economic prosperity. All we have heard this morning is, "We will lose" and "We will be worse off". As one commentator said yesterday, it is not the best of all deals but it is not the worst of all deals. What I suggest to Members who voted to leave the European Union is to show that sense of optimism and show some respect for democratic principles.

The representative from Sinn Féin said that there was no mandate for Brexit. There was a mandate. She went on to refer to the fact that it was driven by narrow nationalism. Sinn Féin would not be engaged in anything like that. It would not be engaged in any party politics like that. Then the Member talked about the impact on our businesses. What happened 28 years ago, on 13 November 1992, in the town that she represents? The IRA blew the heart out of Coleraine. That was seen as politically opportunistic. That was seen as advancing the cause. We have a party in the House that has opposed Europe at every stage down through the years. Now, because of political opportunism, not because of some pragmatism, it sees an opportunity to do Northern Ireland down.

I stand here today realising that there are challenges ahead, but there are also opportunities. Let us give the message to our businesses that we will work with them and do everything for them to ensure that they prosper and build a better future for us all and that that prosperity is not tagged with orange and green, nationalism or some other political ideology but is driven by the best interests of the people whom we represent. I say to Members: let us ensure that we have the debate and that it is based on reality.

The Member for the SDLP mentioned a legislative consent motion. I think that the Sinn Féin representative said that they would not —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Storey: — give their consent. Members will be glad to know that we do not need legislative consent because the deal will be passed —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Storey: — in the House of Commons, the very place from which the Members opposite stay away but still get their allowances.

Mr McAleer: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion and in support of amendment Nos 1 and 4. I speak from an agriculture and rural affairs perspective.

I want to point out that the food and drink sector in the North employs 100,000 people. It feeds 10 million people and provides 30% of private-sector employment. For the past four years, the Brexit crisis, which we did not vote for in the North, has caused absolute mayhem in the sector. The North voted to remain. Brexit is an imposition on us all.

With or without the deal, Brexit will cause friction, and friction causes delay and cost. From 1 January, there will be non-tariff barriers to trade, east and west. We will have SPS checks on goods that are traded across the Irish Sea. I noted commentary at the weekend from the British Government, who estimate that 40% to 70% of freight that arrives at the ports will not have the appropriate documentation to sail. That is absolutely incredible. That is a huge burden on those drivers. We saw what happened to drivers at Dover over the Christmas break. We are also dealing with perishable stock and food that is coming across. That has the potential to cause mayhem. We have seen that in Holyhead, in Wales, they are creating a contraflow to deal with that. At Cairnryan, they are leasing a disused airport to cope with that possibility. That is a consequence of Brexit that could have a huge impact on us here. Come 1 January, we will have customs and SPS checks. Next year, we will have customs arrangements in place. Again, all that can add more bureaucracy and cost to consumers and businesses here.

There is the sheep issue. Thousands of sheep are stranded over in Scotland. They cannot come across here. That is a consequence of Brexit. There has been no resolution to the seed potato issue. Indeed, there has been no resolution to the issue of breeding animals. They cannot come across here. That has a huge impact on the pedigree trade.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he find it strange, then, that his colleague in the Irish Parliament, Matt Carthy, the Sinn Féin agriculture spokesman and his equivalent, criticised the reduction in

the money that is currently available from the EU, when he said that the common agricultural policy had taken a huge hit and was lower than it had been in 2014 and that the rural development fund had also taken a substantial cut and had been halved? That was when we were part of the European Union. What does the Member say to that?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McAleer: I thank the Member for his intervention. He has pre-empted me, because I was coming to the topic of funding.

One of the biggest consequences of leaving the EU against our will is the fact that we will lose EU funding. We get £300 million a year on average for single farm payments. That is 100% EU-funded money that goes directly to farmers and agri-food businesses to keep them going. Whilst we have had promises from the British Government until the end of the mandate, there is nothing beyond that at all.

We are also being dragged out of the rural development programme. The previous programme, which was introduced by the former Agriculture Minister and, now, deputy First Minister, was a £623 million programme over six years. We are being taken out of that. Not only are we being taken out of that, but we are not allowed to carry over into the next financial year the £34 million that we had not spent. That £34 million is there only because there was some unspent money as a result of COVID. That is also a signal of the British Government's intent towards the North. The separate state aid regime in Britain also has the potential to place our agribusinesses at a disadvantage.

1.00 pm

One of the things that is spooking the sector — which, again, is to do with Brexit and the recent deal — is that it is very clear that Britain has an agenda to open access to its market through trade deals with Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the USA and the Mercosur countries in South America. That could potentially have a huge impact on farmers here and in the South of Ireland, because Britain, as has been quite rightly pointed out here on many occasions, is their biggest market. If we have a situation whereby Britain enters into trade deals with countries, particularly those that are big agricultural exporters, they will displace our share in the British market, which will have a huge impact on our producers.

In terms of labour, 70% of employees in processing factories here are from countries beyond Britain and Ireland, mostly from the EU. Indeed, 95% of the vets in our abattoirs graduated overseas, mostly in other EU countries, and we are not 100% sure what the situation will be after the transition period. In the recent deal, there is no reference to a rolling over of the recognition of professional qualifications.

It is the same thing with fish. The sea-of-opportunity promise was made by the British Government. However, the British fishing industry will lose its frictionless trade with the EU and the 25% increase in the quota may well be outweighed by the additional costs and burdens of bureaucracy.

I heard British Prime Ministers, including Winston Churchill, being mentioned a few times, but one person

who has got it right all along is the former British Deputy Prime Minister Michael Heseltine. He said:

“We must welcome the news that Brexit does not end in the chaos of no deal with the sense of relief of a condemned man informed that his execution has been commuted to a life sentence.”

Mr Givan: In 2016, the people of the United Kingdom voted to remove themselves from the European Union. Yes, it divided the nation and it divided this country, but nevertheless a majority voted to leave the European Union. They voted to leave, and the arguments were well rehearsed, because they wanted to take back control, they wanted to have sovereignty, they wanted to have power with the people and residing close to the people, they wanted parliamentary sovereignty in the United Kingdom and they wanted judicial sovereignty in the United Kingdom. That is what the people voted for. They voted for a United Kingdom that was open with the rest of the world and not shackled to 27 other European countries and the restrictive natures in which they operate in a global perspective. They voted for that openness. Those hopes have not been fully realised. Even in this deal, they have not been fully realised for people in Great Britain, and they certainly have not been fully realised here for the people of Northern Ireland.

However, the values that motivated people to vote in 2016 for those fundamental freedoms are the same values that will continue to drive those of us who sit on these Benches to realise the dreams of those people. It is the political elite who regard those people as the stupid ones. Nicola Mallon referenced stupidity; the peasants voted to get out of the European Union, but the political elite are the ones who know better. Far be it for the political class to fulfil the ambitions of the people who voted. Indeed, the SDLP said that it was against any deal that resulted from the democratic wishes of the people of the United Kingdom. So we know the democratic principles of the SDLP run very, very thin when it comes to respecting the wishes of the people, but we will continue to fight for them.

Then, we had the movement that took place to introduce the protocol. The protocol is owned by the SDLP, Sinn Féin and the Alliance Party, so when we look at the costs that are going to be placed upon our businesses, we need look no further than those three political parties in this Chamber. Of course, the Republic of Ireland did not help; it did not want to police its own border and so pushed for the kind of barriers that came through in the protocol. It was unable to carry out the basic function, on behalf of the European Union, of maintaining the integrity of the border, and so did not want to do it here. However, there was a priority given to North/South relationships. I can understand that from Sinn Féin and the SDLP, but the Alliance Party prioritised North/South to the detriment of east-west, and that will not be lost on the people of Northern Ireland.

The increased costs of bureaucracy are owned by those parties that failed to accept Brexit as voted for in 2016, but there are opportunities. There are opportunities through the Joint Committee and I hope that we see a much more productive engagement by the Republic of Ireland, albeit that they have ceded their powers to the European Union when it comes to the Commission and so on. We need to see them, now, working in the interests of businesses here

in Northern Ireland. If they want to create the best of both worlds, the power is in the hands of the European Union to put Northern Ireland first. If we are part of the single market, they should make sure there are no barriers to trading because they are still insisting on barriers being put up.

Of course, Her Majesty's Government have now got the power to act unilaterally if the people of Northern Ireland are placed at an economic disadvantage. They can do that because we have given them the power to do it as a result of Brexit.

Mr Stalford: I appreciate the Member giving way. Having opposed entry into the Common Market and having opposed the Single European Act, having opposed the Maastricht Treaty, having opposed the Lisbon Treaty, having opposed the European Constitution and having opposed every single European treaty that created the EU, does my friend agree that it is rank hypocrisy for Sinn Féin to now pose as defenders of the European Union?

Mr Givan: The Member is absolutely right and my colleague from North Antrim made those very points. The overriding objective of their campaign is for the reunification of Ireland and so any other principle will be cast away. Sinn Féin dispensed with its Brexiteer position because that did not suit its agenda. Sinn Féin can explain why it prefers a globalist-based European Union system that is distant from the working man and woman, remote and unaccountable. That is the European Union that it wants to remain shackled to.

Today's debate leads us into the constant constitutional argument, but I am confident that, as Great Britain benefits from the trade deals, we too benefit as a result of being part of the United Kingdom. People in this jurisdiction will look at being part of the fifth-largest economy in the world. They will look at the financial support that is being given to us, even over the past 12 months as a result of the COVID pandemic. They will also see how the United Kingdom has led scientifically and at how the vaccination programme is being rolled out. While I am pleased that the first vaccinations took place in the Republic of Ireland yesterday, the residents of 80% of our nursing homes have been vaccinated. That is what people will look to when they test the tangible benefits of being in the United Kingdom.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Givan: I am confident that Northern Ireland's future is very secure for many generations to come within the union that matters — the United Kingdom.

Mr Gildernew: It is ironic that the First Minister and the previous contributor mentioned the vaccine. Yesterday, I welcomed the fact that over 33,000 people here have received the Pfizer vaccine. It was developed by a Turkish immigrant who was working with a German company in conjunction with a Belgian manufacturing plant. The world has moved on, while Britain has moved backwards. There is no question that narrow English exceptionalism and interests have taken over here.

Dr Archibald: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gildernew: Yes, go ahead.

Dr Archibald: It is likely that many of those who were involved in the research that led to the creation of the vaccines were funded by European sources.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Gildernew: Absolutely. In my role as Sinn Féin's health spokesperson, I agree that that is a critical point.

I also heard Members on the opposite Benches quoting Winston Churchill extolling taking opportunity from difficulty. He could hardly have meant that you would create the difficulty in order to find the opportunity, so I do not think that that is overly relevant either.

The Member opposite talked about looking at the negative and at the doom and gloom. Surely he read the British Government's own analysis right at the start when they identified that, given that this was the first time that a nation had entered trade negotiations to take themselves out of a trading arrangement, there would inevitably be additional costs, including non-trade, non-tariff costs.

As part of my research for this debate, I serendipitously came across the fact that the collective noun for turkeys is a rafter. At present in Westminster, we are seeing a rafter of Tory turkeys voting for Christmas at Christmas time and cheered to the rafters by the DUP all the way.

Unfortunately, we all have to live with the damaging and lasting impacts that that is likely to bring, and that includes the health sector. We are seeing the loss of the European health card. While the Irish Government have stepped in to ensure that the card continues, there are no guarantees and we need to see how that scheme rolls out in practice. Doctors, nurses and other regulated professionals will now have to wade through a maze of red tape to have their qualifications recognised, whereas at present there is a seamless system in place. I believe that that will have significant impacts on cross-border health workers who cross the border in both directions.

I have been discussing the issue of medicines and essential supplies with the Department of Health since 2019. We had been assured all along that the issue had been dealt with: supply chains would deal with the issue, and everything was in place. At the time, I made the point to officials that it does not matter what plans are made if lorries cannot get out of Kent to bring the medicines here; that is going to create a problem. We have seen that writ large over the past couple of weeks. We depend on an integrated supply chain for medicines. At the very last minute — a number of weeks ago — an arrangement had to be arrived at whereby an additional 12-months' supply was bought. That was not a solution to the problem, but breathing space to try to find a solution. However, those are the types of problems that Brexit is piling up for us. There is no good Brexit; we did not vote for it, but we are being dragged out along with the English Government. The Member opposite talked about Brit-bashing. There has not been much need for that because they are doing quite a good job of that themselves through the self-inflicted exit from their current trade deal.

There is also a significant problem that has been discovered in recent weeks. The new immigration system will very negatively impact on many future EU citizens: citizens who we need, value and who contribute in a range of ways across our business and health and social care sectors. Surely, if we have learnt one thing from COVID,

it is that the skilled workers are those who provide care, supply equipment and work on the front line. We are now going to place additional barriers to their entry to our job market. We are going to put them through language tests and place salary levels at a point that will discriminate against them. Again, there is a notion of a skilled economy, but we need workers who have a range of skills and many of them will be discriminated against as a result of the regime that has been brought in.

As my colleague mentioned earlier, the issue of medical research and cooperation has been evident in the past number of months. However, we do not know about the future. Again, the Irish Government has said that it will guarantee the ERASMUS scheme, but those connections and relationships matter. We are about to throw a massive hurdle in the way of all of that, and it will impact on our system.

At present, we are all quite aware of the high-level cooperation with the North West Cancer Centre and paediatric cardiology services. However, there are over 150 other cross-border service level agreements. Some or all of those may survive this trauma. However, the ongoing development of those linkages for the benefit of our population will now be under severe threat. Make no mistake about it: on a small island those things matter. We need to ensure that we are working effectively and cooperatively with each other. At present, we can see that the world has moved on and Britain has moved backwards. We cannot be dragged along in their wake; our society deserves better.

Ms McLaughlin: Brexit was always going to be bad for most of the people across the UK and Ireland, North and South. This deal is not the worst possible outcome because we now know that the British Government accepts that a bad deal is better than no deal.

The past five years of self-inflicted political harm have already caused substantial damage through loss of investment, loss of potential jobs and, already, the loss of some of our most valuable workers, who have returned to the other parts of Europe from where they came to add value to our National Health Service, to our care homes and to our businesses.

1.15 pm

All that was obvious to most people in the Assembly from the outset. It has to be recorded that the DUP's support for Brexit was the biggest own goal for unionism. It was interesting to hear DUP MP Gregory Campbell speaking on BBC radio earlier this week about the opportunities presented by Brexit for Northern Ireland's economy. He said that it would encourage companies to locate here as it would give them access to both the EU and UK markets. I look forward to the Executive putting in place an economic strategy that supports the growth of an all-island economy. I am disappointed not to have seen that as yet, but, still, Brexit will create a bad outcome for Northern Ireland. It will be a particularly bad outcome for citizens who choose to identify as British and for those who were born in Britain and are not entitled to an Irish passport.

The Irish Government have been proactive and decisive in protecting many rights of people living in Northern Ireland, not just those with Irish passports. ERASMUS and EU healthcare are just two examples. Thanks, too, are due to

the European Union for its diplomacy of dignified calmness throughout the torturous negotiations. The EU and the Irish Government have worked tirelessly on behalf of the people on this island in order to keep an open border, recognising that it is essential for our economy, our cross-border social connections and our peace. The continuation of the Peace programme is of enormous importance, especially for our border areas. The Peace programmes have delivered much progress over the past three decades, and PEACE PLUS will continue that work. It is a clear sign that the EU remains committed to us in the North and will not turn its back on us, just as the majority of the people in the North did not reject our link to the European Union.

For many reasons, Northern Ireland is different from Great Britain. Along with Scotland, our voters wanted to stay in the European Union. They wanted to recognise their European identity, wanting cooperation and partnership with the European continent, our neighbours in the South and our neighbours in the east. Northern Ireland is also different economically from England, Scotland and Wales. Our businesses have more transactions with businesses in the South than they do with businesses in Britain. Northern Ireland is unlike Scotland, Wales and England in doing more business outside the UK than within the UK.

Our future has to be outward-looking and focused on external trade and improving our productivity by investing in skills and infrastructure. We can do the best by embedding our relationships with the South. We need an all-island economy that builds infrastructure and prosperity. The reality is that Brexit will be the basis of much greater all-island cooperation and partnership. We will increasingly have a much stronger all-island economy, and that is to be welcomed. We would like to take the opportunity also to strengthen our other all-island partnerships, especially in health and education. I particularly thank the Irish Government for their commitment to supporting the expansion of higher education in Derry, something that my party has been calling for from the Assembly for many decades.

I can see positives, but the cost has been severe. We have lost investment, we have lost jobs, and our international relationships have been undermined. Many of our citizens have had rights removed: the rights to work, study and live in the EU. Some of our professional firms face new obstacles to doing cross-border —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms McLaughlin: — business, with the loss of recognition of qualifications.

I ask Members to support amendment No 4.

Mr Beattie: Happy new year to all of you for the coming days. I hope that it can be peaceful.

The motion asks for the Assembly to note:

“the trade and cooperation agreement between the United Kingdom and the European Union.”

So I take note. I note the insidious Northern Ireland protocol that forms part of the trade and cooperation agreement. There will be a trade border down the Irish Sea, separating Northern Ireland from the rest of the United Kingdom. I note that the DNA of some unionists is on that protocol. I note that the EU ERASMUS+ will be replaced by the UK Turing scheme, no doubt creating

further division in Northern Ireland as some, internally and externally, try to undermine the United Kingdom as they try to create an educational resource. However, people in Northern Ireland, be they British or Irish citizens, will have the choice of both.

The European health insurance card will continue for all citizens who hold one until its run-out date. It will be replaced in the UK by the global health insurance card. Surely that is a good thing, but, already, I see people trying to undermine it. I do not get it. We will continue to coordinate with Europol and Eurojust, and I note that the European arrest warrant will be replaced by a surrender agreement. I will look to see which friendly nation adheres to the limited grounds for refusal that are mentioned in the agreement. In respect of law enforcement, biometric material, including DNA and fingerprints, and vehicle registration details will be shared between the UK and EU member states via member state contact points, but I note the loss of access to the Schengen information system. That may affect cross-border and wider European Union judicial cooperation in such areas as missing persons. Northern Ireland will remain under the direct jurisdiction of the European Commission and the European Court of Justice without having any elected representation or elected input. Northern Ireland will be ruled by committee, and some in the Assembly salivate at the idea of that.

The draft trade agreement allows cooperation on the peaceful use of nuclear energy, including training cooperation, guarding, movement and transfers. That includes radioisotopes in medicines and radiation in agriculture.

I note how the Belfast Agreement has been undermined, at best, and breached, at worst, with no consideration from those in the Assembly and in the European Parliament who said that we must protect the agreement at all costs.

The European Union will not ratify the trade and cooperation deal until the end of February, so it is still a draft deal and will remain so until that date. The First Minister is right when she says that we are not at the end of the Brexit saga. It is a great Brexit, but it is certainly not a UK Brexit. Northern Ireland has been separated from the United Kingdom in trade and justice. The Ulster Unionist Party warned of that impact on Northern Ireland's position within the UK, but we were ignored. Instead, some followed the lead of English nationalists who have no interest whatever in Northern Ireland. We have to face that fact.

I cannot support or be in favour of the trade and cooperation agreement. My vote will be a protest vote, as will those at Westminster, because the Government there, supported by Labour, will vote it through. As a unionist, my job is to maintain, protect and promote the union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, so I will have to make it work. If I do not make it work, the people of Northern Ireland will suffer even more, and it will damage our union even more.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beattie: That is the stark position that I find myself in. It is unenviable.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Beattie: Sorry, Christopher.

Mr Muir: I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for bringing the debate to the House. Today, we debate the motion and the amendments that have been selected. It is perhaps important to reflect on the fact that the almost inevitable passing of the trade deal by Westminster will result in a vastly different and new future for Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK from Friday.

Over the course of our history, relations between our islands have improved and been strengthened — North and South, east and west — thanks to the EU. Friction has been removed, checks abolished and common standards enjoyed to protect the rights of workers and citizens and protect the environment and to enable businesses to grow. It saddens me greatly that, in the year in which so passionate a pro-European as John Hume passed away, we are set on a course away from the EU and the benefits that it offers. Exit from the EU on the basis of the agreed deal is vastly better than a chaotic no-deal crash-out, but, no matter how it is constructed, Brexit is bad for Northern Ireland, people, business and the environment. It has triggered active serious discussions about the constitutional future of Scotland and Northern Ireland. Those who seek to deny that should take their heads out of the sand. The fact that the DUP campaigned for Brexit and paid for advertisements in London newspapers makes it all the more incredible.

We did not have to have a deal like this. A soft Brexit that kept the UK in the single market and the customs union could have been pursued but was pushed firmly off the agenda by the ERG and the DUP. The loss of frictionless trade was then a *fait accompli*. With the UK set on course for a hard Brexit, as reflected in this short trade deal, the protocol was inevitable. It is not ideal — on the contrary, it is the least worst outcome — but I have yet to hear any viable alternatives, besides fantasy, unicorn solutions.

Those who say that the border should be on the island of Ireland as opposed to the Irish Sea should pick up an atlas and have a look at the number of border crossings. Rather than acting as a hurler on the ditch, Alliance, led by our Brexit spokesperson, deputy leader Dr Stephen Farry, has been actively seeking ways to mitigate the impact and secure maximum possible flexibilities with regard to the protocol. The derogations and grace periods secured to date are to be welcomed. It remains an absolute scandal that the UK Government failed to request an extension to the transition period as businesses struggle to adapt to the new rules, many of which were only published a few days ago.

All of that is in the context of the economic carnage caused by the pandemic. We are not ready for the changes coming about on 1 January, and the blame lands fairly and squarely at 10 Downing Street and not on those who are fighting to earn a living wage and put bread on the table.

I recognise the arguments put forward by Dr Aiken concerning the invocation of article 16. However, the stark reality is that the threshold for invoking that article has not been met. The fact is that the window for scrutiny of the deal has been made deliberately narrow, and we sit here on 30 December to scrutinise it. That just adds to the reasons why it should be opposed.

A quick review of the details of the deal reveals real concerns, and more and more are expressed as people examine the details. As my colleague Stewart Dickson

outlined, services are excluded from it. Future participation in ERASMUS is ruled out. An alternative programme, known as the Turing scheme, is now offered, which, to me, does an injustice to Alan Turing's life and legacy. I thank the Irish Government for their commitment to the future participation of Northern Irish students in ERASMUS and for helping to ameliorate some of the aspects of the deal. However, overall, it is a bad deal for Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland is certain to be short-changed when it comes to the Shared Prosperity Fund and other funding due to replace the EU programmes.

If anything, the deal looks like a relatively short agreement to remarry after our divorce on 31 January 2020 but with extensive prenuptials based on real fears that one party — namely, the UK — will diverge, especially since it has already been spotted window shopping and talking about divergence. Time will tell whether the new marriage will work, but I fear that it will not. The best marriage is a future in the EU. However, we have to make a go of this relationship, because it is the only deal presented to us. I will not hesitate in the future to turn back and say, "I told you so".

1.30 pm

Ms Bailey: Of course a deal is better than no deal, but let us stop fooling ourselves that Brexit holds benefits for Northern Ireland, its businesses or its people. Let us remind ourselves that Northern Ireland, like Scotland, voted against Brexit. We should not be relieved that a bad deal for Northern Ireland has been done, or that we have been given a choice between bad and really bad, because bad is bad is bad, Mr Speaker. There is little in this future relationship Bill that will lessen the Irish Sea border, for example, and no one here thinks that that is a good thing. Boris Johnson wanted a hard Brexit, and it seems that this is as close as he could get. While there has been much lauding that a deal has been reached, it would be wise to remind ourselves that Prime Minister Johnson has a long record, as Mrs Mallon mentioned, of U-turns and lies. Of course, he seems to have no issue with threatening to break international law, as was supported and announced by our very own Secretary of State, Brandon Lewis. Time will tell, really, what the commitment to this deal is, for this current Government cannot be trusted. Some here know that better than others.

For the duration of this Brexit process, we have been given no proper scrutiny time and no proper access to relevant papers. We have had SIs, SRs and LCMs all being rushed through without full understanding of their impacts. I am somewhat relieved that, here today, the recall of this Assembly is simply to debate a non-binding motion and not to vote anything through, since this deal was done less than a week ago and contains massive changes for people's lives and businesses. It is our job to fully scrutinise and fully understand exactly what we are being told to do, and Brexit is being done to us, for we have no power in this process and no inclusion in the negotiating teams. Neither have the Irish Government. We have all been passengers. This has been an EU/UK Government process, and every devolved region has been no more than an influencer or a concern raiser.

I want to focus on people and on the changes that are going to be brought about by this Bill come Friday — some of the changes to people's lives that will come into effect

on Friday. Some have been mentioned. For example, from Friday all Northern Ireland university students can still access ERASMUS+ programmes. It is just that now the Irish Government will facilitate that, and not the UK Government, who are their actual Government. British students are going to need a visa and will potentially face hefty increases in university fees — and roaming charges, as has been mentioned. They are back, and that will cause so much daily frustration to those living anywhere close to border regions. Of course, the price caps have gone with that.

What if you need medical assistance in the EU? Well, Irish passport holders will see no change, really. For British passport holders, the UK Government have actually recommended that you go and get yourself comprehensive insurance once your current health certificate expires, despite the coming new global health card system.

All Irish citizens will retain free movement rights, and that will extend to children and spouses, but British citizens will not. So, in practice, we can actually still travel freely, buy as much duty-free as we can, come home via Dublin, and all will be well. Should we be advising all our citizens to get themselves an Irish passport, if they have not done so already? I know that I have signed many, many applications. Of course, remind them not to forget their green card if they are taking their car with them across the border or into Europe with a UK registration. Your pet passport will still be valid, so feel free to bring the dog.

The Green Party has never supported Brexit. We absolutely acknowledge that it is here and it is happening; the momentous changes start now. There are indeed opportunities to be had in the times ahead, because radical change is needed if we are to mitigate the climate and biodiversity crisis that is upon us, as well as Brexit. Do we have the leadership, do we have the —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms Bailey: — imagination, and do we have the will to do right: to secure a future relationship and build the new systems needed?

Mr Allister: Friday is 1 January, which will be 220 years from the activation of the Act of Union. Article 6 of the Act of Union was the fundamental building block and foundation of the Union. It was to the effect that there would be free and frictionless trade across and within the entirety of the United Kingdom, from which every citizen could benefit. Sadly, on this 1 January coming, article 6 of the Act of Union will be trashed by the protocol, which creates friction in trade within the United Kingdom and causes the creation of an Irish Sea border to aid that friction. Of course, that brings with it the odious imposition of laws that we never made, that we cannot change and that will be supervised by a foreign court in a foreign jurisdiction.

Make no mistake about it: the protocol is a dire consequence for every citizen in Northern Ireland. We will all live through its dire consequences. Therefore, we have to ask the question of how it arose. Well, the truth is that it arose because nationalism, aided by their little helpers in the Alliance Party and some useful idiots in commerce, so baulked at the very thought of an extra camera on the land border that they pushed the border to the Irish Sea. Some — Mr Beattie used the word — will now “salivate” at the consequences. They do not care about the consequences

for the people of Northern Ireland. Rather, they see it as an advance towards partitioning the United Kingdom and unifying the island of Ireland economically. That is why they salivate, but it is the people of Northern Ireland who will suffer immensely in consequence of that.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to Mr Allister for giving way. Earlier in the debate, we were told the collective noun for turkeys. I looked it up: apparently, the collective noun for hypocrites is a congregation.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Allister: Well, I think that that says it all. That congregation will be those who will wring their hands, lament and pretend that they are upset that their citizens cannot readily access goods through Google or any of the other suppliers or that their companies cannot readily import. They will say, “How terrible”, but they are the originators. It is they, in this House, who egged it on, who had to see it done and who will now impose that price on us all.

My other sadness about this is that the DUP is a party that knows the issues, although the Irish Sea border is the product of the betrayal of Brexit. Let me say, this is not the Brexit that I voted for. My ballot paper did not ask, “Do you want GB to leave the EU and leave Northern Ireland behind, abandoned in the EU's customs union, single market and VAT regime?”. No, it invited me to vote to leave as we joined, as one nation. One of my great sadnesses is that, although the Irish Sea border is being delivered by the betrayal of Brexit, it is a DUP Minister who is building the infrastructure.

Although the DUP today in Westminster will vote in principle and correctly against the deal, in this House it has been voting to implement the protocol. I say this to the DUP, pretty directly: there is a huge onus upon you to ensure that the ambition of this protocol, of building an all-Ireland economy, is thwarted at every turn. You have heard it today; that is the ambition. It is self-evident; it always was the price for Europe to sacrifice Northern Ireland. As the lead party of unionism in the Government, the burden upon you is immense to make sure that, at every turn, in every small and every large measure —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Allister: — you utterly thwart the building of an all-Ireland economy, because you know and I know what the next step is.

Mr Carroll: Mr Speaker, I will be breaking from some convention in this debate by not quoting Winston Churchill. He was an imperialist butcher who believed that the British Empire was superior to people here and in every country that the British Empire colonised across the world.

Boris Johnson's reactionary and calamitous Tory Government is presiding over the worst crisis in living memory for working-class people collectively across these islands. Their disastrous handling of Brexit is one element of it, but, of course, Brexit dangerously intersects with the COVID health crisis, economic ruin, job losses and a deep social crisis that Britain and Ireland are now deeply in the throes of. In the past 48 hours, Britain has had more new cases of COVID-19 than France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal and the South of Ireland combined. It has been horrific to watch as cases have multiplied locally and deaths have increased yet again.

Obviously, our thoughts are with everyone affected by it. It is astounding that people are coping at all, our healthcare staff included. It is a winter like no other and a year like no other for far too many unfortunate people.

The prospect of a no-deal Brexit during this pandemic was clearly deeply troubling for many. No doubt many breathed a sigh of relief in recent days. However, the trade deal being debated currently in Westminster, by a Government made up of posh, rich, Tory MPs, is not a good deal for working-class people here in Ireland or across the water. It may give us cause to be troubled in the near future. We in this Assembly should use this opportunity to collectively reject the deal.

As usual, Boris Johnson approached the announcement of a trade deal on Christmas Eve with much bluff and bluster, presenting it as a good deal, but the truth is far from that. No gains will be made for working-class people under this Tory Brexit, and it is not the ringing commitment to a fairer and more equal society that we so desperately need. The details of many areas of the deal remain unclear as the vote swiftly approaches, and parts are yet to be fully negotiated and settled. Yet the Tories' commitment to pay cuts and further austerity measures speaks volumes about what we can expect in the coming year.

The Tory vision of exiting the EU was a fantasy to bolster the British Empire. They were happy to use racism in order to advance it and even happier to throw their would-be allies in the DUP under the bus while they were at it. The new immigration system at the heart of the Tories' post-Brexit plans, elements of which were put forward in this House just a few weeks ago —

Mr Givan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Carroll: No, thanks.

— will restrict the free movement of people and begin the process of a racist, points-based immigration system. I strongly reiterate my opposition to that, again, as we sit on the precipice of a likely deal in Westminster.

The entire Brexit process has exacerbated the deep crisis at the heart of the British state — a reactionary state based on militarism, austerity and inequality; a state that continues to deny justice to the victims of its actions on this island and, indeed, its own island, particularly the people of Grenfell Tower; a state whose rotten record of austerity over the past decade is enough to illustrate the nefarious role of Britain in Ireland. I believe that progressives and radicals in Ireland should use the current context of crisis and instability in British capitalism to rid ourselves of the Tories once and for all.

We should recognise moves that have been made to prevent a hardening of the border in Ireland, but that should be only the beginning. Historically, the border has divided people on this island, holding back progress and helping to bolster two conservative, right-wing states, North and South. For these reasons, we have always opposed a border, and, today, we repeat our call for a border poll.

1.45 pm

I submitted an amendment to today's motion to oppose outright Boris Johnson's deal, to call for a border poll and to endorse cross-border action on a range of political

issues. However, it appears that only amendments tabled by the Executive parties were deemed to be acceptable.

Mr Speaker: Order, Member. I ask the Member to resume his seat. I know that you do not have much good to say about this institution, and that is fair enough. That is entirely your opinion, and, perhaps, you have a mandate for that. However, you have been here long enough to know the rules. Do not be questioning the Speaker's intention or motivation for accepting or rejecting amendments. Your amendment was dealt with with the same integrity as every other amendment, so I advise you strongly not to recommence that discussion.

Mr Carroll: Mr Speaker, I am just mentioning that my amendment was not selected. I was not casting judgement on you.

Mr Speaker: You were. I will not take any more discussion on it, so depart from it altogether.

Mr Carroll: I will bring my comments to a conclusion. I support amendment No 4. I certainly do not agree with everything in the amendment in the names of Matthew O'Toole and Nichola Mallon, and I am on record detailing why. I am no friend of the neoliberal heart of the EU, but this amendment is the only opportunity today for us to send a message to Boris Johnson and Westminster that we have no truck with this deal, as other devolved institutions have had the opportunity to do so. Therefore, I critically support amendment No 4, and, in the aftermath of a Tory Brexit —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Carroll: — our immediate and primary aim should be to stand up for working-class people on these islands.

Mr Beggs: I support amendment No 2, in the name of Steve Aiken, and I also support amendment No 3. Today is a day of mixed emotions for me. It is a day when I am very proud to be part of the United Kingdom, a day when the new Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine has been approved by the United Kingdom Government, who have already purchased 100 million doses of the vaccine, which can help to protect me, my family and, indeed, everyone in the United Kingdom and in Northern Ireland. This will also be very beneficial to the Third World, given that it was developed on a not-for-profit basis.

However, it is also a very, very sad day for me because the Labour Party has indicated that it will support the UK-EU trade and cooperation agreement at Westminster, so it is certain to go through. When it is passed, it will cement in place the Northern Ireland protocol. As a democratic representative, I find the Northern Ireland protocol offensive. As a unionist, I find it offensive. I find it offensive because it breaches the consent principle in the Belfast Agreement, in that unionists and nationalists should agree to any change to our constitutional position. Our position in the UK has changed. As of 1 January, there will be a border down the Irish Sea. No one can argue that the constitutional position of Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom will not then be different, and it is for that reason that I am very, very sore.

As a member of the Assembly's Infrastructure Committee, I know that we gained advice that we should not have discussed and approved a statutory rule because it is to be the fiefdom of the new Joint Committee that will be governing all of us in many aspects of our lives. In

particular, I understand that the chairman and the vice-chairman of the Joint Committee have to agree and that, once that is done, guess what? It becomes law and regulation in Northern Ireland. Who wants to live under such a regime? It is undemocratic. Ultimately, we will, unlike the rest of the UK, continue to be ruled by the European Court of Justice on many issues.

The Ulster Unionist Party has warned other unionists, privately and publicly, about the dangers of even discussing or acquiescing to a border down the Irish Sea. Sadly, we were ignored. Boris Johnson took that door ajar, and he pushed it open, and he forced into his agreement something that suited him. I think that all unionists subsequently realised that it was a mistake to have acquiesced to that, and we now have this border down the Irish Sea.

Mr Gildernew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: I will.

Mr Gildernew: Mr Allister is no longer in his place, but I want to comment, in light of what you said as well, that we heard reference — rather insulting, in my opinion — to “useful idiots”. We are discussing this politically today in the context of politics. This has been a debate and a discussion right across our society. People who are involved in farming, agriculture, business and community development are entitled and were entitled to take part in that debate, and they have expressed their significant concern. That is why the protocol is necessary. The protocol is a result of Brexit.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Beggs: I have highlighted that it is a clear breach of the Belfast Agreement. There is not unionist consent for it. There has been a failure of nationalism, of the EU, of the British Government and of the Republic of Ireland Government to recognise that. I just wish that everyone would.

We have warned about the dangers of the protocol, which will be enacted on 1 January. As my colleague Doug Beattie stated, it is sad that some unionists’ DNA is on that border down the Irish Sea. It is a sad fact that my East Antrim MP followed the lead of English nationalism and is still trying to justify his unjustifiable actions when he gambled the union and which have resulted in the border down the Irish Sea.

What does it actually mean? It will result in extra paperwork and bureaucracy when we move goods across the Irish Sea. Time is money: it takes time to complete that paperwork. Ultimately, it will result in additional cost to you and me and everyone in Northern Ireland as consumers. We will all have to pay more. I have already learnt of one businessman who sought to get quotes for moving pallets next month. He is being charged a surcharge of £100 a pallet. Guess what? We will all have to pay for it. I am aware of another constituent who ordered a phone from EE. It is already a number of days late. When he went to track it, he discovered that it was being delivered by DPD. Of course, it is not delivering to Northern Ireland at present, unless that has changed in recent times. A number of delivery companies have indicated that they are not delivering here because of concern that it may breach some of the protocol and the bureaucracy that has yet to embed. Guess what? Someone else will have to deliver it

and, no doubt, will charge extra for it — something that we all will have to pay.

On the movement of animals across the Irish Sea, I am aware that guide dogs for the blind is an area of concern. Passports will be needed to move dogs about. Perhaps veterinary inspections will mean even more expense to get them back here.

Mr Speaker: The Member’s time is up.

Mr Beggs: It is important that we all work together and try to mitigate the costs, use the regulations that are in —

Mr Speaker: The Member’s time is up.

Mr Beggs: — article 16 to try to make a better place for us all to live and do business.

Mr Blair: I state at the outset my membership of the Northern Ireland Policing Board, as I am likely to refer to policing-related matters in my speech.

I will start by reflecting on the fact that the challenging time frame of just one year to negotiate a comprehensive free trade agreement was almost impossible from the outset and, of course, was made worse by the coronavirus pandemic. The UK Government, devolved Assembly and EU have rightly diverted their focus and resources into dealing with the crisis, leaving an extensive list of questions surrounding Brexit unanswered and insufficient time to extensively scrutinise any deal.

As Alliance colleagues who spoke before me today have said, the UK-EU trade deal avoids a catastrophic no deal situation, but it is difficult to be enthusiastic about any deal that disregards the majority Remain vote in Northern Ireland and puts us in a more distant relationship with the EU than before. Northern Ireland will face consequences and loss of opportunities no matter the details of the deal agreed between the UK and the EU. As has been said, there is no such thing as a good deal. All versions of Brexit will leave Northern Ireland in a worse situation than before and will see the loss of a broad range of opportunities and benefits, including the loss of freedom of movement and the impact on the service economy.

No one should underestimate the importance of the loss of some of the European freedoms to some of us in the Chamber. However, a UK-EU future relationship agreement is necessary to avoid that catastrophic no deal outcome. While Northern Ireland has some protection and even some comparative advantage due to the protocol, it is workable only in the context of a wider deal. A no deal would have created a broad range of major economic and other challenges for our region, alongside the knock-on consequences of wider disruption in Great Britain.

Turning to those policing matters and matters related to security, as I previously indicated, I want to say that it is probably fair to reflect that, if the initial reading is correct, the deal achieves a little more than had been feared. There are, however, remaining and serious concerns, such as future arrangements around the European arrest warrant, a very tight time frame of six months to try to fix data management arrangements and the reality that readjustment process realignment and changes on this scale are likely to have a significant impact on policing capacity and resources.

Notwithstanding this deal, Alliance remains strongly pro-European and was never prepared to give legitimacy

or acquiescence to a hard Brexit. We will continue to advocate the closest possible relationship for Northern Ireland with the EU and to seek further flexibilities and mitigations regarding the implementation of the protocol. With colleagues and fellow Irish, Northern Irish and UK Europeans, we will, in the time ahead, explore all opportunities to rejoin the EU and to campaign for it. Until then, the situation and all that it brings must be owned by those who supported Brexit, campaigned for Brexit and campaigned on behalf of others for Brexit. Today, with colleagues, I will support amendment Nos 1 and 4 but oppose amendment Nos 2 and 3.

Mr Speaker: I call Matthew O'Toole to make a winding-up speech on amendment No 4.

Mr O'Toole: In addition to my winding-up speech on the SDLP's amendment No 4, I indicate our broad support for amendment No 3 but ask colleagues to reflect on whether amendment No 4 offers slightly more weight to opposition to this specific deal. However, we support the broad intent of both amendments.

A lot can happen in four and a half years. Since mid-2016, the United States has elected and, thankfully, subsequently rejected Donald Trump. As we know, it took little more than three quarters of this year for researchers to come up with a series of vaccines to combat the novel coronavirus. This year, Liverpool even won the league for the first time in three decades. However, for the past four and a half years, the UK has been spending its time constructing a relationship with the European Union that will make it poorer, less influential and markedly less safe. It is the greatest single act of self-harm in the history of modern states.

In pursuit of an impossible perfection of sovereignty in an age when countries are interdependent and challenges do not recognise borders — challenges such as COVID-19 — the UK has devoted more than half a decade to agreeing an inferior relationship with the EU: the one set out in the 1,200 page document that MPs and MLAs are debating today. It was called taking back control. If gathering your Parliament on New Year's Eve to force through a 1,000 page trade deal with barely any scrutiny is taking back control and giving to your Parliament, my God, I do not know what we had before.

Yes, people voted for this. A majority in England voted for this but not in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland voted Remain, and, at every subsequent election, we have reasserted our preference for EU membership or, at the very least, a closer relationship with the EU than the UK has sought in this agreement. Thankfully, we have some of the protections in the Ireland protocol, which, as others have said, is far from perfect but essential with the UK pursuing such a divergent relationship with the EU, but the protocol only covers trade and goods. There will be marked disruption to our economy and our lives as a result of this deal and what is not covered by the protocol.

Let me take a few examples. This deal barely touches on services, which are the majority of our economy. As of Saturday, we will have fewer guarantees on how legal advice, engineering projects or digital marketing can be provided across the border. The legal ban on roaming charges will be gone. In 2016, in my old job, I wrote the press release that warned how roaming charges could be at risk, so I know of what I speak. The legal ban on

roaming charges will be gone, leaving mobile phone operators free to impose charges as they wish. As people in Warrenpoint and Strabane will know, you do not even have to cross the border to accidentally roam. There are few guarantees at all on financial services where we simply have to wait for the EU to decide how much equivalence UK financial services providers will have.

It is not just about the derivatives market and the City of London; this could have real-world consequences for our banking sector, where most of the biggest financial institutions have always been cross-border.

On law enforcement, the deal is certainly better than no deal, but it will make cross-border law enforcement, including extradition, as Members including Doug Beattie have acknowledged, slower and more cumbersome. It is a bad deal for everyone in the UK and everyone in Northern Ireland.

2.00 pm

One of the greatest mysteries of all is why those in the Chamber who claim to be the greatest supporters of the UK have been the greatest cheerleaders for a project that, all economic forecasters say, will make the UK poorer and less influential. It was not Irish nationalists or Remainers who did that: it was the DUP, a party that had the opportunity and power to deliver a better outcome for everyone, including the people of Northern Ireland, but chose instead to court the approval of fanatical Brexiters and Tory chancers, who let that party and us down. Tomorrow is not Christmas Eve but New Year's Eve. However, I suspect that some members of the DUP may get a visit from three ghosts. I would not want to speculate about new years past, present or future that they would argue for, but I would hope that DUP members wake up on New Year's Day with a slightly different attitude from that which they have had over the past three or four years.

Brexit was always going to be particularly awful for this part of the world. Our society was uniquely exposed to the risks. We are the hinge point of the relationship between the UK and the EU. We were not properly considered either in the run-up to the referendum or in the aftermath. Take it from me, because I was there. That is why the SDLP is moving its amendment and will oppose the deal here and at Westminster. People in Northern Ireland, whatever their background and constitutional perspective, deserve so much better than this. That is why the Assembly should send a clear message that we do not consent to the terms of the Brexit being imposed on us by Boris Johnson and his ideologues.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr O'Toole: I am immensely grateful to those in the EU, particularly Michel Barnier and his team —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr O'Toole: — *[Inaudible]* to protect our interests. We cannot consent to what is happening today. I commend our amendment to the Assembly.

Mr Stalford: Just as others have quoted Churchill, I am afraid that — ah, Mr Carroll is back. That is excellent, because I am going to ruin his Wednesday by quoting Margaret Thatcher at him. In her 1988 Bruges speech, Margaret Thatcher said:

“We have not successfully rolled back the frontiers of the state in Britain only to see them re-imposed at a European level”.

Unfortunately, the deal does that. It reimposes bureaucracy on us and reimposes the frontiers of the state. It is not fair to say that only one or two parties in the Chamber are responsible for this: three parties have spent the past four years demanding those provisions and a border up the Irish Sea in order to prevent checks on the land. Alliance, the SDLP and Sinn Féin own the provisions of the protocol. We all remember the trips to Brussels, going in and out of Barnier’s office and saying, “We are campaigning and lobbying”. You campaigned for this, you delivered it and you own it — not us.

I believe fundamentally that the case for leaving the European Union is a sound one. I am a good European, and that is why I believe in independent, sovereign, self-governing states that are responsible for their own money, their own laws and how they run their own country. The concept of being European is a lot older than a failing supranational structure like the European Union.

When we joined the European Union in 1972 and it was reaffirmed in 1975, it accounted for almost 30% of world trade; today, it is less than half that figure. The European Union is not some miracle cure for our economic ills; it is a declining market. Our future lies in expanding markets and improving trade with the rest of the world. The protocol’s provisions are not helpful to local business. That has been acknowledged. It is a source of profound regret to me that it is the Conservative and Unionist Party that is bringing in those provisions.

The hypocrisy that has been demonstrated by some contributions has been remarkable. To be lectured about British exceptionalism by a party whose name literally translates as “Ourselves Alone” is remarkable. To be accused of engaging in British exceptionalism from that source is just incredible. I thought that it was interesting in one of the contributions that — I raised this — Irish, Scottish and Welsh people were referred to but people like me — British people in Northern Ireland — were excluded. That is demonstrative of a mindset that we have seen over recent days.

I am British. Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom, and I will do everything in my power to keep it that way. My aspirations are just as legitimate as those of Members across the way, whether they consider themselves to be nationalist, European, Irish or whatever. I will not have the community that I come from and its aspirations delegitimised, as has been attempted during the debate. We are British, and we want Northern Ireland to stay within the United Kingdom.

I say to the Prime Minister that we do not and will not consent to the provisions of the protocol, because it damages the integrity of the United Kingdom. He should be in no doubt that what he has done is wrong and that it is wrong for any unionist, so called, to endorse the provisions. It is interesting as well —.

Ms Mallon: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stalford: I will not get an extra minute, so I am sorry. The Member did not give way to me when I asked her.

It is interesting to note that the consent protections that were initially envisaged in the deal have been removed. At whose behest were the consent protections, which meant that the Assembly would have had a direct say on the operation of the protocol, removed? Alliance, Sinn Féin and the SDLP. The principle of dual consent applies only when it runs contrary to unionist positions but not in other circumstances. People can see the opportunism and the cynicism at the heart of that position.

Mr Nesbitt: I do not intend to rehearse the contributions of speakers, given that there are so many winding-up speeches. I would like to focus on the impact of the trade and cooperation agreement on the fishing industry, which was decimated over the decades that we were bound by the common fisheries policy. That is why it believed it would be the poster boy for Brexit, quickly and clearly being seen to prosper, having left the European Union.

The industry’s reaction is summarised in a briefing document in which the two representative bodies come together in an unprecedented manner as the Fishermen’s Federation. I commend the document to the House, not least the asks that it makes of us, particularly on how the £100 million that Boris Johnson has promised for revitalising the UK fishing fleet is distributed. They make the argument that it must not be distributed via the Barnett formula because, if it is, all we will be able to afford is a new boat. It may be a big boat, but it is just a boat. It takes £40 million to modernise a port such as Portavogie. We must think carefully and lobby on that front.

Reading that document, I wondered whether, if the fishermen had known in June 2016 what they know today — that it would take four and a half years to get a deal and that the biggest promise in the deal would be to wait another five and a half years to hold on to the forlorn promise that we would finally take back control of our waters — they would have voted to leave. Not when the document states:

“The NI fishing industry had been led to believe it would be much better off. We are not.”

Let us acknowledge their hurt but also listen to their positive asks for making the most of a bad deal.

In 2016, my party published ‘A Vision for Northern Ireland outside the EU’ and brought the framework strategy to the House for a debate. We lost that debate, which I regret because, in this debate, I have not heard one person who is anything other than unhappy with where we are today. What went wrong?

On one level, it went wrong because nobody thought Brexit through. The party to my left simply seemed to think that Brexit was the cure for all our problems, just as their partners in Stormont Castle seem to believe that a united Ireland is the panacea and the holy grail. Neither of them is right. The other issue is that, although Brexit is a long-term strategy, those who are delivering it — the Prime Minister and, sadly, the DUP — are short-term tacticians. On 9 June 2017, the DUP found itself holding the balance of power at Westminster. What was its price for propping up the Government? It was tactical — £1 billion for public services. It could have been strategic. It could have had locked-in guarantees about the outworkings of Brexit and the implications for Northern Ireland. Today, would you not

swap that £1 billion for a better Brexit? Would that not be a better long-term solution for Northern Ireland?

Mrs Foster: Will the Member give way?

Mr Nesbitt: The First Minister has asked me to give way. My response is to quote her words back to her: no.

I did not support Brexit. I never sensed that it would deliver what the Brexiteers promised us. We have not taken back control. We did not leave as one, and we are now a place apart within the United Kingdom.

On 9 August 1974, Richard Nixon resigned as the 37th president of the United States. His tactic to try to excuse away the criminality of Watergate was to go for what he called “plausible deniability”. I sense that the DUP is trying the same thing. The First Minister said that her party was consistent in its opposition to the protocol. However, on 2 October 2020, she called it a serious and sensible way forward. I also note that she said that it had been imposed on us. Well, now she knows how the 52% of us who voted Remain feel about Brexit [*Interruption.*] Plausible deniability did not work for Richard Nixon, and it will not work for the DUP [*Interruption.*] I commend amendment No 2.

Mr Speaker: Let us have some order, please. I call John O’Dowd to make his winding-up speech on amendment No 1.

Mr O’Dowd: It has been an interesting debate that, perhaps, could be summed up by Mr Nesbitt’s reference to plausible deniability. As I listened to the contributions from the Members on the DUP Benches in particular, I was trying to figure out what exactly they were trying to state, sell or promote. At one stage, the deal was bad; then, it was good but the bad parts of the deal are to blame for the protocol and Brexit really had nothing to do with it. Well, Brexit has everything to do with it, and they own it all. Those who promoted Brexit, those who promised a new beginning after Brexit and sat in farmers’ kitchens and told them that they would get rid of all the European red tape, that their profits would soar and that they would be selling meat and other products around the world and there would be fewer regulations own Brexit. They own the fact that those farmers will be less well off than they were before Brexit. The people who told businesses that they would get rid of red tape and that their products would be sold under free trade deals around the world are responsible for those businesses now being less well off. They own it all.

In 2016, for whatever reason, when the DUP decided to support Brexit, it made a fundamental economic and political error. Brexit was the backdrop to the collapse of the Assembly later that year. I remember how, in April 2017, as negotiations were going on in Stormont Castle to restore the Assembly and the Executive — they were at quite an advanced stage, and there was huge potential for agreement — Theresa May called the election. The election took place, and the DUP hooked up with the Tory Party.

I hear a lot from the Benches opposite about consent, about the feelings of unionism and about Britishness. I recognise Christopher Stafford’s Britishness. I support and recognise his right to be British, I do not support his position on the Union, but I support his right to be British. However, when the DUP decided to hook up and take power with the Tories, did it consider the impact that

that would have on nationalism and republicanism? I do not think that it did. When the DUP decided to support Brexit and become advocates of a hard Brexit, did it ever consider what impact that would have on nationalism and republicanism on the island of Ireland? I do not think that it did.

Dr Archibald: Will the Member give way?

Mr O’Dowd: A quick one, yes.

Dr Archibald: I am sure the Member will agree that it is quite interesting to listen to the utterances about consent. I am sure the DUP and UUP Members all know full well that parallel consent applies to certain Assembly procedures. It is laid out in the Good Friday Agreement. It is not to do with constitutional issues that will be decided by a simple majority.

2.15 pm

Mr O’Dowd: They know those positions full well.

The then First Minister and deputy First Minister attended the Joint Ministerial Council on European Negotiations that was due to take place on a Thursday. On the Tuesday, Theresa May made her famous speech and said that:

“We are leaving the single market ... [and] the Customs Union”.

The DUP immediately supported that. Did the DUP take into consideration the impact on nationalism and republicanism on the island of Ireland? No, they did not. At no stage of this process have the current leaders of political unionism considered any of that. However, here is the lesson: when the DUP had its deal with the Tories, they were told that the Tories would sell them out, and the Tories did sell them out. The Tories sold them out because they did not see the DUP as co-equals; they did not see them as fellow Conservatives and Unionists. They, perhaps, saw them as Ulster men and Ulster women or Irish people, but they certainly did not see them as their co-equals.

The flaw in the Unionist strategy for this entire statelet has been that they have not seen their neighbours and political allies in the Chamber and political partners in the Executive as co-equals. When you do not see someone as a co-equal, you treat them as a lesser partner. You do not treat them with respect.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr O’Dowd: I do not have time to give way to you.

You do not treat them with respect.

Mr Storey: You do not murder them either.

Mr O’Dowd: The strategy of political unionism over the 100 years that this state has existed has failed you.

Mr Speaker: The Member’s time is up.

Mr O’Dowd: I appeal to the Members opposite to start treating others with respect, and maybe we will find a strategy that works for us all.

Mr Storey: You have had 15 years to do that.

Mr Speaker: Order, Mr Storey.

I call the deputy First Minister to conclude, and she has 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech on the motion.

Mr Storey: [*Inaudible.*]

Mrs O'Neill (The deputy First Minister): I want to offer my comments —.

Mr Speaker: Sorry, deputy First Minister. Mr Storey, I do not want to have to ask or rebuke you again. You spoke for a while this afternoon and everybody gave you respect during your entire contribution. Please offer the same respect. Thank you.

Mrs O'Neill: I want to speak with two hats, first as deputy First Minister and then as vice president of Sinn Féin.

It is evident that there are widespread differences across the House on the decision to leave the EU. However, there is agreement that it was in no one's interest to leave the transition period at 11.00 pm on 31 December without having a deal in place. The Executive have been unified in their commitment to secure the best possible outcome for our communities, businesses and citizens. It is clear that an outcome under which we would have been required to trade under WTO terms would have been disastrous for our economy, particularly for the agri-food industry. Many Members referred to the real-time implications for that industry.

The conclusion of the negotiations and this agreement marks the end of one phase, but it certainly opens up the beginning of another. Since the referendum result in June 2016, this has been a particularly difficult road to travel. Whether or not you agree with the decision to leave the EU, it is now our responsibility as elected representatives to work together to ensure that the withdrawal agreement, including the protocol and the future relationship agreement, are implemented in a manner that protects our citizens, businesses and economy.

Dealing with the challenges posed by the implementation of this agreement and the protocol is one area where citizens will look to us to work together for the good of everyone. Therefore, as we move forward it is essential that we are represented appropriately and proportionately in the governance structures of both agreements if the continued interaction between the agreement and the protocol are to be taken into account.

As many Members acknowledged in the course of the debate, the lateness of both this agreement and the Joint Committee decisions on the protocol presents an enormous challenge for our businesses and society to know exactly what they need to be prepared for. The development of clear guidance and communications will be vital in the next period to ensure that any impact is minimised.

It is clear that the agreement is complex, and implementation will be a challenge and probably an evolving process. The agreement will be implemented and will operate alongside the protocol. There will be interactions between them that will need to be monitored carefully to ensure that there are no unintended consequences.

We want be equally clear now as the then deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness, and the First Minister were when they set out in their 2016 letter to the then Prime Minister, Theresa May, that it is critical to our economy that our businesses are able to retain their competitiveness, North/South and east-west. It is critical that they do not incur additional costs that could lead to the relocation of

businesses or increased costs for consumers here. The agreement does not mark the end of our representations on the issue but recognises that this will be a continuing priority for the Executive in the weeks, months and years to come.

Many Members have today recognised the importance of EU funds to our economy and the peace process. The Executive Office will work closely with the Finance Minister to ensure that the British Government are fully aware of the importance of replacing those funds and to ensure that the new shared prosperity fund will provide support to the many excellent projects that have benefited our communities.

Members picked up on a number of points that require clarity. For example, a number of Members referred to roaming charges, and it is correct to say that surcharge-free roaming, when travelling to EU and EEA countries, will no longer be guaranteed from 1 January, but we understand that mobile operators have stated that they have no current plans to change their mobile roaming policies, and we look very much to them in the time ahead on that.

Members rightly raised concerns about access to labour. Declan McAleer referred to the fact that this will cause huge challenges for many industries, not least the agri-food industry. It is really disappointing to say that our needs have not been reflected in the Government's immigration policy. However, we will continue to press on those issues.

SPS was raised. Again, it is really disappointing that there was not a higher level of aspiration to achieve a better deal on SPS in the negotiations. It is important therefore that we continue to engage through the governance structures.

Parcels were mentioned. Over recent days, many people have experienced the fact that they cannot get parcels delivered. That will have implications for small businesses that rely on that service as a way to secure goods and services.

These are all huge issues that we have raised and will continue to raise. All those things demonstrate that we are at a turning point, with much more work to be done.

I want to make some remarks as vice president of Sinn Féin. The first thing to say is that, for over four years, we have, regrettably, been exposed to the worst kind of toxic political discourse from Westminster and a Tory-inspired Brexit. The Tories have no mandate and no regard for the interests of the people here; the people that we all represent in the Chamber. There is no good Brexit for the people of the island of Ireland from whatever tradition or culture they may come. Brexit has caused huge division, instability, uncertainty and fear. It has stretched British-Irish relations after almost two decades of trying to renew that relationship between our two islands. For those of us who are opposed to Brexit, it has threatened those rights and entitlements that, as EU citizens, we benefit from, enjoy and, in many ways, have probably taken for granted.

However, many, throughout the course of the debacle, have seen the enormous political and practical benefits that the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA) brought, in helping to safeguard citizens, businesses and society here from what would have been a much more catastrophic situation than the one that we find ourselves in today.

The 27 member states that make up the EU, along with the United States Congress, recognised the value and success of the Good Friday Agreement. Importantly, they recognised that our special and unique circumstances required a bespoke solution. They recognised that, prior to the Good Friday Agreement, security checkpoints existed on the border between the North and South of Ireland. They recognised that the British Army military installations that had been built and reinforced —

Mr Beattie: Will the Member give way?

Mrs O'Neill: I will finish my point. They recognised that the British Army military installations that had been built and reinforced from the 1970s onwards were symbols of division and symbols of conflict. They recognised that the common travel area, full EU membership and the peace process combined meant that, 22 years ago, customs posts and immigration checkpoints on the Irish border were demolished. They also recognised that people's daily life in the border region had been transformed and that the invisible border on the island of Ireland had become the greatest symbol of peace. Thankfully, our international allies recognised that any reversal of any of that would have had hugely adverse economic, social, political and security impacts on people in the border communities and across the island as a whole.

The pro-Remain parties in the Assembly, with others, have successfully defended the interests of citizens, workers, businesses and civic society by working together to protect peace, jobs, economic stability and people's livelihoods. That is reflected in the Irish protocol. It is the solution to avoiding a hard border on the island of Ireland. It protects the all-Ireland economy and the GFA, in all of its parts, gives us access to the EU single market and the British internal market, and keeps the North aligned to the EU on regulations and standards. The protocol is secured, and will be implemented in full and operational from 1 January 2021. Nobody from any political quarter wanted us to crash out of the EU after the transition period ends tomorrow, with no terms of departure or future relationship with the EU, and over a cliff edge, coupled with the impacts of COVID. Therefore, although the fine detail of the trade and cooperation agreement has to be carefully analysed, there will be relief that a trade deal has been agreed, that special arrangements have been secured for the island of Ireland, as encapsulated in the Irish protocol, and that that will be implemented in full.

There is also a level of certainty for businesses, but there remains much more work to be done in the weeks and months ahead by the British Government on trader support. In the immediate term, we need to ensure that there is full support for those sectors that will struggle, despite today's deal, and we need to look at how the North's voice can be heard at an EU level in the coming years. I am very open to discussing with others in the Chamber the ways in which that could be facilitated, including through observer status for the Assembly within the European Union.

Under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement, there is an inherent right, for those born on this island, to Irish citizenship, and, by virtue of that right, to citizenship of the European Union. Citizens who enjoy that right must be afforded the benefit of their citizenship. We know that at least 700,000 people born in the North hold an Irish passport and that about 200,000 of those made their

first application after the Brexit referendum. I welcome, therefore, the Irish Government's announcement that they will fund students from the North, regardless of what passport they hold, to participate in the hugely popular and successful ERASMUS programme. I had pressed the Government on that, as well as on funding the European health insurance card scheme, which I expect to be facilitated. That practical cooperation and collaboration on a North/South basis must continue and be strengthened.

To conclude, this is not the end of the road; it is a turning point. It is a defining moment in the history of Ireland. The future belongs to us all. I have described it as the decade of opportunity, because the decisions that we take now will determine the future of another generation. I want to see, and will work every day to see, all of Ireland, once again, back within the European Union.

Mr Speaker: Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I remind Members that, if it is made, I will not put the Question on amendment Nos 2, 3 or 4.

Members are aware of the protocols for proxy voting, under Standing Order 112. I remind Members to ensure that social distancing continues to be observed while the Division is taking place. Please be patient at all times and follow the instructions of the Lobby Clerks.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 26; Noes 38.

AYES

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Brogan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin.

Tellers for the Ayes: Dr Archibald and Mr McAleer.

NOES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Stewart, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Givan and Mr Stalford.

The following Members voted in both Lobbies and are therefore not counted in the result: Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Blair, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Dickson, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Muir, Mr O'Toole, Miss Woods

The following Members' votes were cast by their notified proxy in this Division:

Ms Bailey voted for Miss Woods.

Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Givan [Teller, Noes], Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford [Teller, Noes], Mr Storey and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Beggs, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

Mr Dickson voted for Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle and Mr Muir.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald [Tellers, Ayes], Mr Boylan, Ms Brogan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer [Tellers, Ayes], Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan and Ms Sheerin.

Mr O'Toole voted for Ms Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Mallon, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin and Mr McNulty.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question put, That amendment No 2 be made.

Mr Speaker: I have been advised by the parties that, in accordance with Standing Order 1(3), there is agreement that we can dispense with the three minutes and move straight to the Division.

*The Assembly divided:
Ayes 38; Noes 49.*

AYES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Stewart, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Ayes: Dr Aiken and Mr Givan.

NOES

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Ms Brogan, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McAleer and Ms McLaughlin.

The following Members' votes were cast by their notified proxy in this Division:

Ms Bailey voted for Miss Woods.

Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster,

Mr Givan [Teller, Ayes], Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Beggs, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

Mr Dickson voted for Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle and Mr Muir.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Brogan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer [Tellers, Noes], Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan and Ms Sheerin.

Mr O'Toole voted for Ms Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Mallon, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin [Teller, Noes] and Mr McNulty.

Question accordingly negatived.

Mr Speaker: We will pause for one moment to ensure that all Members are back in the Chamber.

Question put, That amendment No 3 be made.

*The Assembly divided:
Ayes 37; Noes 49.*

AYES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beggs, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Stewart, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Ayes: Dr Aiken and Mr Givan.

NOES

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Ms Brogan, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McAleer and Ms McLaughlin.

The following Members' votes were cast by their notified proxy in this Division:

Ms Bailey voted for Miss Woods.

Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Givan [Teller, Ayes], Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Beggs, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

Mr Dickson voted for Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle and Mr Muir.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Brogan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer [Tellers, Noes], Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan and Ms Sheerin.

Mr O'Toole voted for Ms Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Mallon, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin [Teller, Noes] and Mr McNulty.

Question accordingly negatived.

Mr Speaker: We will pause for a moment allow Members to come back to the Chamber.

Do we have Tellers? Sorry, I am ahead of myself
[Laughter.]

Question put, That amendment No 4 be made.

*The Assembly divided:
Ayes 49; Noes 38.*

AYES

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Ms Brogan, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms McLaughlin and Mr Muir.

NOES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Stewart, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Noes: Dr Aiken and Mr Givan.

The following Members' votes were cast by their notified proxy in this Division:

Ms Bailey voted for Miss Woods.

Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Givan [Teller, Noes], Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Beggs, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

Mr Dickson voted for Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle and Mr Muir [Teller, Ayes].

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Brogan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan and Ms Sheerin.

Mr O'Toole voted for Ms Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Mallon, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin [Teller, Ayes] and Mr McNulty.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Ms Mallon: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Northern Ireland Assembly has declined again to give consent to Brexit and to the Tory Government's inferior trade deal. Will you now write to the Commons' Speaker and the Prime Minister to convey immediately the view of the Assembly?

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for that point of order. It was not really a point of order as such. However, that will be done. It is my intention to convey the results of today's sitting to the relevant authorities.

Main Question, as amended, put.

*The Assembly divided:
Ayes 47; Noes 38.*

AYES

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Ms Brogan, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms McLaughlin and Mr Muir.

NOES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Stewart, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Noes: Dr Aiken and Mr Givan.

The following Members' votes were cast by their notified proxy in this Division:

Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster,

Mr Givan [Teller, Noes], Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Beggs, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

Mr Dickson voted for Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle and Mr Muir [Teller, Ayes].

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Brogan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan and Ms Sheerin.

Mr O'Toole voted for Ms Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Mallon, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin [Teller, Ayes] and Mr McNulty.

Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly takes note of the trade and cooperation agreement between the United Kingdom and the European Union; rejects Brexit, in line with the democratically expressed view of the people of Northern Ireland; notes that this deal will mean new barriers to trade and other negative consequences for Northern Ireland's economy and society; and calls for the implementation of the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, positive efforts to make arrangements work for all the people of Northern Ireland, and for this Assembly to decline legislative consent to the British Government to impose the European Union (Future Relationship) Bill, their inferior trade deal and their Brexit against the will of the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: Before we move to the final item on the Order Paper, I want to thank all the members of staff who have been working over the past number of days to prepare for today's proceedings, in particular the staff in the Business Office and the Speaker's Office who have been doing a lot of the unseen work, liaising with the various parties and Members tabling the motion and amendments. I want to say a special thank you to all the staff who helped to facilitate the debate today, especially as they were on leave. We tried to promise staff before Christmas that they would be able to take their leave, so I will just leave that thought with you.

I thank all the Members for their contributions today. It was a healthy and mature debate that reflects on them very well., not only because of the complexity of the issues being debated, but also the manner in which they navigated through the difficulties of building public confidence.

I remind Members that the Business Committee has agreed that the Assembly should meet in plenary session tomorrow, and the sitting will commence at 11.00 am.

Adjourned at 3.52 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Thursday 31 December 2020

The Assembly met at 11.00 am (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Private Members' Business

COVID-19: Impact on School Opening

Mr Speaker: Members, having been given notice by not less than 30 Members, I have summoned the Assembly to meet today for the purpose of debating a motion on the impact of COVID-19 on school opening.

Mr McCrossan: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern reports that the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) may have recommended school closures; is deeply concerned by the number of deaths from COVID-19; recognises the concerns of teachers, pupils and parents; calls for urgent clarity from the Minister of Education on what work has been undertaken with the Department of Health on protecting schoolchildren, teachers, parents and the wider public from the spread of COVID-19; and further calls on the Minister of Education to outline the medical and scientific advice his Department has received and to explain whether he will consider additional mitigations, including a phased return or extended school closure, if this has been recommended by the medical and scientific advice.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours for the debate. The Member will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. One amendment has been selected and printed on the Marshalled List. As the amendment has been tabled by the proposers of the motion, I ask Mr McCrossan to move the amendment and to address both the motion and the amendment when opening the debate.

Mr McCrossan: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "mitigations" and insert:

"and protections, while welcoming the announcement today by the Minister detailing a phased return to schools and seeking assurances from the Minister on the work his Department will now undertake to ensure the safety of staff and pupils during the remainder of the pandemic."

Thank you, Mr Speaker, and thank you to the Members of the House who joined the SDLP in signing a recall petition that forced today's meeting of the Assembly. I recognise that it is New Year's Eve, and there are many other places that many of us would rather be than in the Chamber debating an issue that we have warned about for many, many weeks, if not months.

This is not a new pandemic. We are nearly a year into this public health crisis situation and yet, our Minister of Education is spiralling dangerously in one position without taking heed of the warnings from school leaders, the unions, politicians, parents and children and the public. He has continued — until 7.30 am this morning when a statement was released — to persevere with 4 January as the opening date for schools. That was always a dangerous position and one that many people had profound concerns about.

The situation with coronavirus has gotten very, very serious. Our communities are rife with infection. Every part of our community is concerned about how dangerously the situation is spiralling out of control. How this Minister felt, at any stage, that it was appropriate for schools to return on 4 January, given that we knew that infection rates would spiral out of control over Christmas, and how he suggested and stood over 4 January, is the reason that we are in this situation today. Our hands were tied and we were forced to this position.

At the outset, I want to say that we are in this position because of a Minister who continues to ignore everybody. We do not know who is advising this Minister, nor do we know what scientific or medical advice this Minister is following. I am pretty certain that, all along, we have been told that the incubation period for the virus is up to two weeks, yet this Minister wanted to return at least 30 children into a classroom in front of a teacher, which puts people at huge risk.

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): Will the Member give way?

Mr McCrossan: You will have your chance in a moment, Minister. I am making my point, thank you.

This Minister has forced us into a position where the Assembly has been recalled on New Year's Eve. That is why we are in this situation. Teachers, principals, school staff, parents and members of the community have all spoken out in outrage and with considerable anxiety, but yet it has taken, once again, a recall petition for this Minister to change his mind. It has taken Gavin Williamson to determine the English position for this Minister to determine the Northern Irish position. It is a totally reckless situation and it shows a Minister who is not in control of his own Department or brief. It shows a Minister who is more willing to follow a Conservative Government instead of putting the interests of our community first.

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for giving way, although the prospect of any decision being taken on the basis of what

he is saying rather than the scientific advice that I have got beggars belief.

I want to talk about the return to schools on 4 January. In the last 24 hours, there has also been a shift down South. Given the fact that, until yesterday, the Republic of Ireland took the same position on a return date, I wonder did the Member give the same advice with the same admonishment to his effective party colleagues in Fianna Fáil who, presumably, are in the same position.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Minister for the intervention. This is not a day to be playing with a table tennis ball. Lives are at risk — *[Interruption.]* Lives are at risk, Minister. Let me make a point; you cannot dare to compare with the leadership that has been shown by Minister Nora Foley in the south of this island. From the outset, she —

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCrossan: No, I will not, Minister.

Mr Weir: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. If the Member is referring to the Minister down South, it may be helpful if he got her name right. It is Norma rather than Nora.

Mr McCrossan: Minister, if you want to play about with us, people are watching today and they are very concerned about their children and their teachers. If you paid more attention to what they are saying instead of throwing balls across the room then maybe we would get somewhere.

The situation is very, very dangerous and serious and this Minister cannot compare with the South. Why? Because the Minister down there has shown great, profound leadership. She has put mitigations, protections and resources in place to protect children, teachers and classroom assistants and, in turn, their parents and families as well. However, this Minister is willing to die in the ditch for the transfer test — a glorious DUP agenda for which they were willing to sacrifice our grannies and grandas over the Christmas period when COVID has been rife.

Yet, we look to the South for leadership. Do you know why? Because that Minister stepped up and listened to the school leaders in her community. That Minister used extra public buildings to ensure that social distancing could be enforced.

That Minister also made face masks mandatory. That Minister employed more teachers, That Minister made sure that the classroom environment was safe. This Minister has done absolutely nothing. If he wants to go round the houses, Scotland has put in place measures to protect teachers, staff and children. Wales has done the same. Even the Minister in England, Gavin Williamson, whom our Minister looks up to so proudly, has put in place mitigations and protections.

We are in this situation simply because the Minister has failed to act. The Minister has ignored warnings for months and does not seem to believe that the virus can be carried home by children to their families. He does not believe that teachers are terrified. We are now in a situation where we must decide between the protection of children's education and their lives. That is a deplorable situation that we have been forced into by a Minister's inaction in the Assembly. I do not think it is enough.

To be clear, we do not want schools to close. No Member could safely say that they want that, but we want schools

to reopen safely with the mitigations, protections and resources in place that the Minister has failed to provide. I heard the Minister commenting over the last few days about special educational needs (SEN) and vulnerable children. I share his concerns, and I am glad that he shares the concerns of the many people who have expressed them to him, particularly in the Education Committee. I also share the position that special educational needs settings need to remain open. However, the Minister needs to put in place protections for the teachers, classroom assistants and others who will be in those rooms and will be directly exposed to the virus.

The situation is grave. We are back in the Chamber today because the Minister waited until 7.30 this morning to release a statement that practically repeated what the English Minister, Gavin Williamson, put out yesterday. Why cannot the Minister stand on his own two feet and listen to the teachers, principals and young people in our society and recognise that COVID is spiralling out of control? Even over the last week there have been hundreds of people under the age of 20 who have tested positive for the new variant of the virus. It is spreading throughout our community without control. Despite the record high rates of infection in communities across Northern Ireland and multiple schools and unions raising considerable concern, the Minister has failed to act.

In the Minister's statement of 21 December to the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response, he acknowledged that:

"options need to be developed that protect the education and safety of our children while combating the virus."

That sounded lovely, but there was nothing behind it. There has been no communication with schools, teachers or principals whatsoever, and they have been left again to the last minute by this last-minute Minister, who flips around at the last minute leaving teachers two days, in some instances, due to his statement this morning, to prepare to open parts of their schools for nursery places or special educational needs children. Two days? It is totally outrageous, and it is a failure of the Minister to put the interests of our children first.

The House is largely united. I would even argue that people in the Minister's party disagree with his position and his dithering on these important issues. I repeat, for the public, that this is not about closing schools, but anyone who thinks that schools will be safe to open on 4 January, which the Minister planned to do until 7.30 this morning, is mistaken. It is a serious failure on his part, and it would be a serious failure by us all were we not to hold him to account for it.

I also touch on resourcing. If the Minister were serious about protecting children's education, he would have acted sooner, but he has continued blindly to ignore the concerns of teachers and young people.

The Minister needs to get serious. Public confidence is at an all-time low, and, if he does not step up very soon, I will find myself on the same side.

Mr Newton: We all recognise the very serious health situation that is out there. In recognising that serious health situation, I want to pay tribute to the principals, teachers, support staff and, indeed, the boards of

governors in all of the schools, whose only main interest is the protection of the children and their education.

In these difficult days, we should also recognise the very serious work that is being done by the National Health Service, particularly those doctors and nurses who are working at the very sharp end of things. I thank every nurse and doctor who is in that front-line service.

11.15 am

I thank the Minister for his attendance today and, indeed, for his previous attendance in the Chamber and his willingness to attend the Committees on a regular basis and, indeed, to give generously of his time when he has attended the Committees, often extending that time to allow Committee members to pose questions and seek advice and answers from the Minister. In that context, it is disappointing that in a press statement to the 'Belfast Telegraph' the proposer of the motion referred to the Minister as ducking and diving. Peter Weir has never ducked and never dived: he has given generously of his time in this situation.

A Member: Appalling language.

Mr Newton: Appalling language, as my colleague has said.

I welcome the work of the Minister. Initially, in his work with the Department of Education, along with the Minister for Health, the Department of Health, the Education Authority and the Public Health Agency, he sought professional advice on handling the situation in our schools with the aim of keeping our pupils safe. The proposer of the motion referred to the Minister as only seeking advice from a Conservative Government. However, the motion calls on the Minister to seek advice from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies: I think that is a Government organisation. SAGE has offered advice, and, if I am not wrong on this, the Minister has indicated in his most recent statement that he seeks advice from Dr McBride and Professor Ian Young. I believe that Dr McBride and Professor Young also engage with SAGE as they go about their work.

On 21 December — and the proposer of the motion has referred to it — the Minister indicated that:

“the Executive agreed to a full return to school with mitigations, as soon as it was safe to do so”.

Within the Executive are, obviously, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, Minister Murphy, Minister Mallon, Minister Long and Minister Swann. So the Minister and the Executive agreed on the safe return to schools.

Mr McCrossan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Newton: I will give way.

Mr McCrossan: Will the Member please enlighten us as to what mitigations the Minister has put in place, because no one can seem to find the detail?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Newton: If you look at the end of the Minister's statement, you will see an indication of the direction in which the Minister is going and, indeed, the statement that you referred to this morning contains the further directions he is taking.

Indeed, the Minister indicated that the Executive, when considering the range of severe but necessary restrictions in the current circumstances, did not seek to close schools. The Minister, in his plans at that time, had the support of his Executive colleagues for his directions. Now, the situation is changing, and it is changing extremely quickly. We know that. We have seen the actions taken in England, Scotland, Wales and the Republic, and I commend the Minister for his response to the situation as it stands.

The motion is not unexpected. It is a serious situation that we are playing with, and I know that the Minister recognises its seriousness.

Ms Brogan: Sinn Féin is conscious of the impact that the initial wave of school closures had on the lives of our children and young people. At the time, the decision was not taken lightly, and it was taken in the interests of protecting public health and saving lives. Since the school restart in late August, we have been clear that the school setting is the best place to meet the social, developmental and educational needs of our children and young people. We are also aware that, for many, school is often a sanctuary, a place of safety and refuge for some of our most vulnerable children. Sinn Féin wants schools to be open, but it has to be demonstrably safe, sustainable and in line with the scientific and public health advice. Over the last number of months, Sinn Féin has been vocal in calling for scenario planning and contingency planning across all areas of education from examinations to blended learning. At every turn, the Minister dithered.

We welcome the announcement from the Minister this morning. Unfortunately, many questions remain unanswered, and school communities and families still await clarity. The Minister's proposals for remote learning will lead to further disadvantage and exacerbate an already uneven playing field.

Our GCSE students and their families cry out for clarity on the modules that they are due to sit. What measures are being put in place to ensure that pupils are supported in taking those exams at this difficult time? What will happen in the event that a child who should be sitting an exam is forced to self-isolate? The fact is that a distinct lack of contingency planning and preparedness has been a hallmark of Minister Weir's time in office throughout the pandemic. Asked about the work that he was doing in relation to the possibility of future school closures, the Minister remarked that he was not preparing for failure. I argue that failing to prepare was preparing for failure.

Teachers, principals and other essential school staff work tirelessly to maintain a safe school environment. In the absence of the necessary support from the Public Health Agency, they are taking on new roles as track-and-tracers. The pressure on our school communities has been immense. Schools have not had the luxury of decisive and strategic leadership from their Education Minister. In the Chamber, the Health Minister, Robin Swann, said:

“I do not believe that the return to school as normal in January is a sustainable position.”

The Education Minister's initial plan tinkered around the edges and lacked urgency and decisiveness. We need to see the advice and recommendations of the Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA) and the Chief Medical Officer

(CMO) in the Department of Health. We need to see exactly what mitigations are required for our schools to remain safe spaces for our children and the education workforce in the time ahead. The new strain and its increased transmissibility is of huge concern to school staff and families. They need reassurance and support, but, most of all, they need to see clear action from the Education Minister.

It is imperative that we do not see a roll-back of the statutory obligations in relation to provision for our children and young people with special educational needs. We must be cognisant of the role of special schools and the support that they provide to children and young people and their families. In the event of a new period of closures, the Minister and the Department must not allow those families to be left behind again. In addition, the Minister must ensure that measures are in place to protect and support the education and well-being of children who are designated as vulnerable.

There are no easy solutions to the problems that we face in relation to education provision during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, above all, we must endeavour to ensure the safety of our school communities and continuity of learning for our children and young people.

Mr Butler: At the outset, I want, on the record — I am sure that you will join me — to wish all those involved in the education sector a happy new year. 2020 was a remarkable year that will go down in all our memories and history as one that was tough, regardless of where you sat, what you worked at or what you did. It will have a lasting impact on us all, not least on our mental health to a greater or lesser degree. It has had an impact on everyone in the education sector: students, pupils, teachers, principals, bus drivers and those who work to create school meals. That is why good planning is necessary.

It is good to be here. Sadly, I believe that the debate could have been avoided if we had had the news sooner. Nonetheless, the news is welcome. The steps that the Minister proposes are welcome. Some of them will have been proposed to him previously. We must understand that we are not working in normal circumstances. We talk about risk assessment, but we are actually in times of dynamic risk assessment, which is totally different from risk assessment. We have to make the decisions as best we can, as has been said by the Member across the Chamber, with the medical and scientific advice to hand, and that changes rapidly. I believe that the Minister was in communication with the Health Minister on that recently. We have to learn from those instances where we can give people that information more quickly, because public confidence is ebbing. We are all responsible — not just the Ministers — for managing that. We all need to be cognisant — I will say this in the spirit of the time of year — of the mental health of every Minister.

Everyone will remember January 2020, when the Assembly came back. Each of the bigger parties had a choice of Departments. The DUP picked Economy and Education, because it believed those to be its priorities. Sinn Féin picked Finance and Communities. The SDLP picked Infrastructure. The Ulster Unionist Party picked Health. I will not condemn any party for picking what it picked. Those were the parties' priorities. Those were the priorities for the DUP. I believe that the Minister may have got some things wrong during his tenure — I am sure that

every Minister will have got some things wrong along the way — but what we need to do is ensure that we learn from them. I want to hear a commitment from the Minister at the end of this that he has listened and has looked at the motion, which I signed. I welcomed it because we need to give that leverage and see that change come. To err is human; to forgive, divine: I hope that the Minister can take that in the manner in which it is meant.

Mr McCrossan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Butler: Absolutely.

Mr McCrossan: I take the Member's point, but how many times are we to call the Minister to the House? What will it take for him to actually listen and learn his lessons?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Butler: Thank you. I thank the Member for his intervention. Perhaps, the Minister could respond to that. I hope that he does so in a positive manner.

There are still issues that we need to address. I will not waste any more time. I will just ask the Minister to address them. I have been inundated, as many Members will have been, because there are still uncertainties about the guidance that has been issued. I welcome the move for special schools. The Committee has met regularly about that sector and has a real passion to see it supported. With regard to special schools, what further mitigations can be put in place, especially around transport? As most of us will know, special schools are a challenging but worthwhile environment in which to work. However, two-metre social distancing is even more difficult to maintain in those instances. COVID is a live threat, so we need to ensure that those who work in those environments are protected.

The other issue relates to mainstream schools. Further clarification is needed with regard to children who have been statemented and those who are vulnerable. It is my understanding that they will have places in mainstream schools. Can we get confirmation of those mainstream places for children who have statements and children who come under the description of "vulnerable"? Perhaps, the Minister will clear that up in his speech or an intervention.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Butler: Yes.

Mr Weir: While there is a separate category of vulnerable children in special schools who are not counted under the definition of "vulnerable children", broadly speaking, children who have statements are counted under that definition. We found that a relatively small number came under the accurate definition of "vulnerable children" previously. It covers around 30,000 children.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister.

I will spend my last minute and a half on the issue of blended and remote learning. I have had a real concern about it from the start because our teachers have not been instructed in how to use blended and remote learning. They do their very best, and there have been some fantastic examples of it. However, we have digital poverty across Northern Ireland. A mother got in touch with me yesterday. She has five children of school age. She does not have five computers or phones. She has limited broadband. We are agreed that face-to-face teaching is best. In that regard, Minister, has there been an

assessment of the impact of remote and blended learning? What I would like to see is that the examination bodies do not test any of our pupils on anything that is learned at home and that everything that is tested is based on face-to-face teaching. I do not think that there is anybody in the House — the proposer of the motion covered this too — who does not desire to see our children in school, but we desire to see them in school safely.

On that, when the schools return in greater number post 11 January, can you give us confidence today that every mitigation that is possible can be put in place to keep our teachers safe and to give our pupils and parents confidence, with early indications of what they might be?

11.30 am

Mr Lyttle: Déjà vu, Mr Speaker. The Education Minister who does not want to meet the Education Committee, does not want to engage with the Assembly and does not, it seems, want to make decisions until Gavin Williamson has made his has today again been required to do so by a cross-party, cross-designation Assembly recall for the second time in less than two weeks. It is difficult for me to speak on behalf of the Education Committee today, given that the Education Minister's statement on the important matter of school restart was made via broadcast and social media at approximately 7.00 am on 31 December with no prior engagement with the Education Committee. I am able to say that, for weeks, Education Committee members have expressed serious concern about the Minister's approach to school restart and, in the Assembly on 21 December, called for a phased school restart.

We now have a statement with which to engage, so, speaking as Alliance education spokesperson, I will say this: pausing school-based learning is, of course, a measure of last resort and reflects the seriousness of the situation that we are in. As a community, we must adhere to the regulations to drive down the transmission of the virus to help our children to attend school, but the Education Minister's stubborn refusal to engage the advice of school leaders and, indeed, scientific and medical experts in a timely manner leads to decisions and announcements of this nature that make contingency planning for teachers and for parents distressingly difficult. The decisions should have been taken before the end of term. Our dedicated teaching and non-teaching staff have been left with only one day to prepare for remote and key-worker provision from next week. The Minister has to accept that that approach has to change direction.

The statement has left many more questions than it has given answers. I ask the Minister to be willing to attend an emergency meeting of the Education Committee to deal with those in more detail, but I will endeavour to ask some today.

Mr Sheehan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyttle: I will give way briefly, yes.

Mr Sheehan: Thank you very much. Does the Member agree that it does not help parents and children when the Minister is so categorical and definitive in his statements that schools will open in the first week of January, instead of saying that we will assess the situation, take the medical and scientific advice and act on that?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for his intervention. Yes, I think that that is at the heart of what the Assembly is saying: engage with parents, engage with school leaders and engage with Members of the Assembly to heed those concerns, rather than continuing to adopt this stubborn, dogmatic approach on these extremely dynamic issues.

I ask the Education Minister to outline the scientific and medical basis for the decisions announced today: for example, why four weeks' remote learning for years 8 to 10 and none for special schools, preschools and childcare? Why one week for exam years, with the option, it seems, of no weeks for exam years being given to schools as well? Why one day to prepare for the new arrangements? Will there be, as a previous Member asked, an option for some degree of weekly review, given the seriousness of the situation that we find ourselves in? Will there be extra measures to protect children and adults in special schools? Will there be priority vaccination for teaching and non-teaching staff in schools, particularly in special schools?

Has the Education Minister established the vulnerable children reference group, as recommended by the Education Committee? Will clinically vulnerable children and adults be attending school or is there shielding advice for those in such categories? Why is year 11 not considered to be an exam year? What has the Department of Education done to ensure that every child experiences equal educational opportunity via remote or school-based learning under these arrangements? What enhanced testing and tracing is going to be put in place? How can the Education Minister effectively suspend school-based operations until 11 January for so many of our children and yet support the sitting of transfer tests on 9 January? How can those tests fairly, safely and legally proceed? That is a legitimate question, it is focussed on this year alone and parents have not received a satisfactory answer to that or the question of what the contingency plan is for any child who is unable to sit tests due to a COVID-related absence or after there is further clarification on clinical vulnerability.

The Minister also said that he would extend the use of face coverings, improve compliance on the wearing of face coverings on school buses and devise messaging to improve responsible behaviour among young people. Has he delivered on those issues swiftly as he said he would? There are many, many issues to address here —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Lyttle: — and I hope that the Minister can do that today.

Mr M Bradley: I thank the Minister for attending today, as he has done on many occasions. There are calls for a change of attitude, but we all need to examine our attitudes in this place; there are more than the Minister in this place who need to change their attitudes.

Many teachers have been in contact with me to urge that children be kept at school. Many have expressed the opposite viewpoint. Opinion amongst parents is also divided. For some parents, their children not being at school will have a detrimental impact on their incomes. Many parents work in essential services, fitting their part-time working arrangements around school times. Therefore, no matter what the Minister announced here today, he was not going to please everyone. There is no one-size-fits-all solution.

I ask for consideration of the needs of vulnerable children and children who have educational statements; can we afford to interrupt their schedules again? For children and young people who suffer from autism, ADHD or other complex needs, school is a necessary routine and is often the only respite that some parents have. The needs of those children and young people must be given careful consideration.

There are other issues that are a priority. The top priority is education but there is also preparing children for the next stage of their development, whether it is for examinations, transfer from primary to post-primary education, further education or young people going out into employment. Vital learning, development time and experience has been lost.

Going home from here last night, I drove past the local football field. There was a group of children playing in the multi-use games area under floodlights, about nine or 10 of them, and I thought, "What's the impact of all this COVID-19 on the mentality of our young people, on their mental health and on their physical well-being?". We have to take that into consideration too. There were about nine or 10 of them, but I ask that that be taken into consideration as well.

Schools take thousands of children under their care and nurturing every day. For some, it is an escape, perhaps from abuse at home, and for others it is an opportunity to have at least one full meal in the day. There is no one-size-fits-all solution; no matter what the Minister does, he will please some and disappoint others.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that we are in this dangerous position because the Minister has not put in place the necessary mitigations, protections and resources to ensure that schools can continue?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr M Bradley: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Member for that intervention. Being on the Education Committee, he should be fully aware of all the commitments that the Minister has given, financially and otherwise.

Has anyone assessed the role of child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) lately? I imagine that its workload has increased dramatically during the pandemic. Does it have the staff and the resources to cope?

I provide no answers, only questions, and I do not for one minute underestimate the thankless task that the Minister has in trying to navigate the many complex issues that the pandemic has caused to the education of our children, young people and adults. None of it is of the Minister's making. We are all in this together. We are all trying to make decisions that benefit those who send us here to represent them. My appeal is that we do what is best for all of our children and, in doing so, make every effort to consider the impact that our decisions will have, especially on vulnerable children and children who have educational statements. We must endeavour to give clarity and support, including transport, for children, their parents and teachers.

There is no normal in these abnormal times. As we peer through the mist of uncertainty, there is no abnormal answer to make normal again.

Mr Gildernew: I welcome the decision that the Minister has made, although it is very late in the day. Surely, the same information was available 10 days ago which would have allowed schools to plan better. However, we are operating in the overall context of significant and growing health concerns. In that context —

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gildernew: Yes.

Mr Weir: I appreciate that we are in a moving situation and that the need for additional measures has largely arisen out of the situation post-Christmas. From the chronology of events — I was going to deal with this later — we were contacted on Tuesday evening by the Minister of Health, the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and the Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA) to say that there needed to be a change compared with where we were, and we have been working with them since then. It is difficult, if you like, to retrofit something prior to that when there has been a request for a further change at that particular point.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Gildernew: I thank the Minister for that intervention.

We are dealing with a situation where yesterday, in the past 24 hours, we have had 2,143 cases. That is 40% of all tests that are coming back as positive. We are looking at two significant mutations: one that emerged in the south of England and one in South Africa, both of which, potentially, have a considerable impact on younger people in terms of transmissibility and the effect and impact on them, and that is very worrying. While we all value education and want to see our children in schools, no more so than teachers themselves, we must recognise that schools are part of our community. They are vulnerable to and part of the transmission of the virus, and we need to take all of the steps that we are taking to recognise that.

We need to know, Minister, what the health and scientific advice is beyond 11 January and when you received the advice about when to open schools. While we all want to see schools open, it must be absolutely safe for them to do so and they must operate in a way that is safe.

At the start of the pandemic, the World Health Organisation issued guidance. Mike Ryan, in particular, said that the enemy in dealing with a virus in a pandemic is delay and that you have to act fast. That advice applies to education just as it does to health.

Too often, we have responded slowly here. We have seen where, at times, we have been too slow to close schools when it was necessary and to deal with the exam situation. We have been too slow at times — and still are — to put in place a proper find, test, trace, isolate and support system that is effective across the community and that supports the continuing educational needs and does not put teachers and children in vulnerable situations. We have been slow to see a blended learning approach being used, which schools are ready and welcome to embrace, in order to prevent further increases in the transmission of COVID-19.

Minister, this is in the context where we have fully devolved education and health systems. We have the opportunity to move quickly, to be agile and to take measures which are appropriate to what is happening here and to the needs of our community. We have, at times, squandered that ability.

We need to see more appropriate steps being taken and taken faster in what we are doing here. If we are delaying the reopening of schools, that delay needs to be for a purpose. We need to be doing things with the time that we are putting in place.

So, we need to see better space within schools. We need access to remote or blended learning to be made available to all to ensure that we do not increase inequalities in education, as we have seen increasingly in health. Ventilation issues need to be addressed in schools. As I mentioned earlier, the test and trace system needs to be put in place in schools to let them get on with education and to allow the public health authorities to deal with find, test and trace.

11.45 am

We need to see all those things happening. Too often, we have waited for others to lead and we have then followed that lead. First of all, we should be leading for ourselves — with the devolved powers that we have, there is no reason why we cannot do that. However, to follow England, which has one of the worst track records in the world, is a crucial mistake. We need to tailor our solutions to the situation that we are facing.

To finish, Minister, in the Irish language, the word for Minister is Aire, as you may or may not know; you will hear it occasionally here in the Chamber. The word is Aire. Aire has two other meanings in the Irish language, and they are relevant here. The second meaning is to take care of someone or to protect them. The third meaning of Aire is to listen to, to pay heed to or to pay attention to advice. Minister, we need you absolutely to be a Minister in every sense of the word.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for coming to the House and for coming to the Education Committee on countless occasions. I am not sure where the myth that the Minister does not make himself available to the Committee has come from. It is simply not true, and I thank the Minister for his attendance. I also congratulate Mr Derek Baker, who recently retired from the position of permanent secretary in the Department of Education and who did so much for our young people's education across Northern Ireland, for the honour that he received in Her Majesty's New Year's Honours List that was announced last night.

COVID has presented challenges to all across our nation. Indeed, no home has been left untouched, some of them tragically with the loss of life. Slowing down and the elimination of this awful pandemic must be our aim, and we surely must work together to do so. Collaborative working across government is essential. The pandemic has forced many Ministers across jurisdictions into the most difficult and unenviable choices. The view of the education sector on school closures is uppermost, I believe, in the Minister's thoughts and decision-making. I commend all Ministers. Surely we are all, sadly, too keen and too swift to criticise, and in this House in particular. As I have said in Committee, I find that, sometimes, members are keen to criticise Ministers from other parties, as opposed to their own. Each and every Minister has difficult decisions to make.

As a governor in two schools, I commend the principals, teachers, classroom assistants and all who are involved in the day-to-day running of our schools for the work that

they have done across education in Northern Ireland. I also commend school governors for the difficult decisions that they have had to make. Each and every one of them is to be thanked and commended by the young people and their parents for the role that they have played and the leadership that they have provided in our community.

Like many Members, as stated by Mr Bradley, I have received much correspondence on the issue from teachers, trade unions and parents. It is fair to say that it is a mixed bag. As with everything, Ministers are faced with difficult challenges and competing choices, and COVID presents them with a particularly difficult challenge. Many share the view that children are best placed in the classroom. I agree with that, not just for their education but for their general well-being, mindfulness, social interaction and development. I share that view and I would like to think that that view is shared across the House. Others take the view that remote learning can and does work. I have no doubt that it can and does, given the right circumstances, familial support, technology, space and environment, but what of those young children who cannot have those resources and that support in place?

Recently, I became aware of a young couple in north Belfast who have three children with autism. They were terrified that schools might be closed and the effect that that would have on their young children who need that routine each day. So I commend the Minister for the decision that he has made on special educational needs, given the young family that I referred to, the challenges that they were facing and the fears that they had for their children.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for giving way. Special educational needs is, obviously, an issue that the Education Committee has prioritised. The return to special schools on Monday 4 January will, however, cause some concern, particularly for staff. Does the Member agree that testing, vaccination and additional support for our special schools are needed to ensure the safety of all the children and young people in them?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Humphrey: Yes. That is something that we have discussed in Committee, and its members have all agreed on that point before. I thank the Member for his intervention, and I do not think that anyone in the House would disagree with him.

The motion calls for the Education Minister to clarify the work that has been undertaken with the Department of Health to protect children, teachers, parents and the wider public from COVID-19. We all must see greater working and collaboration across government; the virus demands it. As I have said before, it is a balance. Many families, particularly young families, are struggling. Many employers will face difficult and hard choices, and many lives and livelihoods will be affected negatively when the furlough scheme comes to an end.

The new strain, which, it appears, spreads particularly among younger people, poses a new threat. Government needs to be nimble and reactive in a way that it has never been before, even during the pandemic over the last 10 months. There are many difficult choices, and government must be responsive and responsible in making those choices. Therefore, a close, meaningful and ongoing relationship between the Department of Education and the

Department of Health is not only desirable in the interests of the people of Northern Ireland but essential. This is a highly dangerous situation. Everyone across government must be flexible and responsive. Yesterday, 2,100 of our people tested positive for the virus. Far too many people have lost their life, and too many families have been affected.

Of course, the other pandemic facing Northern Ireland is that of mental health and general well-being. That is a huge and growing issue in our community, as many families — young families in particular — and parents face the challenges not just of education but of poverty, food shortages, loss of employment and the loss of opportunities to generate wealth. Those things threaten our community —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Humphrey: — and they require government at all levels to work in a cross-cutting way. I wish the Minister and his colleagues well, but this is something that has to be tackled by everyone in the House being responsible.

Ms Flynn: I support the motion and, in particular, the call for clarity from the Education Minister on the return of schools in January. The Education Minister has very recently provided some clarity on the return of schools. The announcement of the decision not to open primary and post-primary schools next week in light of the deteriorating COVID-19 pandemic situation, however belated, is important, and I welcome it.

Sinn Féin has consistently said that we will follow the scientific and health advice in how we respond to the pandemic, and that applies in the context of schools reopening. It is important to recognise that health is not just physical but mental and that we need to protect the mental health and well-being of children and that of their parents and all school staff as well as their physical health in school settings during the pandemic.

In October 2020, the youth well-being survey found that rates of anxiety and depression were around 25% higher in the North compared with Britain. There were differences between the most deprived areas and the least deprived areas. That is really stark, especially when we already know that COVID-19 has had a disproportionate impact on deprived communities here. Some children will undoubtedly have experienced anxiety during the pandemic when they have already spent many weeks away from their school, their friends and their normal study routine. They will have been worried about how to prepare for exams and the implications that that might have for them without that support from their friends, who may have had similar worries. They are unable to communicate with one another in the way that kids would be used to.

Similarly, anxiety is experienced by those with children who have special educational needs. It has already been mentioned in the Chamber that those kids need the routine of school, which is really important in their lives. There will also be anxiety among those for whom childcare in the absence of school will be problematic. There is also considerable anxiety for pupils, parents and teachers who are or who live with clinically vulnerable people as they go to school every day, while cases of COVID in the North increase significantly. In addition, we need to consider the implications of the spread of the virus for us all, including the added risk, as has been mentioned, from the new

strains of COVID-19, particularly the one that has gripped Britain.

There are no easy answers with regard to school openings during the current wave of the virus. However, the ongoing confusion and slowness in decision-making in the Department of Education compounds some of the stress and anxiety that is already being experienced by children, parents and school staff. The Minister's recent statement provides some clarity in the short term with regard to the first week of the school term, but there is much uncertainty about the way forward and what contingencies will be put in place for schools, particularly in the event of the situation deteriorating further. Hopefully, that will not happen.

A few Members have said — it is referred to in the motion — that the Education Minister needs to be really clear with parents and school leaders with regard to the scientific and public health advice that he has received from the Department of Health. He needs to say what that specific advice was and when he received it. The health and scientific advice must be the basis of our approach. As I said, it will protect us not just from the physical impact of the coronavirus but also the mental health of our young people, parents, families and all the school staff.

Mr McNulty: I thank you, Mr Speaker and all the Members who supported the SDLP recall petition, which allows us to hold the Minister to account on this most important issue.

We must take a moment to thank our teachers and school staff. We should put ourselves in their shoes, going daily into a classroom with 30-plus pupils, fearing for their own health and the health of their families. They still do it because they believe passionately in educating our young people. Those teachers, school staff and principals should be applauded.

It is abhorrent that we are discussing this on New Year's Eve. We have been banging the drum on the issues over and over again at the Education Committee, at Ad Hoc Committees, at the Minister's Question Time and via written questions to the Minister. We have not had the answers, and it is sad that it has come to this.

I am really worried about the vulnerable and at-risk children whose safe haven is school, those with special educational needs, those who do not have educational support at home and those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. I worry about the mental, emotional and physical health of our children and young people. We all recognise that the best place for children is school, but we also recognise that the galloping COVID figures have forced this move.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he also recognise that the reason we are in this situation is that the Minister has not acted quickly enough throughout the pandemic to put in place mitigations, protections and resources so that schools can continue educating our children in a safe environment?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr McNulty: I absolutely agree.

As recently as last week — just over a week ago — I was banging this drum again, asking you, Minister, what the mitigations and the contingency plans were. That detail has not been forthcoming and still is not there. I ask you

again, Minister: what are the mitigations you will put in place to allow children to be educated safely and keep safe teachers and school staff, families and parents? What are the resources?

Mr Newton: Will the Member give way?

Mr McNulty: Of course.

Mr Newton: I know that the Member shares my concern for children who are at school on a regular basis but are at risk in their own home. There are 2,000 such children across Northern Ireland. The Member will have noticed the Barnardo's adverts, where a child pleads to be allowed to return to school.

Will the Member agree with me that the partnership with Health, as explained by the Minister, should be extended to include the beefing-up or increased professionalism of the family intervention teams in Health and Education to address the issue of at-risk children?

12.00 noon

Mr McNulty: I thank the Member for his contribution. I fully agree. However, the Minister must take responsibility for that as well. The Minister is responsible for ensuring that every child is safe. He has a role to play in ensuring every child is safe.

Minister, in terms of the transfer test, I applaud the brave moves of the principals in Newry: the Abbey Christian Brothers, St Colman's College, Our Lady's Grammar School and the Sacred Heart Grammar School. They made an early and brave decision when it was not popular in many quarters, but it was the right decision. Now, we have heard much about a level playing field. How is there a level playing field across this part of the island? There was a lack of leadership and consistency and, Minister, that is down to you.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr McNulty: I am sorry, I cannot give way. I am running out of time.

Minister, it is fair to say that you have not put children first. You have put your political allegiances first. We needed leadership and a consistent approach, and that has not happened.

What pressure are you bringing to bear on the Health Minister to ensure that teaching staff are prioritised for vaccinations to enable schools to get back to open normally as quickly as possible? What pressure have you brought to bear on the Health Minister to ensure that prioritisation, especially for staff in special schools?

There is a widening education gap. How will that be addressed, Minister? Parents are now at home with their heads in their hands because they recognise the impact this closure will have on their children, especially those children with special educational needs. Parents see their children falling further behind. Minister, what additional resources will you bring to bear to help those children to catch up? What additional resources will you give to support teachers to enable those children to catch up? What additional resources will you put in place to support children whose mental, emotional and physical health has been adversely impacted by the pandemic and this latest closure? I recognise that the closure is necessary,

but what additional resources will be brought forward to help teachers and staff ensure that children can catch up and that their mental, physical and emotional health has not been too adversely impacted? Minister, I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Nesbitt: I declare an interest as chair of the board of Movilla High School in Newtownards. I want to put on record my admiration for the principal, Mr Bell, the senior leadership team, the teachers and the non-teaching staff for providing a continuity of teaching and learning through this health crisis.

I do wonder what this session is intended to achieve. Is it just to give the Minister a verbal beating? If it is, fair enough, I suppose that that is part of the political mix, and I know there are many who think that the Minister deserves a verbal beating. However, surely there is more to it than that.

When we sit in Committee, as we all do, we have a statutory duty to assist and advise Ministers in their work. I would like to assist and advise this Minister, but it is essential to have a little bit more information about his thinking. For example, as I understand it, his original intention was that children would go back to school for a couple of weeks to allow teachers to prepare to deliver remote learning. However, now, because of changing circumstances, they get two days to prepare for remote learning. In his remarks, can the Minister expand on his thinking about that change, and the impact and challenge that it presents to teachers, such as the teachers I represent at Movilla High School?

The second issue is a concern about whether the transfer test will go ahead as scheduled. We are all used to risk assessment graphs where the horizontal axis assesses how likely an adverse event is to happen: 0, being not likely; 5, being almost certain. The vertical axis assesses the impact should it happen: 0, being not very likely and 5, being, potentially, calamitous.

I would like to know where the dot is in the Department's risk assessment of those exams not going ahead, because I suspect that we are much closer to it being where 5 meets 5 than where 0 meets 0. I would really appreciate the Minister's saying where the dot is and what the contingency plan is should this come to pass. That is very important to us, particularly the Committee chaired by Mr Lytle, in being able to assist and advise the Minister.

Mr Butler: Will the Member give way?

Mr Nesbitt: I will.

Mr Butler: On that point about testing, does the Member agree that another question that primary schools will want to be answered is on whether they can open to provide help to children who may sit the test very soon?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank my colleague for his intervention. I look forward to the Minister's addressing that as well.

I will not use all my time, but I want to raise just one other issue, and it is in regard to following scientific and medical advice. I note that some politicians are saying today that teachers should be prioritised for the COVID-19 vaccine. Of course I would like teachers to get the vaccine as soon as possible — I would like everybody to get it as soon as possible — but, in the real world, we have to have a list,

and we have to have priorities. If we are truly to follow the scientific and medical advice, we must follow the advice of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI). I will read what it says into the record:

"The Committee considered evidence on the risk of exposure and risk of mortality by occupation. Under the priority groups advised below, those over 50 years of age, and all those 16 years of age and over in a risk group, would be eligible for vaccination within the first phase of the programme. This prioritisation captures almost all preventable deaths from COVID-19, including those associated with occupational exposure to infection. As such, JCVI does not advise further prioritisation by occupation during the first phase of the programme."

That is the clear, open, transparent scientific and medical advice. Are we following it? Or do we follow it only when it suits a party political agenda?

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Member for giving way. I am glad that he raised the issue of the JCVI advice. There is an official list and scientific backing of the order in which people will be offered or will receive the vaccine. It is worth mentioning that one solution would be, as far as possible, to speed up the vaccination process. Does he agree that the House should be supporting the Minister of Health and giving him every resource that he needs to roll out the vaccine much more quickly? The process is already quick, which is very welcome, but, with a bit more resource and a bit more thought behind it, it could be quicker so that everybody who wants the vaccine could receive it even sooner than planned.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for her intervention. I support the Minister 100%, and I know that Mr Swann will roll out the vaccine as quickly as he can. With the full support of his ministerial colleagues in the Northern Ireland Executive, it will be quicker.

I will finish by wishing the House, and, indeed, society, a happy new year and a happier 2021. Mr Humphrey was modest when congratulating Mr Baker. Mr Humphrey is also on the New Year's Honours List, and I congratulate him on that. Members, let us work together on this. Happy new year.

Mr O'Dowd: It is a very sad day. It is a very worrying day. The fact that we are closing our schools again is an acknowledgement that, despite the measures taken, COVID-19 is rapidly spreading in our society. Many vulnerable people are at risk of dying, and our health service is at risk of being overrun, if it is not already being overrun. At the end of an awful year, this day marks what the year has been about: missed opportunities, lives put on hold and lives lost.

I am a father and a legislator. When I look at my children, I am worried about them. I am worried about them missing out on education, and I worry about their mental health and well-being.

My children are lucky because they are in a loving, caring family. The heating will be on today. There is food in the cupboard. They will have access to electronic devices for their education. However, the reality is that there are thousands of children who do not have those luxuries. Well, food is not a luxury; it is a right. Heating is a right.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Member for giving way. He makes a salient point. The point that a principal in my constituency made to me was that, for many of those children, school is the only normality in their day, unfortunately. It is where, as another Member said, they get their only square meal of the day. We need to be mindful of those issues when those very difficult decisions are made. All those issues must be taken into consideration.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr O'Dowd: I must declare an interest as the vice-chairperson of a board of governors.

I am very concerned about where society is going with regard to COVID-19 infection rates. My colleague the Chairperson of the Committee for Health pointed out that there have been missed opportunities; in particular, the failure to put in place a proper test-and-trace regime in society. In my opinion, that has led to continued, wider spread of the virus.

To anyone who is planning a New Year's Eve party tonight, I will be perfectly honest: I hope that the police knock on your door. You are putting yourselves and other members of society at risk. You are denying children their education. If you are planning a party, I say: please, do not do it. If you do, the police have every right to knock on your door and you should be duly dealt with through the legal process. How dare you place society's health at risk? How dare you deny our children their education?

We, as legislators, have responsibilities as well. The Minister has responsibilities in this. He may be familiar with this quote: we are "condition-led, not calendar-led". That was the DUP's battle cry in 2006 during the negotiations that led to the re-establishment of these institutions. However, it would now appear that the DUP is calendar-led. To have set a date and time for schools to return on 4 January was not realistic. We have seen it time and time again. We saw it after the summer break, in October and again in November, when the DUP set dates in time, said restrictions would be lifted on such and such a date, and said that there would be only a two-week lockdown. Folks, the COVID-19 virus does not work to school timetables. It is not realistic for the Minister to say that schools will reopen in normal fashion in one, two or three weeks' time. The Minister must plan for the potential that schools will remain closed for a significant period. That must be planned for. The DUP, in general, must accept that we may be in restrictions for a significant period, and that setting a date in the calendar will not work for us. So let us work on that basis.

The reason that I say that the Minister must plan for it is this: blended learning. What is it? What does it mean in reality for many young people out there? Parents are educators, but they are not teachers. They cannot be expected to be children's teachers. We rely on the teaching profession for that. It needs support to be able to provide online learning to pupils. That online learning also needs to be quality controlled. It needs to be checked for quality. We need to ensure its quality delivery into children's homes. Therefore, the Minister has a lot of planning to do. He must not think for one second that schools will open on a date because he has said it.

What concerns me most is this: the Minister has set his agenda with regard to the transfer tests on 9 January. For

generations, the education system was planned around the 11-plus. We reached the stage where, for a certain part of the year, a section of the class was sat at the back of the classroom with colouring books and pencils and was told to colour in while the rest of the class were educated. I ask the Minister: please, do not go back to that mentality. We now have an education system in the middle of the COVID-19 crisis that is being directed towards the needs of the minority instead of the majority. Many say that we have to follow the scientific advice in relation to COVID. They are absolutely right. Why do we not follow the evidence in relation to academic selection? Why do we not listen to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr O'Dowd: — the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Equality Commission and the Human Rights Commission? It is time to educate everyone, not just a few.

12.15 pm

Ms Armstrong: I have not written a speech because, to be honest, I have received so many emails from parents over the last few days that my head was spinning, so all I can do is declare an interest as the parent of a pupil in an exam year and as a member of the boards of governors of Strangford College and of Portaferry Integrated Primary School.

What I can say as a parent of an exam year student is that mental health is a problem for our young people. I absolutely agree that they should be in school when they are safe to be in school, but the mental health of teenagers is being fundamentally harmed by the dithering and the not knowing and the trying to guess what the heck is going to come next. COVID is at the core of all of this, but Minister, honestly, it is time to take leadership and be clear and honest with our pupils and our teachers.

Today is the last working day before schools are returning and today is the day that our heads and teachers get the announcement. I think that we owe them an apology. As an Assembly we should be saying sorry for putting that pressure on our teachers because tomorrow will not be a bank holiday for them and it will not be a celebration of New Year's Day. They will be planning what the heck is going to happen next week.

I am quite happy to say sorry to our teachers, to our classroom assistants and to those pupils. It was left far too late for this decision. Scotland and Wales were able to plan ahead but we had to wait until Westminster finally gave the go-ahead before we did something here.

I will take everyone back to the scientific advice or the information that has been called for in the motion. I ask you, Minister, to give us an outline of the scientific and medical advice that you have been provided with, including what SAGE said in December. I also ask you to clarify the work that you have been doing with the Minister of Health, and I thank you for that. Mr Bradley referred to CAMHS. Where is it, because, to be honest, I cannot get a hold of it for love nor money? I appreciate that CAMHS is underfunded. It is up to the Executive to ensure that CAMHS has enough funding.

Our pupils are looking for mental health support and we cannot even get it through schools because the family support networks that were put in place for those people are not there, because of COVID. I ask you to clarify what the medical and scientific advice is.

Can I also ask you about the vaccination programme? Mr Nesbitt mentioned it earlier. I consider teachers to be key workers, in particular teachers of children with special educational needs. They are key workers. They are the very people who are working with some of the most vulnerable children across society. Where are they on the lists? Where are they on the vaccination programme? Will you please clarify what work has been done with Health to discuss those teachers, because those pupils are going back next week and will be in school? Some of those pupils have both physical and mental health issues and some of those children can be very ill. To catch COVID is life ending. Why has the vaccination programme not included them? To those who talk about the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) — if I have got that right — Northern Ireland is not included on that list. We are taking note of it and we are following that advice. Northern Ireland can actually change its vaccination priorities to include special educational needs teachers and classroom assistants.

The other thing, Minister, is that you talk about vulnerable children. I am very glad to see that there will be support for vulnerable children. However, I speak day in and day out, including weekends, with parents of children who cannot get educational psychologist support to have a statement made, so those children are being denied access to schools. They are not being classified as vulnerable children. They do not have the opportunity because they are not getting access to educational psychologists. We know that you are recruiting more, but, my goodness, this is just so frustrating. Our special educational needs schools are some of our most oversubscribed. In particular, I will mention Killard House School, a fabulous school that could be filled four times over. Where do those children go? They go into mainstream and if they cannot get a statement, that is it — they are left out.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for giving way. Will the Member also agree that mitigations around school transport, particularly special school transport, will be essential to limit the transmission of the virus?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

To be honest, it gets my geek up when you start talking about transport. When somebody has their head right at the knee of a person in order to attach their wheelchair to the floor of a bus, of course they are coming into close contact so why would they not receive a vaccine?

As has been mentioned by others, GCSEs are starting from 11 January, and we still do not know what the COVID tariff will be. Minister, has the CCEA provided you with any contingency plans? That is one thing that would finally help some of those teenagers who are driving their parents to distraction. What is happening with that COVID tariff? We have a week now in which those pupils may or may not be in school; whether there will be any classes for those children depends on their school as there will be remote learning.

So, there are a lot of questions, which is why I am glad that we are debating the motion, although I am sad that we had to bring the Minister to the House in this way. It is a difficult time for everyone, but it is time that we recognised that our teachers have just been put under some of the most intense levels of stress that we could ever have put them under. We did not have to do that; we could have said before Christmas that we knew rightly that this was going to happen because we knew that there were going to be problems. Minister, I ask you today to please give us some clarity, please explain exactly what that medical advice was and please be fair to our pupils.

Mr McGrath: First of all, I want to highlight that I am saddened, dismayed and somewhat depressed that we are having to have this debate. The Minister has had to be proverbially trailed here, kicking and screaming. This is the third time that the Minister has had to be brought back to the House to discuss the decisions that he has or has not taken, much to the dismay of those who are working in the various sectors. That reflects that the Minister is failing the sector that he is here to protect

A recall, as we know, is used when a Minister is not listening, is not doing what is reasonably asked of them and is refusing to listen to logic and sense. I fear that, in this instance, we have a Minister who is out of touch, out of his depth and out of tune with the thoughts and concerns of the people in the education sectors, namely the parents, the teachers, the support staff, the unions and, indeed, the children.

The Minister told us up until 7.30 this morning that schools are safe places. He said that schools are the best places for our children and that hard-working parents need somewhere to send their children. The Minister stated at the last meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee that schools were not safe places, yet he has now introduced a number of changes that go nowhere near far enough to address the issues that parents, principals, teachers, unions and children have highlighted. Minister, you are failing them all. His argument for delivering education in the classroom could work if he and his Department did something — anything — to help make those schools safer than anywhere else.

Ms Hunter: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that, in many ways, what has happened is too little, too late?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McGrath: I thank the Member for her intervention. That is pretty much the mantra of the Minister: too little, too late. That is what we have seen throughout the 10 months of the pandemic.

The special needs sector is a specific strand of the educational establishment and is quite bespoke in its delivery. Parents, principals and teachers from that sector have raised their concerns and want to see them addressed too. I welcome that the special needs sector will open on Monday, because much of its work is as much therapeutic as it is educational, but it needs to have its questions answered too. What protections are there for the staff in that sector? Are there any special mitigations for them? Is transportation being delivered correctly and safely? Figures released yesterday indicate that three times as many cases of COVID in special needs schools are among the staff than are among the children. So, what

is being done to protect the staff in that sector? As ever, we see half a decision from the Minister, which leaves us with more questions than answers.

What of the children who have special needs but attend mainstream schools? What protections are in place for them? When do they restart? What will they do next week? If they do not attend next week, what do they do at home? What extra support is in place for them? Again, we get half a decision that leaves us with more questions than answers, which is totally failing the children of Northern Ireland.

It is worth remembering that we do not want to see schools closing. The SDLP is not here to shut schools; quite the opposite. We want to see schools opened, but done so safely. For those that must reopen, as directed by today's ministerial decision, how do our principals prepare to reopen safely on Monday? Today is New Year's Eve, tomorrow is New Year's Day and then it is the weekend. One principal contacted me today and said, "Pass on our thanks to the Minister for managing to wreck whatever New Year's Eve principals were going to have with their families". He is failing the sector, once again, with last-minute, knee-jerk reactions, rather than being planned and strategic.

The Minister would do well to remember an old adage: he has two ears and one mouth because he is expected to do twice as much listening as talking. I suggest that the Minister goes out and engages with the principals, teachers, unions, parents and even the pupils. There is a secondary-school students' union that is headed up by one of my constituents Cormac Savage. Listen to what those students are saying.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member agree that it is regrettable that the Minister of Education waited until yesterday to engage with the Minister of Health, the CMO and the CSA regarding reducing the risk of COVID in schools, particularly after warnings for weeks from the Education Committee and Members of the House?

Mr Speaker: The Member has already had an extra minute. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McGrath: I thank the Member for his intervention. We hear time and time again from the sector that it is too little, too late. They are not being given the time to prepare and deliver. If you engage with all those sectors, you will hear what they are saying, and it is the same as us. We want schools to reopen but we want them to be safe. We want our children to learn but not to compromise their safety to do so. We want them to be educated but not in a manner that endangers their educators. We want them to learn, and the Minister needs to learn too. Stop failing the education sector, learn to listen to it and do the right thing.

Mr Speaker: I call Rachel Woods. I remind the Member that the longer that she takes, the less time that Mr Carroll will have to speak. I want to try to maximise the time that each Member has to speak.

Miss Woods: Thank you, Mr Speaker. That could have been said to other MLAs before me.

It is somewhat of a déjà vu that we are here today to discuss our schools and the pandemic. We have been here before. Earlier this year, schools and parents took it upon themselves to take children out of the physical

buildings, only to be told weeks later, at the end of March, that schools would be closed and children should stay at home. Parents, if they were not designated as key workers, heeded calls not to send their children to school. Many had already made that decision, well before the Executive, who were somewhat behind the curve in their decision-making, moved. This week, parents have been making the same decision. Many pupils were not going back the classroom next week regardless of any decision taken by the Minister this morning.

Some children have had to spend their holidays preparing for AQE tests, which I note in the announcement are being pushed ahead with. Why is it that exams are to go ahead in light of this? We have not seen the scientific or medical evidence and advice received by the Minister that says that it is safe for schools to reopen on 11 January for children, teachers, staff, assistants, bus drivers, chefs and cooks, lollipop men and women and so on, let alone what mitigations are in place above and beyond what is there at the moment to reduce the spread of COVID during the period in which the students and staff are required to be in the buildings? What will change the week after next? Have additional resources been given to schools or pupils? Has there been any guidance? What about our SEN pupils and the most disadvantaged or vulnerable who will be accessing blended learning, as Mr Butler mentioned?

I note that childcare provision is to remain open, which is crucial and I welcome, but has additional support been given to the key workers who will look after our children? Some are worried about mixing with pupils who have been mixing with others over the festive period when infection rates were increasing. Someone who contacted me suggested a phased return, with different year groups or bubbles returning from the middle of January. Can that be considered, Minister, and will people be given enough notice?

What additional resources can be put in place to ensure children and young people's safety and support for their mental and emotional health? As many will know, in the last Northern Ireland Youth Forum survey, 67% of the thousands of respondents identified education and learning as a key theme that they were worried about. The survey also said that 45% did not feel safe in their workplace, school or college due to COVID.

Minister, what, if any, engagement, conversation and consultation on this has there been with children and young people whose voices deserve to be and must be heard? I hope that the Minister will, perhaps, do a youth press conference to answer those important questions.

12.30 pm

There is a lack of a coherent plan, and the Executive are clearly not speaking with one voice on this. Then there is the timing of the announcement, only a few days before the start of term. Did the Minister engage with schools, boards of governors, teaching unions, parents and pupils on this decision? If not, when will he and when will his Department? Is five days enough time to allow parents to make arrangements for childcare? We know that we need the details. We need clarity and we need the Executive to follow the scientific and medical evidence. We need a clear plan and we need the evidence to be published. However, if that is not possible, we need an expert-led COVID task

force to do so if we are to curb COVID-19 through effective decision-making processes and a coherent response.

Mr Carroll: It is utterly disgraceful that the Education Minister dug his heels in for so long, stubbornly refusing to listen to the Health Minister, the CMO, the Chief Scientific Adviser, SAGE and many other people, to keep schools running as normal in the middle of a pandemic that is sweeping through our communities and taking the lives of workers, including education workers. True to form — true to his tenure as Education Minister this year — he has performed another U-turn, which has caused increased anxiety for those in education.

The reality is that this Minister — indeed, this House — knew that cases had risen at an exponential rate in the past few weeks, and while the Executive's handling of the pandemic has been a disaster, Mr Weir certainly tops the class for incompetence, for sure. How many U-turns has he performed this year? Too many to count. More U-turns than Mickey Marley's roundabout. The Minister is not fit for the job. These are people's lives that we are talking about. We are talking about protecting people in our schools from a deadly virus and from a new variant of it, which is spreading through our communities at a much quicker rate.

The motion rightly references:

“the concerns of teachers, pupils and parents”.

Throughout the pandemic, the Minister has essentially ignored and sidelined those voices. The Minister's latest U-turn has been forced in part by pressure from the unions that represent teachers and education workers, and I thank them for their work. I say to them directly that if the Minister continues to put you and your pupils at risk, I will wholeheartedly support you if you take action, including walking out or refusing to go into unsafe working conditions. I hope that other Members will stand by you as well.

I have said repeatedly that the Executive have, too often, followed the Tory approach to tackling the crisis. The Education Minister has really turned that into a virtue and certainly wins the award for being an ardent Tory follower. Again, he acts only after a Tory Minister belatedly acts, refusing to listen to the concerns of those who know the day-to-day reality of working in education and those who know the reality of the virus and what it represents. What message does it send to education workers that the Minister waited until the final day of the year, only a few days before schools were due to reopen, to announce this backtracking? Waiting until the eleventh hour again, when I and many others predicted that a situation would likely occur. No bland statements about people needing access to education will suffice here. We know the importance of education, but, I repeat, we are dealing with a pandemic.

Mr McCrossan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Carroll: I will.

Mr McCrossan: Does the Member agree that, as a suggestion, the Minister could spend a week or two in a classroom, surrounded by 30 kids and with no protective mitigations or resources in place, just to see what our teachers and schoolchildren are going through?

Mr Speaker: I advise the Member that he has about one minute left.

Mr Carroll: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I would certainly support that suggestion.

We know the importance of education, but, I repeat, we are dealing with a pandemic that is ripping through our communities. Of course the classroom is an important part of education in normal times but it should not be the only method of education. Ultimately, the Minister's approach is to defend a system that is already failing so many people in our society. It is quite ironic that although the Minister and his party often talk about working-class Protestants being failed by the education system, they are willing to defend the system, even in the middle of a pandemic.

The Minister has been operating on the basis that schoolchildren are not at risk from the virus. He sneered at my suggestion many months ago that pupils should wear masks on public transport but has, eventually, acceded to that request. In England, we have seen that year 8 pupils are the second-highest infected group, and the rate is rising there.

The Minister has taken some belated action to push back the schools' opening date, but the reality is that it is likely to be nowhere near enough in a situation where the Executive have said that people should work at home if they can and where all but essential services are closed until the end of January at the earliest.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Carroll: Why is the Minister willing to put the health and lives of so many education workers and their families at risk? He is not fit for the job, and he should step aside. If he does not, he should be forced to do so.

Mr Weir: I thank all those who have taken part in the debate, many of whom have made cogent and valued contributions. There has been an element of ping-pong across the table, which is, perhaps, not unexpected. On the last day of the year, I thank all those in the education sector for all their work this year. It is important that we acknowledge that. All of us throughout society are working in difficult circumstances, but I applaud that work that has been done to meet the challenges. I also add my congratulations to my colleague Mr Humphrey and the former permanent secretary, Derek Baker, on their honours, along with those in the education system who also received honours.

My priority is to try to ensure that we get the best possible education for our young people and sustain their life chances. I make absolutely no apology for trying to meet my objective of keeping schools open and keeping face-to-face teaching. I agree with the first half of what Mr O'Dowd said in that regard: it is a tragic day whenever action of this nature has to be taken. Any action taken that causes disruption should be a last resort. I want to minimise the disruption.

Regardless of the situation, even with the support measures that can be put in place, it is undoubtedly the case that delayed openings, school closures, remote learning or blended learning are all second-best for our children; face-to-face teaching delivers most. It is not simply a matter of whether there is a device in the household: there is no adequate substitute for face-to-face teaching. Whatever actions are taken, any disruption to education will hit those who are disadvantaged most.

Undoubtedly, even with remote learning or, indeed, in any circumstances, that those from families who are better off financially and can provide that level of support, those who are the brightest in the land will always survive and maybe even thrive. However, for those who are disadvantaged and do not have that level of support and can respond much better in the classroom, anything else is second-best. Any action that is being taken has to be done with the highest level of reluctance.

Members talked about listening. I think that I have been at the Education Committee more than 20 times in 2020. We may not always agree, but it is not the case that I am, in some way, deficient in being in front of the Committee. I have not checked any figures, but I suspect that that is the most times for any Minister.

Mr Lyttle: Is the Minister willing to give way?

Mr Weir: I want to get through this [*Interruption.*] That is fair enough. Some Members have been very balanced in what they have said. If that was replicated elsewhere, I would maybe, at times, be keener to give way.

Let us be under no illusions. When it comes to the issues around reopening schools, it has been, at times, suggested that there is a unified voice calling for one particular course of action: that is simply not the case. It may well be that the loudest voices will say a particular thing, but, as Education Minister, I probably get more correspondence from individuals than anybody else. There are, undoubtedly, large numbers of teachers who will say that we need to delay and that further things need to happen, and there are some parents who will say that. It is undoubtedly the case that I have also had quite a lot of messages from teachers and principals saying that they want to go back on 4 January — that has been their fairly consistent position — and overwhelmingly from parents who do not want to see any interruption in their children's education. If we are talking about listening, it is undoubtedly the case that there are a range of voices that need to be listened to.

Critically, and at the heart of this, is listening to medical and scientific advice. I must listen when I get it, and react to it. Given the speed and course of the pandemic, one of the issues is that, at times, changes have to be made at very short notice. Circumstances change greatly.

Let me make it clear that I have worked closely with Robin Swann, the health officials, the CMO and CSA. We worked closely before the Executive agreed the position at the start of the summer with the initial opening. When changes had to be made to move towards full reopening in September, we took advice and held discussions with them. Before the statement on 21 December, there were discussions with them. Indeed, on that very day, we held discussions with the officials of the CMO and CSA, and I spoke directly to the CMO. So, throughout, any actions that have been taken have been the by-product of that joint working.

That is undoubtedly the case with this decision as well. Part of the mitigations, and the timing, were to allow for preparation, not just for schools, but for parents. There was an expectation that, with the new variant, we may face into a situation whereby late January and February may become a very dangerous period.

Since then, over the last 10 days, things have moved on dramatically. Most significantly, they have moved on with regard to the figures. A week or two ago, they were running in the mid-400s. Shortly before Christmas, it was around 700. However, in a matter of a few days, they moved to over 2,000. Statistically, there may be small question marks over some of the figures, on the basis that they are delayed results. However, there is no doubt that we are facing an unprecedented and deteriorating situation. With the vaccine coming, it is hoped that this will be a temporary position, but a major threat is out there. I have consistently said that I agree with the Health Minister that we should not reopen as normal.

The Department and I were contacted on Tuesday evening by the Health Minister, the CMO and CSA. They said that further measures needed to be taken. We spent yesterday in discussions and in consultation with them. Initially, there were meetings between the officials of the CMO and CSA, earlier in the day. Then I had the opportunity to meet directly and discuss the issue with the Minister of Health, the CMO and CSA at 4.00 pm yesterday.

I appreciate that one of the accusations is that we are following England. It is very difficult, but I do not suggest that there is any blame on either side. If we had a meeting at 4.00 pm to try to do something before what happened at 3.30 pm yesterday, it is a little bit difficult to do. We continued to work on that. The statement was worked on until about midnight last night. The idea was to try to get these decisions out as quickly as possible, given the circumstances.

We are seeing a deteriorating situation. It is believed that the new variant is in Northern Ireland and, indeed, in all the jurisdictions. I echo the words of Minister O'Dowd on this. At the moment, the key driver seems to be the activities of people before Christmas. In some cases, they were very irresponsible activities. Indeed, had people behaved responsibly throughout this, we would be in a much stronger position. I also echo his remarks to heed the words of the Chief Medical Officer and the Minister of Health, particularly as regards this evening. Stay at home. Do not have a New Year's Eve party. If you have planned one, cancel it.

This is, above all, a time to act as responsibly as possible. For us all, this involves not just the implications for us as individuals, but the direct health threat to the elderly, the vulnerable and the impact it will potentially have, down the line, on children's education. There is a choice for everyone in this society. You can play your part in combating the virus or, alternatively, you can take action to help prevent it.

Mention has been made of the SAGE paper. There is probably some misunderstanding about this. The latest SAGE paper was produced shortly before Christmas. I have seen, read and taken it into account. That paper highlighted some of the problems, particularly for children and young people. It is not accurate to say that the paper made any form of recommendation for school closures. It highlighted the problems and damage that would be done to young people by school closures and a number of other things.

12.45 pm

First, whether this is on the SAGE paper or internationally, it is undoubtedly the case that the direct clinical threat to children is extremely low. We know that, of those who have died from the virus, over 90% have been aged 65 and over. Children are in a very low-risk group. It is also the case that, whether this is from the SAGE paper, the advice of the PHA or, indeed, from international experience from the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, nowhere is risk-free, and I think that everyone will accept that. For example, there is no difference in the number of education staff and teachers who have tested positive for COVID than the rest of society. There is clear and strong evidence of child-to-child transmission; there is considerable evidence of adult-to-adult transmission; it is relatively rare for any form of transmission to occur between adults and children.

It is also the case that if you talk closely to the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser, their concerns about schools are not within the classroom. If I get the chance, I will outline some of the measures within the classroom. Basically, it is not what is happening in the classroom that is the problem. They will say very clearly that it is the behaviour that happens outside the classroom. Indeed, SAGE was not able to distinguish between the impact of schools and the impact of the wider context. There are issues around the fact that, when schools are open, there is additional mobility, a greater level of contact between adults, at times there is irresponsible behaviour at the school gates, it effectively frees up adults to engage more socially and gives some of the younger children greater opportunities for socialisation outside of school. There is a tendency towards increased activity when children are at school.

Mr McCrossan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Weir: I am trying to get through a number of aspects in relation to that.

We do need to make it clear that, while whatever additional measures can be taken will be taken, it is not principally the problem of the structures that are within the school gates. It is what is happening beyond, and indeed trying to break and reduce the levels of contact is the reason behind this, particularly the first week that is being targeted.

The Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser feel that the likely situation is that the first week will be the peak week after what has worked through from Christmas. It is the most important week to keep people apart and reduce contact within the community as a whole, and that is why that week is being targeted. We can say that schools are very much an at-risk place, and there is risk everywhere. However, schools are relatively low-risk compared with the levels of risk in the wider community, and that has not changed.

Mitigation measures have been put in place. First, catch up and mental health have been mentioned. The Executive has put £12 million into the Engage programme to support catch up. Similarly, an additional COVID recovery fund of about £5 million has been put in place to support mental health and well-being. At best, if there was more money available, could more be done? I am sure it could be, but we have to live within the opportunities that are there.

I concur with what has been said about vaccinations. We are working with Health to see what more can be done to roll out testing. I am very much at one with what people have said about prioritising vaccinations, particularly for special schools and teachers. I have absolutely no problem with that. To be fair, I have written to the Health Minister on this and urged that that be done. Certainly, my understanding is that Northern Ireland is part of the four nations JCVI.

Therefore, it does not lie entirely in the hands of the Health Minister, to be fair to him. In prioritising, the JCVI has taken a clinical view, which means that, overwhelmingly, in the early stages, vaccination will be based on age. As I indicated, two thirds of those who have died were over the age of 80; over 90% were over the age of 65. They are also the people who are most vulnerable to being seriously ill. However, I would like teachers to move to vaccination as quickly as possible. Again, to be fair to the Health Minister — I seem to be defending him today — any extra resources to speed up the process will be helpful. The key determinant will not be the logistics or the availability of people; it will be the extent of the vaccine that we get as part of the UK's share. There is a wider call to be made to the UK Government to take any action that they can to speed up provision. I have no doubt that, in Northern Ireland, everything will be done to administer whatever we get as quickly as is humanly possible. The sooner that can be done, the better.

An issue was raised about the teachers of vulnerable groups and children of key workers. In the first phase of the pandemic, the number of those children who came in was relatively small. Teachers are not being asked to do face-to-face teaching and provide remote learning simultaneously. It would be impossible, and no one is suggesting that. Critically, this is about providing space for those children to be in school. As mentioned, for many vulnerable children, unfortunately, the risk of being at home can be much greater than the risk of being at school. It is about providing that space. In terms of equality of provision, it is not a question of, for example, one year 8 group being taught in school while another year 8 group has the provision of remote learning; there will be equality across the board on that.

I want to clarify the position on examinations, particularly those that will impact on years 11, 12 and 13. Around 26,000 children will do GCSE examinations between 11 January and 14 January. It may well be that, in the first week of January, for many of those children, the best option will be remote learning or some scenario in which they are able to revise. We are cognisant of the fact that a range of schools might want to have, for example, a revision class. Those schools will want that freedom to manoeuvre, so we are giving that flexibility. Similarly, as Ms Armstrong mentioned, some year 11s will do GCSEs in June. Again, some flexibility will be given to schools in relation to that cohort for that four-week period. In most cases, much of this will be covered by remote learning. Schools may want to have an additional aspect. I should point out another small variation, which is that, in the Dickson plan, year 10 in junior high schools is also counted as an exam year, so there will be some additional flexibility there.

Issues were raised about childcare, preschool and nurseries. Members identified the impact that some of

the restrictions that we have put in place will have on a broader societal level — quite often, on young parents. It is clear that, even with the new variant, very young children are not, generally speaking, impacted to the same extent. Certainly, the clear medical position is one of being relaxed about provision being in place throughout.

I also take on board the position of special schools, whose pupils make up about 2% of the school population. School is important for many of those children, particularly those with autism, who need routine. Others depend on special schools for medical interventions. Often, families are highly dependent on that. Other parents will take the view that they want their child to be at home. Ultimately, that will be a decision for families. However, there will be availability, and if, moving forward, any additional measures can be taken to support that, they will be taken.

In relation to interventions, we will make it clear that the wearing of face coverings within schools will apply to lessons in all post-primary schools. That will apply for the January period, at least, and will be reviewed; indeed, all measures are under constant review.

Similarly, with regard to school transport, we have been working with EA on a range of measures. A particular issue is the level of compliance on wearing face coverings on school transport, so there will be spot checks. The EA will work with us to push up that compliance as much as possible. To some extent, there is a level of constraint with regard to the numbers on school transport, but there will be a dramatic impact, particularly during the four-week period, when, effectively, about one third of the school population will be taken out of the picture.

I appreciate that people raised a number of other points. We will try to get back to them.

Mr Speaker: As the amendment was tabled by the proposers of the motion, I call Ms Cara Hunter to conclude and make the winding-up speech on the motion and amendment. The Member will have 10 minutes.

Ms Hunter: I thank the Minister for being here and thank other Members for their contributions. I welcome the opportunity to contribute and make the winding-up speech in this crucial debate.

Before I move to other Members' comments, I want to say briefly that I, too, have received mass correspondence from the public on their concerns about the dire need for improved classroom safety measures and on the call for teachers and school staff to receive the vaccine sooner due to their constant, consistent, hands-on engagement with multiple pupils every day. We have raised that issue in previous weeks, and we want to see teachers included as a priority. Recently, I spoke to a 25-year-old teacher who said, "I love my job, but I would be lying if I said that I was not scared to go back to work".

To meet the needs and aspirations of young people, tougher, clearer safeguards are absolutely necessary and are urgently required. The principle of creating a safe working environment for our teachers and a safe educational environment for our students is absolutely paramount. It demands action.

As I have only 10 minutes in which to speak and many comments to contribute, I will move to comments from other Members. I welcome the general and widespread recognition expressed by many Members of the

importance of safety in educational settings during the crisis. Mr McCrossan stated his concerns about the rising number of COVID-19 cases in the North and about how children could bring home the virus to their parents, grandparents and many loved ones. He also noted that Norma Foley had implemented additional measures in the South, such as mandatory masks. I share his concern about transport in the education sector and private operators. Recently, I spoke to a school bus driver who lives in Limavady in my constituency and recently caught COVID at work on the school bus. He had 53 children from mixed households on the bus, and, as a result, over 40 families had to self-isolate. I am keen to hear more from the Minister about what is being done by his Department to protect children and drivers.

Mr Newton praised the Minister for steps that he has taken so far and for his statement this morning. He also thanked teachers, school staff and NHS staff for their devotion to helping the public. I share his sentiments on that. However, he stated that the Minister was aware of the seriousness of the situation. I will be frank: I struggle to agree with that. On 21 December, in his statement to the Ad Hoc Committee, the Minister stated, on the subject of mass testing, that he would begin to further explore it. That is deeply concerning because well-planned mass testing is necessary in order to have safe and secure educational settings.

Ms Brogan said that many questions remained unanswered, which is true. She emphasised her support and the need for support for vulnerable children, children with special needs and their families.

Mr Butler from the UUP made a valid point about the importance of mental health during this time. He said that Ministers' mental health was important too: I agree wholeheartedly. No Minister is perfect. We live in unprecedented and challenging times, and there is mass pressure on all Ministers. However, I feel that calling on the Minister of Education today is key and fundamental to seeking clarity on the real, tangible steps that will be taken to protect our constituents and their families.

Mr Lyttle mentioned his frustration at the lack of timely engagement that, he felt, the Minister had had with the Committee for Education and school leaders, making contingency planning somewhat difficult: I agree wholeheartedly. For schools to be a safe environment, organisation through effective communication with school leaders is vital. One teacher informed me that, "I get my updates through the news. I wish that the Department would engage with us more directly". That was a teacher from Claudy.

Mr Bradley said that school was necessary for pupils' development: I agree. School is fundamental to young people's well-being. However, I reiterate what Mr McCrossan said when he moved the motion: none of us wants to shut schools, but we simply recognise that, for them to reopen safely and securely, we must protect children, staff and their families.

1.00 pm

Moving on, Mr Colm Gildernew, who is also Chair of the Health Committee, rightly mentioned the valid point of the new COVID variant and the scientific evidence of increased transmission in young people and the difficulties

that that presents in school settings. He stated that he feels that there have been times when the Department has been slow to act. I echo that sentiment. Parents are genuinely afraid to send their kids to school in this time of uncertainty, and they seek leadership and enhanced communication from the Department.

Mr Humphrey echoed that cross-Department collaboration is key in the pandemic: I agree. He also stated that Members can be too critical of Ministers and that they have tough decisions to make. That is true but is somewhat of an unfair statement. It is a fundamental aspect of our role as MLAs to scrutinise and hold Ministers to account.

Mr Carroll: Will the Member give way?

Ms Hunter: Yes.

Mr Carroll: On her last point, would the Member agree that it is not as if the Minister did not have any sight that the problems would arise? He was warned by the Health Minister several weeks ago that schools should not return to business as usual.

Ms Hunter: I thank the Member for his intervention. Yes, it is a key issue that many people have echoed to me as well through my constituency office. It is key that we have long contingency plans to continually assess what will happen in the next couple of weeks and months.

Going back to Mr Humphrey's point, it is important that we hold our Ministers to account.

Ms Flynn started by saying that clarity was urgent and necessary. She reiterated that mental health was important during the pandemic and stated that children from deprived areas were suffering greatly from increased anxiety. I also find that worrying. Minister, we have known since the start of the pandemic that anxiety in young people of school age is a huge issue, and I welcome your comments about the £5 million investment. I would like to hear more about that as well.

Mr McNulty reiterated his fear for young children and the distress that they may find when taking the transfer test. I agree with that wholeheartedly.

Mr Nesbitt voiced his concerns about the nature of the debate today: was it simply an opportunity to lambast the Minister? He also sought further clarity on contingency plans and said that we must all work together during this difficult time. I agree.

Mr O'Dowd said that he would like the Minister to plan for if schools were to close for a significant period.

Ms Armstrong reiterated the point of mental health being impacted by the lack of decisions by the Department. She also stated that we must apologise to teachers. I absolutely agree on that, as will many Members. Teachers and principals are fundamentally overwhelmed. The lack of answers and time to prepare causes undeniable anxieties.

Mr McGrath mentioned the transport issues again. They are a massive issue. He asked for clarity on children with special needs in mainstream schools.

Ms Woods stated that 45% of young people did not feel safe in their workplace, school or college and called for a youth conference, which is a fantastic idea, to boost engagement with the public.

Lastly, Mr Carroll emphasised his frustrations, stating that he was worried about workers across schools and would like to have seen the Minister act sooner.

Mr McCrossan: Will the Member give way?

Ms Hunter: Yes.

Mr McCrossan: Does the Member agree that it is entirely regrettable that we have had the recall petition today, we have heard the Minister — we have listened to him for 20 minutes — and we are still no clearer on any detail about what mitigations, protections or resources he is specifically putting in place to protect kids, classroom assistants, teachers, school staff and bus drivers? He still has not confirmed whether he will publish the advice that he has received.

Ms Hunter: I thank the Member for his intervention. I agree: it is regrettable. Clarity is absolutely necessary and, above all things, gives people crucial time to plan ahead.

To close, I thank Members for their contributions and hope that I have been able to fit them all in. Lastly, Minister, just briefly, the number of coronavirus positive tests is really staggering and is increasing greatly this week, as you mentioned. I believe that, on the 30th, there were 2,341 cases. It is a really dangerous, serious time, as you have acknowledged. With schools due to return shortly, teachers, simply by doing their job, undoubtedly increase their odds of being a victim of the virus. As I draw my remarks to a close, we ask you to note the concerns voiced today in the Chamber and for your acknowledgment of the mass increases of COVID-19 cases and the challenges that they present. We ask that you listen to the needs of the public and their worries and treat health and safety with the utmost priority. I hope that Members will support the motion.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern reports that the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) may have recommended school closures; is deeply concerned by the number of deaths from COVID-19; recognises the concerns of teachers, pupils and parents; calls for urgent clarity from the Minister of Education on what work has been undertaken with the Department of Health on protecting schoolchildren, teachers, parents and the wider public from the spread of COVID-19; and further calls on the Minister of Education to outline the medical and scientific advice his Department has received and to explain whether he will consider additional mitigations and protections, while welcoming the announcement today by the Minister detailing a phased return to schools and seeking assurances from the Minister on the work his Department will now undertake to ensure the safety of staff and pupils during the remainder of the pandemic.

Adjournment

Mr Speaker: Item 3 on the Order Paper is the Adjournment. A happy new year to all Members and to all our staff. Thank you very much.

Adjourned at 1.05 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

Urgent COVID Temporary Time Limited Financial Support for Belfast International Airport and Belfast City Airport

Published on Friday 11 December 2020.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I wish to provide Members of decisions taken by the Executive on 10 December 2020 on the provision of up to £7.8m (in total) of temporary financial support to Belfast International Airport (BIA) (up to £3.7m) and Belfast City Airport (BCA) (up to £4.1m) in light of the significant financial difficulties these organisations continue to face as a result of COVID-19 and the need to ensure a continued and functioning airport infrastructure locally both now and in the future to help harness our economic recovery. City of Derry Airport has already been allocated up to £1.23m in support towards their losses up to March 2021 and is therefore not covered by this package. All three airports currently benefit from the rates holiday for 2020-21.

Objective

The objective of the support is to ensure a continued and functioning airport infrastructure locally to ensure connectivity during the Covid crisis through to March 2021. Airports are one of the sectors most impacted by the Covid crisis. Covid-19 impacts have led to an unprecedented drop in passenger demand with fundamental short and medium term financial impacts for the airports and airlines operating here. The situation is not expected to return to anything like pre-covid operations in the near-term. BIA and BCA are running at a significantly reduced capacity. This has led to dramatically scaled back operations and operating hours with the potential for this level of service to be reduced further, while both organisations are also running at significant and unsustainable losses - putting these vital connectivity assets at risk.

Level of Support

Package one

To comply with State aid parameters the support will be split into two separate and distinct packages. Package one support will be delivered towards the airports projected monthly losses. It will be temporary and time-limited financial support to Belfast International Airport (BIA) of up to £1.9m and Belfast City Airport (BCA) of up to £2.1m based on losses figures submitted to DoF. It is proposed to provide this first package covering the period

from September 2020 to December 2020 (the end of the transitional period).

Package two

Package two will cover the period January 2021 to March 2021 and will require a separate State aid assessment and decision when the State Aid rules, post transition, will be clearer. However any support will continue to be based on the projected losses submitted to DoF for the period January 2021 to March 2021 and be limited to a total spend of £7.8m across both packages.

Eligibility Criteria

The Eligibility criteria for the scheme are:

- i. This support is for BIA and BCA local airports previously above the annual 200k passenger threshold in State Aid regulations;
- ii. The support will be based on monthly losses demonstrated via standard airport company accounts in relation to 'designated revenues' and 'designated costs';
- iii. Support will be provided in two separate agreements covering the September 2020 – December 2020 and January 2021 to March 2021 periods;
- iv. Package one support will be based on no more than 70% of monthly losses currently submitted to DoF. Support will be non-transferable between months;
- v. Package two support will be dependent the proposed aid complying with future State Aid / Level Playing field requirements; Support will be withdrawn if the airports return to profitability during this period and no dividend or divestment to shareholders will be permissible during the current and subsequent tax year;
- vi. DoF can terminate the agreement with 14 days' notice;
- vii. Support will also be contingent on an 'open-book' policy from the respective airports and that the airports remain open and maintain an agreed level of service from the point of support to the end of March 2021 when support will end;
- viii. Neither airport will make any staff redundant during the support period; and
- ix. Support payments will be considered taxable income.

These eligibility requirements will be reflected in the regulations for the scheme.

Delivery Powers

The support will be provided using the Exceptional Circumstances powers under the Financial Assistance Act 2009 where the First and deputy First Minister will be asked to designate the Department of Finance as the relevant Department and to determine:

- i. that exceptional circumstances exist;
- ii. that it is desirable to provide financial assistance to prevent, control or mitigate any aspect or effect of those circumstances; and
- iii. that such assistance ought to be provided in accordance with a scheme or schemes under this section.

This process is underway. The required Regulations for the scheme will be presented to the DoF Committee as soon as possible.

Financial Implications

DoF will deliver the scheme and DoF has been allocated £7.8m for this purpose.

Department of Health

Decision to Change Blood Donor Deferral Policy for Men Who Have Sex With Men (MSM)

Published at 0.01 am on Monday 14 December 2020.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I have decided to adopt recommendations from the FAIR (For the Assessment of Individualised Risk) steering group to move from a population-based blood donor selection policy to one based on a more individualised risk assessment.

The independent Advisory Committee on the Safety of Blood, Tissues and Organs (SaBTO) have reviewed the proposals outlined by FAIR and confirmed they would not impact on the safe supply of blood and blood components for recipients in the UK. The change will give more people the opportunity to donate blood, including some lower risk men who have sex with men (MSM), whilst continuing to ensure the safety of blood supply for patients.

In Northern Ireland a population based risk assessment approach is currently used to identify potential blood donors and at present, men who have sex with men (MSM) are deferred from donating blood for three months. This policy change will mean that MSM will no longer be automatically deferred from donating blood if they have had sex with another man in the past three months, provided they have been with the same partner and meet other all other medical criteria.

In June 2016 the then Health Minister, Michelle O'Neill, announced the decision that Northern Ireland would lift the lifetime ban on the donation of blood by MSM, and would adopt a one-year deferral. This policy change had the full support of the Northern Ireland Executive and came into effect on 1 September 2016.

In June 2017 SaBTO published the '*Donor Selection Criteria Report*', which set out a range of recommendations including some related to high risk behaviours. The purpose of the recommendations were to allow more people to donate blood without affecting the safety of the blood supply.

At that time SaBTO recommended a deferral of three months for blood donations relating to high risk behaviours. A critical consideration for SaBTO in their deliberations is the window period, which is the time lapse immediately after an individual contracts a virus, such as HIV, and before the infection can be detected in a blood donation. For HIV the window period is twenty-eight days. SaBTO's advice was that a deferral of three months from the time that a person may have contracted HIV through sexual contact was sufficient to maintain the safety of donated blood.

While anyone can acquire a blood-borne infection (BBI) or a sexually transmitted disease (STD), some people have an increased risk of exposure and at a population level, MSM have higher rates of BBIs and STDs. Using protection like a condom or pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) can reduce this risk, but it does not eliminate it.

The donor deferral period for MSM was changed from 12 to three months in England, Scotland and Wales in 2017. I announced this change in Northern Ireland in April 2020 and the new policy was implemented from June this year.

There is no evidence that this change to donor selection policy has impacted on the safety of the blood supply in the UK.

The FAIR (For the Assessment of Individualised Risk) steering group was set up at the beginning of 2019 at the request of the Department of Health and Social Care in England (DHSC) to explore whether there is sufficient evidence to change the current blood donor selection policy. Chaired by Dr Su Brailsford, the group included representation from the four UK blood services (including the Northern Ireland Blood Transfusion Service), Public Health England, experts in epidemiology, virology and psychology, Nottingham University, patients and donors and a range of stakeholders including LGBT+ groups. FAIR's aim was to give as many people as possible the opportunity to donate whilst continuing to ensure the safety of patients.

FAIR used both epidemiology and behavioural science to explore whether there was sufficient evidence to change the current blood donor selection policy. The FAIR steering group report '*Can donor selection policy move from a population-based donor selection policy to one based on a more individualised risk assessment? Conclusions from the For the Assessment of Individualised Risk (FAIR) group*' identified certain sexual activities associated with an increased risk of acquiring blood borne infections (BBIs) and concluded that MSM who have had one sexual partner who has been their sexual partner for more than three months should be eligible to donate regardless of gender, gender of partner or type of sex.

In October 2020, SaBTO members unanimously agreed that the recommended changes to the donor selection criteria proposed in the FAIR report would not impact on the safe supply of blood and blood components for recipients in the UK. SaBTO members noted that regular monitoring of residual risk of blood-borne infections would be maintained and be reported to SaBTO to ensure that there is no impact on the safe supply of blood.

I have therefore decided to adopt the recommendations proposed by FAIR. SaBTO have reviewed the proposals outlined by FAIR and confirmed they would not impact on the safe supply of blood and blood components for recipients in the UK.

My decision is guided purely by the science and the advice of the experts at SaBTO, whose core remit is to minimise any health risk from blood.

I will instruct the NI Blood Transfusion Service (NIBTS) to take the necessary steps to implement this policy for Northern Ireland in summer 2021.

Department of Health

Conversion of the Independent Neurology Inquiry to a Statutory Public Inquiry Under The Inquiries Act 2005

Published at 4.00 pm on Monday 14 December 2020.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): In my oral statement to the Assembly on 24 November 2020 I advised Members of my intention to convert the Independent Neurology Inquiry to a statutory Public Inquiry under the Inquiries Act 2005 (the Act).

In adherence with Section 6 of the Act, I am now notifying the Assembly that:

- on 11 December 2020 I served notice on the Chair of the Independent Neurology Inquiry that the conversion date will be 11 December 2020;
- the Chair of the Inquiry will remain as Mr Brett Lockhart QC, working together, and in partnership with Professor Hugo Mascie-Taylor as an Inquiry Panel Member; and
- the changes to Terms of Reference are administrative and do not relate to the content of the Inquiry. A copy of the revised Terms of Reference is attached to this statement for Members' information.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Mr Lockhart, Professor Mascie-Taylor and their wider team for the work they have undertaken to date and their commitment to ensure this conversion to a Public Inquiry will be completed as seamlessly as possible.

The Executive Office

Decisions of The Executive On Covid-19, 18 December 2020

Published on Friday 18 December 2020.

Mrs Foster (The First Minister) and Mrs O'Neill (The deputy First Minister): The Executive has today agreed to introduce a package of restrictions from December 26 to slow the spread of Coronavirus in the community and protect the health service. The measures, agreed by the Executive, will come into operation from 00:01 on the 26 December and will run for six weeks, with a review after four weeks. The measures are as follows:

Closure of all retail, except essential retail. Homeware stores and garden centres are no longer classified as essential. However, dog groomers and fuel suppliers have been added to the essential listing. All car washes will be closed, including those for contracted services.

Retail and services permitted to remain open include:

- Food retailers, supermarkets, convenience stores, corner shops, newsagents
- Off licences and licensed shops selling alcohol (including breweries)
- Pharmacies (including non-dispensing pharmacies) and chemists
- Building supplies businesses and hardware stores
- Petrol stations
- Pet shops, agricultural supplies shops, livestock markets, veterinary surgeons
- Motor vehicle repair, MOT services, Bicycle shops, taxi or vehicle hire businesses
- Banks, building societies, credit unions, short-term loan providers and cash points, savings clubs and undertakings which by way of business operate currency exchange offices, transmit money (or any representation of money) by any means, or cash cheques which are made payable to customers, and Post Offices,
- Funeral directors
- Laundrettes and dry cleaners
 - Dental services, opticians, audiology services, chiropody, chiropractors, osteopaths, and other medical or health services, including services relating to mental health
 - Car parks and public toilets
 - Storage and distribution facilities for delivery and drop off,
 - Professional services including solicitors.

Click and Collect will not be permitted for those non-essential businesses required to close

Those businesses permitted to open must limit numbers permitted entry at any one time, in order to ensure social distancing can be maintained by those inside

There will be an expanded use of Covid Marshals in the retail sector

Off licences will remain open, with an 8pm closing. This time of closure applies to all sales of alcohol;

Closure of close contact services, and driving instruction (not motorcycles), except: close contact for Film and TV production; those ancillary to medical, health and social care services; and sports massage therapy. Those permitted to open must operate an appointments only system and must record contact details of all customers. Face coverings must be worn when permitted to open, as per exemptions above.

Closure of all hospitality (except for accommodation for essential travel). Takeaway and delivery (5am-11pm), and food and drink in motorway services, airports and harbour terminals will remain open. Use of outdoor seating is not permitted, either on the premises or adjacent to them.

Sectors such as manufacturing and construction can continue to operate.

Indoor sport is only permitted for elite athletes or for P.E. in, or for, schools.

Spectators are not permitted

Outdoor gatherings are restricted to 15 people. Gatherings for the purposes of exercise or sport are only permitted for elite athletes, physical education in or for schools, or if participants are members of the same household.

Indoor gatherings are limited to a maximum of 15 people.

All educational activities, beyond school or higher/further education, must be delivered by distance learning unless face to face delivery is essential

No household gatherings of more than one household, other than current arrangements for linked households (bubbles), with current exceptions for caring, maintenance, house moves, etc. and a transition period to cover the Christmas bubbling arrangements until the 27 December; garden/outdoor gatherings remain at six people from two households;

Places of worship are open for communal services (up to risk assessment numbers), individual worship, weddings, civil partnerships and funerals. Up to eight people will be permitted to make a recording of a service for transmission. Masks are mandatory and those present should not mingle inside beyond their own household or bubble.

Weddings are restricted to 25 people and cannot take place in a private dwelling, with an exemption if one party is terminally ill. All those attending must have contact details recorded by the organiser. More than 15 people requires a risk assessment. Receptions are not permitted. Venues otherwise closed may open to host a wedding or civil partnership.

Funerals are restricted to 25, including children and the celebrant. Contact details of all attending must be retained.

Schools and childcare to remain open;

Closure of :

- Nightclubs
- Conference halls and conference facilities, including those in hotels
- Theatres and Concert Halls except for the purposes of rehearsals

- a range of visitor attractions including funfairs, inflatable parks, amusements arcades, skating rinks, bingo halls, museums and galleries, cinemas
- museums & galleries
- campsites and caravan parks for touring caravans including motorhomes, except in an emergency
- swimming and diving pools
- indoor sports and exercise facilities, including soft play areas, leisure centres, gyms, equestrian centres, venues relating to motor sport and activity centres
- outdoor sports and exercise facilities including activity centres, equestrian centres, marinas and venues relating to motor sport and water sport
- indoor visitor attractions
- outdoor visitor attractions, with the exception of play areas, public parks, forest and country parks, and outdoor areas of stately homes, historic homes, castles and properties operated by the National Trust;

Restrictions on libraries – orders cannot be made in person and access is only allowed for the purposes of collecting an order.

In addition we are putting in place a set of stricter measures for the period of 26 December to 2 January.

These are:

1. between 8pm and 6am the following morning:
 - a. retail able to remain open during the restrictions must close between these hours
 - b. no indoor or outdoor gatherings of any kind including at sporting venues will be permitted,
 - c. outdoor exercise will be permitted only with members of your own household
 - d. no household mixing will be permitted in private gardens, or indoors in any setting, except for emergencies or the provision of health or care services.

These measures do not apply to Christmas household bubbles that are in place up to 27th December.

2. No sporting events at any level and either indoors or outdoors will be held during this period.

Department of Health

COVID-19 Vaccination Programme

Published at 3.30 pm on Wednesday 30 December 2020.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): This statement provides an update on the latest developments relating to the COVID-19 vaccination programme.

Members will no doubt have heard that the Medicines & Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) has now provided approval to supply a second COVID-19 vaccine within the UK, the AstraZeneca/Oxford coronavirus vaccine.

This is an excellent development and another hugely significant day for Northern Ireland's continuing battle to control the impact of coronavirus on our society. The Northern Ireland vaccination programme began on 8 December 2020 and the initial phase of the programme quite rightly focused on care home residents and staff which were the number one priority as recommended by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI). In addition health and social care staff in direct contact with vulnerable patients were also offered vaccination. Progress to date has been very good with over 80% of care homes visited which has resulted in 9,133 care home residents vaccinated as well as 10,701 care home staff and 16,890 HSC staff now vaccinated. In total over 36,724 individuals in Northern Ireland have now been vaccinated.

The approval by the MHRA paves the way for a significant acceleration of Northern Ireland's COVID-19 vaccination programme and means the GP led element of the vaccination programme can begin from 4th January, starting with those aged 80 years and over. Fifty thousand doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine have already been received in Northern Ireland and further supplies are expected early in the New Year. The GP led programme will be rolled out to others based on age and other clinical vulnerability factors. Prioritisation will continue to be guided by JCVI. See Annex A for JCVI priority groups.

For both the AstraZeneca/Oxford and Pfizer/BioNTech vaccines, data provided to MHRA demonstrate that efficacy is optimised when a second dose is administered, but both offer considerable protection after a single dose. For both vaccines the second dose completes the course and is important for longer term protection.

JCVI have issued a statement today recommending that as many people on the priority list as possible should be offered a first vaccine dose as the initial priority, while the second dose can be administered up to 12 weeks later. The clinical risk priority order for deployment of the vaccines remains unchanged and applies to both vaccines. Both are very effective vaccines and comparisons between the vaccine efficacies are unhelpful due to the different methodologies used and lack of data on long term protection and transmission reduction.

The Chief Medical Officer and his counterparts across the UK agree with JCVI that prioritising the first doses of vaccine for as many people as possible will deliver the greatest benefit overall in the shortest possible time, will have the greatest impact on reducing mortality and hospitalisations and protecting the health service, and

is the right thing to do for public health. I fully agree and endorse this advice and from early January the main focus of the programme in NI will be on ensuring as many people as possible receive their first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine. Those who were due to receive their second dose from early January will be advised to return for their second dose at a later stage.

While today's developments are very welcome the coming weeks will be among the most challenging yet in the pandemic, with our health service under immense pressure. The COVID-19 vaccination programme has the potential to help transform the current situation but even with these latest developments, that will still take time to ensure the programme is delivered swiftly but safely. Between now and then, we need another big push to get through this winter. We can all help by playing our part and by encouraging everyone to follow the public health advice to help stop coronavirus spreading by strictly abiding by the current lockdown rules.

Vaccine priority groups: advice on 30 December 2020

Phase 1 – direct prevention of mortality and supporting the NHS and social care system

JCVI advises that the first priorities for the COVID-19 vaccination programme should be the prevention of mortality and the maintenance of the health and social care systems. As the risk of mortality from COVID-19 increases with age, prioritisation is primarily based on age. The order of priority for each group in the population corresponds with data on the number of individuals who would need to be vaccinated to prevent one death, estimated from UK data obtained from March to June 2020 (3)

1	Residents in a care home for older adults and their carers
2	All those 80 years of age and over Frontline health and social care workers
3	All those 75 years of age and over
4	All those 70 years of age and over Clinically extremely vulnerable individuals*
5	All those 65 years of age and over
6	All individuals aged 16 years** to 64 years with underlying health conditions which put them at higher risk of serious disease and mortality***
7	All those 60 years of age and over
8	All those 55 years of age and over
9	All those 50 years of age and over
*	Clinically extremely vulnerable individuals are described here. This advice on vaccination does not include all pregnant women or those under the age of 16 years (see above)
**	The AstraZeneca vaccine is only authorised for use in those aged 18 years of age and over, however, JCVI is of the view that this vaccine may be used in those 16-17 years of age where there is no access or availability to an alternative approved COVID-19 vaccine
***	This also includes those who are in receipt of a carer's allowance, or those who are the main carer of an elderly or disabled person whose welfare may be at risk if the carer falls ill.

It is estimated that taken together, these groups represent around 99% of preventable mortality from COVID-19.

Department of Education

Further Changes to COVID Restrictions in Education Settings from January 2021

Published on Thursday 31 January 2020.

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): As Education Minister it is my core objective to ensure the ongoing delivery of the high quality education to our young people that we are rightly proud of. That is why, throughout this pandemic, I have followed the medical and scientific advice provided and I continue to do so.

My Department's guidance provides an overarching framework for how schools and education settings can operate safely in an ongoing COVID environment, with the aim of ensuring broad consistency and equity across local areas, but which is sufficiently flexible to allow education settings and staff to adapt and adopt approaches that best suit their needs. As the pandemic has progressed and the medical advice and guidance has changed, so too has the guidance provided to schools, with the current fourth version published on 8 December after clearance by the Public Health Agency.

The Departments of Education and Health have worked closely throughout the pandemic and the proposed way forward which I am setting out today continues to reflect that joint working. Our common aim throughout has been to protect the health and well-being of our children, alongside continuing to enable high quality education to be delivered which will contribute to our children's success both now and in the longer term.

While previous arrangements have been informed by the advice of the Department of Health, unfortunately the deteriorating nature of the epidemic and the risks to public health has necessitated these much more substantial changes being announced today, which reflect a fair and balanced position by both Education and Health.

Therefore, having considered the most up to date advice from the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Advisor, I have decided that all primary and post primary pupils will be taught remotely next week. Special schools, nursery and childcare provision will, however, remain open including childcare attached to school settings. From the following week, that is week commencing 11th January, pupils in years 8 through to 11 will continue to be taught remotely until the end of January while pupils in years 12 to 14 will attend school for face-to-face teaching and primary school pupils will return to full time education.

To protect our most vulnerable and sustain vital key services across society, in addition to all special schools being open, all schools will provide supervised learning for vulnerable pupils and the children of key workers from the start of term recognising that these measures place additional stresses on society and that we need to support these children.

Exams due to take place in January will be facilitated and schools will have flexibility to deliver face-to-face teaching to pupils due to sit public examinations, should they wish to do so.

The first day of the school term next week can be used by schools to prepare for the first week.

In reaching this decision I have balanced the potential and projected impact of the pandemic on our wider society against what is my position, that face to face education within educational settings is best for our children and society as a whole.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected educational systems worldwide, leading, at times, to the near-total closures of schools, universities and colleges. School closures impact not only students, teachers, and families but have far-reaching economic and societal consequences. School closures have shed light on various social and economic issues, including digital learning, food insecurity and homelessness, as well as access to childcare, health care and disability services for children. Early evidence suggests that the impact has been more severe for disadvantaged children and their families, causing interrupted learning, compromised nutrition, childcare problems, and consequent economic cost to families who could not work

As this pandemic continues and more data becomes available in early January, I will continue to work closely with Minister Swann to consider how best to support pupils and schools and return to a more normal education delivery as and when the medical and scientific advice indicates this is appropriate.

In the interim and in addition to the adjusted restart arrangement described, further improvements to school mitigations will be taken forward as I indicated in my statement to the Assembly on 21st December including : face coverings being required in classroom settings for post primary pupils, improved signage and stronger public messaging. These will add to the already significant range of mitigations that have been put in place and operated by schools across the province.

Teachers, Principals and all school staff have already done extraordinary work to make schools as safe as possible and played a vital part in how we as a society have adjusted to and managed this pandemic. Their passion and commitment to our children has been obvious to all.

I see evidence of that as I visit schools and talk to teachers and school leaders and of course in the hundreds of letters and emails I have received pressing the case in favour of one policy change or another. I welcome that debate and challenge and hope that, as we rebuild our education system, we can harness that passion and commitment to build a world class education system in Northern Ireland that delivers for all.

Department of Health

COVID-19 Update

Published at 5.00 pm on Friday 8 January 2021.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): This week, a number of our Health and Social Care Trusts have confirmed a downturn of elective surgery. This reflects the unprecedented pressures that the Covid-19 pandemic is creating in our hospitals.

I am assured that every attempt will continue to be made to protect the most urgent surgery where this is achievable, and that postponed operations will be rescheduled as quickly as possible.

I deeply regret any patient experiencing postponements of this nature. The unfortunate reality is that a health service that struggles to cope in normal times is not built to withstand a pandemic of this scale.

As a result of the prevailing Covid situation, an even greater number of staff will have to be redeployed in the days and weeks ahead to meet the urgent and immediate needs of extremely ill patients. That applies equally for both Covid and non-Covid patients needing critical care.

According to the most recent inpatient and ICU modelling, the peak of the third surge is expected in the third week of January 2021.

I can inform Members that I have approved the establishment of a new regional approach to ensure that any available theatre capacity across Northern Ireland is allocated for those patients most in need of surgery both during surge and as we come out of this surge. This will include seeking to fully maximise all available in-house HSC and Independent Sector capacity.

Whilst this may mean that patients will need to travel further for their surgery I would rather see the highest priority treatments delivered elsewhere in Northern Ireland than not at all.

As this new mechanism settles in it is also my firm expectation that inter-Trust transfers for the highest clinical priority cases will be facilitated.

I want to assure the public that hospitals are doing their absolute best to care for patients, and that includes treating the sickest quickest. This is not the case of prioritising one medical condition over another.

It is incredibly offensive for anyone to accuse frontline staff of doing that. I hope no Member will resort to making such claims. It is long past time that this falsehood was nailed once and for all. Indeed, anyone making such an allegation is insulting health staff who are battling the most appalling pressures and facing decisions no one should have to grapple with.

Well before this pandemic, we were already short of the staff we needed to meet growing demand for health care in society. Important initiatives are in place to rectify that situation but it is a long-term challenge. It takes years to train up specialist nurses and doctors. There are no quick fixes here.

It remains the case that the best way to protect non Covid health services is to push down Covid infection rates as

aggressively as possible. To that extent, it is essential that the current lockdown successfully and significantly reduces the R number.

I believe the majority of people are doing the right thing in terms of complying with the lockdown, adhering to Covid-19 regulations, and following the public health advice.

Let me again pay tribute to that collective spirit – and urge everyone to stay the course in this crucial and extremely difficult period. That includes sticking rigidly to the requirements on self-isolation for 10 days in relation to symptoms, confirmed or suspected cases, and travel.

I would remind Members that anyone arriving into Northern Ireland from within the Common Travel Area - Great Britain, Republic of Ireland, Isle of Man and Channel Islands – who plans to remain here for at least 24 hours, must self-isolate upon arrival for 10 days in the same way as international arrivals. People who routinely cross the border (from either Great Britain or the Republic of Ireland) for essential purposes are not subject to these requirements. Further information on travel regulations and guidance is available on NI Direct.

The scale of the threat posed to our citizens at this time from Covid-19 must not be underestimated. This is a time for maximum vigilance.

We have seen over recent times the largest daily figures for confirmed Covid-19 cases in Northern Ireland since the beginning of the pandemic. This level of new cases will inevitably lead to mounting and unparalleled pressures for our hospitals in the coming weeks. In particular, the increase in cases among the over 60 age bracket will drive escalating pressures on our health system.

Official figures for confirmed cases will always underestimate the actual total, given that many people can have Covid-19 without displaying symptoms or being aware of the infection.

It is estimated that in some parts of NI, where transmission is particularly high, as many as 1 in 40 people currently have Covid-19. For the province as a whole, the estimated figure is in the region of 1 in 60.

Colleagues across health and social care are extremely concerned about what is coming our way in the early part of this year. So whilst we are facing a very precarious few weeks ahead, as I informed the Assembly earlier in the week there is also real cause for optimism. Our vaccination programme continues apace and as of today I am advised that in the region of 74k vaccinations have been administered in NI. Of these, some 65k are first doses and 9k second doses with 166 care homes having their 2nd dose.

Northern Ireland should be proud of its progress to date on Covid-19 vaccination. Members can be assured that the programme will be scaled up significantly and rapidly as more vaccines become available.

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 18 December 2020

Written Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Ms Anderson asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether there will be a new Urban Villages programme.
(AQO 1095/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): Since 2016, the Urban Villages initiative has been supporting a range of community led, cross cutting and capital projects to improve good relations outcomes and to help develop thriving places where there has previously been a history of deprivation and community tension.

The area based approach has proven to be extremely effective in: fostering positive community identities; building community capacity; and improving the physical environment. It is important that we learn from the approach and seek to further embed it.

We are looking at a range of options, including how we might best apply the Urban Villages methodology to other areas, including rural locations. As we review the learning we will also consider how we can consolidate the progress made across the existing five Urban Villages and leave a legacy for the future.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what guidance is in place for hunting in Northern Ireland.
(AQW 7811/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I am not aware of any specific guidance having been issued in respect of hunting. The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs is not responsible for the legislation relating to, or potential restrictions on, gatherings due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether his Department's officials are engaged with (i) the Department for the Economy; and (ii) Fibrus to ensure that Project Stratum targets the rural areas most in need of broadband provision.
(AQW 10979/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- (i) DAERA are represented on the Project Stratum Project Board which is led by the Department for Economy; and
- (ii) the contract for the implementation of Project Stratum will be managed directly by DfE who will report to the Project Board. DAERA will work to ensure that the Project Stratum benefits all rural areas in need of broadband provision.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how many planning applications have been denied due to the negative impact they would have on native birds of prey species, in particular hen harriers and migratory birds, in each of the last five years.
(AQW 11304/17-22)

Mr Poots: DAERA is a statutory consultee in the planning process and provides advice with regard to its areas of competence to assist Planning Authorities make their determinations.

It is the role of Planning Authorities to make decisions on planning applications; as such DAERA does not retain the information requested.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail (i) the current threats to biodiversity, including the species and habitats most at risk; and (ii) how his Department is raising public awareness of the scale and nature of the threats to biodiversity.

(AQW 11314/17-22)

Mr Poots:

Recent reporting for the Habitats and Birds Directives have identified the most significant current threats to habitats and species, and main drivers of biodiversity loss to be:

- (i) -
- Changes in farming practice, including both intensification and agricultural abandonment
 - Nutrient enrichment in freshwater habitats
 - Aerial deposition of nitrogen (ammonia)
 - Development
 - Fishing practices
 - Non-native invasive species
 - Plant and animal pathogens
 - Climate change

The above pressures and threats impact virtually all natural habitats and many species. Wetland habitats, including bogs, lowland fens and marl lakes are arguably the most at risk.

Declining species including curlew, hen harrier and freshwater pearl mussel. A number of species, while not globally threatened, occur at only a few sites in Northern Ireland and are, therefore, locally vulnerable due to their limited distribution.

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>.

- (ii) My Department is actively involved in collecting evidence on the state of our nature and the conservation measures and actions required to address the pressures and threats for our priority habitats and species. As we approach 2021, a critical year for addressing the climate and biodiversity challenges and preparing for the 2 seminal global conferences on Climate Change, with its particular focus on nature recovery and nature-based solutions (COP26) and biological diversity (COP15), we will be embarking on a nature-specific campaign to highlight these issues and the steps we will be taking to address them.

In addition, the Department raises awareness of nature issues and encourages engagement on nature through, for example, its Country Parks, website and social media and, indirectly, by supporting initiatives such as the Centre for Data and Recording at the Ulster Museum (CEDaR), the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan and a wide range of eNGOs, such as RSPB, Ulster Wildlife and Butterfly Conservation which help raise public awareness of threats to biodiversity.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether further tranches of the Environmental Farming Scheme will open in (i) 2021; (ii) 2022 and; (iii) 2023.

(AQW 11352/17-22)

Mr Poots: Subject to completion of a Business Case to support further tranches, subsequent Department of Finance approval and availability of national funding, my department is planning to open a fifth tranche of the Environmental Farming Scheme in 2021 and a sixth tranche in 2022.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the policy in place for local councils to adhere to for the control of grey squirrels.

(AQW 11371/17-22)

Mr Poots: Grey Squirrels are a non-native invasive species recognised to cause considerable economic and environmental damage through their damage to trees and their role in the decline of the native red squirrel. My Department has maintained a policy of encouraging the removal of grey squirrels by landowners and volunteers, primarily in areas where red squirrels are at risk and/ or to protect tree plantations. As there are isolated populations of red squirrels in most council areas and/or native trees or commercial timber crops vulnerable to grey squirrel attack, there are strong grounds for encouraging widespread control of grey squirrels.

The grey squirrel is listed under Schedule 9 of the Wildlife (NI) Order 1985 (as amended), reflecting its status as an established non-native species which is harmful to our environment. Landowners/managers may authorise humane control of the animals at any time. To help facilitate this, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), in conjunction with

colleagues on the Northern Ireland Squirrel Forum (NISF), have published a standard operating procedure which advises landowners how to control the grey squirrel both humanely and legally - (<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/control-grey-squirrels-red-squirrel-conservation-code-practice>). Shooting, live trapping or a combination of shooting and trapping are the most efficient methods available to controllers. Additionally the NIEA have worked with partners at Ulster Wildlife in developing and part-funding a training course to certify basic competence for squirrel controllers, ensuring best practise.

The EU recognised the economic damage and impact on biodiversity of non-native species with Regulation EU 1143/2014, on the prevention and management of the introduction and spread of invasive alien species, which came into force on 1 January 2015. It addresses the problem of certain Europe-wide invasive alien species in a comprehensive manner. The grey squirrel is listed as one of these invasive alien species.

The Invasive Alien Species (Enforcement and Permitting) Order (Northern Ireland) 2019 (<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisr/2019/159/contents/made>) makes provision for offences relating to breaches of requirements of the EU Regulation. Public bodies should take every care to not only to reduce populations of listed species within their lands, but to prevent spread from their properties.

Additionally public bodies across Northern Ireland have a duty to conserve biodiversity under the terms of the Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (NI) 2011 and, in exercising any of their functions, are required to further the conservation of biodiversity so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions. My Department encourages all public bodies to take practical steps to conserve and enhance biodiversity across Northern Ireland.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the new European Commission Animal Health Law due to come into effect next year; and its implications for a draft TB strategy.
(AQW 11400/17-22)

Mr Poots: The new EU Animal Health Law (Regulation 2016/429) (AHL) was adopted by the European Parliament and the Council of the EU on 9 March 2016. The AHL, which is due to come into operation on 21 April 2021, aims to provide a single, comprehensive framework for EU animal health requirements, and replaces a large number of existing pieces of EU legislation. The European Commission is continuing to develop tertiary legislation to support the AHL.

Officials are working to ensure that our animal health legislation and associated programme requirements comply with those of the AHL, this includes our current bovine Tuberculosis (bTB) programme. The AHL, and the associated Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2020/689, replaces Council Directive 64/432 (as amended) which is the basis for much of our current bTB programme.

Replacement of this Directive with the AHL, and a number of the new requirements contained within it, could possibly affect the implementation - with regards to timing - of some of the cattle testing measures that have been consulted upon for potential inclusion in the new bTB Eradication Strategy. These cattle measures are mainly concerning the compulsory removal of gamma interferon test positive animals, and around requirements to be met prior to restocking following a breakdown. Officials are, however, currently working through the detail of this to understand what the practical implications could be.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to AQW 8666/17-22, to detail (i) the terms of reference for the consultation paper as part of the current review of access legislation; and (ii) the timeframe for the public consultation phase.
(AQW 11408/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department was asked to review current access legislation as part of the Outdoor Recreation Action Plan for Northern Ireland. In particular, Theme 2 Action (2A) "to develop policies and to support appropriate legislative priorities, changes and developments to optimise the benefits and opportunities for outdoor recreation."

An initial consultation with key stakeholders, including; the Ulster Farmer Union (as landowners), the National Outdoor Recreation Forum (as recreational users) and District Council Access Officers (as implementers of the current legislation), identified a number of difficulties, with the current Access to the Countryside (NI) Order 1983.

Issues raised included clarity on current legislation, including public access to the coast; the absence of a formal process for developing permissive paths with landowner agreement, and the development of a Core Path Network throughout Northern Ireland.

It is anticipated that a consultation document will be developed for key stakeholders and issue in early 2021, with an 8 week consultation period. A wider public consultation document aimed for March/April 2021 along similar timeframes is also envisaged.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) how many people were penalised under cross-compliance rules for hedge cutting during the bird breeding season for the years (a) 2018; (b) 2019; and (c) 2020 to date; and (ii) to detail how much the penalties were.
(AQW 11433/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Department applied penalties to the following farm businesses for breaches of Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition (GAEC) Measure 7 – 6.13, which states that hedge cutting / coppicing or laying is not permitted between 1 March and 31 August except when a derogation has been received from DAERA.

Year	Number of farm businesses penalised	Amount of penalty applied per year
2018	6	£2,750.53
2019	8	£1,787.19
2020	13	£6,228.99

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the average amount of fines issued for hedge cutting during the bird breeding season for the years (i) 2018; (ii) 2019; and (iii) 2020 to date.

(AQW 11434/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department does not hold any information detailing the amount of fines that have been issued for hedge cutting during the bird breeding season. The disturbance of nesting birds is an offence under the terms of the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 and reports are investigated by the PSNI. Records of fines in relation to these offences may be held by the PSNI or the Public Prosecution Service.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what evidence exists that the fresh water pearl mussel populations of the Owenkillew river catchment are viably reproducing; and what success his Department has had in ensuring that the integrity of these populations and their habitats have improved and not deteriorated.

(AQW 11516/17-22)

Mr Poots: There is no evidence that the populations Freshwater Pearl Mussel in the Owenkillew River catchment are viably reproducing. A Northern Ireland Freshwater Pearl Mussel Survey in 2016 found in excess of 8434 individuals which was considered to be stable compared to previous surveys. However, there had been virtually no juvenile recruitment over the last 30 years.

The Freshwater Pearl Mussel populations in the Owenkillew catchment gain protection as a feature of both an Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI) and a Special Area of Conservation (SAC), which highlights the importance of the existing populations and the river habitat. The Department's most recent assessment of the Freshwater Pearl Mussel in the Owenkillew SAC shows that the population and the river habitat is stable, ie, not deteriorating further, but nevertheless remains unfavourable.

A Conservation Management Plan for the Owenkillew SAC is being developed which will identify measures required to improve condition on this site. This will include detailing the pressures and threats at site level and proposes site specific management actions to address these. This is a particular challenge due this species' sensitivity to even small changes in its aquatic environment.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what responsibility her Department has over seabed safety at Beaufort's Dyke.

(AQW 11517/17-22)

Mr Poots: The historic munitions disposal site in the Beaufort Dyke lies within Scottish territorial waters and I am aware that some unexploded ordnance may have drifted over the ensuing years from the site into Northern Ireland waters. The Northern Ireland fleet fishes in Northern Ireland and Scottish waters and has on occasion trawled up such ordnance. Occasionally World War 2 ordnance is found on washed up on our shores after prolonged easterly winds and is generally perceived as having come from the Beaufort Dyke.

DAERA does not have a direct role in dealing with unexploded ordnance found on the seabed of Northern Ireland but will work closely with other agencies who do have a role such as the MCA, PSNI and explosive ordnance disposal squads through the provision of appropriate advice.

My officials have recently contacted all Northern Ireland registered fishing vessels and circulated a copy of the Marine Guidance Note MGN 323 (M+F) of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA). This gives guidance and recommendations about best practice to the fishing industry on interpretation of law and general safety advice should they recover unexploded ordnance in their nets.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how many times he has attended a meeting of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs since 11 January 2020, broken down by (i) Committee meetings attended in person; and (ii) Committee meetings attended remotely.

(AQW 11567/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- (i) To date I have appeared a total of 4 times before the AERA Committee in person.
- 30 January 2020 – Initial Meeting with Committee;
 - 6 May 2020 – I updated the Committee on Covid-19 Issues;
 - 22 May 2020 – I attended an exceptional meeting following the allocation of £25m to the Department; and
 - 1 July 2020 – I provided a further update on Covid-19 and transition arrangements.
- (ii) I have not attended any Committee meetings remotely.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the new border inspection post at Larne Port.

(AQO 1268/17-22)

Mr Poots: I have been clear from the beginning of my concern that Northern Ireland jobs and consumers could be damaged by the Northern Ireland Protocol in the UK-EU Brexit withdrawal agreement and that the 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 people. I have also been clear about the need for a legally binding framework which ensures continued, unfettered access for Northern Ireland businesses to their key market in Great Britain. In operational terms, this approach means minimising the need for physical checks and the scale of infrastructure required, a position which is shared by the UK Government as set out in its Command Paper, published on 20 May 2020.

The Official Controls Regulation (OCR) requirements are part of domestic law as a result of Article 5(4) of the NI Protocol and s. 7A of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. Under the OCR, DAERA is responsible for Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) checks on certain goods coming into Northern Ireland. I, as DAERA Minister am therefore required by UK domestic law to ensure compliance by the Department with its legal duties under the OCR.

A decision not to take actions required to implement a legal obligation would be an unlawful decision and in breach of the commitments made under the Ministerial Code to uphold and support the rule of law. The consequences of an unlawful decision by the Department may be a judicial review or a claim for damages by affected parties. Furthermore, failure to implement the NI Protocol may result in penalties under the Withdrawal Agreement, to which the UK Government may require the Department to contribute.

Dr Denis McMahon, DAERA Permanent Secretary was appointed as the Senior Responsible Officer for the Sanitary and Phytosanitary elements of the NI Protocol Implementation on 26 May 2020. As SRO Dr McMahon is ultimately accountable for the programme meeting its objectives, delivering the projected outcomes and realising the benefits.

After a period of intensive work on the SPS Operational Delivery Programme, significant progress has been achieved in relation to the facilities required for physical checks at Larne Port. However, it is clear that the full arrangements will not be in place for the end of the transition period and therefore contingency measures will be required. These interim arrangements will be in place from 1 January 2021.

John Graham Construction Ltd were awarded the design and build contract on 7 October. They are moving forward in parallel to develop plans for both the full implementation and contingency measures at Larne Port. They are developing a detailed building schedule for the fully operational facility and when this is finalised it will provide a robust timeframe for the commencement and completion of work.

Since appointment, the contractor has focussed on delivery of the interim contingency arrangements to ensure that the necessary facilities are in place to allow for operational delivery from 1 January 2021. This includes office accommodation, along with product and live animal facilities and the plans are well advanced.

The contingency arrangements that are planned for Northern Ireland will allow goods requiring SPS checks to move through our ports until the permanent facilities are constructed and ensure Food Supply Security is maintained.

Department for Communities

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Communities whether she will give consideration to the reintroduction of the policy of ring-fencing new social housing builds with robust monitoring to effectively address social housing shortages in areas suffering from persistent and chronic housing inequality, such as Derry and North Belfast.

(AQW 6012/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister for Communities): In my statement to the Assembly on the 3 November I announced my plans to increase the supply of social housing to address demand. A key element of this plan will be to ring-fence and weight SHDP output so that it is better at providing new social homes in greater numbers in the areas of most acute housing need. My officials and the Housing Executive are urgently progressing this work.

Derry and North Belfast are currently recognized by the Housing Executive as areas of intense need. The table below details recent and currently programmed provision in those areas.

Location	Total Social Housing Units completed 2017/18 – 2019/20	Total Social Housing Units Under Construction	Total Social Units Programmed to Start 2020/21 – 2022/23
Derry	967	854	1,469
North Belfast	397	183	134

Notes:

- Derry refers to the former Derry City Council area;
- North Belfast refers to the Housing Executive District area and not the Parliamentary Constituency.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for Communities which public services are included in plans to extend the video relay service (VRS) to allow the deaf community to make telephone calls to those services through a BSL or ISL interpreter; and which local groups and VRS experts her Department has engaged with during the procurement process.

(AQW 6530/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department of Finance Collaborative Interpretation, Translation and Transcription Services contract has been extended to April 2021 and has been varied to include the capacity for the VRS to be delivered by the Action on Hearing Loss. This VRS is available to all public bodies listed at <https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/publications/list-public-bodies-which-can-participate-cpd-collaborative-frameworks>.

Co-design is at the heart of the approach set out in the New Decade New Approach Agreement. Work on both sign language legislation and the Department's disability strategy, is being taken forward using co-design methodology and will involve representatives from the Deaf community.

My officials met with the NI Deaf Campaign Group and Jeff McWhinney, the Belfast born founder of VRS provider sign video, on 27 October to discuss VRS and other sign language issues. In addition through my Department's co-funding of the Health and Social Care Board's Remote Interpreting Service officials routinely engage with the British Deaf Association. Officials will continue to engage with various representatives from the Deaf community regarding VRS and other issues of importance to the Deaf community.

I remain committed to ensuring that BSL and ISL users have the same rights and opportunities as those of us in the hearing community.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities on what date she took the decision to design a bespoke scheme for young people in Northern Ireland, rather than signing up to the Kickstart Scheme announced by the Chancellor.

(AQW 6774/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: On 8th July 2020, the British Chancellor announced the Kickstart Scheme for Britain. This scheme only applies to Britain, not here. Employability and Employment Schemes are a devolved matter and we cannot simply sign up to a British Scheme. From the date of the Chancellor's announcement (8 July 2020), my officials set about designing an equivalent scheme that best suits the needs of employers and young people here.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Communities what plans she has to introduce a Green Homes Grant Scheme of up to £5000 for energy conservation, similar to that recently announced for England and Wales.

(AQW 7183/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department of Finance has informed me that following the British Chancellor's announcement on 8 July, Treasury is undertaking further refinement work, following which we may receive additional funding as a Barnett Consequential. The Executive will then decide how any additional funding will be allocated.

The 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.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities whether she has considered providing an automatic grant from the Universal Credit Contingency Fund for those claiming Universal Credit for the first time.

(AQW 7184/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Universal Credit Contingency Fund was designed specifically to provide financial assistance to people who experience hardship as a result of the wait for their first Universal Credit payment. All payments from the Contingency Fund are in the form of non-repayable grants and it now forms part of an enhanced package of support for people who make a new claim to Universal Credit.

In addition to the Contingency Fund, from July 2020, anyone who moves to Universal Credit from Income-based Jobseekers' Allowance, Income-related Employment and Support Allowance or Income Support will also receive a two week

“run-on” of benefit. This will effectively reduce the waiting time for the first Universal Credit payment from five weeks to three weeks, which should address some of the concerns with the wait for an initial Universal Credit payment.

Anyone who finds themselves in an extreme, exceptional or crisis situation may also be able to access urgent financial assistance through the Discretionary Support scheme. Awards can be made in the form of a grant or a loan.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities what plans has she for a centenary capital fund to help community and sporting groups to advance projects to mark the Northern Ireland Centenary.

(AQW 7221/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: There are no plans to create a centenary capital fund for sporting groups. Sport NI, an ALB of the Department, is a lead body for the development of sport here. Any investment it provides to the sector is to improve sports facilities, increase participation opportunities in sport for all abilities and to build capacity to continue to develop sport at all levels from grassroots up to high performance.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for Communities whether she will liaise with the Irish Government to ensure that the European Solidarity Corps programme can continue in Northern Ireland within the existing framework of the Irish National Agency Léargas.

(AQW 7328/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The European Solidarity Corps (ESC) programme is a European Union initiative, managed by the Erasmus+ National Agency. Continuance of this programme due to Brexit is uncertain at this time.

This is one of many post-transition arrangements which will need to be considered by the Executive in due course.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 6106/17-22, what steps are being taken to ensure a consistency of service of maintenance contracts into the future.

(AQW 7341/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has advised that all procurements are carefully planned to ensure both continuity and consistency of service for their tenants. However, some procurements in recent years have been subjected to legal challenges, and where this has been the case, the Housing Executive has put interim measures in place to ensure the maintenance service continues.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister for Communities to detail the level of supporting information that applicants of the Sub-Regional Stadia for Soccer programme will be required to disclose.

(AQW 7432/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Sub Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer is one of the commitments in the “New Decade, New Approach” Deal and my Department has begun work to refresh and re-engage with the programme to provide a robust evidence base on the current challenges, strategic priorities and needs of soccer at all levels. Following this work I will present recommendations to Executive colleagues on the future implementation of the Programme. This will be followed by the further development of the Programme which will include consideration of the level of supporting information needed for the application process.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister for Communities whether projects in the Sub-Regional Stadia for Soccer programme will require a one-off application or whether there will be multiple stages in the application process.

(AQW 7433/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Sub Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer is one of the commitments in the “New Decade, New Approach” Deal and my Department has begun work to refresh and re-engage with the programme to provide a robust evidence base on the current challenges, strategic priorities and needs of soccer at all levels. Following this work I will present recommendations to Executive colleagues on the future implementation of the Programme. This will be followed by the further development of the Programme which will include consideration of the application process to be used.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities whether she has carried out any research to indicate the impact of austerity and welfare reform measures on women.

(AQW 7510/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The first phase of Welfare Reform research with customers took place between November 2017 and July 2018. Telephone surveys were conducted with customers by staff from the Professional Services Unit on behalf of my Department. The following reports and supporting data tables present findings on the experiences and attitudes of people with regards to the welfare changes.

<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/welfare-reform-ni-claimant-baseline-surveys-report-january-2019>

These findings provide a baseline for future research and form part of a wider ongoing evaluation of Welfare Reform by my Department.

A series of Welfare Reform Information Booklets containing analysis of specific policy measures have also been produced and can be found at www.communities-ni.gov.uk/topics/welfare-changes-briefing.

A composite evaluation framework has also been developed to measure the impact of the implementation of Welfare Reform. Underpinning this are project specific evaluation strategies that have been developed in order to measure the impact of each project. The impact of the policies and their relevant mitigations will be evaluated at both the composite and project specific levels. Details on the composite framework can be found at www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/welfare-reform-composite-evaluation-framework

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Communities, given increases in the complex needs of those presenting as homeless, and the existing and historic pressures on housing officers to process these cases and waiting lists for appropriate support services as quickly as possible, what action she is taking to ensure vulnerable people receive services in a timely manner. **(AQW 7667/17-22)**

Ms Ní Chuilín: Individuals with complex needs and vulnerabilities can apply for assistance and support across a range of service areas provided by the Housing Executive. The Housing Executive has sought to ensure that vulnerable individuals who present as homeless and who are accepted as statutorily homeless under the Housing Order 1988 (as amended), are assessed, and vulnerability or support needs identified prior to placement in available accommodation most suited to their particular needs. The Housing Executive have advised that when conducting housing solutions interviews with customers who present as homeless, Housing Advisors attempt to identify any support needs that the applicant may have. Where support needs are identified, the Housing Executive attempt to make referrals to a range of external support services tailored to the individual needs of the individual where available, regardless of the type of temporary accommodation they are placed in, including those placed in single lets in the private rented sector.

It should be noted that the Covid-19 restrictions and demands have been challenging for many of our homeless and there has been an increase in support needs and complex cases. Homeless providers have also faced challenges in delivering their services in new and different ways – with a shift from face to face to remote or online delivery and a move from in-reach to out-reach support. The Housing Executive has sought to put in place additional wraparound support arrangements to ensure that those with support needs can access suitable services and support from the homeless sector by contributing to guidance for homeless providers available on the Department for Health website.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail the Housing Executive maintenance schemes planned for the next two years in the East Belfast constituency; and when each scheme will commence. **(AQW 7834/17-22)**

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive have provided the tables below which set out the planned maintenance schemes that are currently programmed for the East Belfast constituency in the next two financial years. The Housing Executive is currently carrying out its annual programme roll-on exercise and consequently these details may change. Unfortunately, due to uncertainties surrounding the current Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on the delivery of this year's programme, it is not possible at this time to guarantee actual start dates.

It should be noted that, while most of these schemes are entirely based in the East Belfast constituency, some schemes are mainly based in other constituencies but include some properties located in East Belfast.

2021/22

Scheme Name	Scheme Type	No
Bridge End	Bathroom Kitchen Rewire (BKR)	30
Cregagh Phase 1	Bathroom Kitchen Rewire (BKR)	98
Cregagh Phase 2	Bathroom Kitchen Rewire (BKR)	103
Ravenhill/ Lawnmount/ Titanic	Bathroom Kitchen Rewire (BKR)	128
Titanic Phase 2	Bathroom Kitchen Rewire (BKR)	128
Woodstock/ Cherryville	Bathroom Kitchen Rewire (BKR)	93
Lower Braniel Phase 1	Bathroom Replacement	92
Garnerville/ Knocknagoney	Bathroom Replacement	100
Lord Street Avoniel Phase 1	Bathroom Replacement	119
Lord Street Avoniel Phase 2	Bathroom Replacement	91
South & East	Double Glazing	405
Knocknagoney/ Orchard/ Garnerville	External Cyclical Maintenance	292
Tower/ Flower/ Thistle	External Cyclical Maintenance	121

Scheme Name	Scheme Type	No
Clonduff	External Cyclical Maintenance	150
Ardcarn/ Cherryvalley/ Ashmount etc.	External Cyclical Maintenance	243
Ballybeen Phase 2	External Cyclical Maintenance	226
Ballybeen Phase 3	External Cyclical Maintenance	149
South & East Phase 2	Heating Replacement	66
South & East (2006)	Heating Replacement	225
Lisburn mop-up Phase 1	Heating Replacement	145
Lisburn mop-up Phase 2	Heating Replacement	189
Tullycarnet Roofs	Roof replacement	123
South & East Roofs	Roof replacement	102
Wandsworth	Thermal Improvements	43
Morven/ Islay	Multi Element Improvements	40
Kings Road Flats	Multi Element Improvements	102
Cherryvalley	Multi Element Improvements	18

2022/23

Scheme Name	Scheme Type	No
East Belfast BKR-mop-up 2 (Draft)	Bathroom Kitchen Rewire (BKR)	100
Braniel mop up scheme	Bathroom Kitchen Rewire (BKR)	64
East Belfast BK	Bathroom Kitchen Rewire (BKR)	89
Avoniel/Bloomfield ECM	External Cyclical Maintenance	305
Beersbridge ECM	External Cyclical Maintenance	160
Hollywood Road ECM	External Cyclical Maintenance	274
Ballybeen Bath	Bathrooms	138
Tullycarnet EI	Environmental improvement	N/A
Clonduff thermal (no fines) EWI	Thermal Improvements	102
Dehra Grove	Multi Element Improvements	18
Clara Way Maisonettes	Multi Element Improvements	28
Melford Drive Bedsits	Multi Element Improvements	10

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities whether any part of the Port of Larne lies within a site of archaeological interest.

(AQW 8006/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department does not hold information on the extent of the Port of Larne land ownership. However, the Historic Environment Record which is maintained by my Department, records a number of heritage sites within the vicinity of the Port. These can be viewed on the DfC Historic Environment map viewer:

(<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/services/historic-environment-map-viewer>) or can be downloaded as open data from my Department's website (<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/historic-environment-digital-datasets>).

Most of these recorded sites relate to the industrial heritage of the port:

- Point Pier (Industrial Heritage Site; ref 05616:000:00)
- Chimney (Industrial Heritage Site; ref 05616:002:00)
- Slip (Industrial Heritage Site; ref 05616:003:00)
- Coastguard Station (Industrial Heritage Site; ref 05617:000:00)
- Quay (Industrial Heritage Site; ref 05617:002:00)
- Quay (Industrial Heritage Site; ref 05614:000:00)

- Harbour (Industrial Heritage Site; ref 05604:000:00)
- Salt works (Industrial Heritage Site; ref 05589:000:00)
- Navigation beacon (Industrial Heritage Site; ref 07510:000:00)
- Lighthouse (Industrial Heritage Site; ref 06984:000:00)
- Chimneys (Industrial Heritage Site; ref 05615:002:00)
- Shipbuilding Yard (Industrial Heritage Site; ref 05615:001:00)
- Quay (Industrial Heritage Site; ref 05615:004:00)
- Slips (Industrial Heritage Site; ref 05615:003:00)

In addition, there are a number of other heritage assets in the vicinity of the Port area, including:

- Olderfleet Castle (State Care Monument; ANT040:040)
- Princess Victoria Memorial (Listed Building; HB06/08/016)
- Clyde Valley Memorial (Listed Building; HB06/08/008)
- Chainé Memorial (Listed Building; HB06/08/001)
- Curran Point Mesolithic Occupation Site (Archaeological site; ANT040:043)
- Site of the Battle of Ard Corainn (Archaeological site; ANT040:090)
- Curran and Drumaliss Mesolithic Occupation Site (Archaeological site; ANT040:116)
- Bronze Age Occupation Site (Archaeological site; ANT040:011)
- Aluminium Works (Industrial Heritage Site; 05603:000:00)
- Curran Saw Mills (Industrial Heritage Site; 05602:000:00)
- Wreck of brig George (Known Marine Wreck Site)
- Wreck of steam coaster Harrington (Known Marine Wreck Site)
- Unidentified stranded wreck (Known Marine Wreck Site)

Previously unrecorded archaeological sites can be uncovered during the course of any new development or ground works. These may require appropriate and proportionate mitigation works, recording and addition to the Historic Environment Record.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities what plans she has to help support councils financially in 2021/22.
(AQW 8473/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: On 23 November 2020, the Executive allocated a further £10m to my Department to support local councils for the period from mid-March 2020 to March 2021. This was in addition to £75.3m that was previously allocated for councils for this financial year of which £40.3m has been paid to date.

My Department will continue to carry out analysis of the figures to be provided by each council reflecting their projected financial losses and COVID-19 costs for this financial year taking into account updated estimates and actual spend.

Once my Department has carried out due diligence exercises on further 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 for the remaining £45m funding which includes the recent allocation of £10m will be confirmed once information has been provided by councils and due diligence exercises have been completed.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 7851 17-22, to detail the timescale for the completion of the business case for a dispersed intensively managed emergency accommodation service in Derry city.
(AQW 8523/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Due to the scale of this service and the accompanying procurement exercise that would be subject to Official Journal of the European Union (OJEU) Regulations it is unlikely that any commissioning of a new service would be in 2020/21. The Housing Executive is committed to the long term provision of a dispersed intensively managed emergency accommodated service in Derry city. It is currently investigating what short term measures it can facilitate as part of its ongoing pandemic response while the process around commissioning a long term service is completed. My private office will be happy to provide the necessary contact details for the relevant team.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Communities why the Sub-Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer funding has not yet been delivered.
(AQW 8630/17-22)

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 I want to satisfy myself that the investment will address current and future need.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Communities why further consultation on the Sub-Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer funding has been deemed necessary by her Department.
(AQW 8631/17-22)

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 Chambers asked the Minister for Communities when clubs will receive allocations from the Sub-Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer.
(AQW 8632/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Sub Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer is one of the commitments in the “New Decade, New Approach” Deal and my Department has begun work to refresh and re-engage with the programme to provide a robust evidence base on the current challenges, strategic priorities and needs of soccer at all levels.

Following this work I will present recommendations to Executive colleagues on the future implementation of the Programme including the timeline for delivery.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities how many complaints her Department has received concerning discretionary support.
(AQW 8687/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Departmental complaint reports are collated on a quarterly basis. The most recent report shows that Discretionary Support received three complaints during the quarter ending September 2020.

- One complaint was in relation to another business area and Discretionary Support was asked to provide input regarding services available.
- The other two complaints were from the same customer and the issues she raised were resolved to her satisfaction.

Discretionary Support also carries out a customer exit survey, this provides a valuable insight into how well our service is operating. The last reported results from the survey were in February 2020. They showed an overall customer satisfaction rate of 100%.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of staff working in the discretionary support section of her Department, in each of the last three years.
(AQW 8689/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The number of staff working in Discretionary Support will vary over time due to turnover and natural attrition.

The number of staff working in Discretionary Support as at 31 March 2018 was 149.28 whole time equivalent (167 actual headcount of staff in post).

The number of staff working in Discretionary Support as at 31 March 2019 was 180.77 whole time equivalent (199 actual headcount of staff in post).

The number of staff working in Discretionary Support as at 31 March 2020 was 185.3 whole time equivalent (211 actual headcount of staff in post).

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail (i) the discretionary support budget for 2018/19 and 2019/20; and (ii) the amount spent in each financial year.
(AQW 8690/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The discretionary support budget, not supported by receipts, for 2018/19 was £16.49 million and the spend was £13,765 million.

The discretionary support budget, not supported by receipts, for 2019/20 was £16.49 million and the spend was £12,865 million.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of (i) successful; and (ii) unsuccessful applications made to discretionary support in the last 12 months, broken down by the time taken to process the application.
(AQW 8691/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: A total of 70,178 successful applications and 20,633 unsuccessful Discretionary Support applications were processed in the 12 months ending on 30 November 2020.

On average in the 12 months ending 30 November 2020, 55% of applications were processed in 1-2 days.

Significantly a comparison between November 2020 and November 2019 shows that during November 2020 an additional 4,001 applications were processed of which an additional 1,538 were successful. Moreover, an additional £900K was awarded in November 2020.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail the additional funding required by her Department to deliver each New Decade, New Approach commitment, broken down by financial year.

(AQW 8847/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: As part of the recent Budget 2021-24 Information Gathering Exercise, commissioned by the Department of Finance, my Department submitted 13 bids for additional Resource funding, covering the next 3 financial years (2021-22 to 2023-24), required in order to deliver on its New Decade, New Approach commitments:

	NDNA Resource Bids	2021/22 £'000	2022/23 £'000	2023/24 £'000
01	New Welfare Mitigations	57,650	147,300	147,300
02	Terminal Illness	1,950	4,000	4,000
03	Offsetting 2-child limit on UC, HB & CTC	28,750	57,500	57,500
04	Welfare Supplementary Payments (Existing Mitigations)	42,800	40,600	40,700
05	Child Funeral Fund	703	756	813
06	Social Strategies	593	474	460
07	Independent Advice Services – Welfare Reform	2,000	2,000	0
08	Irish Language/Ulster-Scots Strategies	2,000	2,000	2,000
09	Sign Language Framework/ Legislation Commitments	900	900	900
10	Regional Stadia Programme Casement Park - Staff	354	359	365
11	Sub Regional Stadia for Soccer Staff Resource costs	316	427	432
12	Housing staff needed to deliver NDNA	539	547	555
13	Citydeal	600	537	537
	NDNA Resource Bids Total	139,155	257,400	255,562

In addition, my Department submitted 3 bids for additional Capital funding, covering the next 4 financial years (2021-22 to 2024-25), required in order to deliver on its New Decade, New Approach commitments:

	NDNA Capital Bids	2021/22 £'000	2022/23 £'000	2023/24 £'000	2024/25 £'000
01	Casement Park	20,000	50,000	27,000	4,500
02	New Mitigations IT System	4,000	2,500	0	0
03	Sub Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer	0	5,000	20,000	11,000
	NDNA Capital Bids Total	24,000	57,500	47,000	15,500

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities whether she intends to include a ban on conversion therapy as part of the Sexual Orientation Strategy or as a separate piece of legislation to be brought in this mandate.

(AQW 8943/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I view so-called Conversion Therapy as an abhorrent practice. It takes a number of forms and ending it will be cross-cutting matter best considered as part of the development of the Executive's Sexual Orientation Strategy outlined in New Decade, New Approach. This Strategy will be developed using a co-design, co-production approach with meaningful involvement at all stages from stakeholders including those within the LGBT communities with lived experience and whose lives are most affected by this issue.

Following agreement of the Strategy, my Executive colleagues and I will take forward actions pertaining to their Departments' responsibilities including any legislative requirements in relation to a ban.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Communities why she did not TUPE the staff currently carrying out work coaching under the Steps to Success programme.

(AQW 9014/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: TUPE is a set of legal rights that apply only in certain situations. As you are aware, the Steps 2 Success programme is not being replaced by another large mainstream employment programme, but rather a framework of provision. Under the Service Provision Change (Protection of Employment) Regulations (NI) 2006 (SPC), TUPE does not apply to the Steps 2 Success Provider organisations in relation to Employability NI. Also TUPE does not apply to the Department's recruitment of Universal Credit Operations frontline staff.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities 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 9088/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Information relating to correspondence and invitations are retained in the Hewlett Packard Electronic Records Manager (HPERM) system, in line with NICS Records Management policy and GDPR obligations.

Details of all of meetings with external organisations and individuals are also collated and provided to the Department of Finance for publication quarterly.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities how much her Department paid Ulster University for the data on targeting for the affordable warmth scheme.

(AQW 9132/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Ulster University has carried out various pieces of work to support the delivery of the Affordable Warmth Scheme. The work assists in identifying those most at risk of fuel poverty, so they can be targeted and encouraged to apply to the Scheme:

	Year	Payment
Developing targeting tool	2011	£26,500
Update to the targeting tool (data from the 2011 Census)	2014	£6,000
Developing a revised targeting tool	2018	£28,500
Health Impact Analysis of AWS	2019	£15,200

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Communities to detail any communication, support or assistance that has been offered to the Belfast Giants to ensure their long-term viability.

(AQW 9175/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My officials worked with sports Governing Bodies and major sporting organisations, including the Belfast Giants, to establish the extent of the financial impact of the pandemic and the potential future implications.

It was clear from this engagement that the financial position facing the sports sector is dire, with the real possibility of serious long term damage. Therefore, I submitted a bid to the Executive for a support package to provide much needed financial relief for Governing Bodies, clubs and sporting organisations which have incurred losses due to Covid restrictions. As a consequence of this bid my Department received £25 million.

I am acutely aware of the financial impact that the Covid interventions have had on many in the sports sector. Therefore my officials have worked urgently with Sport NI to design a needs based scheme to which organisations in the sector, including the Belfast Giants, can apply.

As a result, the Sports Sustainability Fund was launched on 4 December with a closure date of 11 January to allow sporting organisations time to gather the necessary information and complete a validated application, as well as collate the necessary evidence to support their claim for assistance. The Belfast Giants will be eligible to apply to this Fund.

Sport NI is administering the Sports Sustainability Fund. It is planned that the assessment and verification phase will take place during January with payments commencing in February.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities whether the Sub-Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer will be open for applications in the current mandate.

(AQW 9193/17-22)

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 full analysis of this exercise, along with benchmarking and research, will inform my proposals on the future of this Programme. Following this work I will present recommendations to Executive colleagues on the future implementation of the Programme including the timetable for delivery.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail her forward work plan, including timelines, for the delivery of the Sub-Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer.
(AQW 9194/17-22)

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.

The analysis stage has begun and will inform the shape and scope of the programme going forward including timelines.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the review of welfare mitigations.
(AQW 9268/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I can confirm that draft proposals for the review of the welfare mitigation schemes are well advanced. I will make an announcement in the near future

Mr Buckley asked the Minister for Communities to detail (i) whether DJs were eligible for assistance under the Individual Emergency Resilience Programme in August 2020; (ii) how many DJs received assistance under the programme; and (iii) the total financial assistance provided to DJs through this programme.
(AQW 9378/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Arts Council 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. 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 totalling £64,800.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Communities to detail the accountability mechanism for Housing Solutions.
(AQW 9395/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has advised that oversight of its Housing Solutions service is provided by Area offices and the Belfast unit who in turn report and account for the service to the Regional Manager.

A monthly performance meeting, including the Housing Executive's Regional Managers, is held by its Director for Housing Services at which all divisional activity, including Housing Solutions is reported on.

In addition, the Housing Executive's senior management team hold a monthly performance review meeting to consider the performance of each Division. These accountability arrangements are complemented by regular reports to the Housing Executive's Board and via quarterly Accountability meetings with the Department. Furthermore I have an annual performance meeting with both the Chair of the Housing Executive Board and the Chief Executive.

Finally all activity of the Housing Executive is subject to regular audit by both Internal Audit and by the Audit Office which is also complemented by inspections undertaken by the Department.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities whether she will include a review of Carers' Allowance in the review of Welfare Mitigations, with a view to increasing the allowance and amending entry criteria to allow carers who are in employment the ability to access support.
(AQW 9462/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department is not yet in a position to provide details of the specific issues that will be covered in the forthcoming review of welfare mitigations. However, I expect that the review will consider the current levels of financial support currently available to carers in the social security system.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities how her Department will support private renters who are being charged illegal letting fees and rebranded letting fees.
(AQW 9568/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: As I outlined in my recent statement to the Assembly, I will bring forward legislation to the Assembly that will improve the safety, security and quality of the private rented sector.

At present, the charging of fees by letting agents for services carried out on behalf of the landlord is unlawful and should cease. Minister Hargey and Minister Murphy issued a joint communiqué to this effect in March of this year. Any tenant who has been asked to pay such a fee should contact the Housing Rights Helpline.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Communities how many complaints there has been with regard to anti-social behaviour by Housing Executive tenants, over the last 5 years, broken down by constituency.
(AQW 9622/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has provided the following table which details the number of anti-social behaviour cases recorded over the last 5 years. These are broken down by Housing Executive Area Office since it does not hold the information on a constituency basis. It is also not possible to provide the information by tenure, however it has advised that the majority of anti-social behaviour complaints recorded relate to the behaviour of Housing Executive tenants.

Housing Executive Area Office	15/16	16/17	17/18	18/19	19/20
Causeway	293	226	130	117	123
Lisburn/Castlereagh	70	121	91	96	90
Mid & East Antrim	308	259	201	201	197
Mid Ulster	193	183	104	145	103
North Belfast	90	93	62	104	130
North Down & Ards	320	270	199	215	133
South & East Belfast	124	95	96	107	110
South Antrim	149	147	75	66	103
South	282	259	198	241	192
South Down	393	235	150	124	167
South West	185	194	128	118	74
West	485	361	265	227	274
West Belfast	295	200	154	190	222
Total	3,187	2,643	1,853	1,951	1,918

I hope this information is useful.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for Communities whether she has any plans to increase legacy benefits, such as Job Seekers Allowance or Employment Support Allowance, in line with the uplift of Universal Credit for this financial year.
(AQW 9631/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Legacy benefits such as Income Support, Jobseeker's Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance were increased by 1.7% in April 2020.

On 20 March there was a temporary increase to the Universal Credit standard allowance of £20 per week. Legislation allows this measure to continue for the 20/21 financial year. The temporary increase of £20 per week in Universal Credit was aimed at helping people who subsequently became unemployed or whose earnings or work hours decreased because of the pandemic. It was also to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and prevent lower paid and/or self-employed people from suffering financial loss as a result of following Public Health guidance.

It has always been the case that people on legacy benefits can make a claim for Universal Credit if they believe that they will be better off. There are special arrangements for those in receipt of the Severe Disability Premium, who will be able to make a new claim to Universal Credit from January 2021.

People should check their eligibility before applying to Universal Credit as legacy benefits will end when they submit their claim and they will not be able to return to them in the future. For this reason, people are signposted to independent calculators on GOV.UK. Neither the Department for Communities nor Revenue and Customs can advise people whether they would be better off moving to Universal Credit or remaining on legacy benefits.

From July 2020, a two-week run on of Income Support, income-based Jobseeker's Allowance and income-related Employment and Support Allowance is available for those whose claim to Universal Credit ends entitlement to these benefits to provide additional support for people moving to Universal Credit.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities 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 9687/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department is responsible for delivery of two of the headline actions under the T:BUC Strategy, the Uniting Communities through sport and creativity programme and the creation of 10 new shared neighbourhood developments.

The Uniting Communities through sport and creativity programme consists of three elements, two of which are inextricably linked. The 'Uniting Communities through Leadership' engages young people aged 16-24 who are recruited to become Young Leaders and take part in a structured training programme with the aim of creating the next generation of community leaders. Running parallel to this is 'Uniting Communities through Community Activity' for young participants aged 11-16 that uses sport and creativity to build good relations.

These elements of the programme involve delivery over a longer period in selected locations where community challenges exist. To date projects have been completed in the Falls and Village, the Colin and Eastside urban village areas of Belfast and a rural project in the Erne East area of Co Fermanagh.

Part of the delivery model includes the 'Uniting Communities by Building Capacity' that awards funding through a Uniting Opportunities grant scheme which targets groups of marginalised young people. These shorter term projects help young people to better engage with their community by building their confidence, personal abilities, core skills and building good relations. Since 2017 the scheme has provided funding to 17 different organisations, delivering 30 projects, and engaging almost 1,000 of the most marginalised young people in society today.

Delivery of the programme has been disrupted in 2020/21 due to COVID-19 restrictions. However the young leaders continue to train across delivery areas with the Uniting Ardoyne and Ballysillan project currently completing the final 'Embedding Sustainability' stage and the Uniting Derg project in Co Tyrone due to recommence activity in December 2020.

The 10 T:BUC shared housing schemes have completed, and they are being supported through Advisory Groups which have been established to oversee the development and delivery of five-year Good Relations Plans. The Plans include 'bonding' projects/events which are delivered to the new shared housing residents, and 'Bridging' projects/events which are delivered between the shared housing residents and residents from the surrounding communities (within a five-mile radius of the shared schemes).

The 10 T:BUC schemes have been the catalyst for further shared housing commitments in the (Draft) Programme for Government 2016-2021; badged as 'Housing for All'. There are an additional 24 schemes under development, and the Department is liaising with the Housing Executive to bring additional schemes onto the 2020/21 Shared Housing Programme. This additionality has been made possible through funding received from the Fresh Start Agreement. As with the 10 T:BUC schemes, the 'Housing for All' schemes will be supported through the establishment of Advisory Groups and the development and delivery of five-year Good Relations Plans.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Communities when she plans to introduce legislation to reform the housing points system. (AQW 9803/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: As I have already stated, I plan to publish a report of the consultation on 'A Fundamental Review of Social Housing Allocations' which will include an action plan for implementing changes. These changes will make our Selection Scheme fairer and better at responding to objective need.

Some of the proposals may require legislative amendments, but in the main implementation will be carried out via amendments to the Housing Selection Scheme and other operational changes, which do not require legislation.

The published report will make next steps clear. I anticipate publication of the report in the near future.

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister for Communities to detail the payments to the Ulster University for modelling the Affordable Warmth Scheme since its inception. (AQW 9863/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Ulster University has carried out various pieces of work to support the delivery of the Affordable Warmth Scheme. The work assists in identifying those most at risk of fuel poverty, so they can be targeted and encouraged to apply to the Scheme:

	Year	Payment
Developing targeting tool	2011	£26,500
Update to the targeting tool (data from the 2011 Census)	2014	£6,000
Developing a revised targeting tool	2018	£28,500
Health Impact Analysis of AWS	2019	£15,200

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Communities what support is due to be provided by (i) her Department; and (ii) relevant arm's-length bodies towards the PGA EuroPro Tour tournament to be held at Clandeboye Golf Club in 2021. (AQW 9890/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Policy responsibility for events, including sports events, rests in the first instance with the Department for Economy (DfE) and Tourism NI (TNI). That said, my officials and Sport NI do engage regularly with DfE and TNI officials to explore what support can be provided to ensure that the sport sector benefits from a legacy of hosting sports events.

I understand that Sport NI met with members of Clandeboye Golf Club in February 2020, along with Tourism NI, and heard about the Club's plans to host the PGA EuroPro Tournament in August, which was cancelled due to the Covid-19 restrictions introduced in March 2020. At that time, Sport NI had also engaged with the Governing Body – the Golfing Union of Ireland (now Golf Ireland) to explore legacy opportunities from that event.

As a result of the Covid-19 restrictions, no further work had progressed in this regard, however, I can advise that Sport NI is available to engage further with the Club to discuss the event planned for 2021.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities whether she will consider reopening the COVID-19 charities grant.
(AQW 9897/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: You will now be aware that I have announced plans to bring forward a second phase of funding which will be open for applicants between 6 and 22 January 2021.

On 14 December 2020, full details of the funding scheme will be publicly available and I would urge all charities to use their time wisely to assemble information and prepare applications in advance of the opening date. I have also put in place support arrangements so that any charity that may need help or assistance in any way as they prepare their application can access it.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities how much community funding has gone into (i) Ballintoy; (ii) Balnamore; (iii) Dunloy; (iv) Loughgiel; and (v) Rasharkin, in each of the last five years.
(AQW 9954/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Government Funding Database is a public database that holds records of applications from and funding to voluntary and community sector organisations. You may find it helpful to search the database to obtain details of funding awarded to specific organisations registered within the noted areas. Please note, information within the database is held according to the registered address of the organisation, which may not correspond to the location of the group benefitting from the funding awarded.

The Government Funding Database can be accessed at: <https://govfundingpublic.nics.gov.uk/>

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the introduction of legislation to extend welfare reform mitigations payments.
(AQW 10024/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I intend to introduce new primary legislation to provide for an extension of welfare mitigation payments for people affected by the bedroom tax.

My Department continues to make mitigation payments to eligible people.

This is possible as my Department has agreed contingency arrangements with the Department of Finance so that payments are currently made under the sole authority of the relevant Budget Act. These arrangements continue to be kept under review and will be extended as necessary.

I can confirm that draft proposals for the review of the welfare mitigation schemes are well advanced I will make an announcement in the near future

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities when she will introduce proposals to strengthen welfare reform mitigations to the Executive.
(AQW 10025/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I can confirm that draft proposals for the review of the welfare mitigation schemes are well advanced. I will make an announcement in the near future.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities when the sports sector COVID-19 relief fund will be open for applications.
(AQW 10026/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Following a successful October Monitoring Round bid, I have secured £25m funding for the Sports Sustainability Fund. The aim of the Fund is to ensure that the sports sector, which is representative of the diverse range of interests across our communities, is sustained during the ongoing challenges that Covid is presenting.

Following appropriate approval of the business case, the Fund was launched on 4 December with a closure date of 11 January to allow Governing Bodies and clubs time to gather the necessary information and complete a validated application as well as collate the necessary evidence to support their claim for assistance.

It is planned that the assessment and verification phase will take place during January with payments commencing in February.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Communities (i) whether a commissioner's role has been considered for Irish and Ulster Scots language, culture and identity as part of New Decade, New Approach; (ii) what consultation has been made beyond that with the existing boards for Gaelic and Ulster Scots regarding language and culture; and (iii) whether there is a role for the Northern Ireland Office, Secretary of State and the Dublin Government for the Irish and Ulster Scots language, culture and identity as part of New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 10406/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Executive Office (TEO) continues with preparatory work, to legislate for core elements of the Rights, Language and Identity proposals contained in New Decade, New Approach.

New Decade New Approach (NDNA) provides a commitment to the development and delivery of an Irish Language Strategy and an Ulster-Scots Language, Heritage and Culture Strategy.

The principles and practice of citizen and community engagement and co-design will be a key part of the strategies' development and delivery. A timetable for commencement will be published following Executive agreement.

The NDNA was jointly published by the Secretary of State and the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade.

The commitments of each Government are noted in NDNA.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities whether she plans to address the issue of benefit recipients being unable to access a private rented sector tenancy.

(AQW 10666/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: A county court Judge in England recently ruled that "No DSS" rental bans are against equality laws.

While the ruling is not binding, I would be opposed to landlords or letting agents operating any such policy, as this in my view would be discriminatory. Ultimately, however, this would be a matter for the courts to decide upon.

My officials are monitoring developments in this area and exploring options.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Communities (i) whether community and voluntary organisations are able to provide mental health and social support services, including youth services, in their premises further to the 27 November 2020 COVID-19 related restrictions; and (ii) to detail the current restrictions and guidance for community and voluntary organisations including management meetings.

(AQW 10685/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Executive Office (TEO) are leading on the Covid-19 related restrictions for all departments. The guidance will also be placed on the NI Direct website as soon as it is available.

The current restrictions can be found at www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-guidance-what-restrictions-mean-you

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Communities when the Housing Executive will commence the 50-year lease extension to those who have purchased flats under the right to buy scheme.

(AQW 10823/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has advised that at its meeting on 28th October 2020, the Board of the Housing Executive approved a new policy enabling Leaseholders of sold Housing Executive flats to purchase extensions to their lease of at least 50 years, subject to payment of an appropriate consideration. As you are aware the policy will ensure that sold Housing Executive flats remain marketable and afford good security for mortgage purposes.

The Housing Executive will now develop the procedures and processes to support the implementation of its new policy, and is currently considering the timescale for this.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities to detail the Jobstart scheme that had been due to open in November 2020.

(AQW 10843/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The JobStart Scheme will help young people (16 – 24 year olds) at risk of long term unemployment get into the job market by providing government funding for employers to create six-month job opportunities with nine-month opportunities available for those young people who would benefit from having a longer period of time to settle into the job opportunity, and to allow adequate time for reasonable adjustments to be addressed.

The eligibility criteria for the JobStart Scheme includes any young person aged 16-24 on a working age benefit who is work ready, as well as those leaving care, those with disabilities and returning citizens who are ready for work.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Communities what plans her Department has to support Kirkistown Race Circuit.

(AQW 11280/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department, through Sport NI, has supported the Kirkistown Race Circuit by providing £85,000 between 2017 and 2020 through the 500 Motorcycle Club of Ireland, for the provision of safety fencing, improving an access path and a new Pit wall.

The Circuit has also benefited from funding of £200,000 which was provided to 2&4 Wheels Motorsport Group, the Governing Body for Motorsport, in 2019/20 for safety related equipment.

In relation to current Covid related funding I can advise that the Sports Sustainability Fund, which totals £25m, is open for applications from sports clubs and organisations through their respective Governing Bodies.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities who will fund the write off of the historic debt under the new mutual body being created for housing.

(AQW 11287/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My officials have commenced work to assess options to revitalise the Housing Executive and I have stated my preference for a co-operative or mutual model or one which enhances the role/ownership of tenants. In line with the New Decade New Approach commitment that "the Executive will examine options to remove historical debt from the Housing Executive", the write off of historical debt will be considered within the assessment of options.

I can assure you that I intend to bring proposals to the Executive before the end of this mandate.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities whether she has considered implementing a strategy and action plan to support people with disabilities into training and employment following labour market disruption due to COVID-19.

(AQW 11288/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department is implementing a range of new provision in response to labour market disruption due to COVID-19. This provision includes the JobStart Programme, an enhanced work experience offering, and a range of measures to support the removal of barriers for those seeking employment.

The Department is working collaboratively with key stakeholders including other Departments, local government, employers and the voluntary and community sector to ensure efforts are aligned to achieve the best outcomes for those most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Department's existing range of work preparation and in work support programmes remain available to people with disabilities who wish to enter employment, need assistance to retain their job or indeed to progress in their career. These include Workable NI, Access to Work, Condition Management Programme, and the range of European Social Fund provision funded by the Department.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for Communities how much of the £10 million for councils and sport will be paid to Ards and North Down Council; and when this payment will be made.

(AQW 11328/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The funding allocated and paid to Ards and North Down Borough Council for the periods from mid-March to 30 June 2020, and 1 July 2020 to 31 October 2020 was £1,415,734 and £1,811,688 respectively.

My Department will continue to carry out analysis of the figures to be provided by each council reflecting their projected financial losses and COVID-19 costs for this financial year taking into account updated estimates and actual spend.

Once my Department has carried out due diligence exercises on further 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 for the remaining £45m funding which includes the recent allocation of £10m will be confirmed once information has been provided by councils and due diligence exercises have been completed.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities to detail the future funding arrangements for disability employment projects that are currently delivered through the European Social Fund; and what assurances she can give that there will be no gap between existing and new funding streams.

(AQW 11378/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department for Communities (DfC) currently provides match funding to 14 disability projects in the European Social Fund Programme 2014 -2020.

The Department is critically aware of the milestone of ESF funds ending. The replacement of this provision, that supports vulnerable individuals, is a challenge and we will fully engage and work collaboratively with all Departments in the Executive.

The Department for the Economy (DfE) together with the Department of Finance is engaging with the British Government on the Shared Prosperity Fund - this trilateral engagement is at both Ministerial and official levels.

In order to consider the future policy and delivery options, DfE have established a project in collaboration with DfC to consider options and develop details of potential ESF succession arrangements.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for Communities (i) what plans she has in place to address homelessness and those sleeping rough this Christmas; and (ii) what plans she has to financially support foodbanks and those providing hot meals to the elderly and vulnerable this Christmas.

(AQW 11386/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín:

- (i) The Housing Executive has statutory responsibility for homelessness. It has set out its approach to assisting those who are homeless or threatened with becoming homeless in the Homelessness Strategy 2017-22, which can be accessed via <https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Homelessness/homelessness-strategy-northern-ireland-2017-2022.aspx?ext=..> Staff in the Housing Solutions and Support Teams will work with clients and avail of the support from other agencies to ensure clients are supported. This can include floating support to prevent homelessness or temporary accommodation in cases where emergency accommodation is required

Over the Christmas period the Housing Executive will continue to deliver homeless services through an out-of-hours emergency homelessness service on evenings/weekends and any days on which their offices are closed. For any individuals who are identified as rough sleeping the Housing Executive confirms that the 'Everyone in' approach continues to be adopted, including for those with no recourse to public funds. The 'Everyone In' approach seeks to ensure that any individual sleeping rough is offered appropriate support and accommodation if required.

As part of their Homelessness Prevention Fund, the Housing Executive has provided £838k of funding to 39 projects. These projects support a range of organisations across the voluntary and community sectors to deliver homelessness prevention activities during 2020/21.

- (ii) The Department was allocated an additional £3.5m for Access to Food in October monitoring. This will be invested in a range of immediate and medium term interventions to address challenges which may exacerbate food poverty and insecurity. In the short term, funding will be provided to a number of charities who run established seasonal campaigns, to ensure vulnerable individuals have access to food and other essential items through the Christmas period and into the New Year. The remaining allocation will build on the previous support provided by my Department earlier in the year to implement more sustainable responses to food insecurity.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities how many applications for Discretionary Support payments her Department received for every year between 2015 and 2020 broken down by constituency; and how many were approved.

(AQW 11409/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Discretionary Support was introduced in November 2016, application and payment data is available therefore from 2016/17 through 2019/20.

Management information on Discretionary Support applications received since its implementation in November 2016, broken down by Parliamentary Constituency is provided in the table below: -

Parliamentary Constituency	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Belfast East	1,310	3,050	3,520	3,280
Belfast North	4,410	9,400	11,080	10,090
Belfast South	1,480	3,360	3,730	3,400
Belfast West	3,590	7,880	9,500	8,550
East Antrim	1,380	2,890	3,360	3,120
East Derry	1,550	3,390	4,060	3,450
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	1,090	2,370	3,390	2,860
Foyle	3,960	8,130	9,610	8,050
Lagan Valley	990	2,220	2,500	2,270
Mid-Ulster	1,160	2,220	2,810	2,560
Newry & Armagh	940	2,310	3,090	3,020
North Antrim	1,450	3,270	4,030	3,510
North Down	870	2,030	2,370	2,290
South Antrim	910	2,150	2,490	2,490
South Down	1,490	3,180	4,200	3,590

Parliamentary Constituency	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Strangford	1,040	2,410	2,790	2,400
Upper Bann	1,530	3,420	4,440	3,920
West Tyrone	1,490	3,080	4,210	3,340

Management information on Discretionary Support applications paid since its implementation in November 2016, broken down by Parliamentary Constituency is provided in the table below: -

Parliamentary Constituency	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Belfast East	930	2,120	2,440	2,340
Belfast North	2,760	6,180	7,260	6,990
Belfast South	990	2,280	2,560	2,380
Belfast West	2,200	5,080	6,310	5,930
East Antrim	860	1,920	2,280	2,130
East Derry	920	2,270	2,610	2,360
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	700	1,610	2,220	1,960
Foyle	2,480	5,320	6,290	5,520
Lagan Valley	650	1,490	1,670	1,620
Mid-Ulster	730	1,490	1,880	1,780
Newry & Armagh	630	1,520	2,060	2,150
North Antrim	930	2,150	2,650	2,430
North Down	580	1,370	1,590	1,590
South Antrim	560	1,460	1,700	1,750
South Down	910	2,060	2,790	2,460
Strangford	650	1,600	1,950	1,720
Upper Bann	940	2,270	2,860	2,680
West Tyrone	900	2,040	2,760	2,310

Management information is not yet available by Parliamentary Constituency for 2020/21.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for Communities to detail, since January 2020, the number of social housing units (i) approved by her Department but on which construction has not yet commenced; (ii) on which construction has commenced but is not completed; (iii) on which construction has been completed and the housing association has received a Completion Certificate from a contractor; and (iv) which have been allocated to new tenants by housing associations in the South Down constituency.

(AQW 11412/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I can advise that within the South Down Parliamentary Constituency there have been 79 social housing units approved since the beginning of 2020, but on which construction has not yet commenced. I have included details of these in Table 1 below.

There are currently 48 social housing units under construction. Details of these units are included in Table 2 below.

There have been 72 social housing completions, since the beginning of 2020 to-date. For context, "completion" means that work on the dwelling is complete and that these units have been handed over to a housing association (following receipt of a Completion Certificate from a contractor).

The housing associations have confirmed that 47 of the 72 units have been allocated to new tenants. The status of the remaining 31 units is not available as we have not as yet received this information. Details of these units are included in Table 3 below.

Table 1: Social housing units approved since 1st January 2020, but construction not commenced (79 units)

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Need Group	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Ark	Rourke's Link	Ballyhornan	General Needs	11	2020/21	2021/22
Ark	Rourke's Link	Ballyhornan	Wheelchair	2	2020/21	2021/22
Clanmil	Pound Lane, Downe Hospital, Phase 2	Downpatrick	General Needs	41	2020/21	2022/23
Clanmil	Pound Lane, Downe Hospital, Phase 2	Downpatrick	CAT1 Elderly	20	2020/21	2022/23
Clanmil	Pound Lane, Downe Hospital, Phase 2	Downpatrick	Wheelchair	5	2020/21	2022/23

Table 2: Social housing units under construction (48 units)

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Need Group	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Clanmil	Pound Lane, Downe Hospital, Phase 1	Downpatrick	General Needs	35	2017/18	2020/21
Clanmil	Pound Lane, Downe Hospital, Phase 1	Downpatrick	Wheelchair	2	2017/18	2020/21
Clanmil	Castlewellan Road	Newcastle	General Needs	11	2020/21	2021/22

Table 3: Social housing unit completions since 1st January 2020 (72 units)

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Need Group	Units	Onsite Year	Completed Year	Status
Apex	Mountain View	Castlewellan	General Needs	29	2017/18	2020/21	Allocated
Apex	Mountain View	Castlewellan	Wheelchair	5	2017/18	2020/21	Allocated
Clanmil	37-45 Downpatrick Street	Crossgar	General Needs	18	2017/18	2020/21	*
Clanmil	37-45 Downpatrick Street	Crossgar	Wheelchair	2	2017/18	2020/21	*
South Ulster	80 Grange Meadows	Kilkeel	General Needs	1	2019/20	2019/20	*
Connswater	40 Struell Crescent	Downpatrick	General Needs	1	2019/20	2020/21	*
Choice	6 Fountain Court	Downpatrick	General Needs	1	2019/20	2020/21	*
Ark	Causeway Road	Newcastle	General Needs	10	2020/21	2020/21	Allocated
Rural	42 & 44 Dromore Street	Rathfriland	General Needs	2	2020/21	2020/21	*
Ark	Carquillan Court	Hilltown	General Needs	3	2020/21	2020/21	Allocated

* Housing Association has not provided a response to NIHE's request for this information.

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 McGrath asked the Minister for Communities how many applications were received for discretionary support payments from the South Down constituency; and how many were approved.
(AQW 11414/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Discretionary Support management information on applications is available for full years from 2016/17 through to 2019/20. For South Down, this information shows that in 2016/17 there were 1,490 applications received, 3,180 in 2017/18, 4,200 in 2018/19 and 3,590 in 2019/20.

Management information on payments, for South Down, shows that in 2016/17 there were 910 payments, 2,060 in 2017/18, 2,790 in 2018/19 and 2,460 in 2019/20.

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 9943/17-22, (i) for her assessment of the Gambling Commission's jurisdiction to investigate regulatory breaches of online gambling operator licenses issued and if it only covers England, Scotland and Wales, as laid out in its Statement of Principles for Licencing and Regulation (June 2017); and (ii) what plans she has to licence and regulate online gambling operators providing services to the public in Northern Ireland.
(AQW 11417/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In relation to the first part of the question, and as stated in my answer to AQW 9943/17-20, the Statement of Principles for Licencing and Regulation (June 2017) sets out terms under which the Gambling Commission can investigate regulatory breaches of licenses issued by it.

Section 1.8 of the Statement affirms that the Commission's jurisdiction under the Gambling Act 2005 (the Act), covers England, Scotland and Wales. Footnote 12 of the Statement states that the Commission's jurisdiction extends to consumers here under section 5 of the Gambling (Licencing and Advertising) Act 2014 in respect of the offence of advertising unlicensed remote gambling here.

Further, the Gambling Commission will, in accordance with the Statement of Principles for Licencing and Regulation, assume jurisdiction here to investigate regulatory breaches where a consumer from here has a dispute with an online operator who is relying on the license held from the Gambling Commission.

In relation to the second part of the question, I continue to keep all aspects of the regulation of gambling under review and will make an announcement on the way forward shortly.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities when applicants to the Sport Hardship Fund will be advised if their application has been successful; and when successful applicants can expect the funding to be released.
(AQW 11418/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Since the Fund opened in June, 622 clubs have received the £2,000 Sports Hardship Fund grant.

Sport NI received over 800 applications in the most recent (3rd) round of the Sports Hardship Fund which closed on 5th November 2020.

This latest round of applications includes applicants who had not previously applied as well as a number of applicants who were able to reapply for an additional £1,000 grant. Sport NI have prioritised the processing of applications from new applicants in the first instance.

Payments to 3rd round applicants commenced on 19th November. The assessment of applications is ongoing, with processing and grant payments expected to continue throughout December 2020 and January 2021.

A copy of the most recent Sports Hardship Fund dashboard and list of successful applicants is available at the following link: <http://www.sportni.net/funding/our-funding-programmes/sports-hardship-fund-2/sports-hardship-fund-dashboard-reporting/>

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities what plans there are to equalise job seeker's allowance with the employment aspect of universal credit.
(AQW 11420/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Jobseeker's Allowance (old style and new style) both have the entitlement condition that the claimant is not working 16 hours or more per week. This is a legal requirement and there is no plan to amend the legislation to change this requirement.

The remunerative work rule in Jobseeker's Allowance and the difference in Universal Credit is down to the two benefits being administered for different reasons. Jobseeker's Allowance is for those not engaged in remunerative work of 16 hours or more per week on average, or less than 24 hours as a partner. Universal Credit is designed to simplify the interaction between benefits and earnings so that it pays for someone to take a job or increase the hours they work and as such there is no hour limit unlike Jobseeker's Allowance. Universal Credit instead uses work allowance and a single taper rate. The work allowance is the amount certain households can earn before their Universal Credit is affected.

Universal Credit has replaced both income-related benefits and tax credits, so is available to those in and out of work. People claiming Old Style Jobseekers Allowance can make a claim to Universal Credit if they feel they would be better off. From July 2020, a two-week run on of Old Style Jobseeker's Allowance is available for those whose claim to Universal Credit to provide additional support for people moving to Universal Credit.

However, it is advised that a person checks their eligibility and entitlements under Universal Credit before applying as their Jobseeker's Allowance will end and they will not be able to return in the future. They can do this by following this link <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/benefits-adviser>

There are special arrangements for those in receipt of Severe Disability Premium, who will be able to make a new claim to Universal Credit from January 2021. The Department for Communities cannot advise people whether they would be better off moving to Universal Credit or remaining on legacy benefits.

Mr Irwin asked the Minister for Communities what support and advice is being offered to pensioners in opening a personal bank account following a decision to cease the payment of pensions to the Post Office.

(AQW 11467/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Post Office card account (POca) contract is due to end in November 2021 and ahead of contract end, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), on behalf of Department for Communities (DfC) are issuing letters to customers of all ages encouraging them to switch payment into a mainstream account. People are being given advance written notice so that those who are able to move to a mainstream account have time to make that change.

Support is available to help customers choose a payment method that is right for their circumstances;

- A dedicated free telephone service has been established within DWP which offers POca customers access to help and advice so that they can make informed decisions on how they receive their benefits and pensions.
- A method of payment discussion takes place with POca customers at every opportunity to ensure they understand the need for change and to assist them in choosing a suitable method of payment.
- My Department's 'Make the Call Wraparound' service, can assist customers when considering which payment method will best meet their needs.
- When encouraging customers to switch to an alternative method of payment, customers are being signposted to Advice NI or Money Advice Service for independent advice.
- For those customers who are unable to access or manage a mainstream account, my Department will continue to offer a payment exception service.

Following contract end, people who have not already switched to an alternative mainstream account will be migrated onto a new Payment Exception Service (nPES).

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Communities whether she is aware of any issues or delays specific to Northern Ireland regarding the issuing of National Insurance numbers to migrants who wish to legally work; and how the speed of the application process in Northern Ireland differs from other regions of the UK.

(AQW 11488/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: There are no specific issues or delays here in relation to the issuing of National Insurance numbers to migrants who wish to legally work here. You can start work without a National Insurance number if you can prove you have the right to work. In those cases where we are currently able to process a request for a National Insurance number, the applicant is allocated a number within 7 working days, against a target of 16 days. The Department for Work & Pensions target for processing is 15 days.

In order for a National Insurance number to be allocated, an individual's identity must be verified. Application interviews for employment-related National Insurance numbers have been suspended due to the pandemic as they require a face to face interview in a Jobs & Benefits Office. These offices have been closed to the public with the exception of limited opening to deal with specific emergency situations.

We are allocating National Insurance numbers to non EU individuals who enter the country on a visa and have already had their identity verified as part of that process.

We are also continuing to process applications for benefit inspired National Insurance numbers by telephony, as this is required to pay benefits. Information provided by the person on their claim and information already held on our benefit systems is used to verify identity.

The National Insurance Number registration helpline (028 90 138286 or 028 90 138287) is available Monday to Friday, 9.00am - 4.00pm. The helpline is recording contact details for employment-related applicants so we can get in touch with people as soon as we are able to resume face-to-face interviews.

It is hoped the digital solution will be in place during 2021.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Communities (i) how many applications were made from the Upper Bann constituency to the Social Enterprise Fund; (ii) how many were approved; (iii) how many were declined; and (iv) how many payments have been made.

(AQW 11491/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Social Enterprise Fund opened on 28 September 2020 and closed on 23 October 2020; in total it received 394 applications. I am unable to provide a breakdown of information by constituency but I am able to provide this by district council area.

In the Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council area, there were 33 applications received with 26 of these being approved. Therefore 7 applications were declined. As of 3pm on Tuesday 7 December, 24 of the approved applications had been paid out, the remaining 2 were awaiting payment or a letter of offer.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Communities how much of the £10 million for councils and sport will be paid to Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Council; and when this payment will be made.

(AQW 11493/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The funding allocated and paid to Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council for the periods from mid-March to 30 June 2020, and 1 July 2020 to 31 October 2020 was £2,052,238 and £1,483,788 respectively.

My Department will continue to carry out analysis of the figures to be provided by each council reflecting their projected financial losses and COVID-19 costs for this financial year taking into account updated estimates and actual spend.

Once my Department has carried out due diligence exercises on further 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 for the remaining £45m funding which includes the recent allocation of £10m will be confirmed once information has been provided by councils and due diligence exercises have been completed.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister for Communities to detail each Housing Association in operation, its location and the Board Members in each Association.

(AQW 11509/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The housing associations regulated by the Department for Communities, their location and Board Members are as follows:

Housing Association	Registered Office	Board Members
Abbeyfield & Wesley Housing Association	2 Wesley Court, Carrickfergus, BT38 8HS	Celia Worthington
		William Graham
		Malcolm Beattie
		Mark Bryson
		David Capper
		Ken Gordon
		Glenn Montgomery
		Andrew Shott
		Eileen Stewart
		Joanna Shaw
Paula Sands		
Alpha Housing Association	6 Edgewater Road, Belfast, BT3 9JQ	John Clarke
		Kieran Dempsey
		Catherine Cooney
		Eileen Askham
		Irene Kingston
		Alan McAlister
John McConnell		

Housing Association	Registered Office	Board Members
		Patricia Mallon
		Emmet Moore
		Arthur Halligan
		Richard Todd
Apex Housing Association	10 Butcher Street, Derry/Londonderry, BT48 6HL	John Meehan
		Damian McKenna
		Martin Doherty
		Alice Diver
		Rachel Naylor
		Frank Dunne
		Sean McKenna
		Catherine Cooke
		Linda Watson
		Alison Wallace
		Philip O'Flaherty
		Peter Caldwell
Ark Housing Association	Hawthorn Office Park, 37a Stockmans Way, Belfast, BT9 7ET	Deborah Donnelly
		Nicole Mulholland
		Deborah Reynolds
		Tom Doran
		Ian McAvoy
		Kevin McElroy
		Sara McClintock
		Nicole Toner
		Sarah Corrigan
		Denise Burns
		Ward Erwin
		Catherine Blackbourne
Choice Housing Association	Leslie Morrell House, 37-41 May Street, Belfast, BT1 4DN	Ciaran McAreavey
		Joe Higgins
		Helen Harrison
		Mary Donnelly
		Noreen Taggart
		Catriona Gibson
		Paul Leonard
		Janet Hunter
		Ken Slattery
		Valerie Watts
		Liam Dempsey
		Caralyn Scales
		Damien Toner

Housing Association	Registered Office	Board Members
Clanmil Housing Association	Northern Whig House, 3 Waring Street, Belfast, BT1 2DX	Joy Scott
		Paul Fiddaman
		Niall Adams
		Paddie Cassidy
		Maria McCann
		Kevin O'Neill
		David Orr
		Antje Otto
		Alastair Rankin
		Richard Williamson
Connswater Homes	5 Citylink Business Park, Albert Street, Belfast, BT12 4HQ	Patrick Gray
		Robbie Davis
		Martin Leahy
		Kelly Andrews
		Alan Hill
		Alex Ward
		Mary Durkan
		Nicola Barber
		John Beattie
		Michael Graham
Sara Templar		
Covenanter Residential Association	8 Eastermeade Park, Ballymoney, BT53 6HP	Diane McMitchell
		Paula Downey
		Sarah Galway
		Brian Rankin
		Ian McCaughan
		Nathan Hawthorne
		Joel Loughridge
		Roger Sloan
		Rosemary Lyons
Craigowen Housing Association	Strand Studios, 150 Holywood Road, Belfast, BT4 1NY	Andrew Hamilton
		Nigel Carson
		Anne Smyth
		Ann Watt
		Richard Buchanan
		Hugh Logan
		Peggy Woods
		Carmel Horan
		William Rainey
Patrick Farry		

Housing Association	Registered Office	Board Members
Grove Community Housing Association	171 York Road Belfast, BT15 3HB	Ian Hackney
		Philip Oliver
		Erskine Holmes
		Amanda Johnston
		Brian Dunn
		Eamonn Hunt
		David Arthurs
Habinteg Housing Association	Alex Moira House, 22 Hibernia Street, Holywood, BT18 9JE	Ian Nelson
		Bernie Gray
		Trevor Greene
		Brendan Johnston
		Edel Creery
		Neil McIvor
		Gerry Gilpin
		Gerry McCabe
		Nuala Loughran
		Jonny Currie
Northern Ireland Co-ownership Housing Association	Moneda House, 25-27 Wellington Place, Belfast, BT1 6GD	Sidney McDowell
		Jack Hood
		Philip Price
		David Little
		Sam Dickey
		Alastair Coulson
		Norman McKeown
		Damien McElholm
		Gillian Greer
		Derek Wilson
		Alyson Kilpatrick
		Jordan Buchanan
		Alan Ledlie
		Nicola McCrudden
North Belfast Housing Association	Gatelodge, 8 Flax Street, Belfast, BT14 7EQ	Tom Mervyn
		Jane Shaw
		Ursula Mayers
		Janine Fullerton
		John Simpson
		Will Chambré
		Brian Reid
Radius Housing Association	38-52 Lisburn Road, Belfast, BT9 6AA	Diana Fitzsimons
		Des Neill
		Peter Gibson

Housing Association	Registered Office	Board Members
		Melanie English Lorraine Campbell Peter McGuinness John Leckey Mary Smith Ciaran Doherty Kieran Gilmurray Sloan Harper Iain Lees Connor Diamond Martin Pitt Helen Walker John Taggart Robert Dunne
Rural Housing Association	Tollgate House, 2 Killyclogher Road, Omagh, BT79 0AX	Neville Armstrong Carol Follis Ciaran McKenna Rory O'Brien Alistair McKane Tommy Gallagher John Moss John Waddell
South Ulster Housing Association	18-22 Carleton Street, Portadown, BT62 3EN	Angela Clarke Judith Eve Sam Bryans Colin McCusker Pauline Flynn Carolyn Lyness Nichola Casey Mark Spence Art O'Hagan Nigel Hampton
St Matthews Housing Association	58 Harper Street, Belfast, BT5 4EN	Pilib Ó'Ruanaí Kevin Craig Paddy Donnelly Lauren Fegan Joe O'Donnell David Brennan Cathal Devenny Patricia Brennan Frank Woods

Housing Association	Registered Office	Board Members
Triangle Housing Association	60 Eastermeade Gardens, Ballymoney, BT53 6BD	Frank Liddle
		Michael Thompson
		Prof Robert Hutchinson
		Mary Lou Winchborne
		Jacqueline McCollam
		Noeleen Diver
		Lorna Dougherty
		Noel Dunlop
		Kathy Mackenzie
Woodvale & Shankill Community Housing Association	91-95 Woodvale Road, Belfast, BT13 3BP	Morris McCracken
		Terry Fuller
		Sarah Chambers
		Christopher Campbell
		Winston Irvine
		George Courtney
		Frazer Agnew
Newington Housing Association	300 - 302 Limestone Road, Belfast, BT15 3AR (currently 63 - 75 Duncairn Gardens, Belfast, BT15 2GB)	Bill Johnston
		Sean McKenna
		Niall Kelly
		Rosaleen Bradley
		George Walsh
		Carmel Maginness
		Peter Privilege
		Sarah Walsh
		Lawrence Mooney
		Bernadette Hassan
		Laura Privilege
		Philip O'Flaherty
Christopher McCarroll		

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on bands such as the Salvation Army Brass bands; and whether there will be any relaxation on restrictions to allow them to engage in their traditional carol services.

(AQW 11541/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The COVID-19 restrictions have had a very significant impact on the broad banding community here but that has been felt particularly by our brass bands including those from the Salvation Army, those that are associated with the Brass Band League and others.

These are amateur bands with close community ties and a focus on musicianship that make them vital, but often unsung, players in our musical culture.

For all bands and choirs, social distancing and limits on gatherings have made it very difficult to meet, practice and perform. Protective measures have also meant that for many they have been unable to undertake their normal activities since March. Bands have lost income as membership dues, fundraising, events and competitions have been lost. In addition those that can meet have often incurred extra costs to safely reinstate rehearsals through access to larger venues and rehearsal spaces to comply with social distancing and provide Covid-19 related signage and sanitation. However I pleased to note that a number of bands have successfully applied to funding support programmes delivered by the Arts Council on behalf of my department.

Brass bands, and indeed anyone singing or playing brass or wind instruments, have been particularly impacted by COVID-19 protection measures. Due to particular concerns over whether these activities carried an increased risk of virus transmission, the guidance has been that in non-professional settings people should avoid singing or playing brass and wind instruments in groups. Following a review of studies into these concerns these restrictions have been reviewed and new sector specific advice has now been issued by the Arts Council.

The new guidance came into effect on 11 December and, I am pleased to say, it means that, subject to the standard rules on social distancing and group numbers, the way is open for our choirs and our brass bands, like those from the Salvation Army, to provide what for many people is a traditional soundtrack to Christmas.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the Queen's Parade redevelopment scheme in Bangor.
(AQW 11542/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Developer for the Queen's Parade Development Scheme, Bangor Marine, submitted a Planning Application at the end of January this year. A decision on that planning application is expected in early 2021.

My officials, in the Department's Regional Development Office, along with Ards and North Down Borough Council, are continuing to work closely with the Bangor Marine team to progress this exciting scheme which will transform that area of Bangor.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities to detail the intended process and timeframe for a development of Writer's Square as part of the Tribeca project.
(AQW 11545/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department will objectively assess options and this will include its future use as a public space. Any decisions will be compliant with current legislative powers, policy and best practice to determine the best use for the site and ensure that this is in the interest of Belfast City as a whole. I will make my decision in due course.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities whether she will take account of alternative potential uses by community interests in the relation to development at Writer's Square.
(AQW 11546/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department will take account of all potential uses, including those with community interests, in the relation to development at Writers' Square.

Any proposals need to consider the best use for the site in the interest of Belfast City as a whole.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the historic and symbolic role played in public life by Writer's Square.
(AQW 11547/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I acknowledge the contribution Writers' Square has made as a public open space and venue for outdoor arts performances and events, promoting our rich literary and cultural heritage, since its opening in 2001. Any proposals needs to consider the best use for the site in the interest of Belfast City as a whole.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for Communities whether she has held further talks with the GAA about the funding for the redevelopment of Casement Park; and whether she has presented a paper of funding options to the Minister of Finance for consideration or to the Executive Office for tabling at the Executive.
(AQW 11554/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: 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.

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.

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.

Upon approval of the FBC, I will, as appropriate, submit a request to increase the Casement Park Project budget to the Executive for approval.

It would not be appropriate to submit a formal bid to the Department of Finance in advance of cost estimates being updated.

Dr Aiken asked the Minister for Communities how many times she has attended a meeting of the Committee for Communities since 11 January 2020, broken down by (i) Committee meetings attended in person; and (ii) Committee meetings attended remotely.

(AQW 11556/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Minister for Communities has appeared before the Committee for Communities seven times between 11 January 2020 and 8 December 2020.

Thursday 13th February 2020	In person
Thursday 27th February 2020	In person
Wednesday 13th May 2020	Remotely
Wednesday 8th July 2020	Remotely
Wednesday 9th September 2020	Remotely
Wednesday 30th September 2020	Remotely
Thursday 19th November 2020	Remotely

Mr Stewart asked the Minister for Communities what consideration has been given to a new hardship fund supporting licenced sports and social clubs required to stay closed under the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

(AQW 11566/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The financial impact of Covid-19 on all sectors has been unprecedented and the Executive is committed to providing as much support as possible. I have secured funding for the sports sector to be delivered through the Sports Hardship Fund and the Sports Sustainability Fund.

While the Sports Hardship Fund has currently closed for applications, the Sports Sustainability Fund, designed to help governing bodies of sport and clubs who have been financially impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, is currently open for applications. More information, including guidance notes, can be found at: <http://www.sportni.net/funding/our-funding-programmes/sports-sustainability-fund/>.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister for Communities what support is available for (i) workers who have to stay off work due to contracting COVID-19; and (ii) those who have been in contact with a positive case and have to self-isolate.

(AQW 11596/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Help is available from the Department for Communities for those on a low income through the Discretionary Support scheme.

On 25 March 2020, Minister Hargey, the then Minister for Communities, introduced a non-repayable Discretionary Support Self-Isolation 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.

To be eligible for a Discretionary Support Self-Isolation grant a household's annual income must be no higher than £20,400. This income threshold was increased in response to the pandemic and it means that more people in low paid employment can access Discretionary Support.

The support available has recently been reviewed and I increased the daily amount that can be paid through the Discretionary Support Self-Isolation grant and introduced more flexibility for awards to be paid for longer periods.

There is no restriction on the number of Discretionary Support Self-Isolation grants that can be awarded. If a person continues to require immediate assistance with living expenses, further payments will be considered. Awards will also not impact any future application to Discretionary Support. As with all Discretionary Support awards the amount payable as a living expenses grant is calculated after considering the specific circumstances of the person.

Further information on Discretionary Support, including how to make a claim, is available at <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/extra-financial-support#toc-2>.

A temporary change to statutory sick pay rules has also been introduced to ensure support is available from day one for individuals who are sick, self-isolating or shielding due to COVID-19.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Communities how she will ensure that the new housing mutual body does not result in the Housing Executive becoming more centralised and that decisions, which involve housing in Derry, will have local representatives of the Housing Executive involved in the decision making process.

(AQW 11609/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The objective set out in my statement is to change the landlord part of the Housing Executive so that it may borrow, invest and provide a sustainable future for its homes.

This work is at an early stage and I am committed to a co-design approach in developing options. Engagement with the Housing Executive, tenants, staff and their representatives will be central to this process.

I can assure you that I intend to bring proposals to the Executive before the end of this mandate.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities to detail her commitment to ensuring that any development brief associated with Writer's Square protects and facilitates its use as a public space.

(AQW 11624/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department will objectively assess options and this will include its future use as a public space. Any decisions will be compliant with current legislative powers, policy and best practice to determine the best use for the site and ensure that this is in the interest of Belfast City as a whole.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Communities (i) for an update on the reopening of theatres; (ii) what conversations she has had with the arts community on this subject; and (iii) to detail any future plans for funding support beyond that already announced.

(AQW 11630/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Theatres and concert halls are permitted to open for rehearsals or live recording without an audience and much great work has continued to be done.

I have engaged with people right across the arts sector and I have heard directly the impact the closure of theatres has had on the staff who normally work there. I also recognise the impact the restriction has had on theatre audiences.

Decisions in relation to restrictions are matters for the Executive. The restrictions are aimed at mitigating the risks of transmission of the virus; they are intended to be temporary in nature and will be relaxed and ultimately removed as soon as circumstances allow.

I will continue to provide support to the organisations and individuals who work across the arts and wider creative economy. Since the COVID-19 restrictions have been in place the Arts Council, on behalf of my department, has:

- delivered two programmes for individuals, with grants totalling £4.427m being paid to 1313 individuals;
- delivered two rounds of funding for organisations, with grants totalling £2.85m to 212 organisations; and
- delivered two capital programmes for arts and cultural organisations to help them prepare to safely reopen following the Covid-19 pandemic, with grants totalling £1,075,335 to 108 organisations.

A further significant programme, the Stability and Renewal Programme for Organisations closed to applications on 27 November and a third programme for individuals will open on 17 December. Information on this programme is available already on the Arts Council website.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities how much of the £10 million for councils and sport will be paid to Derry City & Strabane District Council; and when this payment will be made.

(AQW 11639/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The funding allocated and paid to Derry City and Strabane District Council for the periods from mid-March to 30 June 2020, and 1 July 2020 to 31 October 2020 was £1,291,091 and £1,824,842 respectively.

My Department will continue to carry out analysis of the figures provided by each council reflecting their projected financial losses and COVID-19 costs for this financial year taking into account updated estimates and actual spend.

Once my Department has carried out due diligence exercises on further 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 for the remaining £45m funding which includes the recent allocation of £10m will be confirmed once information has been provided by councils and due diligence exercises completed.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities (i) how many applications were made from the Foyle constituency to the Social Enterprise Fund; (ii) how many were approved; (iii) how many were declined; and (iv) how many payments have been made.

(AQW 11640/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Social Enterprise Fund opened on 28 September 2020 and closed on 23 October 2020; in total it received 394 applications. I am unable to provide a breakdown of information by constituency but I am able to provide this by district council area.

In the Derry City and Strabane District Council area, there were 25 applications received with 22 of these being approved. Therefore 3 applications were declined. As of 3pm on Tuesday 7 December, 16 of the approved applications had been paid out, the remaining 6 were awaiting payment or a signed letter of offer.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 10777/17-22, to place in the Assembly Library a copy of the Memorandum of Understanding with Conradh na Gaeilge in respect of its delivery of the COVID-19 Culture, Languages, Arts and Heritage Support Programme 2020/2021.

(AQW 11649/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The administration of the Covid-19 Culture, Languages, Arts and Heritage Support Programme 2020/2021 involves the agreement of multiple Memorandums of Understanding. It would therefore be inappropriate to single out one organisation's Memorandum of Understanding for placement in the Assembly Library. Memorandums of Understanding are standard agreements between the Department and a grant recipient outlining the arrangements for and the objectives of the grant funding. I have attached a sample Memorandum of Understanding for information purposes.

Annex A

Covid 19 Culture, Languages, Arts & Heritage Support

MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN:

THE DEPARTMENT FOR COMMUNITIES (DFC)

&

XXXX

1 Overview

On 24 September 2020 the NI Executive agreed to allocate an additional budget of £29 million to the Department for Communities (DFC) to support the NI culture, language, arts and heritage sectors which have been impacted by the coronavirus pandemic.

Following consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, including arm's length bodies, local government partners and sectoral representatives, a number of funding programmes have been developed to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic.

XXX is a key delivery partner. In accordance with existing governance arrangements, XXX will receive an additional budget allocation to deliver agreed funding schemes to provide urgent financial support to XXX sectoral organisations.

It is anticipated that the majority of the allocation will be used to meet immediate needs, with a focus on stabilising sectoral organisations.

2 Purpose of this Document

The purpose of this memorandum of understanding (MOU) is, in relation to the programmes to be delivered by XXX, to:

- Set out the objectives;
- Establish the administrative arrangements;
- Describe the roles and responsibilities of each party to this agreement;
- Set out financial arrangements;
- Detail reporting arrangements; and
- Outline the arrangements for demonstrating value for money, and for evaluating the programme impacts in realising proposed benefits as outlined in the Business Case.

3 Objectives of Funding

The overall objectives of this funding are to:

- Stabilise viable organisations and venues within the NI Arts, Heritage, Culture and Language Sectors to enable them to survive, adapt and renew.
- Protect the Sectoral infrastructure across the widest possible breadth of creativity;
- Maintain a representative, sustainable, equitable and skilled workforce to overcome current challenges, enable the sectors to learn, improve and adapt, and grow, while protecting the widest possible breadth of creative skills;
- Protect the current level of access and capacity, for people and communities most disadvantaged and socially excluded in society to engage and participate in Sectoral Activities.

4 Scope and Duration

Funding is provided to support the Covid-19 emergency and should only be used for the designated purpose of providing financial support to organisations impacted by the pandemic. The XXX have agreed to open for applications for Organisations on XXX and remain open until XXX

The overall aim of the emergency funding is to address immediate financial needs within the NI arts, culture, languages and heritage sectors up to 31 March 2021.

5 Roles & Responsibilities

(a) DfC

As funding department DfC has overall policy and financial responsibility, and will:

- Ensure the timely approval of policy framework and funding allocation to underpin the emergency support scheme;
- Agree the process for funding drawdown;
- Take prompt action on receipt of a request for drawdown;
- Take account of budgetary position, needs and wider priorities; and work collaboratively to review, agree and formulate a Policy response; and
- In recognising the additional demands placed on ALBs, provide support throughout the delivery period of the funding schemes.

(b) Senior Responsible Owner (SRO)

DfC has appointed XXX as SRO reporting to the Accounting Officer, XXX. The SRO is responsible for the successful implementation and delivery of the emergency funding schemes to support the arts, culture, language and heritage sectors; and for providing assurance on the effective use of public money by the Department or its Arms Length's Bodies.

(c) Programme Director

XXX is the programme director.

(d) Programme Manager

XXX is programme manager and takes day to day responsibility for ensuring that funding schemes are delivered in accordance with policy and delivery arrangements. All operational issues should be channelled through XXX and he/she will ensure that appropriate action is taken to resolve/escalate in a timely way

(e) XXX

As an XXX with delegated responsibility for administering emergency funding on behalf of the Department, XXX will:

- Deliver the funding schemes in line with agreed eligibility and assessment criteria;
- Seek advice to inform decision making where appropriate from a range of experts
- Deduct appropriate administration costs for the programme from the total allocated budget;
- Mitigate the risk of duplicate funding by carrying out due diligence with other public funding sources, in conjunction with the Department;
- Maintain appropriate records in line with current procedures;
- Provide a report to DfC once all applications have been received, setting out the total value applied for and expected total awards (subject to final decisions), to allow the Department to make budget decisions in a timely manner;
- Inform progress on funding by providing a fortnightly (or otherwise agreed interval) update to DfC on a range of data in accordance with the Outcomes Report card, including details of successful recipients;
- Conduct post payment verification checks, within an agreed timeframe, on grant awards to organisations and individuals to provide necessary assurance to the Accounting Officer;
- In light of the prevailing emergency financial situation, ensure that payments are issued to grantees within 10 working days of receipt of the letter of acceptance;
- Publish a full list of all successful organisation and individual applicants; and
- In line with Northern Ireland Guide to Expenditure Appraisal and Evaluation (NIGEAE) carry out an evaluation on each emergency funding scheme, submitting findings to DfC by XXX.

6 Financial Arrangements

The funding provided relates to the financial year 2020 to 2021 and the expectation is that will be used to meet financial need up to 31 March 2021.

The levels for funding available to organisations and individuals will be within the eligibility and assessment criteria agreed with the Department.

- A sum of up to XXX will be designated to deliver financial support to organisations and groups within XXX sector.

For the purposes of cost control, the Department has designated initial allocations, but will consider any requests from the XXX to increase expenditure to better reflect and address demand, subject to the availability of funds. Any administration costs incurred by the XXX must be recovered from the funding allocation of XXX.

7 Monitoring & Reporting

Funding provided in response to Covid-19 has been allocated by the Executive to the Department and is outside the normal operating arrangements. The Outcomes Report Framework/Outcomes Report Card will inform reporting requirement. Given the agreed light touch approach adopted to ensure the money is quickly distributed to meet need this should not detract from the framework of managing public money.

8 Accountability

XXX of the XXX is designated as the XXX Accounting Officer, and is responsible for safeguarding the public funds for which they have charge, and ensuring propriety and regularity in the handling of those public funds. However, Covid-19 emergency funding has been allocated by the Executive. Departments are therefore accountable to the Executive for the appropriate use of emergency funding.

9 Review of the Memorandum

This MOU will take immediate effect on signatory confirmation by both parties, and will remain in force until completion of the evaluation of the funding schemes.

The Agreement may be amended at any time with the consent of both parties.

FORMAL COMMITMENT TO MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING

Signed on behalf of DfC

[signed]

Name (block capitals): XXX

Date:XXX

Signed on behalf of XXX

Name (block capitals): XXX

Dat

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Communities when the applications process for National Insurance numbers will return to normal; and whether this will include an online application process.

(AQW 11653/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department has continued to allocate National Insurance numbers to those who require one for benefit purposes and for those who are applying for Student Finance. People do not need a National Insurance Number to start work or as evidence for the EU Resettlement Scheme.

In order for a National Insurance number to be allocated, an individual's identity must be verified. Interviews for employment-related National Insurance numbers have been suspended due to the pandemic as they require a face to face interview in a Jobs & Benefits Office. These offices have been closed to the public with the exception of limited opening to deal with specific emergency situations, although work is currently ongoing to review that position.

The National Insurance Number registration helpline (028 90 138286 or 028 90 138287) is available Monday to Friday, 9.00am - 4.00pm. The helpline is recording contact details for employment-related applicants so we can get in touch with people as soon as we are able to resume face-to-face interviews. It is hoped a digital solution will be in place during 2021.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for Communities (i) on what date the Stability and Renewal for Arts Fund opened for applications; (ii) on what date the first payment under the scheme was made; (iii) how many applications have been received from the South Belfast constituency up to and including Friday 27 November 2020; (iv) how many payments were made by this date; and (v) what is the total amount paid.

(AQW 11677/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Stability & Renewal Programme for Organisations opened for applications on 28th October 2020 with a closing deadline for applications of 27th November. To date no payments have been made. Decisions will be made at the end of January 2021. Up to and including Friday 27th November 2020, 50 applications have been received from the South Belfast constituency.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for Communities (i) on what date the Heritage Recovery Fund opened for applications; (ii) on what date the first payment under the scheme was made; (iii) how many applications have been received from the South Belfast constituency up to and including Friday 27 November 2020; (iv) how many payments were made by this date; and (v) what is the total amount paid.

(AQW 11678/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Applications to the Heritage Recovery Fund have been received from 62 organisations and 42 individuals. The Fund opened on 2 November 2020 and closed on 27 November 2020. At this stage a geographic breakdown of applications is not available.

When eligibility checks has been completed, applications will be assessed during December and early January, with final decision made by the end of January 2021. I anticipate that payments will reach bank accounts in February 2021. A list of all awards made from the Fund will be published at

that stage.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for Communities how many people in South Belfast are eligible for the one-off heating payment of £200 for disabled people on higher rate allowance and older people in receipt of pension credit; and when this payment will be made.

(AQW 11679/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: High level analysis shows there are approximately 221,000 people eligible for the Covid-19 Heating Payment. The qualifying week for this payment is the 30th November to 6th December 2020 inclusive. Data is not yet available for this period to indicate the number of eligible recipients, including any geographical breakdowns. Once this information is available, my Department will be happy to provide this.

My Department plans to make the payments during week commencing the 25 January 2021.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for Communities (i) how many applications were made from the South Belfast constituency to the Social Enterprise Fund; (ii) how many were approved; (iii) how many were declined; and (iv) how many payments have been made.

(AQW 11680/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Social Enterprise Fund opened on 28 September 2020 and closed on 23 October 2020; in total it received 394 applications. I am unable to provide a breakdown of information by constituency but I am able to provide this by district council area.

In the Belfast City Council area, there were 111 applications received with 86 of these being approved. Therefore 25 applications were declined. As of 3pm on Tuesday 7 December, 95 of the approved applications had been paid out. The remaining 16 were awaiting payment or a signed letter of offer.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for Communities how much of the £10 million for councils and sport will be paid to Belfast City Council; and when this payment will be made.

(AQW 11681/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The funding allocated and paid to Belfast City Council for the periods from mid-March to 30 June 2020, and 1 July 2020 to 31 October 2020 was £4,042,083 and £5,568,533 respectively.

My Department will continue to carry out analysis of the figures provided by each council reflecting their projected financial losses and COVID-19 costs for this financial year taking into account updated estimates and actual spend.

Once my Department has carried out due diligence exercises on further 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 for the remaining £45m funding which includes the recent allocation of £10m will be confirmed once information has been provided by councils and due diligence exercises completed.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the absence of GAA as an elite sport in Sport NI's Draft Corporate Plan for Public Consultation 2020-2025; and whether she will raise the issue with the body to rectify this oversight.

(AQW 11698/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Sport NI Draft Corporate Plan does not make reference to elite sport and does not define any sport as elite. The draft plan sets out two high-level strategic outcomes, the first relating to people adopting and sustaining participation in sport and recreation and the second relating to international competition.

Sport NI remains committed to continuing to work closely with the GAA on the development of Gaelic games and continuing to widen and deepen participation.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister for Communities when her Department plans to allow swimming clubs to reopen.

(AQW 11746/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Executive has announced that from Friday, 11 December, swimming and diving pools can open for individual training, training with a personal trainer/coach and classes of up to 15 that do not cause an individual to get out of breath. Please note, contact details of all participants must be taken.

The review of the ongoing restrictions are a matter for the Executive and will be cognisant of the medical and scientific advice available at that time.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of (i) children deemed to be living in poverty; and (ii) individuals deemed to be living in fuel poverty, in (a) Belfast East; (b) Belfast South; (c) Belfast North; and Belfast West, in each year between 2015 and 2020.

(AQW 11758/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín:

- (i) Official measures of absolute and relative poverty are derived from the Family Resources Survey (FRS). Both measures can be presented on a before and after housing costs basis. The number of children estimated to be living in poverty are presented in the table below.

Child Poverty Type	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Relative Poverty Before Housing Costs	93,000	99,000	85,000	107,000
Relative Poverty After Housing Costs	103,000	118,000	102,000	122,000
Absolute Poverty Before Housing Costs	78,000	82,000	69,000	92,000
Absolute Poverty After Housing Costs	92,000	94,000	87,000	109,000

Further information regarding the Family Resources Survey (Households Below Average Income) can be found at the link below.

<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/households-below-average-income-northern-ireland-201819>

- (ii) Figures relating to Fuel Poverty are published every five years by the Housing Executive via the House Condition Survey. The 2016 report (most recently reported results) estimated that approximately 22% (160,000) households were in fuel poverty. These figures are not currently available at the constituency level.

Further information regarding the House Condition Survey can be found at the link below.

<https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Research/HCS-2016-Main-Reports/HCS-Main-Report-2016.aspx>

Mr Catney asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of (i) children deemed to be living in poverty; and (ii) individuals deemed to be living in fuel poverty, in Lagan Valley in each of the last five years.

(AQW 11809/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín:

- (iii) Official measures of absolute and relative poverty are derived from the Family Resources Survey (FRS). Both measures can be presented on a before and after housing costs basis. The number of children estimated to be living in poverty are presented in the table below. Due to the uncertainty around estimates at lower levels, the Department does not present results for child poverty below the regional level.

Child Poverty Type	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Relative Poverty Before Housing Costs	109,000	93,000	99,000	85,000	107,000
Relative Poverty After Housing Costs	122,000	103,000	118,000	102,000	122,000
Absolute Poverty Before Housing Costs	100,000	78,000	82,000	69,000	92,000
Absolute Poverty After Housing Costs	116,000	92,000	94,000	87,000	109,000

Further information regarding the Family Resources Survey (Households Below Average Income) can be found at the link below.

<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/households-below-average-income-northern-ireland-201819>

- (iv) Figures relating to Fuel Poverty are published every five years by the Housing Executive via the House Condition Survey. The 2016 report (most recently reported results) estimated that approximately 22% (160,000) households here were in fuel poverty. These figures are not currently available at the constituency level.

Further information regarding the House Condition Survey can be found at the link below.

<https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Research/HCS-2016-Main-Reports/HCS-Main-Report-2016.aspx>

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities whether dance clubs were eligible for funding from the Sports Hardship Fund. **(AQW 11871/17-22)**

Ms Ní Chuilín: Eligible organisations delivering sport and physical recreation were able to apply to the Sports Hardship Fund if experiencing financial hardship.

These organisations included:

- Governing Bodies of Sport recognised by Sport NI (with an office base in NI).
- Constituted local sports clubs affiliated to a Governing Body of Sport recognised by Sport NI.
- Community & Voluntary sector organisations that deliver or enable sport and/or physical recreation as their primary activity. Sports and activities must be recognised by Sport NI.
- Small charitable trusts that deliver or enable sport and/or physical recreation as their primary activity; and do not qualify for financial help elsewhere. Sports and activities must be recognised by Sport NI.

I can advise that 'dance' as an activity is recognised by Sport NI with the recognised disciplines identified as Ballroom, Highland, Scottish Country, Folk Dancing - as listed on Sport NI website: Recognised Sports Governing Bodies and Activities (<http://www.sportni.net/sportni/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/List-of-UK-Ireland-Recognised-NGBs-and-Sport-List-November-2020.pdf>).

As such, any community and voluntary organisation, or small charitable trust, that deliver or enable sport and/or physical recreation as their primary activity, (which include recognised dance activities); and do not qualify for financial help elsewhere, would be eligible to apply.

Further information on the Fund including a list of successful applicants can be found at the following link: www.sportni.net/funding/our-funding-programmes/sports-hardship-fund-2/

Department of Education

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education whether he will (i) review the Education Maintenance Allowance entitlement (EMA); and (ii) pay the EMA over school holiday periods such as mid-term breaks, Easter and Christmas.
(AQW 9531/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): The Department of Education and the Department for the Economy have joint responsibility for the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) scheme. The scheme is administered on behalf of the departments by the Student Loans Company (SLC).

- (i) In recognition that Education Maintenance Allowance has not changed since academic year 2013/14, a review of the scheme is planned to commence in 2021.
- (ii) The EMA Scheme supports young people from lower income households to remain in post-compulsory education and aims to close the gap in educational under achievement and improve the participation of young people in education. Schools are required to register their holidays with SLC in advance of the school year and EMA support is not payable during holiday periods. Therefore EMA payments will not be paid during holiday periods such as mid-term breaks, Easter and Christmas.

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education whether there has been additional Public Health Agency or Department of Education guidance drafted for the use of schools as test centres for private, non-state regulated tests.
(AQW 10529/17-22)

Mr Weir: Under the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (as amended) the providers and host schools are required to carry out a health and safety assessment of the test centre take account any recommendations arising as well as any guidance issued by a Northern Ireland Department. The Public Health Agency (PHA) publishes a range of advice and guidance relating to Covid-19 and I have highlighted to the test providers the need to consider all relevant guidance. The detailed arrangements for the tests including applying relevant guidance remains the responsibility of the providers and host schools.

Arrangements for familiarisation days also fall to the test providers and host schools. I understand that all children sitting the tests are normally invited to a familiarisation day at the test centre where they are sitting the tests. Whether or not pupils attend this day is matter of individual choice. I have been advised that this year some schools are offering virtual familiarisation days.

As already highlighted, the completion of risk assessments and implementing recommendations, including the appropriateness of employing independent observers with public health expertise is the responsibility of the two test providers and the relevant exam centres.

I have also stressed the importance of communicating information on arrangements for the test days to parents and pupils.

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education whether independent observers with public health expertise will be present at post-primary test centres to ensure compliance to COVID-19 measures.
(AQW 10531/17-22)

Mr Weir: Under the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (as amended) the providers and host schools are required to carry out a health and safety assessment of the test centre take account any

recommendations arising as well as any guidance issued by a Northern Ireland Department. The Public Health Agency (PHA) publishes a range of advice and guidance relating to Covid-19 and I have highlighted to the test providers the need to consider all relevant guidance. The detailed arrangements for the tests including applying relevant guidance remains the responsibility of the providers and host schools.

Arrangements for familiarisation days also fall to the test providers and host schools. I understand that all children sitting the tests are normally invited to a familiarisation day at the test centre where they are sitting the tests. Whether or not pupils attend this day is matter of individual choice. I have been advised that this year some schools are offering virtual familiarisation days.

As already highlighted, the completion of risk assessments and implementing recommendations, including the appropriateness of employing independent observers with public health expertise is the responsibility of the two test providers and the relevant exam centres.

I have also stressed the importance of communicating information on arrangements for the test days to parents and pupils.

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education whether all children entered for the transfer test will attend familiarisation days at their allocated test centres prior to test dates as in previous years.

(AQW 10532/17-22)

Mr Weir: Under the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (as amended) the providers and host schools are required to carry out a health and safety assessment of the test centre take account any recommendations arising as well as any guidance issued by a Northern Ireland Department. The Public Health Agency (PHA) publishes a range of advice and guidance relating to Covid-19 and I have highlighted to the test providers the need to consider all relevant guidance. The detailed arrangements for the tests including applying relevant guidance remains the responsibility of the providers and host schools.

Arrangements for familiarisation days also fall to the test providers and host schools. I understand that all children sitting the tests are normally invited to a familiarisation day at the test centre where they are sitting the tests. Whether or not pupils attend this day is matter of individual choice. I have been advised that this year some schools are offering virtual familiarisation days.

As already highlighted, the completion of risk assessments and implementing recommendations, including the appropriateness of employing independent observers with public health expertise is the responsibility of the two test providers and the relevant exam centres.

I have also stressed the importance of communicating information on arrangements for the test days to parents and pupils.

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education with regard to the AQE and GL transfer tests scheduled for January 2021, whether the test centres or the test providers have responsibility for drawing up risk assessments for the test events.

(AQW 10533/17-22)

Mr Weir: Under the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (as amended) the providers and host schools are required to carry out a health and safety assessment of the test centre take account any recommendations arising as well as any guidance issued by a Northern Ireland Department. The Public Health Agency (PHA) publishes a range of advice and guidance relating to Covid-19 and I have highlighted to the test providers the need to consider all relevant guidance. The detailed arrangements for the tests including applying relevant guidance remains the responsibility of the providers and host schools.

Arrangements for familiarisation days also fall to the test providers and host schools. I understand that all children sitting the tests are normally invited to a familiarisation day at the test centre where they are sitting the tests. Whether or not pupils attend this day is matter of individual choice. I have been advised that this year some schools are offering virtual familiarisation days.

As already highlighted, the completion of risk assessments and implementing recommendations, including the appropriateness of employing independent observers with public health expertise is the responsibility of the two test providers and the relevant exam centres.

I have also stressed the importance of communicating information on arrangements for the test days to parents and pupils.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 9531/17-22, how much it would cost to pay the Educational Maintenance Allowance during each school holiday period.

(AQW 10629/17-22)

Mr Weir: Minister Dodd's response to your question AQW 9879/17-22 indicates the cost of providing Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) support to eligible students – both at schools and at Further Education Colleges (FEC) - 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.

On that basis the estimated cost of paying Educational Maintenance Allowance to all school pupils during each school holiday periods below would be:

Autumn break	1 week	£270,000
Christmas break	2 weeks	£540,000
Spring break	1 week	£270,000
Easter break	2 weeks	£540,000
Summer break	9 weeks	£2,430,000
Total school holidays	15 weeks	£4,050,000

The estimated cost of paying Educational Maintenance Allowance to all Further Education college students during each FEC holiday period would be:

Autumn break	1 week	£180,000
Christmas break	2 weeks	£360,000
Spring break	1 week	£180,000
Easter break	2 weeks	£360,000
Summer break	11 weeks	£1,980,000
Total FEC holidays	17 weeks	£3,060,000

The estimated cost of paying Educational Maintenance Allowance to all students during holiday periods in each academic year would therefore be in the region of £7,110,000.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to the motion passed in the Assembly on 2 November 2020 in relation to contingency planning for post-primary tests this year, for an update on (i) the work he is undertaking to develop contingency plans for post-primary transfer tests this year; and (ii) when these plans will be published.

(AQW 10693/17-22)

Mr Weir: Arrangements for the transfer tests this year remain a matter for the test providers; however, I have written to the providers to highlight the importance of ensuring they comply with health protection legislation and communicate clearly to parents, pupils and schools if contingency plans are being considered should the tests not proceed or if pupils are not be able to take any of the tests.

Boards of Governors of those schools intending to use the results of the transfer tests as part of their admissions criteria will also have to consider contingency arrangements in circumstances where test scores are not available. Once admissions criteria are completed, they will be published by the Education Authority in the New Year.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Education what steps his Department is taking to address racism in schools.

(AQW 10724/17-22)

Mr Weir: I refer the Member to my response to AQW 5070/17-22 on 23 June 2020. I hope this provides the Member with the information she needs.

Dr Aiken asked the Minister of Education to detail a timescale on the decision of the transfer of Ballyclare Nursery School to the Tir Na Nog site.

(AQW 11389/17-22)

Mr Weir: The suggestion of moving Ballyclare Nursery School to the former Tir na nOg Primary School premises is a novel proposal which highlights the good relationships within the local area.

However, Ballyclare Nursery School is not currently included on a list for capital investment and therefore any move will have to be self-financing. My officials are currently preparing a business case to examine the feasibility of this and I expect to be in a position to make a decision in the coming weeks.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Education whether his Department will instruct and fund the Education Authority transport department to deliver nutritional meals to pupils self-isolating due to COVID-19 who are in receipt of free school meals.

(AQW 11392/17-22)

Mr Weir: Since 1 September the Department has made a number of Temporary Modification to Education Duties Notices under the Coronavirus Act 2020 to require the Education Authority and individual voluntary grammar and grant-maintained

schools to provide food to specified pupils entitled to Free School Meals (FSM) who are unable to attend school for a period of 10 days or more due to Covid-19 and wish such provision.

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/notice-coronavirus-act-2020-temporary-modification-education-duties-no-16-notice-northern-ireland>

The EA school meals service makes food provision, by way of a food parcel to the value of a FSM for the required number of days for collection or delivery, in respect of pupils specified in the Notice in controlled, maintained and special schools at the school's request. The food parcels can be collected by the parent, delivered to the pupil's home by the school as part of pastoral care or delivered by taxi arranged by catering staff.

Individual Voluntary Grammar and Grant-Maintained Integrated schools are responsible for making food provision in respect of pupils specified in the Notice in their school.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education when a vulnerable children reference group will be established.
(AQW 11407/17-22)

Mr Weir: As part of the ongoing work between health and education, the Joint Health/Education Oversight Group is currently considering this issue.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children and young people who have missed time in their school setting due to COVID-19 self-isolation, broken down by (i) year group; and (ii) constituency.
(AQW 11508/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department receives weekly reports taken directly from the School Information Management System (SIMS) which records the number of half day sessions in any given period. The number of pupils absent or present by individual attendance code including a breakdown by year group is not routinely available in these weekly reports. However a bespoke report was supplied to the Department by the Education Authority allowing the proportion of pupils recorded using the dual purpose code of self-isolating due to COVID-19/Intensive Support Unit by year group to be calculated.

The tables below shows the proportion of pupils recorded as self-isolating due to COVID-19/Intensive Support Learning broken down by year group since the start of the academic year until and including the 4 December 2020.

Percentage of total possible attendance recorded as self-isolating due to COVID-19/Intensive Support Unit from the start of the academic year to 4 December 2020 for year groups 1 to 7 by constituency of school location.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Belfast East	2.6%	2.6%	1.4%	1.6%	1.5%	2.2%	1.8%
Belfast North	2.2%	2.5%	2.3%	2.2%	2.1%	3.6%	3.0%
Belfast South	2.0%	2.5%	2.2%	3.0%	2.0%	2.3%	3.1%
Belfast West	3.2%	3.6%	4.0%	3.9%	3.4%	4.8%	5.5%
East Antrim	0.8%	1.3%	1.2%	1.6%	2.1%	1.4%	1.5%
East Londonderry	3.2%	2.1%	1.7%	1.7%	2.1%	2.6%	2.3%
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	1.9%	2.4%	1.8%	2.3%	2.9%	2.4%	2.0%
Foyle	4.7%	4.3%	4.7%	3.9%	4.7%	4.2%	4.4%
Lagan Valley	2.0%	1.4%	2.5%	1.5%	2.0%	2.3%	1.9%
Mid Ulster	2.6%	2.5%	3.7%	2.5%	3.2%	2.7%	2.9%
Newry And Armagh	2.0%	2.7%	2.3%	2.5%	2.8%	2.8%	2.3%
North Antrim	1.3%	1.5%	2.5%	1.6%	2.6%	1.9%	2.8%
North Down	2.0%	1.5%	1.8%	1.7%	2.3%	2.0%	3.2%
South Antrim	2.1%	1.6%	2.0%	2.5%	2.3%	2.2%	1.5%
South Down	2.2%	2.9%	3.1%	2.1%	2.3%	2.1%	1.7%
Strangford	2.8%	2.8%	2.4%	3.0%	2.7%	2.5%	2.8%
Upper Bann	1.8%	1.9%	1.4%	2.1%	2.2%	2.9%	1.6%
West Tyrone	2.2%	2.0%	2.4%	2.4%	2.3%	1.7%	1.8%
Total	2.3%	2.4%	2.5%	2.4%	2.6%	2.7%	2.6%

Source: SIMS

Please note the information in the table includes pupils attending primary and special schools.

Percentage of total possible attendance recorded as self-isolating due to COVID-19/Intensive Support Unit from the start of the academic year to 4 December 2020 for year groups 8 to 14 by constituency of school location.

	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Belfast East	2.9%	2.1%	2.8%	2.1%	2.5%	4.8%	4.3%
Belfast North	2.3%	2.7%	3.8%	3.6%	3.1%	3.3%	5.3%
Belfast South	2.8%	4.3%	4.5%	2.8%	4.0%	4.1%	4.2%
Belfast West	3.7%	5.0%	3.0%	5.6%	4.1%	5.3%	6.0%
East Antrim	1.5%	4.4%	3.5%	3.7%	3.0%	4.7%	3.4%
East Londonderry	2.3%	2.7%	2.3%	5.4%	3.5%	3.1%	3.5%
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	2.0%	1.6%	2.5%	2.8%	3.9%	6.1%	4.9%
Foyle	4.2%	6.1%	5.3%	4.7%	6.0%	5.9%	8.5%
Lagan Valley	3.5%	2.5%	2.5%	3.0%	3.1%	4.9%	3.0%
Mid Ulster	4.3%	4.1%	5.9%	5.3%	7.5%	8.1%	6.0%
Newry And Armagh	2.2%	2.6%	2.8%	4.0%	3.6%	3.7%	5.0%
North Antrim	2.6%	3.6%	2.8%	3.7%	4.2%	4.9%	4.3%
North Down	1.8%	3.5%	3.5%	5.2%	4.7%	2.8%	3.5%
South Antrim	2.5%	2.1%	2.7%	3.0%	3.3%	5.0%	2.6%
South Down	3.1%	2.8%	2.9%	6.0%	3.9%	6.2%	7.8%
Strangford	2.6%	3.4%	2.1%	4.8%	4.4%	4.1%	6.4%
Upper Bann	2.4%	2.6%	2.4%	5.6%	6.5%	1.4%	3.6%
West Tyrone	4.6%	5.0%	4.8%	4.9%	7.1%	6.2%	6.6%
Total	2.9%	3.4%	3.4%	4.2%	4.4%	4.7%	5.1%

Source: SIMS

Please note the information in the table includes pupils attending post primary and special schools

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education, given his advice that the AQE Ltd and Post-Primary Transfer Consortium will have regard to his Department's Education Restart guidance, whether post-primary transfer tests are integral to the overall transfer process and the Department of Education and whether he will play some role in their operation.

(AQW 11543/17-22)

Mr Weir: Under regulation 5 of the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 ("the Health Protection Regulations"), gatherings of more than thirty people cannot take place unless one of the exempt purposes set out applies. This includes educational purposes. Where a person is responsible for organising or operating a gathering they are bound by paragraph (4) of regulation 5 including the requirement to carry out a risk assessment and take all reasonable measures to limit the risk of Covid-19 transmission by implementing any safety recommendations and complying with any relevant guidance issued by a Northern Ireland Department.

The requirement to have regard to guidance issued by my Department therefore arises from the Health Protection legislation rather than a direction from me. Additionally the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 enables selective schools to use the test scores as part of their admissions criteria. Changes to the same legislation mean the tests are wholly unregulated and there is no basis for my Department to play a role in their organisation. Any change to that position would require a change to legislation and agreement in the Executive.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education whether AQE Ltd and Post-Primary Transfer Consortium will be bound by the regulation 5, Restrictions on large gatherings, in the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020, or by alternative public health restrictions.

(AQW 11544/17-22)

Mr Weir: Under regulation 5 of the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 ("the Health Protection Regulations"), gatherings of more than thirty people cannot take place unless one of the exempt purposes set out applies. This includes educational purposes. Where a person is responsible for organising or operating a gathering they are bound by paragraph (4) of regulation 5 including the requirement to carry out a risk assessment and

take all reasonable measures to limit the risk of Covid-19 transmission by implementing any safety recommendations and complying with any relevant guidance issued by a Northern Ireland Department.

The requirement to have regard to guidance issued by my Department therefore arises from the Health Protection legislation rather than a direction from me. Additionally the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 enables selective schools to use the test scores as part of their admissions criteria. Changes to the same legislation mean the tests are wholly unregulated and there is no basis for my Department to play a role in their organisation. Any change to that position would require a change to legislation and agreement in the Executive.

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education how many times he has attended a meeting of the Committee for Education since 11 January 2020, broken down by (i) Committee meetings attended in person; and (ii) Committee meetings attended remotely. **(AQW 11584/17-22)**

Mr Weir: Since 11 January 2020 I have attended a meeting of the Education Committee 15 times, (i) Four were attended in person; and (ii) 11 were attended remotely.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education for his current assessment of BTEC qualifications for those in Irish medium education. **(AQW 11621/17-22)**

Mr Weir: BTEC qualifications are a product offered by the English awarding organisation, Pearson. These are vocational qualifications available to Northern Ireland learners, and access to these qualifications helps schools meet their statutory obligation in terms of the Entitlement Framework. However there are also other awarding organisations that provide vocational qualifications to centres in Northern Ireland and these also contribute to delivering the Entitlement Framework.

Coláiste Feirste currently delivers five BTECs for those in Irish Medium education.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of how the current BTEC arrangements for Irish medium students meet the Department of Education's Entitlement Framework. **(AQW 11622/17-22)**

Mr Weir: BTEC qualifications are a product offered by the English awarding organisation, Pearson. These are vocational qualifications available to Northern Ireland learners, and access to these qualifications helps schools meet their statutory obligation in terms of the Entitlement Framework. However there are also other awarding organisations that provide vocational qualifications to centres in Northern Ireland and these also contribute to delivering the Entitlement Framework.

Coláiste Feirste currently delivers five BTECs for those in Irish Medium education.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education what additional resources have been allocated to support the educational attainment of care-experienced children during the COVID-19 pandemic. **(AQW 11634/17-22)**

Mr Weir: Care experienced children are incorporated within the vulnerable category for which schools remained open during the Covid-19 pandemic and I wrote to Principals to encourage their attendance where it was in their best interests and safe and appropriate to do so. Vulnerable children were also prioritised for the allocation of digital devices to support them to engage with remote learning.

The Children Looked After Education Project was which was initially established within the Education Authority (EA) to raise the educational outcomes at Key Stage 2 responded with flexibility to identify and address specific needs arising from the pandemic, including intensive consultation support to the Network around Children Looked After supporting a better understanding of their needs through a trauma and attachment lens and learning support requirements.

The Project also produced guidance to facilitate continued learning for vulnerable children and details of a range of online educational resources to assist all children at this time.

During the pandemic, a weekly update was also provided to the Department by the EA Child Protection Support Service (CPSS) to highlight specific resources which may have been of benefit to all children. The EA also produced specific guidance to facilitate continued learning during the pandemic for vulnerable children and guidance on a range of online educational resources intended to assist all families and pupils, including care experienced children.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education how care-experienced children will be supported to complete curriculum and assessment this year. **(AQW 11635/17-22)**

Mr Weir: The Engage Programme introduced this year to help address the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children's learning provides schools with extra funding so that they can secure additional qualified teachers, enabling the provision of child-centred one to one, small group or team teaching support targeted at pupils identified by their school as most benefitting from additional support following the lockdown period, and in accordance with their particular needs. Care-experienced children will be included in this category.

Targeted and intensive support was also provided through the Children Looked After Champion role to specific KS2 children and included Universal support to the Network around all Children Looked After in the form of a Helpline and Electronic Post Box, a Guidance Document for Primary Educators

‘Care, Communicate, Connect and Collaborate – Supporting Children Looked After in returning to Formal Education’. Narrated PowerPoints were also recorded for School Staff guiding their self and collective care within the School Community. This Champion role is being expanded to cover all children looked after.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education what training teachers receive to help them respond to challenges faced by some care-experienced children such as (i) trauma; (ii) moving schools; (iii) attachment disorder; and (iv) attending contact.
(AQW 11636/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Children Looked After Champion for NI and her team works at primary level with the team around the child, building their confidence and skills to respond to such challenges and effectively supporting children looked after.

‘The Attach Project’ (TAP) is the key intervention in relation to trauma and attachment issues and provision includes:

- Training on trauma and attachment in children: intensive training of School Named Contacts & Key Adults and an awareness session for all school staff members.
- Implementation Support: focusing on implementation on the relationship-based, trauma and attachment informed approach at a child and whole school level.
- Consultations: regarding those identified children who are looked after and reactive in nature where there are identified difficulties or in times of crisis.
- Clinical Assessment, Formulation and Recommendations: regarding those identified children who are looked after.

The Department has also issued all teachers with a copy of the publication “Putting Care into Education” which provides schools with practical advice on helping care experienced children to navigate the school environment. It gives teachers an overview of potential barriers to learning that these children may experience and an insight into how early relational trauma affects child development.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education whether he has any plans to prioritise Looked After Children in school admissions.
(AQW 11637/17-22)

Mr Weir: Responsibility for setting admissions criteria rests with the Boards of Governors of individual schools and not my Department. While there is no statutory requirement that schools prioritise Children Looked After for admission, they may do so in their admissions criteria if they wish. My Department’s guidance, which Boards of Governors must ‘have regard to’ when setting admissions criteria, recommends that primary schools prioritise Children Looked After for admission.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education what is the current longest waiting time for the issue of a statement of special educational needs.
(AQW 11638/17-22)

Mr Weir: As of week ending 4 December 2020, the longest open case stands at 84 weeks.

The Education Authority is not in a position to disclose the nature of this case but would provide assurance that the waiting time is not as a result of avoidable delay on the part of education or health services.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education, in the absence of a Permanent Secretary in his Department (i) what temporary arrangements have been made to fill this post; (ii) who has been allocated accounting officer responsibility; (iii) what timetable has been drawn up for the filling of the post; and (iv) why this post was not filled before the previous secretary retired.
(AQW 11709/17-22)

Mr Weir: With the agreement of NICS HR (DoF), two DE Deputy Secretaries will be temporarily promoted on a rotational basis to cover the Permanent Secretary post until a successor is in place. The Acting Permanent Secretary will be allocated accounting officer responsibility.

An external recruitment competition was launched on 26 October 2020 by NICS HR to fill the DE Permanent Secretary position on a substantive basis. Following necessary rescheduling from the original timetable, arrangements have been put in place to progress the next stages of the selection process, beginning with an eligibility sift in early January 2021.

Individual assessments will take place prior to final interview stage in late January/early February 2021, after which an appointment is expected to be made as soon as possible.

NICS HR began planning for the recruitment competition to appoint a successor in August 2020. While significant work was undertaken prior to the Permanent Secretary’s retirement at the end of November 2020, it was not possible to complete all of the various elements of the (now rescheduled) selection process within the proposed timeframe.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Education what consideration has been given to providing different coding for absence where a child is known to have a long-term, chronic illness, particularly during the period of susceptibility to COVID-19 via community transmission.

(AQW 11725/17-22)

Mr Weir: DE Circular 2020/08 provides guidance to schools on managing pupil attendance in the context of Covid-19.

The appropriate absence code for a school to use for a particular pupil is likely to depend on the specific circumstances of that pupil. At present a school may apply Code 8 in circumstances where a pupil chooses not to attend school, or parent chooses not to send their child to school, on the advice of a medical professional as the child is self-isolating due to a significant underlying medical condition.

My Department is introducing new pupil attendance codes that are specific to Covid-19 absences, which will take effect from 4 January 2021. Information regarding this was issued to schools on 16 December 2020. This will further develop the range of attendance codes set out in DE Circular 2020/08. It will give schools more scope to accurately record the reasons for pupil absence and to capture those related to Covid-19 separately from others.

Departmental officials would be happy to provide advice to any school regarding the recording of attendance. The relevant team can be contacted either by email at: attendance@education-ni.gov.uk or by telephone on 02891 279328.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education whether he will implement the early closure of schools to allow teachers and teaching staff to safely spend time with family members over the Christmas holidays.

(AQW 11852/17-22)

Mr Weir: I issued a letter to all Principals on 8 December 2020 setting out the Christmas holiday arrangements for schools.

This letter set out my expectation that, unless advised to do so by the Public Health Agency due to health related reasons, or other non-health emergencies, all schools should remain open to all year groups for face-to-face teaching for the remainder of this term until their planned Christmas holiday.

It remains my firm belief that face to face teaching is the best form of education and our schools are the best place to provide a controlled and safe environment to provide this.

My main priority is to guard children's education, mental health and well-being. The extension of the Christmas holidays for schools would cause further disruption to children's education and lead to an increase in levels of stress and anxiety especially with scheduled examinations in January.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education what initiatives he plans to take forward to recognise the contribution made by teaching and non-teaching staff during the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 11856/17-22)

Mr Weir: I have regularly and consistently placed on record my appreciation of the contribution made by teaching and non-teaching staff both before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. I am happy to do so again.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of school days lost by pupils due to self-isolating during December and up to 11 December 2020; (ii) the number of teaching or staff absences from schools due to isolating during December and up to 11 December 2020; (iii) how many schools are impacted; (iv) whether he will review his decision not to close schools early for the Christmas holidays; and (v) whether he anticipates schools reopening later than planned in January due to COVID-19 outbreaks during the Christmas period.

(AQW 11857/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) The Department receives weekly reports taken directly from the School Information Management System (SIMS) which records the number of half day sessions in any given period. From data collated from the week commencing 30 November and the week commencing 7 December there were 127,480.5 (3.8% of total days) days recorded using the dual purpose code of self-isolating due to COVID-19/Intensive Support Unit.
- (ii) A snapshot of staff attendance is currently being collected on each Tuesday through a temporary survey. It should be noted that the information relates only to the day of the survey. This voluntary survey had a response rate of around 63% in December (i.e. around 660 Primary, Post-Primary, Special and Educated other than at school settings) and therefore does not include all educational settings. It was established to enable overall trends to be monitored for planning and reporting purposes. It is collected as management information and is not validated to the usual standard of Official Statistics. The survey is not able to accurately identify staff that are not on site due to self-isolating. A breakdown of the reasons for staff not being on site is presented in the publications available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/topics/management-information-attendance-pupils-and-workforce-schools>.
- (iii) There were 869 schools (primary, post primary, special and Educated other than at school settings) with instances of pupils self-isolating due to COVID-19/Intensive Support Unit over the reporting period of 30 November to 11 December 2020.

On 01 December and 08 December around one quarter of the Primary, Post-Primary, Special and Educated other than at school settings that responded to the weekly survey reported staff “Identified by PHA Testing and Tracing to self-isolate”. Almost a further one quarter of the settings reported staff not on site because “They or member of household has confirmed COVID19”, “They or member of household showing symptoms of COVID19”, “Vulnerable category / shielding” or “In quarantine”.

- (iv) I issued a letter to all Principals on 8 December 2020 setting out the Christmas holiday arrangements for schools. This letter set out my expectation that, unless advised to do so by the Public Health Agency due to health related reasons, or other non-health emergencies, all schools should remain open to all year groups for face-to-face teaching for the remainder of this term until their planned Christmas holiday.

It remains my firm belief that face to face teaching is the best form of education and our schools are the best place to provide a controlled and safe environment to provide this.

My main priority is to guard children’s education, mental health and well-being. The extension of the Christmas holidays for schools would cause further disruption to children’s education and lead to an increase in levels of stress and anxiety especially with scheduled examinations in January.

- (v) I fully expect that all schools will reopen on their agreed first day of term following the Christmas period, unless exceptional circumstances have occurred. In exceptional circumstances, which are entirely outside the control of the school, schools can apply to the Department for a reduction in the number of days they are required to operate in line with Circular Number: 2020/09.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education whether one of the reasons he has not brought forward a temporary continuity direction to ensure a minimum level of IT support to those who are distance learning is due to the current C2k system would be inadequate for the job.

(AQW 11866/17-22)

Mr Weir: I do not consider it necessary at present to introduce a temporary continuity direction to require remote learning.

The Temporary Continuity Direction introduced in England requires that where a class, group of pupils, or individual pupils need to self-isolate, or there are local or national restrictions requiring pupils to remain at home, schools are expected to provide access to remote education. It does not specify a minimum level of IT provision.

My Department has asked schools to have similar contingency plans in place for the delivery of remote learning in the event of a school closure, or that a class or group of pupils need to self-isolate. Feedback indicates that these plans are in place.

We are fortunate in Northern Ireland that schools have access to C2K, which is a centrally provided IT system. This has supported online access to school services from the beginning of the COVID-19 school closures.

Funding has been provided to EA to continue to improve the services available, including a number of additional learning applications and upgrading the bandwidth in specific areas.

The scheme to provide IT devices and WIFI access (vouchers or MiFi devices) to our educationally disadvantaged and vulnerable learners has provided almost 10,000 devices and remains open.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister of Education how many Assembly Written Questions his Department received during the period 2 March 2020 to 30 November 2020; and to detail the total cost of responding to these questions.

(AQW 11915/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department received a total of 839 Assembly Written Questions during the period 2 March – 30 November 2020. The information sought in relation to cost is not readily available and may only be obtained at a disproportionate cost

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education who is responsible for teacher workforce planning.

(AQW 11944/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department of Education is responsible for determining the number of students to be admitted each year to courses of Initial Teacher Education, based on a number of relevant factors, including the predicted future need for teachers across the NI education system.

The Board of Governors for every school is responsible for assessing their workforce needs and determining the complement of teaching posts of the school.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) his assessment of the Education, Skills and Training for Young People report; and (ii) the implications for his Department’s education, skills and careers guidance policies.

(AQW 11977/17-22)

Mr Weir: I am aware of the report recently published by Pivotal.

My Department is working in collaboration with the Department for the Economy (DfE) on an innovative project to develop a more strategic, joined up approach to education and training provision for 14-19 year olds in Northern Ireland. The aim of

Transition of Young People into Careers (14-19) Project is to enhance the 14-19 education and training landscape so that our young people reach their potential and maximise their contribution to our economy and society.

The Project is considering a range of work streams in the context of 14-19 education and training as part of its ongoing work. This includes progression and pathways, Post-16, curriculum delivery, careers and funding.

Officials from the Transition of Young People into Careers (14-19) Project met with Pivotal in recent weeks in relation to the work on the 14-19 Project and agreed to a further meeting once Pivotal's report had been published.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Education whether he is aware of any staff employed by his Department or the Education Authority who are currently members of the Armagh county camogie team.

(AQW 12002/17-22)

Mr Weir: This information is not held on the HR records of either the Department of Education or the Education Authority.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education, considering the extensive period of disruption due to COVID-19, and the multiple isolations imposed on families who, while not in the Free School Meal category, cannot afford to purchase multiple devices to enable their children to distance learn from home in an appropriate fashion, whether he will consider (i) establishing a more widespread borrowing scheme; or (ii) a discounting scheme to permit parents to purchase additional ICT equipment, especially, but not exclusively, for children and young people who are facing exams.

(AQW 12075/17-22)

Mr Weir: The current scheme for lending devices aims to ensure that resources are targeted where there is greatest need. Priority is being given to disadvantaged and vulnerable learners in exam years. To date 10,893 devices have been requested and delivered to pupils in the priority groups. These are additional to devices which are being provided by schools. The Department is working closely with the EA to identify solutions to meet the demand from other year groups.

The current scheme provides an approach which ensures that devices can be procured and appropriately provisioned for safe use by learners, both in schools and at home, in an efficient and cost effective way.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education (i) why principals, who ordered ICT equipment in September for pupils to use during potential lockdown or isolation, are still waiting for the equipment to be delivered; and (ii) whether this is contributing to the Minister's decision as to whether to permit schools to move to distance learning at this time.

(AQW 12076/17-22)

Mr Weir: All requests received to date from schools for devices for the four priority year groups (Years 14,12,7 and 4) have been met and new requests from these year groups continue to be supported. The priority year groups has also been expanded to include current year 11s and 13s. The Department is working closely with the EA to identify solutions to meet the demand from other year groups.

On 8 December 2020 I wrote to school leaders noting the expectation that, unless advised to do so by the Public Health Authority (PHA), all schools should remain open to all year groups for face to face teaching for the remainder of this term until their planned Christmas holiday. Reasons for closure would include health related reasons, or other non-health emergencies such a boiler breakdown, fire or adverse weather conditions.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education why he has not introduced a dedicated code to record COVID-19-related pupil absences.

(AQW 12078/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department has advised schools that a new set of codes has been introduced and will be applicable from 4 January 2021. There are six new codes, which will allow schools to more specifically record Covid-19 related pupil absences.

Within the current SIMS application absences must be recorded using a single character. As the range of available characters is extremely limited the six new codes will use a range of brackets. These are set out below alongside their respective SIMS description.

SIMS description	Code	Code description	Statistical Meaning
Covid-19 Illness Confirmed This code should be used in situations where a pupil is sick and Covid-19 is confirmed. This includes pupils who test positive (including asymptomatic) and able to work remotely.	(Left Open Bracket	Authorised Absence
Covid-19 Illness Suspected / Unconfirmed This code should be used in situations where Covid-19 is suspected but unconfirmed (a pupil is sick and showing symptoms))	Right Closed Bracket	Authorised Absence

SIMS description	Code	Code description	Statistical Meaning
<p>Covid-19 Self-Isolating – Vulnerable Pupil or Household member</p> <p>This code should be used in situations where a pupil has chosen not to attend school due to own underlying health conditions or due to health conditions of other household / family members. If a pupil is sick, they should be recorded as such.</p>	{	Left Open Curly Bracket	Unauthorised Absence
<p>Covid-19 Self-Isolating - No evidence of learning from home</p> <p>This code should be used in situations where a pupil is required to self-isolate but is not learning from home or sufficient evidence has not been provided to satisfy school</p>	}	Right Closed Curly Bracket	Unauthorised Absence
<p>Covid-19 Self-Isolating & Learning from Home</p> <p>Formerly Code 8 (used between March 2020 to December 2020)</p> <p>This code should be used in situations where a pupil is required to self-isolate on the advice of school / PHA or medical health professional and is learning from home and is able to evidence learning from home – this does not discount from attendance record – maximum of 2 weeks usage unless advised by PHA. (can be used for multiple periods of isolation as necessary)</p> <p>This code may also be used in exceptional circumstances where medical evidence is provided to support the child abstaining from school,</p>	[Left Open Square Bracket	Approved Activity
<p>Covid-19 Learning from Home - Social Distancing</p> <p>Formerly Code P (used between March 2020 to December 2020)</p> <p>This code should be used in situations where pupils are not required to attend physically at school due to social distancing rules, imposed by DE or school. E.g. pupils required to attend on certain days or for a certain number of hours per day (not to be used if pupils are self-isolating)</p>]	Right Closed Square Bracket	Approved Activity

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education who will be responsible for contact tracing school pupils over the Christmas holidays if the Public Health Agency Education Tracing Line closes at 4:00pm on Wednesday 23 December.
(AQW 12079/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Public Health Agency (PHA) will carry out contact tracing with staff or parents of pupils in the community through their routine contact tracing service after their education support team closes on 23 December.

PHA will identify school close contacts by working directly with the staff member or pupil/parent involved to identify their close contacts

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Education what guidance has been provided to schools about marking pupils present on days that only teaching and administrative staff are in the school building, but pupils have been told they may stay home due to the pandemic.
(AQW 12089/17-22)

Mr Weir: I strongly believe that face to face teaching is the best form of education and our schools are the best place to provide this in a controlled and safe environment. In light of this my Department has not provided any specific guidance in order to facilitate the marking of pupils as present in circumstances where they are not physically attending school.

DE Circular 2020/08 sets out guidance to schools on how attendance should be recorded. My officials are happy to provide advice to any school regarding this issue. The relevant team can be contacted either by email at: attendance@education-ni.gov.uk or by telephone on 02891 279328.

Department of Finance

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Finance how the McCloud ruling will impact on serving officers of the PSNI and the terms of their pension; and for an update on the results of the consultation entitled Public service pension schemes: Changes to the transitional arrangements to the 2015 schemes.

(AQW 11120/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): Under proposals to address unlawful age discrimination occurring since 2015, members of the Police Pension Scheme who were in service on or before 31 March 2012 and on or after 1 April 2015 will be able to choose to have scheme benefits accrued during the period 1 April 2015 to 31 March 2022 calculated under either the 2015 reformed scheme rules or those pertaining to their pre-2015 (legacy) scheme arrangement. To remove the discrimination for the future it is proposed that all members will accrue service from 1 April 2022 in the 2015 reformed scheme, which is of a career average design with a normal pension age of 60.

The consultation on this matter closed on 18 November 2020. Feedback is now being analysed and a response will be published in due course.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Finance to detail the total figure of funds, in addition to the block grant, that have been allocated to the Executive from HM Treasury in 2020/21, including from any spending reviews.

(AQW 11137/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The 2020-21 Budget document published on 31 March 2020 set out the amount of funding available to the Executive at that time both through the block grant and from other sources such as the NDNA financial package.

Since then the Executive has, as a result of COVID-19, received a commitment of a guaranteed £2.8 billion additional DEL funding in 2020-21.

The final level of funding provided to the Executive this year will not be confirmed until the Westminster Supplementary Estimate process concludes. I will update the Assembly on this alongside January Monitoring.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Finance whether sustainability or environmental criteria form any part of procurement policy within his Department.

(AQW 11163/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Public Procurement Policy, for which my Department has responsibility, is underpinned by the concept of achieving best value for money.

The Executive agreed that best value for money is defined as the most advantageous combination of cost, quality and sustainability to meet customer requirements.

In this context sustainability means economic, social and environmental benefits, considered in the business case in support of the Programme for Government.

A paper on social value, including climate change, has been tabled to the Procurement Board for its meeting on 16 December 2020.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Finance for her assessment of the processing and delivery of the Coronavirus Localised Restrictions Support Scheme.

(AQW 11171/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As at Friday 11 December, 13, 844 applications had been received to the Department of Finance's Localised Restriction Support Scheme. 79% of these applications have been processed with £47.9 million having issued to almost 7,000 businesses.

The scheme opened to non-essential retail on 27th November. To date, 1,925 applications have been received and £916,000 has issued to around 500 businesses.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Finance (i) for an update on work within his Department to help with the prevention of loneliness; and (ii) whether his Department would be supportive of the development of a preventing loneliness strategy.

(AQW 11187/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Thank you for your question on 30th November. As mentioned in my response to your letter dated 6th July, I very much support the work of the APG, and I encourage the development of the policies and programmes aimed at reducing loneliness and social isolation, and enhancing wellbeing.

NISRA plays a vital role in providing underlying data in this topic and I would like to draw your attention to the following upcoming reports:

- The Loneliness in Northern Ireland 2019/20 report, which is the main source of Loneliness data, will be released on 10th December.

- The latest report from the NISRA Coronavirus Opinion Survey, which includes Loneliness data collected throughout the pandemic, will be released on 17th December.

I am aware that NISRA staff will be attending and providing an update on data collection and analysis at the next APG on 9th December.

NISRA will continue to work with the APG and policy colleagues in terms of developing new data to ensure they meet user requirements in this topic area.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Finance (i) on what date the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme opened for applications; (ii) on what date the first payment under the scheme was made; (iii) how many applications have been received from the Upper Bann constituency up to and including Friday 27 November 2020; (iv) how many payments were made by this date; and (v) what is the total amount paid.

(AQW 11208/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS) opened to businesses in Derry City and Strabane District Council Area on Wednesday 14th October and to other council areas on Monday 19th October. The first payment made under the scheme was on Tuesday 21st October.

It is not possible to give figures for the Localised Restriction Support Scheme for a constituency area, all figures are recorded based on District Council area.

As of 15th December, for the Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council Council area there were:

Applications received:	1,318
Payments made:	652
Applications rejected:	339
Cases still to be processed:	327
Total amount paid:	£4.4 million

Since the Scheme was expanded to include non-essential retail businesses, LPS has received a further 239 applications from businesses in the Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council area, and 142 of these have been paid out to a value of £268K.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Finance to detail (i) the date Localised Restrictions Support Scheme opened for applications; (ii) the date the first payment under the scheme was made; (iii) how many applications have been received from the South Down constituency up to and including Friday 27 November 2020; (iv) how many payments were made by this date; and (v) the total amount paid.

(AQW 11221/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS) opened to businesses in Derry City and Strabane District Council Area on Wednesday 14th October and to other council areas on Monday 19th October. The first payment made under the scheme was on Tuesday 21st October.

It is not possible to give figures for the Localised Restriction Support Scheme for a constituency area, all figures are recorded based on District Council area.

As of 15th December, for the Newry, Mourne and Down District Council area there were:

Applications received:	1,325
Payments made:	696
Applications rejected:	369
Cases still to be processed:	260
Total amount paid:	£4.78 million

Since the Scheme was expanded to include non-essential retail businesses, LPS has received a further 181 applications from businesses in the Newry, Mourne and Down District Council area, and 104 of these have been paid out to a value of £190K.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Finance (i) on what date the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme opened for applications; (ii) on what date the first payment under the scheme was made; (iii) how many applications have been received from the Lagan Valley constituency up to and including Friday 27 November 2020; (iv) how payments were made by this date; and (v) what is the total amount paid.

(AQW 11239/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS) opened to businesses in Derry City and Strabane District Council Area on Wednesday 14th October and to other council areas on Monday 19th October. The first payment made under the scheme was on Tuesday 21st October.

It is not possible to give figures for the Localised Restriction Support Scheme for a constituency area, all figures are recorded based on District Council area.

As of 15th December, for the Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council area there were:

Applications received:	706
Payments made:	327
Applications rejected:	223
Cases still to be processed:	156
Total amount paid:	£2.34 million

Since the Scheme was expanded to include non-essential retail businesses, LPS has received a further 116 applications from businesses in the Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council area, and 74 of these have been paid out to a value of £136K.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance (i) on what date the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme opened for applications; (ii) on what date the first payment under the scheme was made; (iii) how many applications have been received from the Foyle constituency up to and including Friday 27 November 2020; (iv) how payments were made by this date; and (v) what is the total amount paid.

(AQW 11259/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS) opened to businesses in Derry City and Strabane District Council Area on Wednesday 14th October and to other council areas on Monday 19th October. The first payment made under the scheme was on Tuesday 21st October.

It is not possible to give figures for the Localised Restriction Support Scheme for a constituency area, all figures are recorded based on District Council area.

As of 15th December, for the Derry and Strabane District Council area there were:

Applications received:	1,502
Payments made:	648
Applications rejected:	783
Cases still to be processed:	71
Total amount paid:	£3.87 million

Since the Scheme was expanded to include non-essential retail businesses, LPS has received a further 147 applications from businesses in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area, and 84 of these have been paid out to a value of £150K.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Finance (i) on what date the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme opened for applications; (ii) on what date the first payment under the scheme was made; (iii) how many applications have been received from the West Tyrone constituency up to and including Friday 27 November 2020; (iv) how many payments were made by this date; and (v) what is the total amount paid.

(AQW 11309/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS) opened to businesses in Derry City and Strabane District Council Area on Wednesday 14th October and to other council areas on Monday 19th October. The first payment made under the scheme was on Tuesday 21st October.

It is not possible to give figures for the Localised Restriction Support Scheme for a constituency area, all figures are recorded based on District Council area.

As of 15th December, for the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council area there were:

Applications received:	1,030
Payments made:	508
Applications rejected:	311
Cases still to be processed:	211
Total amount paid:	£3.46 million

Since the Scheme was expanded to include non-essential retail businesses, LPS has received a further 208 applications from businesses in the Fermanagh and Omagh

District Council area, and 98 of these have been paid out to a value of £195K.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance how many people are still awaiting payment for the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme.

(AQW 11470/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As at 17 December, there have been 16,710 applications to the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS). This includes applications made under the most recent set of restrictions. Over 80% of applications have been processed with £53.8 million having issued to 8,780 businesses. 4,752 applications have to date been deemed ineligible. The remaining 3,178 cases still to be processed include a third which are duplicate and/or incomplete applications, approximately 800 received within the past week and 300 where we are waiting for the applicant to respond to a request for further information.

The various overlapping restrictions which have come into effect during the period the scheme has been open, and the consequent changes in the eligibility for support and the amounts payable to eligible businesses, has made the new scheme considerably more complex than the previous £10,000 Small Business Grant Scheme administered by LPS.

In addition, many applicants have submitted multiple applications or applications with incomplete or inaccurate information. This has impacted on progress in processing applications.

Land & Property Services is continuing to progress applications as quickly as possible.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance how his Department will ensure those who have been waiting more than 5 weeks to access the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme will receive financial assistance.

(AQW 11471/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As at 17 December, there have been 16,710 applications to the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS). Over 80% of applications have been processed with £53.8 million having issued to 8,780 businesses. 4,752 applications have to date been deemed ineligible.

The scheme provides support for businesses that have been directly affected by the Health Protection restrictions. It has changed four times since it was first set up in October, extending its geographic range to all council areas and increased the amount of payments issued and the types of businesses that are eligible. This has added to the complexity of administering the scheme.

In addition, there has been a high level of inaccurate and multiple applications. For example, around 25% of applications have been rejected because the business type is not eligible for this scheme. One of the most common is that duplicate applications have been made. In many cases incorrect information has been supplied, for example, a large number of applications related to the wrong address. Land & Property Services cannot provide payment to a business if they've supplied incorrect information on their form.

Land & Property Services is continuing to progress applications as quickly as possible.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Finance what impact the newly designed procurement policy will have on procurement and tendering at local government.

(AQW 11514/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Executives public procurement policy does not apply to local government authorities as they have a different framework of accountability to that which governs Departments and their arm's length bodies.

While it is not mandatory for local authorities to implement procurement policy it can be followed on a voluntary basis.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance to detail the amount of rate relief (i) provided to large supermarkets during COVID-19 pandemic; and (ii) returned to date, broken down by supermarket business owner.

(AQW 11521/17-22)

Mr Murphy:

- (i) The table below lists the amount of rate relief provided to the four largest supermarket chains in response to the pandemic for the current rating year. All businesses in Northern Ireland benefitted from a four month rates holiday for April to July 2020. Properties selling food and household goods with a retail floor space of over 500 m2 were excluded from the 12 month rates holiday.

In addition to these specific support packages, on 31st March 2020 as part of my Budget announcement, I announced a reduction in the Regional Rate for all businesses equating to an 18% reduction on the 2019/20 rate.

Ratepayer	Rate Relief Amount
Tesco	£5,449,818

Ratepayer	Rate Relief Amount
Sainsbury's	£2,089,141
Asda	£2,070,817
Lidl NI Ltd	£1,311,224

(ii) No amount of rate relief discharged to the large supermarkets above has been returned to date.

Mr Stewart asked the Minister of Finance what consideration has been given to the eligibility, under the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme, of licenced sports and social clubs required to stay closed under the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020.

(AQW 11565/17-22)

Mr Murphy: A licensed facility that operates as an independent and separate business from within a sporting premises is entitled to support through the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS). Likewise an independent and separate licensed facility operating outside of a sporting premises will be eligible to apply for support under that scheme on the same basis.

A sports club that operates, or contracts in the operation of, its own clubroom, bar or restaurant within their sporting premises – in other words, not a licensed facility operated by an independent business – are not eligible for support under the LRSS scheme.

Sports clubs are also being supported directly through the £25 million sports sustainability fund announced at the start of this month by the Communities Minister.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Finance what are the five most common pre-existing conditions involved with those dying (i) as a result of COVID-19; and (ii) with COVID-19 as a factor.

(AQW 11583/17-22)

Mr Murphy: This information is not available at this time. The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) has announced to publish an analysis of the presence, number and type of pre-existing conditions associated with Covid-19 related deaths in Northern Ireland. This information will be available at 9.30am on 23rd December 2020 at the following link: <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/monthly-deaths>

The ONS has published information on Covid-19 related deaths in England and Wales by pre-existing conditions for the period March-June 2020, which is available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsinvolvingcovid19englandandwales/latest#pre-existing-conditions-of-people-who-died-with-covid-19>

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance whether he will consider introducing a scheme similar to Scotland's Business Growth Accelerator, providing business-rate incentives for property improvements.

(AQW 11601/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Scottish Business Growth Accelerator was considered by my Department in the context of last year's Business Rates Review. One key issue to be measured in the context of incentivising improvement work is, of course, whether such work would have occurred without the provision. Since the Business Rates Review was conducted, policy making within the rate system has of necessity pivoted to the Covid-19 response, and to ensuring that the rating system does not exacerbate difficulties for businesses at this time.

As we start to emerge from the pandemic wider business rate incentives and the Business Rates Review will be revisited in that context. The Executive in the 2020-21 Budget already announced its intention to reinstate the Back in Business rates incentive for new occupiers (although this is not required at present due to the rates holiday) and I will be keen to explore other policy options both for wider changes to the system, and to secure a sustainable source of revenue for central and local government services.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance how local businesses benefit from the UK Apprenticeship Levy.

(AQW 11602/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The levy is a policy introduced by the British Government and does not result in additional funding for the Executive. Although the Executive initially received a population share of funding raised through the Levy, this was offset by a Barnett consequential on the removal of existing funding for apprenticeships in England. There is also a significant additional cost to the public sector from paying the Levy.

Whilst employers here do not directly benefit from Levy funds, they can benefit from the range of apprenticeships and funding support through participation in the Department for the Economy's ApprenticeshipNI and Higher Level Apprenticeship programmes.

These are available to all private sector employers regardless of whether or not they pay the levy and employers are encouraged to fully utilise the services provided by these programmes to support and grow their business.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Finance how many staff have been employed in the Civil Service HR Diversity and Inclusion Branch in each of the past ten years.

(AQW 11654/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Please see table below detailing how many staff have been employed in the Civil Service HR Diversity and Inclusion Branch in each of the past ten years.

It should be noted that NICSHR, a centralised HR service, was established in April 2017. Before that HR was dispersed and comprised Corporate Human Resources (CHR), the Centre for Applied Learning (CAL) and an HR function in every NICS Department. With the establishment of the centralised HR function the role and name of the diversity and inclusion branch changed.

While some equality, diversity and inclusion work may have been undertaken by HR staff in Departments and CAL, the figures set out below, up to 2017, relate to only those staff employed in the Corporate Human Resources (CHR) Equal Opportunities Unit. Full time equivalent (FTE) figures are only available since NICSHR was established in April 2017, prior to that the figures are for staff headcount.

Year	Branch	Staff *
2011	Corporate Human Resources (CHR) Equal Opportunities Unit	5
2012	CHR Equal Opportunities Unit	5
2013	CHR Equal Opportunities Unit	5
2014	CHR Equal Opportunities Unit	5
2015	CHR Equality and Diversity Branch	5
2016	CHR Equality and Diversity Branch	5
2017	NICSHR Equality and Diversity Branch	3 (FTE 2.34)
2018	NICSHR Equality and Diversity Branch	4 (FTE 3.34)
2019	NICSHR Diversity and Inclusion Branch	4 (FTE 3.52)
2020	NICSHR Diversity and Inclusion Branch	6 (FTE 5.21)

* Staffing figures can fluctuate throughout the year due to vacancies.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Finance to detail the nature and cost of all bespoke training facilitated by the Civil Service HR Diversity and Inclusion Branch carried out in connection with the Civil Service Transitioning at Work Trans Equality Policy since its introduction.

(AQW 11655/17-22)

Mr Murphy: There has been no bespoke training facilitated by the Civil Service HR Diversity and Inclusion Branch carried out in connection with the Civil Service Transitioning at Work Trans Equality Policy since its introduction.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Finance how many alleged breaches of the Civil Service Transitioning at Work Trans Equality Policy have been dealt with under the Dignity at Work Policy since its introduction.

(AQW 11656/17-22)

Mr Murphy: No breaches of the Civil Service Trans Equality Policy and Transitioning at Work Guide have been dealt with under the Dignity at Work Policy since its introduction.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Finance on how many occasions alleged unreasonable behaviour, as constituted in the Civil Service Transitioning at Work Trans Equality Policy, have been dealt with by managers since its introduction.

(AQW 11657/17-22)

Mr Murphy: No recorded or reported occasions of alleged unreasonable behaviour, as constituted in the Civil Service Trans Equality Policy and Transitioning at Work Guide have been reported to NICSHR.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Finance with whom he has consulted in defining unreasonable behaviour under section 17.3 of the Civil Service Transitioning at Work Trans Equality Policy.

(AQW 11658/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Answer previously provided in AQW 5058/17-22.

As per my previous response to you, AQW 5058/17-22, the NICS Trans Equality Policy and Transitioning at Work Guide has been developed in consultation with a range of individuals and groups. This included:

- Trade Union Side
- NICS Diversity Champions
- The NICS LGBT Staff Network
- Individual colleagues
- Stonewall
- Focus: The Identity Trust
- GenderJam
- SAIL NI, and
- TransgenderNI

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance to detail the timescales for striking the regional rate for 2021/22.[R]
(AQW 11671/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Executive will make decisions on the level of Regional Rates as part of the Budget process. I anticipate bringing a draft Budget to the Assembly in the coming weeks.

Once the Executive's Budget is settled, and the decision has been made on the regional rate poundage for 2021/22, my Department can proceed to make and lay the required Statutory Rule to legislate for the poundage, and present this for scrutiny by the Finance Committee and debate at the Assembly.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Finance what recent discussions he has had on establishing the Independent Fiscal Council.

(AQW 11714/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Officials within my Department are currently examining the options for establishing the Fiscal Council and I will consider how this is taken forward, and have any discussions that may be necessary, when that work is sufficiently advanced.

While this work had not progressed as intended earlier this year as the Department focussed on the COVID-19 response, I hope substantial progress can be made on this in the New Year.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Finance how many toilet, shower and changing facilities across the Civil Service estate have been allocated as gender neutral in each of the last five years.

(AQW 11732/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My Department has not allocated any toilet, shower or changing facilities as gender neutral in the last 5 years.

Accessible toilets and some showering and changing facilities are available for use by any member of staff.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance whether returned non domestic rates relief granted to large supermarkets will go to his Department as opposed to HM Treasury; and whether it will have to be spent in 2020/21 financial year.

(AQW 11748/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The current plan is for this money to be repaid to the Treasury for redistribution to the devolved administrations. LPS will provide the information required to Treasury on the amounts for redistribution to my Department. The timetable for redistribution has yet to be agreed; therefore, it is not yet known if the money will have to be spent in the 2020/21 financial year.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Finance what action he is taking to obtain further clarification regarding the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), including the distribution and management of funding.

(AQW 11785/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Thank you for your question on 9th December. I have written to the British Treasury on multiple occasions regarding the lack of information available for SPF.

Most recently, 9th December, I have written to Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (CDL) stating my disappointment in the outcome of the spending review. A pilot programme, a precursor for SPF, valued at a total of £220 million was announced as part of the SR20 with a significant lack of clarity on allocations or scope. The "Heads of Terms" for SPF released alongside the Spending Review indicate that its full introduction will not take place until next spring and will be subject to the 21/22 spending review. This creates a risk of a significant delay representing a potential loss of approximately £70m of spending power for us. This is wholly unacceptable.

I have asked that our funding for next year and beyond is fully guaranteed and that, as the delivery structures are developed, our devolved responsibilities are fully acknowledged and respected.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Finance to outline the work his Department is carrying out in relation to safety and security measures at Belfast International Airport, Belfast City Airport and the City of Derry Airport.

(AQO 1350/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As part of the Tourism Recovery Steering Group, led by the Economy Minister, my Department had been looking at the potential for safety and security support measures for all three airports. The primary purpose of this work was to understand how we could further support our local airports during this difficult time.

We have been able to make really significant progress recently, with the announcement last month of an additional £1.23m of support to the City of Derry Airport, through to March 2021.

And in relation to the two Belfast airports, I announced last week the provision of up to £7.8m of further support to Belfast International and Belfast City Airports through to March 2021.

These support packages, in tandem with the support provided earlier this year, will help support our airports through the most difficult period of the Covid-19 crisis.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the budget for the European Union PEACE PLUS programme. (AQO 1352/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The PEACE PLUS programme currently has a total value of approximately €650m based on original commitments made, this may increase.

The Irish government has proposed adding some €86m to this amount. I have written to the British Government requesting it meets the additional funding proposals by the Irish Government in line with the Withdrawal Agreement. This would require an additional allocation from them of €263m (£235m). With matched funding this would bring the total value of the Programme to around €1 billion.

My officials remain in regular contact with counterparts in London, Dublin and Brussels and negotiations will continue in order to finalise the funding commitments to ascertain an overall programme value as soon as possible.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Finance how much unallocated COVID-19 funding is currently being held by his Department. (AQO 1359/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Following my announcement of £7.8 million of support for airports there is £244.2 million of funding held centrally in 2020-21 both for specific sectoral support and as a reserve.

These amounts are:

- £0.4m for ferry operators;
- £6 million for taxis, buses and coaches;
- £60 million for Department for the Economy-led schemes;
- £150 million for consideration of longer-term rate support;
- £27.6 million in Reserve

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister of Finance for an update on policy in relation to Changing Places toilets. (AQO 1357/17-22)

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, 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 relevant expertise from representative organisations and industry.

Draft proposals could be agreed and ready for wider consultation sometime in the spring of 2021.

Work is also progressing to install a Changing Places Toilet on the Stormont Estate. This will be near to the children's playpark and is due for completion in early 2021.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance for his assessment of the Chancellor's announcement of a public sector pay freeze. (AQO 1356/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Public sector workers have played a vital role in delivering public services throughout the pandemic. Therefore I was hugely disappointed that the Chancellor announced that he was freezing the pay of many hard working public sector employees outside of those in the health service in 2021/22.

I understand that the Treasury will not be seeking to impose this pay freeze on those workforces that the Executive has direct responsibility for. However at the same time, the Treasury has also effectively frozen our resource budget, so any pay increases would inevitably have an impact on the spending on other vital public services. Furthermore, the pay of many staff groups here are linked to pay processes in Britain where the freeze is being imposed by the Chancellor. So clearly this is a matter that the whole Executive will need to carefully consider in the time ahead.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance to outline the impact on public spending in Northern Ireland of the year-on-year change to the core DEL budget for 2021-22 arising from the UK Spending Review.

(AQO 1358/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Spending Review outcome for the Executive falls short of what we might have anticipated pre-COVID.

It essentially represents a stand still position in cash terms. With the additional resource DEL Barnett additions being largely offset by the loss of the additional £350 million of NDNA funding we had received in 2020-21, which while provided for one year only was used to fund recurrent pressures in departments.

There is a slight increase in conventional Capital DEL core funding of £98.3 million while the Financial Transactions Capital budget has reduced to £73.6 million

Details of departmental budget allocations will be set out as part of the draft Budget.

Department of Health

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health (i) how many people are on the annual screening scheme for those who have already had a diagnosis, surgery and treatment for breast cancer; and (ii) what is the expected date for such screenings to take place.

(AQW 5652/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): There are approximately 7,000 patients on the post diagnosis and treatment annual mammography screening scheme across all five Health and Social Care Trusts.

Patients who were previously on a treatment pathway are called for mammogram when their annual appointment is due. The service was temporarily suspended during April 2020 due to COVID-19 and was fully resumed from early May in all five Trusts. Currently there is no backlog or delay in annual mammography reported by the Trusts.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health what changes have been made in haematology wards in each Health and Social Care Trust in response to the COVID-19 outbreak in the haematology ward in Craigavon Area Hospital.

(AQW 6877/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Public Health Agency issued a learning letter to all Health and Social Care Trusts on 30 October with advice in four areas based on immediate learning from outbreaks in health care facilities. In summary this covered:

- (i) Environmental and Communicable Disease Management - This requires Trusts, along with implementing Infection Prevention Control practices, to monitor local trends and to track and trace contacts in order to prevent transmission. Trusts are required to implement the regional testing strategy and to provide assurance of the mechanisms they have in place for surveillance and infection prevention control outbreak management.
- (ii) Infection Prevention and Control Practice - This requires maintaining the enhanced cleaning of all environments that is already in place, footfall management, effective signage, supporting adherence to hand hygiene guidance and effective use of appropriate PPE across all clinical, non-clinical and communal areas. This includes senior leadership monitoring (walk arounds) at Assistant Director/Senior Infection Prevention Control Nurse level alongside IPC audits.
- (iii) Social distancing - This involves ensuring the spread and transmission of COVID-19 is reduced where possible by ensuring 2-metre spacing across health care services, and also putting in place all COVID secure mitigations where 2 metres cannot be maintained.
- (iv) Supporting staff and visitors - This involves creating support systems which enable staff, patients and visitors to maintain the highest standard of COVID secure behaviours.

The Trusts provided assurances to the PHA on all of the above matters. In addition a pilot programme has been established for regular staff testing in the haematology unit in one trust, the findings from which will inform the testing policy of staff across all haematology units.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Health to detail his plans to ensure that people with pancreatic cancer are not left waiting for essential treatment.

(AQW 7554/17-22)

Mr Swann: In June of this year I 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 threat of COVID-19. I published a policy statement on 7 October 2020 setting out my Department's approach to Rebuilding and Stabilisation of Cancer Services, including stabilisation plans for oncology and haematology, and cancer services rebuild plans. Details are available on my Department's website.

As we continue to stabilise and rebuild services in these challenging circumstances it is important to note that all patients are treated according to clinical priority, as determined by specialist clinicians. One of my primary aims is to ensure the continued delivery of high quality cancer services, provided of course that it is safe to do so.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health to detail progress on the phased re-opening of family planning clinics in each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 7819/17-22)

Mr Swann: The following is the latest position in each of the Trusts:

Southern Health and Social Care Trust

- Telephone triage is being carried out for patients experiencing issues with long-acting reversible contraception (LARC) and face to face appointments are allocated as necessary.
- Telephone assessments are being carried out for patients requesting new or replacement LARC and require enhanced access to contraception, with face to face appointments then allocated.
- Telephone consultations are being carried out for patients requesting oral contraception and supplies then posted out.
- Telephone consultations are being carried out for patients requesting emergency contraception and arrangements made for either EHC or CIUD following this.
- Following the second COVID-19 surge and staff redeployment face to face appointments have been consolidated to Portadown Health Centre.

Northern Health and Social Care Trust

- Family Planning Services were centralised to the Braid Valley Sexual Health hub during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown phase and services provided virtually in the first instance.
- In line with the Trust Rebuilding Plan, the Family Planning Service has developed a phased re-opening programme from 1 October 2020, with one main clinic in each area across the Trust.

Western Health and Social Care Trust

- Western Trust Family Planning Clinics have remained open throughout the COVID-19 pandemic with clinicians operating a system of telephone triage, with urgent referrals being offered a face to face contact in the Derry/Londonderry clinic.
- Additional clinics, including Saturday Clinics, have taken place both in Derry/Londonderry and Omagh to address the waiting list for LARC and current waiting times are approximately 2-3 weeks.

South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust

- From 19 October 2020, the Southern Trust has offered telephone assessment, support and postage of medication.
- Patients can receive medication via post or have an appointment made for implants/coils. These booked appointments are available on Tuesdays and Wednesdays in Bangor and Thursdays in Lisburn with plans to commence the service in the Downe in December.
- The Trust commenced Saturday waiting list coil clinics at the Ulster Hospital from 24 October 2020 for four weeks to clear the majority of the waiting list.
- Clinics will be increased subject to staff availability.

Belfast Health and Social Care Trust

- Belfast Trust continued to provide contraceptive advice via telemedicine and emergency contraception and urgent procedures throughout initial lockdown from College Street and Carlisle Centre clinics.
- The Trust provided services to South Eastern Trust patients up until 19 October 2020.
- From July several routine LARC clinics are running daily from College Street and Carlisle Centre.
- The Trust is currently providing more LARC services than before the pandemic to meet unprecedented demand.
- Telemedicine continues for contraceptive pill posting/advice and counselling prior to LARC procedures.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health (i) for his assessment of the recent figures from the Northern Health and Social Care Trust regarding the 14-day waiting time targets for patients to see a breast cancer specialist following an urgent referral for suspected cancer; (ii) to detail the reasons for these figures; and (iii) how he plans to improve these waiting times.

(AQW 8333/17-22)

Mr Swann: Whilst I was disappointed by the most recently published cancer waiting time figures (April-June 2020) regarding the 14-day target for breast cancer assessment in the Northern Trust, I note that all patients diagnosed with breast cancer had their surgery in a timely fashion and within the 31-day treatment target. The delay in providing timely assessment within the 14-day target was mainly due to the initial impact of hygiene and social distancing restrictions and the need to divert resources to meet the challenge of COVID-19. The breast assessment service has been stabilised within the Trust with the appointment of an additional breast surgeon in September 2020.

Furthermore, in June of this year I 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 threat of COVID-19. I published a policy statement on 7 October 2020 setting out my Department's approach to Rebuilding and Stabilisation of Cancer Services, including stabilisation plans for oncology and haematology, and cancer services rebuild plans. Details are available on my Department's website.

As we continue to stabilise and rebuild services in these challenging circumstances it is important to note that all patients are treated according to clinical priority, as determined by specialist clinicians. One of my primary aims is to ensure the continued delivery of high quality cancer services, provided of course that it is safe to do so.

Mr M Bradley asked the Minister of Health what plans are there for the urgent restoration of pancreatic cancer services across all Health and Social Care Trusts.
(AQW 8433/17-22)

Mr Swann: In June of this year I 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 threat of COVID-19. I published a policy statement on 7 October 2020 setting out my Department's approach to Rebuilding and Stabilisation of Cancer Services, including stabilisation plans for oncology and haematology, and cancer services rebuild plans. Details are available on my Department's website.

As we continue to stabilise and rebuild services in these challenging circumstances it is important to note that all patients are treated according to clinical priority, as determined by specialist clinicians. One of my primary aims is to ensure the continued delivery of high quality cancer services, provided of course that it is safe to do so.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health what is the quantified impact of the focus on COVID-19 on the number of cancer diagnoses, since March 2020.
(AQW 8587/17-22)

Mr Swann: As I made clear when my Department published the first mythbuster article on 15 November 2020, all patients are treated according to clinical priority, as determined by specialist clinicians. Hospitals do their best to care for everyone, and that includes treating the sickest quickest. No one condition is prioritised over another.

The NI Cancer Registry (NICR) reports that for the period from 1 March to 10 October 2020, the number of patients with first pathology samples indicating cancer was 22% lower than the annual average in 2017-2019:

<https://www.qub.ac.uk/research-centres/nicr/FileStore/PDF/Covid19/Filetoupload,1005667,en.pdf>

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 threat of COVID-19. One of my primary aims is to ensure the continued delivery of high quality cancer services, provided of course that it is safe to do so.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health whether any business cases have been considered for specialist Huntington's disease nurse specialists, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust, in each of the last seven years.
(AQW 9711/17-22)

Mr Swann: There is a strong commitment to providing nursing support across all neurological conditions, including Huntington's disease (HD). Whilst no specific business case has been brought forward for HD nurse specialists, it is recognised that further investment will be required in a range of neurological nurse specialist posts. Work is therefore underway, as part of the Regional Review of Neurology Services, to develop a staffing model for nursing that will meet the needs of the whole service.

Currently Belfast Health and Social Care Trust is commissioned to provide a specialist advice and support service to HD patients across Northern Ireland, working with the other Trusts to ensure people with HD have equitable access to support irrespective of where they live. Two HD dedicated posts are funded, although one post is being re-advertised. An additional Care Advisor has also been funded, to work as part of a wider neurology multi-disciplinary team, in providing support and care coordination to HD patients.

As part of the Regional Review of Neurology Services, a specific workstream has been established to determine how care pathways for those with long term neurological conditions, including HD can be improved. A number of consultant neurologists on the Review team are also developing a HD pathway for Northern Ireland based on best practice and international evidence.

Unfortunately, work on the Review has been paused in the short term to redirect resources to the COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst this was unavoidable, I am acutely aware that neurology services are in need of reform and will give careful consideration as to how best we can move forward with the Review as soon as it is feasible to do so.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of services to treat and support those with Huntington's disease, including the provision of specialist nurses, across all Health and Social Care Trusts.

(AQW 9712/17-22)

Mr Swann: There is a strong commitment to providing nursing support across all neurological conditions, including Huntington's disease (HD). Whilst no specific business case has been brought forward for HD nurse specialists, it is recognised that further investment will be required in a range of neurological nurse specialist posts. Work is therefore underway, as part of the Regional Review of Neurology Services, to develop a staffing model for nursing that will meet the needs of the whole service.

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Unfortunately, work on the Review has been paused in the short term to redirect resources to the COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst this was unavoidable, I am acutely aware that neurology services are in need of reform and will give careful consideration as to how best we can move forward with the Review as soon as it is feasible to do so.

Ms Ennis asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 8730/17-22, how many deaths of a baby or child were eligible to be considered for a hospital-consented post-mortem, for each year since 2016.

(AQW 9753/17-22)

Mr Swann: All parents who suffer a pregnancy loss and may benefit from a perinatal post mortem are offered access to the paediatric pathology service. However the number of people who would be eligible to access a perinatal post mortem is not retrospectively available from Health and Social Care information systems and therefore cannot be provided.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health, given the time-sensitive nature of the intervention, what consideration he has given to outsourcing fertility treatments to private facilities.

(AQW 9790/17-22)

Mr Swann: The reopening of the Regional Fertility Centre from 10 August 2020 was one of my service rebuilding priorities following the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is recognised that the current COVID-19 restrictions have placed limitations on the services currently offered; however, the Belfast Trust reviews the situation fortnightly to ensure that outpatient and treatment services are maintained, and that these can be provided safely. The Health and Social Care Board, which commissions the regional fertility service, has not given any consideration to outsourcing fertility treatments from private hospitals at this time.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Health to detail the status of the use of the LINX system in Health and Social Care for the treatment of chronic reflux.

(AQW 9807/17-22)

Mr Swann: This procedure is currently not available in Northern Ireland. As with all services which are not routinely commissioned, the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) has advised that it will consider individual funding requests for treatment outside Northern Ireland through the Extra Contractual Referral (ECR) process.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail the factors considered by the Chief Medical Officer to continue the paused status of shielding advice for those vulnerable to COVID-19.

(AQW 9810/17-22)

Mr Swann: Following a review and assessment of the approach to the risks presented by COVID-19, a statement was issued by the Chief Medical Officer on 23 October which advised that the resumption of shielding arrangements was not considered necessary and shielding would remain paused.

This decision reflected the context of a greater understanding of COVID-19 and its clinical outcomes and how to prevent its transmission, as well as an 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 decision to retain the pause in shielding is kept under continual review. A CEV Cell has been established in my Department which meets regularly to review the advice in relation to clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV) people. The most recent meetings were held on 19 November and 1 December.

The Cell considers a range of evidence before making recommendations on the advice to clinically extremely vulnerable people, including information on the spread of the virus in Northern Ireland, levels of hospital and community infection, and the capacity of hospitals to adequately care for CEV people should they fall ill to COVID-19. In addition, Cell members take account of the restrictions that are in place across Northern Ireland and advice to clinically extremely vulnerable people that is in effect across the rest of the UK.

Following their consideration of the evidence, the CEV cell has concluded that the general guidance that is in place in relation to household mixing, travel, wearing of face coverings and hand hygiene, and the restrictions agreed by the Executive which came into force on 27 November, mean that clinically extremely vulnerable people should be protected from exposure to COVID-19 across a wide range of settings. On this basis, the Cell recommend that advice to those who are clinically extremely vulnerable should not change at the current time.

Advice for clinically extremely vulnerable people will be reviewed again in line with the wider review of restrictions, which are due to end on 11 December. This review will also likely encompass advice to CEV people covering the Christmas period.

If in the future the position for people who are clinically extremely vulnerable changes, further guidance will be issued and full details of any changes to advice will be made available on the NIDirect website.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health what consideration he has given to outsourcing fertility treatments to private facilities, given the time sensitive nature of such treatments, that would still be offered through the Health Service.
(AQW 9869/17-22)

Mr Swann: The reopening of the Regional Fertility Centre from 10 August 2020 was one of my service rebuilding priorities following the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is recognised that the current COVID-19 restrictions have placed limitations on the services currently offered; however, the Belfast Trust reviews the situation fortnightly to ensure that outpatient and treatment services are maintained, and that these can be provided safely. The Health and Social Care Board, which commissions the regional fertility service, has not given any consideration to outsourcing fertility treatments from private hospitals at this time.

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 whether additional funds have been allocated to fertility treatments to provide three full cycles of treatment.
(AQW 9870/17-22)

Mr Swann: I announced, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, my plans to establish a Project Board to take forward the New Decade, New Approach commitment to increasing the number of publicly-funded IVF cycles. A Project Board has been established to bring forward options to deliver this commitment and determine the associated investment requirement, which will be subject to business case approval. Funds have therefore not been allocated at this stage. Progress has unfortunately been temporarily delayed due to the ongoing COVID-19 response, however I have informed officials that I expect to see significant movement on this important issue once the immediate pressures subside.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health whether he will reopen the Minor Injuries Unit in Armagh city.
(AQW 9912/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Southern Health and Social Care Trust has advised that there are no plans to reopen the Minor Injuries Unit in Armagh. Minor injuries services are available at South Tyrone Hospital, Craigavon Area Hospital and Daisy Hill Hospital.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health to detail his plans to reduce ambulance waiting times.
(AQW 9984/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department's COVID-19 Urgent & Emergency Care Action Plan, 'No More Silos', recognises that long ambulance waiting times are one of the symptoms of wider pressures across both primary and secondary care.

Two key actions within this plan, which takes a whole system approach to the way in which we deliver urgent and emergency care services, aim to have an immediate impact on ambulance waiting times: the development of ambulance arrival and handover zones outside emergency departments, and improving patient flow through hospitals.

In longer term, increasing demand for ambulance services is outstripping capacity and, although the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) is continuing to recruit and train as many additional staff as possible within available resources, significant further investment will be required to enable an effective response to present and future demand.

My Department is working with NIAS to ensure the Strategic Outline Case for a new Clinical Response Model meets public spending requirements. The progression of this programme will be dependent on value for money and affordability.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Health whether he is considering outsourcing fertility treatments to private facilities, in particular for older recipients.

(AQW 10029/17-22)

Mr Swann: The reopening of the Regional Fertility Centre from 10 August 2020 was one of my service rebuilding priorities following the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is recognised that the current COVID-19 restrictions have placed limitations on the services currently offered; however, the Belfast Trust reviews the situation fortnightly to ensure that outpatient and treatment services are maintained, and that these can be provided safely. The Health and Social Care Board, which commissions the regional fertility service, has not given any consideration to outsourcing fertility treatments from private hospitals at this time.

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 Gildernew asked the Minister of Health what steps he has taken to train and recruit additional laboratory staff for the local Pillar 1 testing capacity.

(AQW 10106/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department is considering bids for the funding requirements associated with the delivery of COVID-19 testing, including additional staffing. All Trusts and the Northern Ireland Blood Transfusion Service have in the meantime provided the required additional capacity to meet Pillar 1 testing requirements through temporary redeployment of other suitably qualified staff, and where necessary agency staff. All necessary additional training has been provided as required to ensure staff are able to undertake their roles in testing.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health to detail his plans to reduce ambulance waiting times.

(AQW 10139/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department's COVID-19 Urgent & Emergency Care Action Plan, 'No More Silos', recognises that long ambulance waiting times are one of the symptoms of wider pressures across both primary and secondary care.

Two key actions within this plan, which takes a whole system approach to the way in which we deliver urgent and emergency care services, aim to have an immediate impact on ambulance waiting times: the development of ambulance arrival and handover zones outside emergency departments, and improving patient flow through hospitals.

In longer term, increasing demand for ambulance services is outstripping capacity and, although the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) is continuing to recruit and train as many additional staff as possible within available resources, significant further investment will be required to enable an effective response to present and future demand.

My Department is working with NIAS to ensure the Strategic Outline Case for a new Clinical Response Model meets public spending requirements. The progression of this programme will be dependent on value for money and affordability.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health whether there are any plans to improve the delivery of ambulance services in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust by increasing staffing levels and capital works at hospital sites.

(AQW 10224/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) is continuing to recruit and train as many additional staff as possible within available resources. NIAS manages services on a regional basis and any additional capacity will be deployed as required across all divisions including the Northern Health and Social Care Trust.

Significant further investment will be required to enable an effective response to present and future demand. My Department is working with NIAS to ensure the Strategic Outline Case for a new Clinical Response Model meets public spending requirements in terms of value for money and affordability.

With regard to hospital sites, my Department's COVID-19 Urgent and Emergency Care "No More Silos" Action Plan contains a specific action for all Trusts to put in place arrangements for physical space and resource to facilitate the assessment and triage of patients arriving at hospital by ambulance, with the aim of improving handover and turnaround times.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health for an update on the review into shielding advice.

(AQW 10235/17-22)

Mr Swann: Following a review and assessment of the approach to the risks presented by COVID-19, a statement was issued by the Chief Medical Officer on 23 October which advised that the resumption of shielding arrangements was not considered necessary and shielding would remain paused.

This decision reflected the context of a greater understanding of COVID-19 and its clinical outcomes and how to prevent its transmission, as well as an 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 decision to retain the pause in shielding is kept under continual review. A CEV Cell has been established in my Department which meets regularly to review the advice in relation to clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV) people. The most recent meetings were held on 19 November and 1 December.

The Cell considers a range of evidence before making recommendations on the advice to clinically extremely vulnerable people, including information on the spread of the virus in Northern Ireland, levels of hospital and community infection, and the capacity of hospitals to adequately care for CEV people should they fall ill to COVID-19. In addition, Cell members take account of the restrictions that are in place across Northern Ireland and advice to clinically extremely vulnerable people that is in effect across the rest of the UK.

Following their consideration of the evidence, the CEV cell has concluded that the general guidance that is in place in relation to household mixing, travel, wearing of face coverings and hand hygiene, and the restrictions agreed by the Executive which came into force on 27 November, mean that clinically extremely vulnerable people should be protected from exposure to COVID-19 across a wide range of settings. On this basis, the Cell recommend that advice to those who are clinically extremely vulnerable should not change at the current time.

Advice for clinically extremely vulnerable people will be reviewed again in line with the wider review of restrictions, which are due to end on 11 December. This review will also likely encompass advice to CEV people covering the Christmas period.

If in the future the position for people who are clinically extremely vulnerable changes, further guidance will be issued and full details of any changes to advice will be made available on the NIDirect website.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Health how many unpaid family or friend carers there are; and to detail the criteria used to add, update and maintain a register of carers.

(AQW 10287/17-22)

Mr Swann: There are currently 8,087 carers listed on the HSC Trusts' Carer Registers as follows:

HSC Trust	
Belfast	1,360
Northern	1,979
Western	1,791
Southern	885
South Eastern	2,072
Total:	8,087

In respect of eligibility for inclusion in the Registers, all that the HSC Trusts require is that a person needs to undertake an unpaid caring role within the Trust's area.

The Registers are maintained by the Trusts' Carer Co-ordinators. Carers are often referred to the Co-ordinators by GPs, other health professionals, or community and voluntary groups. Carers can also self-identify and ask to join the register.

HSC Trusts regularly update their registers, often on a daily basis. Some Trusts undertake formal reviews of their registers periodically when carers are asked if they wish to remain on the register.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail the structure and membership of the regional scrutiny committee for Individual Funding Requests, including any existing vacancies.

(AQW 10343/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Regional Scrutiny Committee (RSC) is hosted within the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) and has been operational since June 2020. It is chaired by Dr Martin Eatock, Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, with the role of deputy chair rotating amongst members of the RSC every three months. RSC membership comprises 11 clinicians from five Health and Social Care Trusts, plus one consultant from the Public Health Agency, who meet weekly and cover a range of specialities. It is supported by the Individual Funding Request secretariat within the HSCB's National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE)/RSC commissioning team. There are currently no vacancies.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the use of electroconvulsive therapy in health services; and how many times it has been used since 2015.

(AQW 10365/17-22)

Mr Swann: Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT) remains an important treatment intervention for patients who do not readily respond to other mainstream treatments.

The number of times it has been used since 2015 is provided in the table below.

Year	15/16	16/17	17/18	18/19	19/20	20/21
Number of treatments	121	123	112	59	49	46

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health to detail the percentage of COVID-19 cases within (i) pre-schools; (ii) primary schools; and (iii) post-primary schools.

(AQW 10379/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the percentage of COVID-19 cases within pre-school, primary and secondary schools is not available. However, the Public Health Agency currently provides a weekly summary of COVID incidents in schools at the link below:

<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications/coronavirus-bulletin>

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health what COVID-19 treatment-related improvements have been made to hospital intensive care units since March 2020, in terms of procedure, staffing and medical equipment procurement and provision.

(AQW 10404/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Critical Care Network NI (CCANNI) has worked collaboratively with HSC Trusts to identify the necessary resources to meet the increased demand for critical care services as a result of COVID-19. This has included estimating and procuring the necessary infrastructure, staffing and equipment and was achieved through the development of COVID-19 specific Surge Plans.

A number of procedures have been introduced to help manage the increase in ICU patients, including the sharing of regional situation reports and the development of a regional dashboard to help collate and share regional data to provide oversight and help manage pressures.

A total of over £9 million has been invested in equipment, with allocation and commissioning into receiving Trusts enabling immediate use to respond to additional demand that has presented, for both COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 critical care patients.

Significant redeployment and training of staff from across HSC has been undertaken to ensure the requirements of those most in need of critical care are met; however, the availability of staff has been one of the biggest challenges for HSC and has had a significant impact on other services.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health for an update on the provision of sexual health services, including development of a new strategy.

(AQW 10441/17-22)

Mr Swann: During the initial COVID-19 response, Trusts were providing a limited sexual health service; however, services provision has increased in line with the Trust Rebuilding Plans, but remains subject to the prevailing COVID-19 conditions. This includes a mixture of virtual and face to face appointments where appropriate. I have no immediate plans to bring forward a new sexual Health Strategy but this will be kept under review.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Health what work has been undertaken to increase cover at Strabane Out of Hours.

(AQW 10454/17-22)

Mr Swann: The provision of the GP OOHs service in Strabane is the responsibility of Western Urgent Care (WUC), and, along with all GP OOH providers, the GP OOH service provided by WUC faces considerable challenges due to demand and difficulties in filling GP shifts. The difficulties with securing GPs to fill shifts is being exacerbated by the demands placed upon GPs during in-hours services and the Covid-19 pandemic, which impact upon their ability to work during the out of hours period.

Whilst the service has faced on-going difficulties in securing GPs to fill shifts it has continued to skill-mix the workforce to ensure that patients' urgent clinical needs can be met by the most appropriate healthcare professional.

The majority of patients who contact the Out of Hours Service do not need to be clinically triaged by nor seen face-to-face by a GP. Many patients can be effectively clinically triaged by a Nurse Advisor, Prescribing Pharmacist, Paramedic Practitioner or Nurse Practitioner. Over the past few years WUC has developed its workforce to include these roles in order to ensure that the needs of patients can be met.

Patients can receive clinical advice from a Nurse, have a prescription confirmed by a Pharmacist or be seen in their home by a Paramedic Practitioner. This means that the GPs and Nurse Practitioners will be available to see clinically urgent patients face-to-face, should it be necessary.

Due to the current Covid-19 situation WUC has also implemented a number of steps to deliver urgent care in alternative ways to patients, such as the use of video consultations and arranging for prescriptions to be sent to the patient's local pharmacy.

Patients who have an urgent clinical need will still be prioritised and offered a face-to-face appointment.

In the event that WUC remains unable to book GPs or Nurse Practitioners to work at a particular OOH base and several patients need to be seen in that area, WUC will arrange for one from another base to attend and undertake blocked bookings for a period.

The GP can also undertake any home visits needed for patients in that area before returning to their original clinic base.

Alternatively, a patient can be offered an appointment at a base where there is a GP or an appointment in their local base with the GP who is working the next booked shift in that local base.

WUC continues to work with GPs and the Health and Social Care Board to look at options to increase the number of shifts booked across all its clinical bases.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health to detail the total new diagnoses of sexually transmitted infections in Northern Ireland, broken down by Trust area, for each of the previous five years.

(AQW 10601/17-22)

Mr Swann: The information requested on the diagnoses of Sexually Transmitted Infections in Northern Ireland has been provided in tabulated form below. As requested, the information has been broken down by Health and Social Care Trust and for the time period 2015/6-2019/20.

Sexually Transmitted Infection Related¹ Admissions², 2015/16-2019/20

HSC Trusts	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Belfast	57	34	29	42	58
Northern	19	19	13	28	20
South Eastern	31	28	21	24	29
Southern	25	20	21	17	19
Western	24	18	11	15	14
Total	156	119	95	126	140

Source: Hospital Inpatient System, Hospital Information Branch, Information & Analysis Directorate, Department of Health, NI.

1 The following ICD-10 codes were used to denote a diagnosis of Sexually Transmitted Infection in each of the 17 diagnostic fields:

A50 Congenital syphilis

A51 Early syphilis

A52 Late syphilis

A53 Other and unspecified syphilis

A54 Gonococcal infection

A55 Chlamydial lymphogranuloma (venereum)

A56 Other sexually transmitted chlamydial diseases

A57 Chancroid

A58 Granuloma inguinal

A59 Trichomoniasis

A60 Anogenital herpesviral [herpes simplex] infections

A63 Other predominantly sexually transmitted diseases, not elsewhere classified

A64 Unspecified sexually transmitted disease

A74 Other diseases caused by chlamydia

B20 Human immunodeficiency virus [HIV] disease resulting in infectious and parasitic diseases

B21 Human immunodeficiency virus [HIV] disease resulting in malignant neoplasms

B22 Human immunodeficiency virus [HIV] disease resulting in other specified diseases

B23 Human immunodeficiency virus [HIV] disease resulting in other conditions

B24 Unspecified human immunodeficiency virus [HIV] disease

B85.2 Pediculosis, unspecified

B85.3 Phthiriasis

B85.4 Mixed pediculosis and phthiriasis

B86 Scabies

O98.1 Syphilis complicating pregnancy, childbirth and the puerperium

O98.2 Gonorrhoea complicating pregnancy, childbirth and the puerperium

O98.3 Other infections with a predominantly sexual mode of transmission complicating pregnancy, childbirth and the puerperium

Z20.2 Contact with and exposure to infections with a predominantly sexual mode of transmission

Z20.6 Contact with and exposure to human immunodeficiency virus [HIV]

Z21 Asymptomatic human immunodeficiency virus [HIV] infection status

Z22.4 Carrier of infections with a predominantly sexual mode of transmission

- 2 Figures do not include admissions to mental health or learning disability programmes of care which account for less than 1% of all hospital admissions. Admissions are approximated through deaths and discharges. These figures do not denote individuals

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Health (i) why his Department has not ensured the commissioning of abortion services in Northern Ireland in line with the legislative framework; and (ii) whether he will provide a timeline of when these services will be progressed.

(AQW 10646/17-22)

Mr Swann: Initial consideration of a commissioning specification was paused due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In April of this year, I sought Executive agreement, as required by the Ministerial Code when an issue is cross cutting and controversial, to introduce an emergency early medical abortion service for the duration of the pandemic.

The Executive has yet to agree my proposal. I am therefore unable to give a timescale for the introduction of services.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Health how much of the additional £500,000 that was given to Health and Social Care Trusts for flexible payments to carers has been allocated, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust and care directorate.

(AQW 10806/17-22)

Mr Swann: Of the £500k allocated to the Health and Social Care Trusts in April, £178k has been spent during the period April to September 2020. Figures for the 3rd quarter will be available in January 2021. A breakdown of spending by each HSC Trust is provided below:

HSC Trust	Care Directorate	Direct Payment Spend £'000 Apr-Sept 2020	Trust Total
Belfast	-	0*	0
Northern	-	0**	0
South Eastern	Adult Learning Disability and Mental Health	30	30
Southern	Children's & Young People's Services	21	27
	Older People & Primary Care	5	
	Mental Health & Disability	1	
Western	Children's Services	33	121
	Learning Disability	63	
	Physical Disability	4	
	Primary Care and Older People	21	
Total		178	178

* Belfast Trust spent £6,000 which was recovered from existing resources.

** Northern Trust costs are marginal and remain within the Trust's overall Direct Payment budget.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister of Health what proportion of staff routinely working in the 3 theatres at Omagh Hospital and Primary Care Complex have been redeployed to work on COVID-19 wards.

(AQW 10855/17-22)

Mr Swann: Theatres in Omagh Hospital are currently operational with no staff redeployed to COVID-19 wards.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health to detail the membership of the project board taking forward the commitment to increasing the number of publicly-funded IVF cycles.

(AQW 10887/17-22)

Mr Swann: Membership of the Project Board to take forward the New Decade New Approach commitment to increase the number of publicly-funded IVF cycles includes representatives from my Department, the Health and Social Care Board, the Public Health Agency, the Belfast Trust and the Regional Fertility Centre.

Progress on this important issue has unfortunately been temporarily delayed due to the ongoing COVID-19 response. This is an issue that I have informed officials I expect to see significant movement on once the immediate pressures subside.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health what extra help his Department is putting in place for those suffering from mental health issues due to the continuing COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 11019/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am aware of the impact the pandemic has had on those suffering from mental health issues. 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 and I aim to start a public consultation on a draft strategy before the end of the year.

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 Easton asked the Minister of Health why patients who do not have COVID-19 are continuing to be admitted to COVID-19 wards in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 11022/17-22)

Mr Swann: The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust has advised that, in line with the current regional testing policy, all elective and non-elective patients who require admission to hospital are tested for COVID-19. This includes patients who are asymptomatic. Admission may therefore take place before a patient's COVID-19 swab result is known, and may include cohorting patients as possible COVID cases who need to be admitted whilst they await a test result. Any patient who is symptomatic of COVID-19 is admitted to a single-occupancy room in a ward where many of the patients have laboratory-confirmed COVID-19. In addition to the use of single-occupancy rooms, infection prevention and control practices are in place in every ward to minimise the risk of cross infection. If a patient's swab is later returned as negative, and clinicians consider that they do not have COVID-19, the patient is transferred to another ward as soon as possible.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health for an update on the provision of out of hours GP services in Strabane town.

(AQW 11126/17-22)

Mr Swann: The provision of the GP OOHs service in Strabane is the responsibility of Western Urgent Care (WUC), and, along with all GP OOH providers, the GP OOH service provided by WUC faces considerable challenges due to demand and difficulties in filling GP shifts. The difficulties with securing GPs to fill shifts is being exacerbated by the demands placed upon

GPs during in-hours services and the Covid-19 pandemic, which impact upon their ability to work during the out of hours period.

Whilst the service has faced on-going difficulties in securing GPs to fill shifts it has continued to skill-mix the workforce to ensure that patients' urgent clinical needs can be met by the most appropriate healthcare professional.

The majority of patients who contact the Out of Hours Service do not need to be clinically triaged by nor seen face-to-face by a GP. Many patients can be effectively clinically triaged by a Nurse Advisor, Prescribing Pharmacist, Paramedic Practitioner or Nurse Practitioner. Over the past few years WUC has developed its workforce to include these roles in order to ensure that the needs of patients can be met.

Patients can receive clinical advice from a Nurse, have a prescription confirmed by a Pharmacist or be seen in their home by a Paramedic Practitioner. This means that the GPs and Nurse Practitioners will be available to see clinically urgent patients face-to-face, should it be necessary.

Due to the current Covid-19 situation WUC has also implemented a number of steps to deliver urgent care in alternative ways to patients, such as the use of video consultations and arranging for prescriptions to be sent to the patient's local pharmacy.

Patients who have an urgent clinical need will still be prioritised and offered a face-to-face appointment.

In the event that WUC remains unable to book GPs or Nurse Practitioners to work at a particular OOH base and several patients need to be seen in that area, WUC will arrange for one from another base to attend and undertake blocked bookings for a period.

The GP can also undertake any home visits needed for patients in that area before returning to their original clinic base.

Alternatively, a patient can be offered an appointment at a base where there is a GP or an appointment in their local base with the GP who is working the next booked shift in that local base.

WUC continues to work with GPs and the Health and Social Care Board to look at options to increase the number of shifts booked across all its clinical bases.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health whether updated guidance will be issued to care homes on Christmas visitation. (AQW 11141/17-22)

Mr Swann: With the upcoming Christmas period we expect that there will be greater demand for relatives / friends to visit their loved ones across all care settings. However, at the present time there are no plans to change the hospital visiting guidance in Northern Ireland over the Christmas period, as the available evidence would not support such a relaxation.

While no change to the Care Home visiting guidance is planned, supplementary guidance (https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/Care-homes-Christmas-visiting_0.pdf) which provides further clarity for residents, families and care home staff on visiting both within and without the Homes over the Christmas period has been developed, and was issued on 10 December.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health whether there is an upright MRI scanner in any Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 11155/17-22)

Mr Swann: There are no upright MRI scanners in any Health and Social Care Trust Northern Ireland. This is a relatively new modality in diagnostic imaging which currently has limited scope for usage in Northern Ireland, however clinically suitable patients may be referred to independent sector providers in England through the normal extra-contractual referral processes.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 5977/17-22, for his assessment of the Human Papilloma Virus vaccination programme since 2019, including the impact caused by COVID-19. (AQW 11156/17-22)

Mr Swann: Delivery of the HPV vaccine normally given in school during the summer term was paused as, in line with UK Government COVID-19 guidance, all education settings were closed from 23rd March 2020 until 24th August 2020. In June 2020, the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) recommended that priority for delivery of the HPV immunisation programme was for all eligible children to receive at least the first dose with delivery of the 2nd dose safely extended by a number of years. In line with this, school nursing teams developed a catch up plan for all school vaccines missed due to school closures. Catch up sessions have been carried out in community settings over the summer months and continue during the 2020-21 school year.

Uptake of the 1st dose of HPV vaccine in 12-13 year old boys and girls (84.1%) and the complete course in 13-14 year old girls (82.1%) remains similar to previous years and is significantly higher than equivalent uptake in England and Wales. This is the first year that the vaccine has been offered to boys with the first dose in 12-13 years only slightly lower than for girls (~5% difference).

Latest uptake figures of the complete course (i.e. 2 doses) in year 9 children for 2019-20 has been impacted as the majority of pupils will not have received their second dose and the catch up sessions will not yet be counted in the figures. In line with JCVI recommendations, vaccine delivery has been prioritised to those who have not received a first dose. The data will be rerun in early 2021 to reflect catch-up opportunities since schools reopened in September 2020.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health to detail the arrangements for families visiting relatives in hospital, nursing and residential homes over the Christmas period.

(AQW 11175/17-22)

Mr Swann: With the upcoming Christmas period we expect that there will be greater demand for relatives / friends to visit their loved ones across all care settings. However, at the present time there are no plans to change the hospital visiting guidance in Northern Ireland over the Christmas period, as the available evidence would not support such a relaxation.

While no change to the Care Home visiting guidance is planned, supplementary guidance (https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/Care-homes-Christmas-visiting_0.pdf) which provides further clarity for residents, families and care home staff on visiting both within and without the Homes over the Christmas period has been developed, and was issued on 10 December.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health what venues in North Down have been booked for the COVID-19 vaccination roll-out.

(AQW 11177/17-22)

Mr Swann: Seven Trust lead vaccination sites have been established across NI to vaccinate all HSCWs. One of these sites is located at the Ulster Hospital, Dundonald.

In addition to this all Care Homes will be visited by Trust mobile vaccination teams to offer vaccination to the residents and staff.

The GP led element of the programme is likely to begin from early January, subject to vaccine availability. This will see GPs vaccinating their patients at their Practice or if necessary a nearby hall. GPs will be responsible for making suitable arrangements for their patients.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health how rural populations will be able to avail of COVID-19 vaccination programmes.

(AQW 11204/17-22)

Mr Swann: The majority of COVID-19 vaccinations will be given by GPs, and the arrangements are likely to be very similar to the annual seasonal influenza vaccination programme.

In addition to this Trust mobile vaccination teams will visit all care home sites in Northern Ireland to offer vaccination to all residents and staff. Seven Trust lead vaccination sites have also been established to offer vaccination to all HSCWs.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how many Health and Social Care personnel in North Down have been prepared for the roll-out of the COVID-19 vaccine.

(AQW 11266/17-22)

Mr Swann: This information is not available in the format requested.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister of Health who authorised the uncommissioned early medical abortion pathways for Health and Social Care Trusts in April 2020.

(AQW 11271/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Abortion (Northern Ireland) (No 2) Regulations 2020 allow for registered medical professionals to terminate pregnancies lawfully and state that such terminations are to be carried out on Health and Social Care premises. Early Medical Abortion (EMA) pathways were put in place by Trusts from April 2020 in line with their statutory duties and functions to provide medical care and treatment in accordance with the needs of patients and subject to the law.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister of Health to detail the cost of (i) staff time; and (ii) resources to the Northern Health and Social Care Trust of its Early Medical Abortion service from April 2020 to 2 October 2020.

(AQW 11272/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Trust is unable to identify the costs of the Early Medical Abortion service as it was funded from within the Family Planning Service and there is no means within the Trust's finance information system to separately identify these costs.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister of Health to detail the role and work that Informing Choices NI has in delivering Early Medical Abortion pathways for each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 11273/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department has not asked Informing Choices to deliver any abortion services. Information on the services provided by Informing Choices NI can be found on that organisation's website, www.informingchoicesni.org.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health how he plans to prioritise the vaccinations for those (i) in care homes; and (ii) who previously were in receipt of shielding letters.

(AQW 11293/17-22)

Mr Swann: The vaccination programme will be based on the prioritisation list as set out below by the Joint Committee of Vaccinations and Immunisations.

- 1 residents in a care home for older adults and their carers
- 2 all those 80 years of age and over and frontline health and social care workers
- 3 all those 75 years of age and over
- 4 all those 70 years of age and over and clinically extremely vulnerable individuals
- 5 all those 65 years of age and over
- 6 all individuals aged 16 years to 64 years with underlying health conditions which put them at higher risk of serious disease and mortality
- 7 all those 60 years of age and over
- 8 all those 55 years of age and over
- 9 all those 50 years of age and over

The number 1 priority is care home residents. The vaccination programme for care home residents and staff started on 8 December. Those who previously were in receipt of shielding letters will be included in priority groups 6 and 8 or by their age cohort, whichever comes first.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail the staffing levels within each of the Muckamore Abbey Hospital wards, including the average number of agency staff on shift within each ward for the month of November 2020.

(AQW 11348/17-22)

Mr Swann: The information requested is set out in the tables below.

Table 1 details the full staffing numbers per ward per shift. A twilight shift starts in the afternoon and runs through to the early hours of the morning so it bridges both the day shift and the night shift. Staff working on the wards are either registered nursing staff or Health Care Assistants (HCA).

Table 2 identifies the number of staff from an agency on each ward for the week 2-8 November. This is an average taken across the week.

It was not possible to provide this information for the entire month due to time constraints, and the level of reporting time required.

Table 1: Numbers of staff working in wards in Muckamore Abbey Hospital

Shift	Day		Twilight		Night	
	Reg	HCA	Reg	HCA	Reg	HCA
Ward 1	6	8	1	2	2	4
Ward 2	5	5	0	1	2	4
Ward 3	5	5	0	2	2	4
Ward 4	5	6	0	2	3	6
Ward 5	6	3	0	1	4	2

Table 2: Average number of agency staff working in each ward for week 2 – 8 November

Shift	Day		Twilight		Night	
	Reg	HCA	Reg	HCA	Reg	HCA
Ward 1	4	1	1	0	2	1
Ward 2	3	0	0	0	1	2
Ward 3	4	0	0	1	2	2
Ward 4	4	1	0	0	2	3
Ward 5	4	2	0	0	3	0

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health whether he will review the current COVID-19 visiting arrangements, including care homes, before Christmas 2020.

(AQW 11349/17-22)

Mr Swann: With the upcoming Christmas period we expect that there will be greater demand for relatives / friends to visit their loved ones across all care settings. However, at the present time there are no plans to change the hospital visiting guidance in Northern Ireland over the Christmas period, as the available evidence would not support such a relaxation.

While no change to the Care Home visiting guidance is planned, supplementary guidance (https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/Care-homes-Christmas-visiting_0.pdf) which provides further clarity for residents, families and care home staff on visiting both within and without the Homes over the Christmas period has been developed, and was issued on 10 December.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health to detail the powers and remit of Patricia Donnelly in relation to the roll-out of a vaccination programme.

(AQW 11381/17-22)

Mr Swann: Patricia Donnelly was appointed by the Chief Medical Officer as Head of the Covid-19 Vaccination Programme in Northern Ireland. Patricia's main role is leading the COVID-19 Vaccination Implementation Group.

The Implementation Group, includes stakeholders from across the Health and Social Care system and was established to plan and coordinate the implementation of the COVID-19 vaccination programme. The group is informed by the work of a number of work streams established to consider particular aspects of the vaccination programme.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Health whether (i) Domiciliary Care workers, employed or contracted by Health and Social Care Trusts to deliver 'at home' care packages; (ii) unpaid volunteer and family carers; and (iii) children's care homes, foster carers or kinship carers, are included within the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation's definition of key workers.

(AQW 11393/17-22)

Mr Swann: The programme in Northern Ireland will be based on five phases with all care home residents & staff, all Health and Social Care workers (including domiciliary care workers) and all those aged 80 years of age and older in the first phase. This will cover around 200k individuals and is likely to run from Mid-Dec to Jan/mid-Feb 2021.

JCVI consider frontline health and social care workers who provide care to vulnerable people a high priority for vaccination. Protecting them protects the health and social care service and recognises the risks that they face in this service.

Further details regarding unpaid volunteer and family carers as well as children's care homes, foster carers or kinship carers will follow in due course.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health whether he has considered covering nurses registration fees for 2020.

(AQW 11404/17-22)

Mr Swann: I recognise the valuable contribution nurses have made to the pandemic response and all health and social care staff.

I have not considered covering nurses' registration fees for 2020. Other healthcare professions also pay a registration fee to their respective regulators, and to take this position would have implications for the wider healthcare workforce.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the Lifeline freephone crisis helpline service, including the current service model.

(AQW 11461/17-22)

Mr Swann: Extensive reviews have been undertaken of the Lifeline service since it moved to Belfast HSC Trust. These have highlighted the success of the transition and the renewed stability in the service. It demonstrated no change in service demand, continued improvements in outcomes for service users and security for staff.

The findings were further endorsed by a satisfactory assurance report in relation to the management of the contract. A review of the Lifeline Information Management System highlighted the need for a safer more robust system that could be transferable to other services commissioned under Protect Life. Lifeline will also form part of the Review of Mental Health Crisis Services that is currently underway.

Maintaining the Lifeline service within the HSC has ensured stability, as well as optimising integration and the continued delivery of a high quality service across the region.

Since the service transitioned to the Belfast HSC Trust, the demand on calls has remained relatively stable. Within the 2020/21 financial year to date, Lifeline has continued to provide a service throughout the Covid response. Lifeline's response in the pandemic is currently being formally evaluated.

In addition to the helpline, the Lifeline Service also provides follow-on face-to-face counselling in the local community where there is assessed need. This service is now being delivered remotely by telephone as a result of COVID.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health whether the roll-out of the COVID-19 vaccine could take up to August 2021 to be completed.

(AQW 11462/17-22)

Mr Swann: I refer the member to the answers to AQWs 10091/17-22, 10923/17-22, 11177/17-22, 11266/17-22, 11614/17-22.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how much funding has been made available to roll-out the COVID-19 vaccine.

(AQW 11463/17-22)

Mr Swann: I refer the member to the answers to AQWs 10091/17-22, 10923/17-22, 11177/17-22, 11266/17-22, 11614/17-22.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how many people have been trained to administer the COVID-19 vaccine.

(AQW 11464/17-22)

Mr Swann: I refer the member to the answers to AQWs 10091/17-22, 10923/17-22, 11177/17-22, 11266/17-22, 11614/17-22.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health what venues in North Down are being considered for the roll-out of the COVID-19 vaccine.

(AQW 11465/17-22)

Mr Swann: I refer the member to the answers to AQWs 10091/17-22, 10923/17-22, 11177/17-22, 11266/17-22, 11614/17-22.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health when the review into the resignation of the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority board will be finalised and published.

(AQW 11472/17-22)

Mr Swann: The final report was received on the 9th December 2020. The report will be published once I have considered the report, its recommendations and met with the review team.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether a COVID-19 vaccine will be safe for people with Multiple Sclerosis; and whether there are any associated risks.

(AQW 11473/17-22)

Mr Swann: Having Multiple Sclerosis by itself does not mean that you shouldn't take a COVID-19 vaccine. Disease modifying drugs (DMD) that are used to treat Multiple Sclerosis work by suppressing the immune system. This means that the person may have a reduced response to the vaccine, and therefore a reduction in effectiveness. Consequently, those who are clinically extremely vulnerable should continue to follow government advice on reducing their risk of infection.

A person's GP will give them more advice, based on their particular circumstances, and any treatments they take, and on whether getting a COVID-19 vaccine is right for them.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether a COVID-19 vaccine is safe and effective for people with Multiple Sclerosis who are taking a disease modifying drug.

(AQW 11474/17-22)

Mr Swann: Having Multiple Sclerosis by itself does not mean that you shouldn't take a COVID-19 vaccine. Disease modifying drugs (DMD) that are used to treat Multiple Sclerosis work by suppressing the immune system. This means that the person may have a reduced response to the vaccine, and therefore a reduction in effectiveness. Consequently, those who are clinically extremely vulnerable should continue to follow government advice on reducing their risk of infection.

A person's GP will give them more advice, based on their particular circumstances, and any treatments they take, and on whether getting a COVID-19 vaccine is right for them.

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Health to detail the capital spend by project within Muckamore Abbey Hospital for each year since 2015.

(AQW 11479/17-22)

Mr Swann: The following table provides details of the annual capital expenditure by project within Muckamore Abbey Hospital since 2015:

Year	Project	Expenditure (£000's)
2015/16	Relocation of Physiotherapy Aids & Appliances Muckamore	266
	Wi-Fi for Muckamore Wards	34

Year	Project	Expenditure (£000's)
2016/17	Erect site boundary Muckamore Abbey Hospital for derelict wards & buildings	36
	Clever Touch ICT Sytem - Portmore Building Staff Training - Muckamore Abbey Hospital	5
2017/18	Refurbishment of Cranfield PICU Seclusion Suite - MAH	75
	Refurbishment of Administrative Facilities at Muckamore Abbey Hospital	50
	CCTV for Moyola Daycare - Muckamore Abbey Hospital	88
	Sound Boarding, Killead Ward - Muckamore Abbey Hospital	50
	Install LTHW Boiler - Energy Centre, Muckamore Abbey Hospital	66
2018/19	CCTV Installation - Erne Ward, Muckamore Abbey Hospital	52
	Refurb Killead to reduce communal areas - Muckamore Abbey Hospital	70
	Phase 2 Refurb - Cranfield PICU - Muckamore Abbey Hospital	100
	Refurbish 10 Houses at Oldstone Muckamore Abbey Hospital	84
	Refurb external façade - Erne Ward, Muckamore Abbey Hospital	50
	Refurbishment of Erne Ward - Muckamore Abbey Hospital	50
	Refurb Greystone Support Centre - Antrim	71
	Fire Alarm Upgrade - Muckamore Abbey Hospital Site	98
	Energy Storage (Battery Storage Tech) Cranfield	92
Photo Voltaic Panels (elec Generation) Cranfield	85	
2019/20	Replacement furniture - Muckamore	28
	Muckamore Abbey Hospital ICT Infrastructure	152
	Muckamore Abbey Hospital replacement switches	219
	Replacement building management systems Muckamore Abbey Hospital	92
2020/21	VRSi backup servers Muckamore Abbey Hospital	14
	CCTV NVR Replacement - Muckamore Abbey Hospital	39

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister of Health what consideration he has given to residents of care home facilities over the Christmas period in relation to visiting by family and friends.

(AQW 11494/17-22)

Mr Swann: Additional guidance covering the Christmas period has recently been issued and is available here: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/covid-19-care-homes-christmas-family-visiting-23-27-december-2020-0>.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health whether he intends to introduce safe staffing legislation during this Assembly mandate.

(AQW 11495/17-22)

Mr Swann: Safe Staffing legislation is a commitment of the January 2020 Framework Agreement which resolved the Agenda for Change industrial dispute.

A working group, comprising officials from my Department and representatives from Trade Unions, including RCN, has been established and has met to consider the case for legislation.

My Department has asked that the legislation be included in the forward work plan of the Assembly. At this point, the scope, format (primary or secondary) and the scale of the legislation is not yet clear and therefore a timescale for its introduction cannot be confirmed.

Introducing legislation is not simply a matter of copying across from other jurisdictions, we each operate under a different legislative landscape. Introduction of any legislation will have to follow the appropriate processes of consultation and scrutiny.

Please be assured that my Department is committed to developing, in partnership with trade union colleagues, employers and others, the case for safe staffing legislation to be introduced at the earliest legislative opportunity.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health what confirmation will be available to prove that a person has received the COVID-19 vaccine.

(AQW 11500/17-22)

Mr Swann: An individual's patient records will be updated to confirm when a person has received each dose of the vaccine. A vaccination certificate is also to be provided but this is currently being finalised.

In the UK, vaccines are only approved and deployed for use following rigorous clinical trials and extensive analysis of the vaccine's safety, quality and effectiveness by experts from the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA). The first COVID-19 vaccine, developed by Pfizer/BioNTech, was granted approval for use following a thorough review.

The UK Government has added COVID-19 to the Vaccine Damage Payments Scheme (VDPS), in line with other immunisation programmes, to ensure that, in the very rare possibility where someone is severely disabled as a result of taking a COVID-19 vaccine, they can access financial assistance through the VDPS.

Changes have also been made to Human Medicine Regulations to support the rollout of COVID-19 vaccines.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, in recommending and making available the COVID-19 vaccine, whether his Department is accepting legal liability in respect of any personal injuries, loss and damage resulting from its use.

(AQW 11501/17-22)

Mr Swann: An individual's patient records will be updated to confirm when a person has received each dose of the vaccine. A vaccination certificate is also to be provided but this is currently being finalised.

In the UK, vaccines are only approved and deployed for use following rigorous clinical trials and extensive analysis of the vaccine's safety, quality and effectiveness by experts from the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA). The first COVID-19 vaccine, developed by Pfizer/BioNTech, was granted approval for use following a thorough review.

The UK Government has added COVID-19 to the Vaccine Damage Payments Scheme (VDPS), in line with other immunisation programmes, to ensure that, in the very rare possibility where someone is severely disabled as a result of taking a COVID-19 vaccine, they can access financial assistance through the VDPS.

Changes have also been made to Human Medicine Regulations to support the rollout of COVID-19 vaccines.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, in recommending and making available the COVID-19 vaccine, whether his Department is seeking to assert any disclaimer of legal liability in respect of any personal injuries, loss and damage resulting from its use.

(AQW 11502/17-22)

Mr Swann: An individual's patient records will be updated to confirm when a person has received each dose of the vaccine. A vaccination certificate is also to be provided but this is currently being finalised.

In the UK, vaccines are only approved and deployed for use following rigorous clinical trials and extensive analysis of the vaccine's safety, quality and effectiveness by experts from the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA). The first COVID-19 vaccine, developed by Pfizer/BioNTech, was granted approval for use following a thorough review.

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Changes have also been made to Human Medicine Regulations to support the rollout of COVID-19 vaccines.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health what support is provided to health and social care students during placement, including accommodation and travel expenses.

(AQW 11505/17-22)

Mr Swann: The support provided to health and social care students during placement, for the courses commissioned by my Department, is extensive and varies depending on the course being studied. This support includes the following:

- Nursing and Midwifery students are supported during clinical practice by a placement supervisor and assessor, who will oversee their learning and teaching as well as providing ongoing feedback and support
- The bursary scheme available to Nursing and Midwifery students also provides for access to accommodation and travel expenses, under certain conditions. This may include accessing free hospital accommodation or the use of NI Tourist Board approved B&Bs
- NI-domiciled Social Work students can access a non means tested Student Incentive Scheme for each year of their course. They also have access to £500 per year to cover expenses whilst on Practice Learning Opportunity placements. This is in addition to any Student Finance support applied for through the relevant Education Authority.

- Medical students receive free residential accommodation during hospital placements, with Trusts making arrangements for students travelling to outlying clinics. For General Practice placements more than 15 miles from Queen's University Belfast, medical students may avail of the free hospital-based accommodation. Alternatively, they may book local B&Bs, with costs reimbursed, within limits and also a small daily subsistence allowance.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health for an update on publishing a consultation on a soft opt out organ donation system.

(AQW 11507/17-22)

Mr Swann: I launched a public consultation on the introduction of a statutory soft opt-out system for organ donation for Northern Ireland on 11 December 2020. The consultation will run until 19 February 2021, and my Department will publish details of public engagement events to take place early in the New Year to ensure that all stakeholders have an opportunity to hear about the proposals and submit their responses.

Further details can be found on my Department's website at www.health-ni.gov.uk/consultations/organ-donation.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Health whether he is considering a one-off payment to all Health and Social Care staff, similar to that offered by the Scottish Government.

(AQW 11529/17-22)

Mr Swann: 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 have requested the development of an options paper, to include a range of possible additional supports to all health and social care staff and also a payment to carers to be explored in the development of possible options. Whilst any decision would likely need to be approved by the Executive due to the impact on the overall Northern Ireland budget, I welcome any opportunity to recognise the extraordinary efforts and sacrifices of staff and carers.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) the number of (a) hospital staff; and (b) intensive care staff that have resigned since March 2020; and (ii) the numbers of each that have cited stress as a factor in their decision to resign.

(AQW 11568/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number of Health and Social Care (HSC) staff who have resigned (includes those that transferred to another HSC organisation) between March 2020 and October 2020 is detailed in the table below. This information has been provided by HSC Trusts.

HSC Trust Permanent Staff Leavers (Resignation, including Transfer to Other HSC Organisation), between March 2020 and October 2020

HSC Trust	Hospital Leavers	ICU Leavers
Belfast	1,633 (1,495.4 WTE)	15 (13.4 WTE)
Northern	133 (110.7 WTE)	0
South Eastern	166 (139.3 WTE)	2 (2.0 WTE)
Southern	166 (135.1 WTE)	4 (3.0 WTE)
Western	149 (126.8 WTE)	6 (5.4 WTE)

Source: Human Resources, Payroll, Travel & Subsistence (HRPTS) system

It is not possible to identify if stress has been a factor in a staff member's decision to resign or leave a HSC organisation.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) the reason for medical and dental students from Northern Ireland receiving reduced financial support in the form of grants, loans and bursaries in the final two years of a five or six year course; (ii) how these students are expected to cover living costs, especially with increased studying hours during these years of study; and (iii) whether she accepts that, while the NHS pays these students' fees during these final years, this does not help them survive financially in the short term.

(AQW 11572/17-22)

Mr Swann: I can respond as follows:

- Health and student finance are devolved matters. The financial support available to medical and dental students varies across the regions of the UK depending upon where they are ordinarily resident. Policy reflects the resources available to each healthcare administration, their view how best to direct these resources, and assessment of workforce supply priorities.
- Students may be able to access a maintenance loan and travel grant, according to individual circumstances, through the Student Loans Company

- (iii) In considering the appropriateness of this Department's support for students, I think it relevant to note that there are very low rates of attrition out of these heavily oversubscribed medicine and dentistry programmes.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health why legal indemnity is required for the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine.
(AQW 11581/17-22)

Mr Swann: Regulation 174 (<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukksi/2012/1916/regulation/174/made>) of the Human Medicine Regulations allows for the licensing authority (the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency – MHRA) to grant a temporary authorisation for the supply of an unlicensed medicinal product for some specific public health purposes. On the 2 December MHRA granted a temporary authorisation for the supply of the Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine. The legal framework recognises that if the Government is asking a person to supply an unlicensed medicine in response to an emergency, it is unfair on that person to take responsibility for the consequences of the use of that medicine in the way that it normally would.

The decision to roll out a mass vaccination programmes using the Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine has been taken by each of the 4 UK administrations, not by the company manufacturing or marketing the product. For this reason, the EU Medicines Directive, Article 5 of Directive 2001/83, includes within it a requirement that EU Member States confer immunity from civil liability on both the manufacturers who supply medicines for use in this type of situation and the health care professionals who actually use the product. This requirement has been implemented into UK law by regulation 345.

The EU scheme leaves the person placing the unlicensed product on the market in an uncertain position, however the 4 UK administrations have rectified the situation by putting the person responsible for placing the product on the market on the same footing as the manufacturer. This will help to give companies willing to co-operate in the sort of mass vaccination programme required for COVID-19 some assurance that they will not be exposed inappropriately to civil liability.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Health (i) to detail the current support available to nursing and midwifery students; (ii) how this compares with other jurisdictions on these islands; and (iii) whether the current supports are being reviewed.
(AQW 11593/17-22)

Mr Swann: I can respond as follows:

- (i) For eligible Nursing and Midwifery students, my Department currently pays tuition fees and provides a non-means tested bursary of £430 per month for the duration of their degree course. Students may also be eligible for other means-tested allowances such as disabled students' allowance and childcare support. Students are currently eligible for free public transport to facilitate travel to and from placements. and to free car parking at HSC sites, during the COVID-19 pandemic;
- (ii) it is for each healthcare administration across the UK and Ireland to determine the support to be provided to nursing and midwifery students according to its assessment of the workforce needs of its health care system. The arrangements that apply in Northern Ireland appear very effective in attracting and retaining high quality nursing and midwifery students;
- (iii) these support arrangements are kept under continuous review, although no proposals for change are currently under consideration

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health what scientific evidence is available that wet bars increase the spread of COVID-19, even when protections are in place.
(AQW 11613/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Executive, when making decisions on restrictions, takes into account the scientific and medical evidence and also the potential impacts of the restrictions on the economy and society. The Executive weighs up the totality of the effect each restriction can have in combination with other restrictions in reducing the rate of infections of COVID-19. It is very difficult to disaggregate the precise impact on virus transmission of each restriction on its own. However, the disinhibiting effect of alcohol is likely to lead to reduced adherence to mitigations. Settings in which people congregate to drink alcohol are higher risk and have been associated with clusters and outbreaks worldwide.

In light of the high rate of spread of the virus which causes COVID-19, and the pressure this is placing on vital health and social care services, the Executive considered a wide range of activities which could impact on the rate of transmission of the virus. The Executive's decision was that certain businesses and activities, including wet bars, would have restrictions placed on them to help to suppress the transmission of the virus within the population. The current combination of restrictions reduces the pressure on our health services, protects the elderly and the vulnerable, and allows other essential services to be maintained during the current pandemic.

The Executive maintains an ongoing process of review of the coronavirus restrictions regulations, which considers both the current level of the pandemic and the impact the restrictions have on the economy, and it is the Executive's clear intention not to retain the restrictions for any longer than is absolutely necessary.

Scientific evidence used by the Executive for decision making purposes is now publically available:
<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/covid-19-scientific-evidence>

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health whether (i) patients over 65 with, or who have suffered from in the previous two years, (a) latent tuberculosis; (b) pneumonia; (c) bronchiectasis; or (d) repeated chest infections, will be considered at high risk from COVID-19; and (ii) they will be put forward for quicker treatment with the COVID-19 vaccine.

(AQW 11633/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) There is a published list that details those at higher risk from coronavirus. The list is not exhaustive and may change as we learn more about the virus. This can be found at: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/people-at-higher-risk/whos-at-higher-risk-from-coronavirus/>
- (ii) Vaccination policy in Northern Ireland is based on the recommendations and advice provided by the independent Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) which advises the 4 UK Health Ministers.

JCVI advice on prioritisation of the vaccine was published on 2nd December 2020. The ranking of priorities is a combination of clinical risk stratification and an age-based approach, which should optimise both targeting and deliverability.

JCVI has advised that the first priorities for the COVID-19 vaccination programme should be the prevention of mortality and the maintenance of the health and social care systems. As the risk of mortality from COVID-19 increases with age, prioritisation is primarily based on age.

Many of those who are clinically extremely vulnerable (high risk) are in the oldest age groups and will be among the first to receive vaccine. From early January 2021, subject to the availability of a suitable vaccine, it is intended to roll out the programme through primary care led vaccination clinics which will be responsible for the vaccination of those considered most at risk, which will include the majority of people who were on the vulnerable list.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health to detail the precise reasons for the delay in introducing Safe Staffing legislation, given it already exists in Scotland and Wales.

(AQW 11643/17-22)

Mr Swann: Safe Staffing legislation is a commitment of the January 2020 Framework Agreement which resolved the Agenda for Change industrial dispute.

A working group, comprising officials from my Department and representatives from Trade Unions, including RCN, has been established and has met to consider the case for legislation.

My Department has asked that the legislation be included in the forward work plan of the Assembly. At this point, the scope, format (primary or secondary) and the scale of the legislation is not yet clear and therefore a timescale for its introduction cannot be confirmed.

Introducing legislation is not simply a matter of copying across from other jurisdictions, we each operate under a different legislative landscape. Introduction of any legislation will have to follow the appropriate processes of consultation and scrutiny.

Please be assured that my Department is committed to developing, in partnership with trade union colleagues, employers and others, the case for safe staffing legislation to be introduced at the earliest legislative opportunity.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health when he will provide clarity to care homes on residents meeting with family in their homes over Christmas.

(AQW 11651/17-22)

Mr Swann: Additional guidance covering the Christmas period has recently been issued and is available here: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/covid-19-care-homes-christmas-family-visiting-23-27-december-2020-0>.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the recent changes to the Patient Information Leaflet for Sertraline, including suicidal thoughts and suicidal behaviour.

(AQW 11662/17-22)

Mr Swann: There have not been any recent changes to the Patient Information Leaflet (PIL) for Sertraline relating to suicidal thoughts or behaviour. Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs) such as Sertraline are effective medicines, and the balance of risks and benefits in adults of all medicines in this drug class remains positive in their licensed indications.

However, some cases of suicidal thoughts have been reported with SSRI use, and the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) and Commission on Human Medicines (CHM) have investigated and monitored this safety issue since these products were first licensed.

On the basis of UK and European reviews, additional warnings of the risk of suicidal thoughts and behaviour with antidepressants was agreed in 2008 for inclusion in PILs for all antidepressants, including SSRIs, and are still in place today.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health how changes to the frequency of side effects are communicated to prescribers within Health and Social Care.

(AQW 11663/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information about possible side effects associated with any medicine are provided in the products information which is available online to all prescribers via the Electronic Medicines Compendium, and this information is also supplied to the patient via the Patient Information Leaflet (PIL) as per current legislation. In addition to the product information, which is approved by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), further communications and guidance may be issued to raise awareness of particular safety concerns.

The British National Formulary (BNF) also provides an essential reference for prescribers when prescribing, dispensing, and administering medicines including details on the possible and likely side effects known of certain medicines.

The Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) regularly issue Medicine Management and Safety update newsletters, which are produced for general practice and community pharmacy by the Regional Pharmacy and Medicines Management Team. These are emailed to all general practices for sharing with all prescribers and posted/emailed to all community pharmacies. They are available on the NI Formulary website for the public and prescribers to view. A Patient zone is also available for the public on this site with information about some of the NI Formulary prescribing notes presented in a patient friendly way.

In addition, the Northern Ireland Medicines Governance Team site provides access to current safety policies, guidelines and newsletters produced by the teams who work in primary and secondary care settings. The team work on various medicines safety initiatives which are uploaded to the website and are available in the 'Latest Publications' area.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to list each planned shipment of isotopes for healthcare use, scheduled within the next three months, including (i) the date the order was placed; (ii) when delivery is expected; and (iii) the purpose of isotope. (AQW 11664/17-22)

Mr Swann: It is not possible to detail the planned shipment of isotopes for healthcare use over the next three months nor is it possible to identify specifically in many cases what the isotope may be used for when received.

Radiopharmaceuticals for diagnostic and therapeutic purposes are ordered on an individual patient basis and are ordered usually less than one week in advance of required use. These are highly specialised pre-dispensed radioactive drugs which are delivered usually on the day of scan or treatment. Due to their radioactive nature and short-half-life, these radiopharmaceuticals have a very limited shelf life and are only brought in on a 'just-in-time' basis as and when required.

Both the Western and Belfast Trusts do however receive regular weekly shipments of radioisotope molybdenum generators but these are normally ordered no more than one month in advance. These generators are used to produce Technetium which is the radioactive tracer used in many of the radiopharmaceuticals manufactured by the Regional Radiopharmacy for diagnostic scanning purposes in Nuclear Medicine Departments across Northern Ireland. The regional radiopharmacy produces Technetium-labelled radiopharmaceuticals for approximately 20 different patient diagnostic scan types.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health whether he intends to ask the army for help with the COVID-19 vaccination roll-out to speed up the process. (AQW 11685/17-22)

Mr Swann: I refer the member to the answer to AQW 10156/17-22.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health how many people are on the waiting list to get access to a paediatrician. (AQW 11692/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department publishes National Statistics on Hospital Waiting Times on a quarterly basis. The latest published position is September 2020, with the December 2020 publication due for release on 25th February 2021. These publications can be found at: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/topics/dhssps-statistics-and-research/hospital-waiting-times-statistics>

At 30th September 2020, 16,871 patients were waiting for a first consultant led outpatient appointment with a Paediatrician. Table 1 to follow shows a breakdown of patients for the different paediatric specialties and how long patients currently on the waiting list have been waiting to date.

These data do not indicate how long patients waited for a Paediatric appointment as they are still on the waiting list, but rather presents how long they have waited to date.

Table 1: Paediatric 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
	0-6	>6-9	>9-12	>12-15	>15-18	>18-52	>52	
Paediatrics	2,221	725	666	618	631	5,921	4,362	15,144
Paediatric Dentistry	28	9	9	4	5	330	152	537
Paediatric Neurology	55	6	11	14	12	98	3	199
Paediatric Surgery	245	80	71	68	73	352	102	991
Total	2,549	820	757	704	721	6,701	4,619	16,871

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health how many paediatricians are operating within each Health and Social Care Trust.
(AQW 11694/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number of paediatricians working in each Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust is detailed in the table below.

HSC Trust	Paediatricians in Post
Belfast	75 (68.4 WTE)
Northern	33 (28.2 WTE)
South Eastern	27 (25.8 WTE)
Southern	52 (42.1 WTE)
Western	64 (56.5 WTE)

Source: HSC Trusts

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of private paediatricians.
(AQW 11695/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on paediatricians employed in the private sector is not held by the Department of Health and Social Care (HSC) organisations.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health (i) whether patients over 65 who, in the last two years, have had (a) latent tuberculosis; (b) pneumonia; (c) bronchiectasis; or (d) recurrent chest infections, will be prioritised in the COVID-19 vaccination process; (ii) in what way will they be prioritised; (iii) how this will be communicated to those affected; and (iv) how this will be carried out.

(AQW 11704/17-22)

Mr Swann: Vaccination policy in Northern Ireland is based on the recommendations and advice provided by the independent Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) which advises the 4 UK Health Ministers.

JCVI advice on prioritisation of the vaccine was published on 2nd December 2020. The ranking of priorities is a combination of clinical risk stratification and an age-based approach, which should optimise both targeting and deliverability.

JCVI has advised that the first priorities for the COVID-19 vaccination programme should be the prevention of mortality and the maintenance of the health and social care systems. As the risk of mortality from COVID-19 increases with age, prioritisation is primarily based on age.

Many of those who are clinically extremely vulnerable (high risk) are in the oldest age groups and will be among the first to receive vaccine. From early January 2021, subject to the availability of a suitable vaccine, it is intended to roll out the programme through primary care led vaccination clinics which will be responsible for the vaccination of those considered most at risk, which will include the majority of people who were on the vulnerable list.

GPs will be responsible for inviting their patients to attend for vaccination which will be largely similar to the annual flu vaccination programme.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health whether he will prioritise COVID-19 vaccine access for unpaid carers and domiciliary care staff.

(AQW 11719/17-22)

Mr Swann: Northern Ireland, along with all the UK nations, will adhere to the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) advice on prioritisation of the vaccine.

JCVI have advised that “the first priorities for any COVID-19 vaccination programme should be the prevention of COVID-19 mortality and the protection of health and social care staff and systems. Secondary priorities could include vaccination of those at increased risk of hospitalisation and at increased risk of exposure, and to maintain resilience in essential public services.”

At present due to the amount of vaccine available in the UK the programme in Northern Ireland is focusing on the number 1 priority group, Care Home residents. As more vaccine becomes available the programme will be rolled out to other groups. More information will be provided in due course as to when the vaccine will be offered to these groups.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health to detail the latest date on which Safe Staffing legislation would need to be laid before the Assembly to ensure it passes during the current mandate.

(AQW 11721/17-22)

Mr Swann: Drafting of any Bill usually requires three months and passage through the Chamber requires between six and nine months. Progress on passing a Bill is also highly dependent on sufficient scrutiny time for the Committee, and is

impacted by other Bills which may be in front of the Committee. To ensure a Bill is passed within the current mandate, I would estimate that Easter 2021 would be the latest at which it would need to be laid.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of Improving and Safeguarding Social Wellbeing: A strategy for Social Work in NI 2012-2022, including any plans to review or renew the strategy.

(AQW 11737/17-22)

Mr Swann: This is the first Strategy for Social Work and it has successfully brought an increased focus to the profession and its contribution to supporting the social wellbeing of the population. Following a mid term review of the Strategy in 2015-16 new governance arrangements for Stage 2 delivery which promote and support a distributed leadership approach, ownership by the profession and the systems leaders and more local autonomy were developed and agreed. This also included the establishment of an Outcomes Delivery Board (ODB), chaired by the Chief Social Work Officer to set the broad strategic direction.

During the period 2012 – 2020 much has been achieved for example: Local Engagement Partnerships have been established in each Trust to agree local priorities; my Department supports the Regional Social Work Leadership Programme-Stronger Together which aims to develop social work capacity across all sectors by building the leadership capability of the profession; workforce development initiatives and supports have been supported; a Framework which articulates the role and purpose of social work in improving social well-being has been developed and distributed to every social worker in Northern Ireland and the experience and expertise of social workers in Quality Improvement (QI) is recognised and utilised throughout the HSC including the development of a HSC QI Infrastructure as part of Delivering Together. Social work employers have also been supported to test new ways of working particularly those that enable social workers to have more face to face contact and have improved outcomes for those who use their services.

As the lifetime of the strategy is coming to an end, an evaluation of the impact of its implementation is planned to commence shortly to inform the next phase of developing the profession. The evaluation will provide an objective assessment of the impact of the strategy, identify what has worked, lessons learned and point the way towards the future.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister of Health for an update on plans to bring forward a consultation following the Power to People report into reform of Adult Social Care.

(AQW 11738/17-22)

Mr Swann: I have asked Departmental officials to bring forward proposals for my consideration in line with the key objectives for Adult Social Care Reform as proposed in the 'Power to People' report. However, you will appreciate that this work has been significantly interrupted during the COVID-19 response, and progress in 2020/21 has been delayed.

From the original sixteen proposals set out in 'Power to People', the Reform Team identified a number of synergies which have since been merged into six proposed strategic priorities. Officials will work with a wide range of stakeholders to develop a series of engagement papers linked to each of these priorities. This work will inform the development of policy options for the future reform of Adult Social Care, which officials will submit for my consideration, after which, a public consultation will take place.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health whether he will contact urgently all care organisations in the independent care sector eligible for care home sick leave support funding scheme to ensure they are taking advantage of that scheme to ensure carers are adequately supported, as carers in Derry are once again being told wrongly they have to take their annual leave when they are isolating due to COVID-19.

(AQW 11760/17-22)

Mr Swann: As you are aware a number of measures have been put in place to support independent care home staff during the pandemic. Part of the financial package announced on 2 June included up to £3.05m available to pay care home staff up to 80% of their salary (or average salary, based on the 3 months December '19 to February '20), when they are on sick leave because they are self-isolating, shielding or ill due to COVID-19. This scheme was due to end on 31 August 2020 but has now been extended to cover sick leave up to 31 March 2021. All independent providers of care were advised of this extension and the claim process by way of letter issued by my Department on 15 October 2020.

Claims should be made monthly in arrears by the independent sector employer through their local Trust.

Health and Social Care Trusts have also issued a reminder about this scheme at the end of November in their respective areas.

My Department continues to communicate with providers in relation to the support available to the care home sector at this time. I am concerned by any reports that providers are not accessing the enhanced sick pay scheme and will be keeping the need for further action under consideration.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister of Health whether guidance will be given regarding visiting residents of care homes and residential homes over the Christmas period.

(AQW 11770/17-22)

Mr Swann: While the existing Care Home visiting guidance remains in place, my Department issued supplementary guidance on Christmas visiting arrangements in care home settings on 10 December; it is available on the NI Direct and Department of Health websites (https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/Care-homes-Christmas-visiting_0.pdf) and provides further clarity for residents, families and care home staff on visiting both within and without care homes over the Christmas period

This additional guidance emphasizes that care homes should recognise the right to a family life for those in care homes, and particularly the importance many people attach to seeing family and friends over the Christmas period.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health whether he will publish regularly the number of COVID-19 vaccinations carried out in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 11800/17-22)

Mr Swann: Regular information on COVID-19 vaccinations will be provided but the exact details of what information and how often it is provided has still to be agreed between the 4 UK nations.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health whether the commissioning of abortion services is a legal obligation under Section 9 of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc.) Act 2019.

(AQW 11802/17-22)

Mr Swann: Section 9 of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019 does not contain an explicit legal obligation to commission abortion services. It requires the Secretary of State to make whatever changes to the law that are necessary to implement the recommendations made in paragraphs 85 and 86 of the CEDAW report (the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women) published on 6 March 2018.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health what discussions he has had with the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists concerning the delivery of the Framework for abortion services as required under Section 9 of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc.) Act 2019.

(AQW 11803/17-22)

Mr Swann: I have not discussed this matter with the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health what support he will provide to Health and Social Care Trusts to maintain and restart abortion services currently being provided.

(AQW 11804/17-22)

Mr Swann: The support provided to Trusts by my Department is to be determined by the commissioning and business case approval process which can only resumed when the Executive agrees my proposals for an emergency early medical abortion service.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health when he will provide a clear roadmap towards a fully commissioned abortion service.

(AQW 11805/17-22)

Mr Swann: In April of this year, I sought Executive agreement, as required by the Ministerial Code when an issue is cross cutting and controversial, to introduce an emergency early medical abortion service for the duration of the pandemic. The Executive has yet to agree my proposal. I am therefore unable to give a timescale for the introduction of a fully commissioned abortion service.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to outline the various ways medicinal cannabis products are available for patients, including as prescriptions.

(AQW 11821/17-22)

Mr Swann: Due to the limited evidence base and their unlicensed nature, prescribing of cannabis-based products for medicinal use (CBPMs) is restricted under the Misuse of Drugs Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2002 to only those clinicians listed on the Specialist Register of the General Medical Council in cases where it is deemed clinically appropriate to do so. Decisions on whether to prescribe CBPMs are a matter for specialist clinicians who are responsible for providing clinical care to individual patients.

My Department has published a set of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) on cannabis-based medicines on its website. These are designed to provide helpful background on the implications of the change in the law that enabled clinicians to prescribe cannabis-based medicines, and provide additional support to specialist clinicians who are considering whether to prescribe a cannabis-based medicine for individual patients. These FAQs are updated regularly and can be found at <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/cannabis-faqs>.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health when he will bring forward legislation on safe staffing levels.
(AQW 11822/17-22)

Mr Swann: Safe Staffing legislation is a commitment of the January 2020 Framework Agreement which resolved the Agenda for Change industrial dispute.

A working group, comprising officials from my Department and representatives from Trade Unions, including RCN, has been established and has met to consider the case for legislation.

My Department has asked that the legislation be included in the forward work plan of the Assembly. At this point, the scope, format (primary or secondary) and the scale of the legislation is not yet clear and therefore a timescale for its introduction cannot be confirmed.

Introducing legislation is not simply a matter of copying across from other jurisdictions, we each operate under a different legislative landscape. Introduction of any legislation will have to follow the appropriate processes of consultation and scrutiny.

Please be assured that my Department is committed to developing, in partnership with trade union colleagues, employers and others, the case for safe staffing legislation to be introduced at the earliest legislative opportunity.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health to detail the support available to children who have suffered the psychological effects of a traumatic brain injury.
(AQW 11859/17-22)

Mr Swann: Belfast Health and Social Care Trust provides a specialist regional service for children with Acquired Brain Injury (ABI). The Acquired Brain Injury Support and Consultation Service (ABCs) works with HSC Trusts in the provision of specialist advice and interventions. The service is led by a specialist Psychologist in ABI with speech and language therapy and occupational therapy linked to the service which operates out of the specialist Paul Ward at the Royal Victoria Hospital for Sick Children thereby ensuring linkage. This service provides a multidisciplinary approach to treatment and care.

In addition, the Health and Social Care Board commissions a number of contracts in Children's Services which include support to children and families where a child has experienced an ABI and these include the Child Brain Injury Trust (CBIT) and Cedar foundation. Furthermore, the Board in conjunction with CBIT, has funded a specific early years and after school project which has been cited as an exemplar of best practice across the UK.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health whether he has any plans to create local capacity for the testing of drugs, including for referrals from community services.
(AQW 11908/17-22)

Mr Swann: Illicit substances seized by enforcement agencies are currently tested by Forensic Science Northern Ireland. Any information on new substances and drug-taking trends can then be circulated wider to an extensive 'Drug and Alcohol Information and Monitoring System' (DAMIS) network.

There is also an ongoing arrangement that allows local agencies and community organisations to refer substances for testing to the Welsh Emerging Drugs & Identification of Novel Substances (WEDINOS) project. There are no plans at present to provide additional capacity for testing of psychoactive substances at a local level.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether his Department has commissioned any work to ensure an increase in the bursary or payment for student nurses and midwives.
(AQW 11921/17-22)

Mr Swann: The pre-registration nursing and midwifery courses commissioned by my Department are consistently very heavily oversubscribed with continuing low rates of attrition out of these programmes. I therefore see no need to increase the level of support currently provided.

Mr Allen asked the Minister of Health for an update on the future use of Pine Lodge care home in East Belfast.
(AQO 1373/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- Pine Lodge on Belmont Road, Belfast was temporarily closed as a residential home in 2016 by the Belfast Trust, pending the outcome of a review into the closure of statutory residential care homes commissioned by then Minister for Health, Simon Hamilton.
- The building has been unused since its closure, with the property vacant at present. The Trust is currently considering whether there are any other potential uses for this property but as yet, nothing has been decided.
- The Trust is aware of some antisocial behaviour in and around the building, and in response, is improving the intruder alarm system, looking at strengthening perimeter security and has increased its check of the building to a weekly basis.
- As part of its Covid-19 surge preparations, the Trust reviewed its estate, including Pine Lodge, but unfortunately due to degradation of this facility it was not deemed a viable option to reopen due to the extensive work required to restore it.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on cancer screenings.
(AQO 1365/17-22)

Mr Swann: Dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic continues to place additional pressures on health services, however, within this context the recovery and restoration of cancer screening services is a priority.

A phased, prioritised restoration of paused screening programmes commenced during June, July and August. The initial priority is to clear the backlog of patients waiting for diagnostic procedures and to issue invitations to those whose screening opportunities were paused. Progress towards restoration continues to be achieved.

The Public Health Agency established a 'Screening Restoration Group' to provide regional coordination and oversight. The Group continues to work, in partnership with Trusts, to restore the paused screening programmes.

This work is being undertaken in the context of maintaining social distancing in clinical settings and enhanced infection control measures, including the use of personal protective equipment. Restoration also needs to be aligned with the resetting and availability of associated diagnostic and treatment services. This has reduced programme throughput as the time to undertake individual screening has increased.

Full recovery is a complex task and is likely to take some time, particularly as the pandemic is ongoing. Many aspects of service and practice have been altered as a result of the pandemic. It is estimated that a 12 month period will be required to restore screening services.

It is vitally important that anyone who is experiencing any of the symptoms associated with early stage cancer should contact their doctor rather than waiting for a screening test.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health what are the consequences, in terms of areas of work, for NHS staff that decline a COVID-19 vaccine.

(AQO 1366/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Health and Social Care system has a professional and moral responsibility to protect patients. While vaccination is not compulsory, the vaccine is the best defence we have against the spread of the COVID-19. By getting vaccinated and increasing uptake rates, staff will not only protect their patients, but also themselves, their family and their community.

It will be up to Trusts or employers to consider what, if any, changes to duties and roles may be required if an individual remains unvaccinated.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Health whether any COVID-19 vaccines are dependent on prior receipt of flu vaccination.
(AQO 1368/17-22)

Mr Swann: It is not necessary to have received the flu vaccine before receiving the COVID-19 vaccine. It is recommended, however, that there is a 7 day gap between receiving the flu vaccine and then receiving the COVID-19 vaccine.

While there is no connection between influenza and Coronavirus it is known that those who catch both virus at the same time are at greater risk of suffering severe consequences. Therefore I would strongly encourage anyone to take up the offer of the flu vaccine and the COVID-19 vaccine when they are offered as part of the national vaccination programmes.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health for an update on the work of the Western Health and Social Care Trust in dealing with waiting times for cataract procedures.
(AQO 1369/17-22)

Mr Swann: I fully appreciate that every patient should be able to avail of the best treatment that the health service can provide, and in a timely manner. It is regrettable that any patient has to wait longer than is clinically appropriate for outpatient treatment and I fully understand the distress and anxiety that long waiting times cause, particularly when patients are suffering pain and discomfort, and I can assure you that waiting times for elective care remain a key priority for the health service in Northern Ireland.

Demographic pressures and a misalignment of demand against funded capacity have created challenges across many aspects of elective surgery, including that required for cataract surgery. It was for this reason that I moved to establish elective care centres, now called Day Procedure Centres. These centres are designed to improve flow whilst maintaining quality and safety, with the efficiencies gained aimed at improving productivity and reducing waiting lists. Cataract procedures will operate from three locations: the Mid-Ulster Hospital, Downe Hospital, and South Tyrone Hospital.

The need to redirect HSC resources to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic has unfortunately had an adverse impact on elective care provision and the impact will be profound and long-lasting. Services will not be able to resume as normal for some time due to the constraints imposed by COVID-19 including staff availability, the continued need to adhere to social distancing, use of PPE and of course the need to plan for future potential COVID-19 surges.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Health what percentage of the population will be required to receive a COVID-19 vaccine before herd immunity is achieved.

(AQO 1370/17-22)

Mr Swann: Herd immunity through vaccination varies from one disease to another. At this stage I do not believe there are any definitive figures for COVID-19 available as to what level will need to be achieved in order to gain herd immunity. However, vaccination is the best personal defence we have against the spread of COVID-19 and the more people vaccinated reduces the overall risk for everyone. We will be striving to achieve as high an uptake rate as possible.

The overall impact of the vaccination programme will take several months to become apparent and therefore people still need to be vigilant and adhere to all the public health advice to help drive down the infection rate.

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister of Health what specialist treatment is provided for Mesothelioma patients.

(AQO 1372/17-22)

Mr Swann: All mesothelioma patients in Northern Ireland are referred for review and discussion at their local Trust lung cancer multi-disciplinary meeting. A treatment plan which includes surgical and oncology representation is agreed with the full multi-disciplinary team. If a patient is considered a suitable candidate for immunotherapy, they are referred to their local oncology team to discuss treatment options and their subsequent treatment plan. All National Institute for Healthcare and Excellence approved therapies are available to all patients as appropriate.

In 2016, the Health and Social Care Board joined in partnership with Macmillan to fund a Clinical Nurse Specialist Expansion Plan. This plan had the aim of bringing Northern Ireland average caseloads across all tumour sites in line with the rest of the United Kingdom.

All mesothelioma patients therefore have access to the lung cancer Clinical Nurse Specialist. This specialised nursing has the necessary expertise to provide care, information and support to patients as part of their individual care pathway.

Department for Infrastructure

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) all public funding given to (a) Belfast International Airport; (b) Belfast City Airport; and (c) Derry City Airport, broken down by date; amounts; and purpose, in each of the last ten years; and (ii) her assessment of their long-term sustainability following the improvements in travel times as result of the A6 and A5 roads upgrade schemes.

(AQW 11186/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): As Minister for Infrastructure, my 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.

Belfast International Airport and Belfast City Airport are privately owned airports. City of Derry Airport is owned by Derry City and Strabane District Council.

Details of central government funding in the last 10 years, from Government Departments, are detailed below.

The former Department for Regional Development (DRD) previously provided grant aid to City of Derry Airport for a safety works scheme in 2011. Ministerial direction was required to award grant aid for this scheme and the Executive approved the decision to make available funding to the Council. This £11.5 million scheme was 75% grant-aided by DRD (£8.6 million).

More recently, due to the exceptional circumstances that emerged from the COVID pandemic in Spring, my Department was, for expediency and logistical reasons, asked to facilitate the distribution of emergency funding on behalf of the Executive to the City of Derry Airport and Belfast City Airport. In April, the NI Executive, DfT and HM Treasury agreed a package of temporary financial support over 3 months to maintain air connectivity, with the Executive meeting half of the costs. City of Derry Airport was granted £924,435 and Belfast City Airport was granted £2,192,347.

Last month, following a decision by the Executive, I announced £1.23 million in additional support to Derry City and Strabane District Council for City of Derry Airport. This short term support grant is to help City of Derry Airport to remain operational until March 2021 and will be drawn down from the £10 million set aside by the Executive to provide further support, as and when required, for Airports during the COVID 10 crisis. On 10 December 2020 the Executive noted a proposal tabled by the Finance Minister for a temporary financial support package for the Belfast International and Belfast City Airports, with up to £7.8million being made available for both airports.

In addition, in May 2020, the Minister of Finance announced 100% rates relief for Belfast International, Belfast City & City of Derry airports until 31 March 2021. This financial support is worth £2.7m.

Furthermore, whilst civil aviation is a reserved matter for the UK Government, the Department for the Economy has responsibility for the development of Northern Ireland's air connectivity and provides support aimed at maintaining connectivity during the COVID 19 pandemic and as part of recovery. The Department for the Economy has secured £2m to fund marketing support by March 2021, delivered by Tourism Ireland. £0.8m relates to co-operative marketing support for

airlines operating to all 3 NI airports with £1.2m on a campaign highlighting all air and sea carriers serving Northern Ireland, and their routes

With regard to the long-term sustainability of the Airports, Derry City & Strabane District Council, which owns City of Derry Airport, commissioned aviation consultants York Aviation, to complete a study of the medium /long term prospects for the airport and its contribution and importance to the local economy. The York Aviation report was completed on 11 November and, is currently being reviewed by a number of Departments. This will inform the Executive on deciding whether continued support for City of Derry Airport is warranted after March 2021.

The York Aviation report into Derry City Airport takes into account the A5 and A6 roads and their impact on travel times and reliability to other Airports. Similar studies would be required to make assessments of the impact of these major road schemes on the long-term viability of the other airports and any future assessment of the 3 airports would have to take road connectivity into account, in addition to many other factors.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the planned upgrade of the Sydenham Bypass to a three lane carriageway which was proposed in the 2015 Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan and the preferred route was published in 2010.

(AQW 11282/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The 2015 Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan proposed the widening of the A2 Sydenham Bypass. As you have also noted, the preferred route was published in 2010, and included removal of the Dee Street traffic signals and provision of alternative access to Belfast Harbour Estate. However, the development of the scheme has not been progressed any further and there are no current plans for a consultation or publication of a draft Direction Order.

I am committed to developing new integrated plans which deliver support for public transport, encourage more walking and cycling, better manages car commuting and promotes sustainable development - all in an effort to improve the environment and people's lives. To this end, my officials are currently preparing for my consideration, a new Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan, which will build on these commitments. This is still in development but will be subject to full public consultation.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether resource budget will be allocated in (i) 2020/21; and (ii) 2021/21 to staff an active travel centre at the North West Transport Hub.[R]

(AQW 11355/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The provision and operation of an Active Travel Centre is a vital component of the North West Transport Hub project. It is expected that it will become an exemplar of best practice; providing a focal point for the encouragement and promotion of sustainable travel.

In March 2020, my Department submitted an application to SEUPB for funding for three years for the operation of an Active Travel Centre at the North West Transport Hub and I await the outcome of this application.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans are in place to address the ongoing flooding occurring at Canneyreagh Road, Donaghadee.

(AQW 11369/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am advised that initial investigations by NI Water at Canneyreagh Road indicates that a capacity issue could be the reason for ongoing flooding at this location.

NI Water has conducted a CCTV survey, and this has confirmed that the storm sewer running parallel to Northfield Road connects to the river culvert on Church Lane. The road gullies on the lower half of the Canneyreagh Road and Church Lane also connect to this river culvert. The road gullies are 'link connected' and the river culvert is mainly concrete pipe except for a section of square culvert, which is quite shallow, and contains a lot of debris.

The survey scope is now being expanded in order to source storm connections into the combined sewer. This will be completed as part of the ongoing Drainage Area Plan (DAP) for Donaghadee and, once the hydraulic modelling is complete, the model could be used to assess any flooding issues and to recommend strategic solutions.

NI Water advises me that the road gullies and river culvert could also be contributing factors to the road surface flooding at Canneyreagh Road and, if required, this could be assessed by adding the infrastructure to the completed hydraulic model, and using 2D modelling to simulate overland flow.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure, with regard to the recent announcement of investing in green public transport buses, why some of these vehicles are low emission, instead of zero emission.

(AQW 11376/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My priority is a safe and sustainable public transport system, and this is supported by Translink's strategy to begin the transition from fossil fuels to zero emissions technologies with Belfast Metro and Derry services, targeting the areas of high levels of traffic congestion and poor air quality. Eventually, all buses in both the Metro and Ulsterbus fleets will be procured as zero emission vehicles.

When taking decisions to purchase new buses, we must consider the routes that the bus may deliver services on and consider which propulsion methods best suit that route. Typically, rural routes within Northern Ireland have longer mileage than those within urban areas and, given that zero emission vehicles have a lower operational range and hydrogen technology is being piloted, this led to the investment decision that vehicles being procured for Ulsterbus would include hybrid diesel vehicles.

These low emission buses for Ulsterbus will deliver significant improvements to the customer experience, but importantly, will also deliver improvements to local air quality. This is achieved because these new vehicles not only meet the latest engine emission standards, but also use advanced technology within the bus design to further reduce fuel consumption and emissions.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure what roadmap or strategy is in place for the decarbonisation of our public transport fleet.

(AQW 11377/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Translink has a strategic vision to see fully zero emission bus services in Belfast and Derry by 2030, and the whole public transport network to be net zero emission by 2040.

Translink is undertaking an in-depth feasibility study to investigate options for decarbonising the public transport network. These studies will consider options for electrification, hydrogen or indeed a combination of both.

On the bus network, three zero emission hydrogen vehicles are expected to go into service shortly. This will be followed by the roll out of one hundred zero emission double deck vehicles by Spring 2022, made up of twenty further hydrogen and eighty battery electric vehicles. I am committed to tackling the climate emergency and doing all that we can as quickly as we can to reduce our emissions.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the most recent user figures of the Comber Greenway as recorded at the user recording points, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 11429/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Estimated usage figures for the two counters at Abbey Road, Belfast and Belfast Road, Comber are set out in the following table. The figures for 2018 and 2019 cover the twelve calendar months whereas the figures for 2020 cover the eleven months period January – November.

	Abbey Road, Belfast		Belfast Road, Comber	
	Walking	Cycling	Walking	Cycling
2018	84,600	94,300	49,500	79,800
2019	88,900	105,300	57,300	81,600
2020*	137,100	149,100	78,300	143,700

* Figures for 2020 are for the eleven months January – November

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will consider the planting of a number of trees on the Comber Greenway as part of the Northern Ireland Centenary celebrations.

(AQW 11430/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department has no current plans to carry out further planting on the Comber Greenway although, as a general principle, I am willing to consider projects for the managed greening of our infrastructure.

Some years ago there was considerable new planting on the greenway. In the past number of weeks, Belfast City Council's tree maintenance contractor has been carrying out selective thinning of vegetation and trees on behalf of the Department along a stretch of the Comber Greenway from Beersbridge Road to Sandown Road. The objective of this was to encourage growth in the existing healthy trees, to increase natural light on the path, and to reduce instances of fallen branches across the Greenway.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 9965/11-15, for her assessment of whether failure to enforce where a development is an unauthorised Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Development, would be in breach of the EIA Directive.

(AQW 11445/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I did not provide an answer to AQW 9965/17-11. This was answered by a former Minister prior to the subsequent amendment of the EIA Directive by the European Union and the transposition of those revised requirements into domestic planning legislation. Since that time amendments to the EIA Directive have been transposed by way of the Planning (EIA) Regulations (NI) 2017. This provides a new requirement under Regulation 32 that a planning authority "shall consider the exercise of their enforcement functions in such a way as to secure compliance with the objectives and requirements of the Directive".

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether any residual money from the Blue/Green Fund could be used to support a bike voucher repair scheme.

(AQW 11447/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Blue/Green infrastructure funding is Capital DEL. Any bike voucher repair scheme would have to be funded from Resource DEL – as is the case with the English scheme. Capital DEL may not be used to fund Resource expenditure and so this proposal would not be feasible. I can assure you the Blue/Green infrastructure fund is being utilised to support cycling in other ways.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the timeframe for payments under the Taxi Drivers Financial Assistance Scheme.

(AQW 11448/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Taxi Driver Financial Assistance Scheme closed on 27 November and within one week payments started to be made to eligible applicants. Over 5000 applications have been received from taxi-drivers and staff in my Department are working at pace to process all applications as quickly as possible to enable payments to be made to those who are eligible without delay before Christmas.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister for Infrastructure what assessment her Department has undertaken for the possibility of the Southern Relief Road design for a lifting bridge to protect access to the Albert Basin and Newry Canal.

(AQW 11452/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The development of Newry Southern Relief Road is currently progressing on the basis of a fixed bridge over the Newry Ship Canal, however, at this stage I have not ruled out the option of an opening bridge.

Whilst the current fixed bridge proposal will facilitate access for vessels under 12 metres, I am aware of concerns about the proposed bridge structure on Newry Ship Canal potentially restricting access for taller vessels, including tall ship navigation, to the Albert Basin. As such, I have asked officials to explore potential options for an opening bridge, including potential cost estimates both in terms of construction costs as well as operational and maintenance costs.

I am also keen to engage with local groups and listen to the views of the local community before I come to a final decision on this matter. I recently met with delegation of local elected representatives and officials from Newry Mourne and Down District Council who highlighted the strong maritime history associated with Newry and the potential long term development opportunities for the area. I also plan to meet with other local stakeholders to discuss this important issue.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the A5 road project.

(AQW 11513/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I want to reiterate my commitment to tackling regional imbalance, connecting communities and improving road safety. There are so many communities, particularly in rural parts west of the Bann, who can benefit from investment in the A5 Project.

The project has been subject to 3 separate legal challenges since its inception in 2007. The most recent being in December 2017 when a new Decision to Proceed with the scheme, made in the absence of a Minister, was challenged leading to the quashing of the Statutory Orders in November 2018. Since then, my Department has been actively progressing the necessary work to enable a fresh decision to be made.

In spring 2019, an addendum to the Environmental Statement of 2016, together with other environmental reports, were published for consultation. This resulted in a further Public Inquiry which concluded in March of this year. My Department has received an Interim Report from the Inspector. My officials have considered the issues raised and recommendations made in this Interim Report and have taken legal advice.

I will be considering all of this advice carefully before deciding on the next steps for the scheme and the timing of the publication of the Inspector's Report.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the grant funding bids for the Road Safety Grant Scheme that were rejected.

(AQW 11518/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The maximum amount available for project funding through the 2020/2021 Road Safety (Safe Travel) Grant Scheme is £100,000. My Department received 61 applications for funding. Each application was assessed by a panel of officials against the published criteria for the scheme.

Of the 61 applications, 14 projects met the criteria and received funding totalling approximately £87,000. The remaining 47 projects did not meet the funding criteria and therefore did not receive funding. The unsuccessful projects are listed below.

Organisation	Reason Application Was Not Accepted		
	Service already offered by DFI	Capital Procurement	Service already offered by DFI & Capital Procurement
Ballinascreen GAC		✓	
Ballyclare RFC		✓	
Ballykelly Primary School	✓		
Ballynure District Community Association		✓	
Blackie River Community Groups		✓	
Blessed Patrick O'Loughran Primary School			✓
Broadbridge Primary School Parents & Friends Group			✓
Brocagh & District Regeneration Group		✓	
Coiste Ghaeloideachas Chromghlinne		✓	
Comber Regeneration Community Partnership		✓	
Conlig Community Regeneration Group		✓	
Crumlin Men's Shed		✓	
Dove House, Youth First Project		✓	
Enda McGrane		✓	
Friends of Glencull Community & Parent Association		✓	
Friends of Millquarter PTA		✓	
Friends of Rosemount Primary & Nursery School			✓
Friends of Rossmar School		✓	
Glenabbey Community Association	✓		
Hezlett Primary School		✓	
Kildress Wolfe Tones GAA Club		✓	
Lettershandoney & District Development Group		✓	
Mallusk Community Action Group		✓	
Meigh Community Association		✓	
Middletown Community Forum		✓	
Mother Goose Community Playgroup, Ballycastle		✓	
Olderfleet Primary School	✓		
Rowandale Integrated Primary School Parents' Council		✓	
St. Ciaran's Primary School, Cushendun	✓		
St. Columba's Primary School, Kilrea	✓		
St. Comgall's Primary School, Antrim		✓	
St. Ita's PTFA, Belfast	✓		
St. John's Primary School, Coleraine	✓		
St. Joseph's Primary School, Belfast	✓		
St. Joseph's Boys' School, Derry			✓
St. Mary's Primary School, Gortnaghey			✓
St. Mary's Primary School, Maguiresbridge			✓

Organisation	Reason Application Was Not Accepted		
	Service already offered by DFI	Capital Procurement	Service already offered by DFI & Capital Procurement
St. Ninnidh's Primary School, Derrylin			✓
St. Patrick's Gaelic Football Club, Donagh		✓	
St. Patrick's Primary School PTA, Portrush		✓	
St. Ronan's Primary & Nursery School, Lisnaskea	✓		
St. Therese's Primary School, Lenamore	✓		
St. Vincent De Paul Primary School, Belfast	✓		
Steelstown Primary School, Derry			✓
Tattyreagh Youth & Community Group		✓	
The ACT Initiative		✓	
The City of Newry University of the Third Age		✓	

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 10470/17-22, to detail the current companies which have been granted permission from her Department to use the Concessionary Fares Scheme.

(AQW 11526/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There are currently seven transport operators participating in the Concessionary Fares Scheme. They are:

- Translink – participating since the Scheme was introduced in 2001
- Córas Iompair Éireann - joined 2001
- ACE Coaches - joined September 2013
- Belfast Bus Company - joined February 2014
- Cavehill Coaches - joined 2001
- PD Coaches, joined September 2015
- Yellow Line Coaches, joined 2001

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will work with her Ministerial counterparts in the south to progress a rail feasibility study between Derry and Letterkenny, potentially through the auspices of North South Strategic Growth Partnership.

(AQW 11527/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As I outlined in my answer to your previous question on extending the railway to Letterkenny (AQW 7765/17-22), I recently met with Minister Ryan at the NSMC and agreed to extend the high speed rail feasibility study to Derry supporting sustainable transport in the NW. I am committed to exploring options to develop our island infrastructure with my counterpart including through the auspices of the North South Strategic Growth Partnership.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many taxi drivers from North Down have applied for the Taxi Driver Financial Assistance Scheme.

(AQW 11530/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Applications for the taxi driver financial assistance scheme are not broken down easily into geographical location. I can tell you that, following closure of the scheme on 27th November, over 5000 applications in total had been received.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure what actions her Department is taking to address those reservoirs that need urgent attention.

(AQW 11538/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Statutory responsibility for the Reservoirs Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 is currently with DAERA and a Transfer of Functions Order is being progressed through the Executive Office to transfer responsibility for the provisions under the Act from DAERA to my Department.

However the absence of the regulatory reservoir safety framework provided for by the Act does not remove the common law duty on Reservoir Managers for them to ensure the safety of their reservoirs. In light of this my Department has written

to reservoir managers to remind them of their responsibilities on a number of occasions and to advise them to progress any safety related works.

My Department has also sought legal advice and has identified that there are a number of provisions within the Drainage (NI) Order 1973 that potentially could be used, in some circumstances, to reduce flood risk. However, the use of these powers would have limited impact and would not adequately address the underlying issues of reservoir safety and condition. They cannot therefore be regarded as a substitute for full commencement of the Reservoirs Act (Northern Ireland) 2015, which is the most appropriate legislation to regulate reservoir safety.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) what percentage of Translink's fleet is accessible for people with disabilities; and (ii) what plans are in place to make all vehicles accessible for all.
(AQW 11539/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am committed to providing an inclusive and accessible public transport network for all. In relation to your specific queries, I can confirm the following:

- i) All of Translink's fleet meets the standards of the Public Service Vehicles Accessibility Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003 (PSVAR), through either low floor access or lifts. Metro and Glider services operate exclusively low floor access vehicles, and Ulsterbus operates 60% of its vehicles with low floor access. I can also confirm that all 145 zero and low emission buses that I recently announced will meet the accessibility standards of PSVAR.
- ii) I do however recognise that there is more work that we can undertake to improve the accessibility of our public transport network.

I can confirm that Translink will continue to improve the proportion of its Ulsterbus fleet with low floor access, however, we must recognise that there are limited vehicle options from suppliers on longer distance coaches that have low floor access.

My Department has also committed to removing the 24-hour notice of travel for disabled passengers on Goldline services in 2021; the introduction of audio visual information systems on Goldline services in 2022; and ongoing engagement with organisations including the Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (IMTAC) on the future design of vehicles.

My Department regularly engages with IMTAC to discuss transport issues impacting disabled and older people. Their advice is invaluable and has allowed my Department to continue to work with Translink in delivering a more accessible public transport network.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in anticipation of the end of the transition period, what work she has done to facilitate all-island mutual recognition of driver licenses and qualifications
(AQW 11540/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Both I and my officials are in regular contact with the DfT Minister and officials on a broad range of post Exit transport issues, including mutual recognition of driving licences and driver qualifications.

The British Government is currently engaging in bilateral discussions with individual Member States, including the South, to agree the arrangements that will apply from 1 January 2021. My officials are continuing to engage with counterparts in DfT and RSA in the South to ensure that the needs of the North are taken into account in these negotiations and to ensure that there is as little disruption as possible for drivers.

Professional licences and qualifications issued in the South will continue to be recognised after the transition period, however, the EU position is that NI specialist licences, i.e. Passenger and Goods Vehicle licences will not be recognised if taking up employment in the South. EU arrangements form part of the wider market access negotiations which are taking place. My officials continue to stress the unique circumstances on the island of Ireland in meetings with DfT to ensure these are taken into account. Future recognition of licences and qualifications is likely to be based on the principle of reciprocity.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she has had any requests from local councils to waive (i) on-street car parking charges; and (ii) enforcement during December.
(AQW 11551/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have received no requests from Councils to waive on-street charging or enforcement during December.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the current extent of street lighting outage in the Upper Bann constituency; and (ii) the average time from report of a fault to repair of the outage.
(AQW 11557/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is unable to provide this information by constituency. However, I can confirm that in Roads Southern Division, which includes the Upper Bann constituency, there are 1126 street lighting outages currently recorded on the street lighting maintenance system.

Following an initial delay in April 2020, due to the COVID-19 crisis, my Department is now providing a street lighting maintenance service with outages generally being attended to within the required 5 working days.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in relation to the departmental statement of 16 September 2020 on a £2.8 million funding investment package towards the development of six greenway projects, and pursuant to AQW 11118/17-22, in which you stated your Department provided £3.7m million funding towards the development of six greenway projects, to detail (i) why there was a difference in the amounts; and (ii) a breakdown in the amounts of funding to each of the six projects. (AQW 11559/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Following my September announcement of £2.8 million towards six greenway projects, Belfast City Council provided further information about the total cost of their two projects. As a result of this, a further amount of £925,000 was allocated bringing the total to £3.7 million.

The table below provides a breakdown in the amounts of funding to each of the six projects:

Project	Council	Total Project Cost	DfI Grant
Forth Meadow Community Greenway	Belfast City Council	£5,300,000	£750,000
Lagan Gateway Greenway	Belfast City Council	£5,800,000	£1,100,000
Strabane North Greenway	Derry City and Strabane District Greenway	£980,000	£490,000
Strathfoyle Greenway	Derry City and Strabane District Greenway	£2,565,000	£1,282,500
Banbridge Riverside Walk	Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council	£180,000	£90,000
North Down Coastal Path	Ards and North Down Borough Council	£45,000	£22,500
Total			£3,735,000

Mr Beattie asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given recent developments, what steps her Department will take regarding the Knock Iveagh wind turbine site. (AQW 11562/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Since the transfer of planning powers to councils in April 2015 the majority of planning decisions, including local enforcement and discontinuance issues are primarily the responsibility of the relevant Council as local planning authority for the area.

The complex matters relating to Knock Iveagh have been under consideration by Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council (ABC) since 2017. Following a special meeting of Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council on 26 November 2020, ABC wrote to me on 4 December 2020 requesting that my Department use its enforcement powers under Part 5 of the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 or exercise its powers under Section 75 of the Act to discontinue the use of the land at Knock Iveagh for wind generation purposes. This correspondence also included a request for the Department to pay any compensation liability and all associated costs incurred by the Council as a result of any decision to discontinue.

I am currently in the process of considering this correspondence from the council and it would not therefore, be appropriate for me to comment at this stage as to what steps my Department may or may not take.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) whether the focus of her Department's Environmental Governance Work Programme is on unauthorised Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) development; and (ii) how she intends to address the unauthorised EIA development that is the wind turbine and ancillary works adversely impacting the scheduled ancient monument of Knock Iveagh. (AQW 11563/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The main aim of my Department's Environmental Governance Work Programme is to enhance competence and capacity across the two-tier planning system in order to support environmentally sound decision-making. As part of the work being taken forward on capacity building, engagement and support it is intended that a number of pieces of guidance will be developed, the first element of this will deal with unauthorised development.

As the vast majority of decisions under the two-tier planning system are taken by district councils in their role of local planning authorities this guidance will seek to inform council decisions in the exercise of their statutory functions.

The complex matters relating to Knock Iveagh have been under consideration by Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council (ABC) since 2017. Following a special meeting of Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council on 26 November 2020, ABC wrote to me on 4 December 2020 requesting that my Department use its enforcement powers under Part 5 of the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 or exercise its powers under Section 75 of the Act to discontinue the use of the land at Knock Iveagh for wind generation purposes. This correspondence also included a request for the Department to pay any compensation liability and all associated costs incurred by the Council as a result of any decision to discontinue.

I am currently in the process of considering this correspondence from the council and it would not therefore, be appropriate for me to comment at this stage as to what steps my Department may or may not take.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the number of electric vehicle charge points in Northern Ireland which have been reported broken or have been out of use at any point during the past year; (ii) how long have or will those broken take to fix; and (iii) the projected cost of this.

(AQW 11569/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The e-car public charge point network in the North is owned, operated and maintained by the Electricity Supply Board (ESB). For information in relation to the e-car public network, ESB can be contacted at ecars@esb.ie or enquiries can be sent directly to ESB, Two Gateway, East Wall Road, DUBLIN 3, D03 A995.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister for Infrastructure when the booking service for driving tests will be open to first-time applicants.

(AQW 11592/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver & Vehicle Agency's (DVA) booking system for driving tests reopened for all customers, including first-time applicants, on 5 October and thousands of bookings were made up to the end of January 2021.

Driving instructors were included in the Executive's regulations on businesses that closed from 16 October until 20 November to help stop the spread of Covid-19. Following this Executive decision, driving tests also ceased over this period of increased restrictions based on public health and scientific advice and the booking system was closed. Driving tests resumed on 21 November but ceased again for 2 weeks from 27 November to 10 December 2020 due to the circuit breaker restrictions announced by the Executive. Motorcycle lessons and tests are not affected by these restrictions.

For reasons of fairness, the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) has now reopened exclusively for those customers whose tests were cancelled between 17 October to 20 November and 27 November to 10 December. Testing slots have been released for February and March and additional booking slots have also been made available in December and January as the DVA increases capacity by recruiting additional examiners. When the DVA is in a position to reopen the booking service for all other customers, including first time applicants, they will issue further communications through [nidirect](https://nidirect.gov.uk) and social media channels, and write to all Approved Driving Instructors to confirm this position.

When testing resumes the DVA will continue 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.

To help further mitigate the impact on customers due to the cessation of practical driving as a result of the latest Covid restrictions, I will be bringing forward further legislation to extend the validity of theory test pass certificates. Theory test pass certificates which have already been extended by eight months and will expire from 1 November 2020 onwards, will have their validity period extended by a further four months. In addition, theory test pass certificates which expire between 1 November 2020 and 30 June 2021, and which have not already benefited from an extension, will have their validity period extended by eight months.

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 what consideration she has given to establishing Car Clubs across Northern Ireland.

(AQW 11597/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is currently considering how cleaner transport, new business models and new modes of travel can transform how people, goods and services move, as part of our work in developing options for inclusion in the Department for the Economy's draft Energy strategy.

Greater use of more efficient, on-demand business models, such as Car Clubs, would enable more frequent and better integrated services which would help to reduce emissions and congestion in our towns and cities.

Members of the public already have access to Car Club vehicles in several urban areas across Northern Ireland. In addition, in consultation with my Department, a number of developers have recently included Car Clubs in their Travel Plans for residential developments in Belfast. Virtually all Car Clubs across the UK and Europe operate as commercial businesses, and as such I do not intend my Department to actively establish or operate Car Clubs. I do however look forward to further operators entering the market and widening access to this service.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how she intends to work with local stakeholders to facilitate green initiatives in town centres and high streets.

(AQW 11616/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is engaged with councils and other local stakeholders in a range of schemes to facilitate green initiatives in town centres and high streets. As part of the COVID-19 Town Revitalisation Programme, my Department is investing £5 million from the Blue Green Infrastructure Fund in towns and cities across all Council areas. This investment is in green initiatives which will make it easier and more inclusive and attractive for people to access shops and services by enabling them to make more short journeys by walking, wheeling and cycling rather than travelling by car.

In addition, the projects being taken forward directly by my Department and in conjunction with councils include improvements to walking and cycling infrastructure, such as pop up cycle lanes, pedestrianisation of streets, widening of pavements, the installation of parklets and the creation of pedestrian areas as part of the COVID-19 recovery.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail her Department's actions following Newtownards Chamber of Trade's proposals on innovative green infrastructure.

(AQW 11617/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Following the proposals put forward by Newtownards Chamber of Trade and Ards and North Down Borough Council, my officials have been working collaboratively to develop a number of proposals for Newtownards. The proposals will provide additional active travel opportunities but will also require consideration of the volume of through traffic using the town centre and an assessment of whether and how this traffic can be diverted.

On 27 October 2020 I met with representatives of the political parties on Ards and North Down Borough Council to discuss the range of proposals, and confirmed that my Department will work with Council and the Chamber in order to deliver these as soon as possible.

In order to assess current vehicular, pedestrian and cyclist movements within the town, the Department has commissioned a detailed Traffic Study. Using this information to carry out traffic modelling for the area will allow us to determine the impact any future proposals might have on the local road network and ensure that any recommendations emanating from this traffic study will not compound the current traffic problems which are also being considered as part of this exercise.

The second tranche of the COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation Programme, which was announced on 28 October 2020, includes a £398,000 allocation to Ards and North Down Borough Council from my Department, specifically for investment in green infrastructure with the Borough.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will facilitate the delivery of support payments for the taxi and coach sectors.

(AQW 11618/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As you are aware from my previous correspondence, the Taxi Driver Financial Assistance Scheme opened for applications on 13th November and closed on 27th November. The Bus and Coach Operators Scheme opened for applications on 27th November and will run for three weeks.

My officials are processing applications at pace and in line with the eligibility criteria for both schemes, as approved by the Executive. Payments to eligible applicants for the taxi scheme have already commenced.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will review her Department's decision to not launch a support scheme for hauliers in financial difficulties.

(AQW 11619/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have considered carefully the information provided by the haulage sector, and have concluded that there is not the evidence to support a financial support scheme at this time. My officials continue to liaise with other Departments and the British government on this and I will, of course, continue to keep this under review. If you have specific evidence that you wish to be considered I would be happy to have my officials examine it.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail Waterways Ireland's (i) priorities; and (ii) related budget allocated to Northern Ireland projects for 2021.

(AQW 11627/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Waterways Ireland's priorities for 2021 are:

- Delivering World Class Corridors
- Reinvigorating Communities and Well-Being
- Environment and Heritage

The anticipated Capital allocation of £1.853m will be used to deliver the projects shown in the table below.

Project	Estimated Cost £000
Carnroe Weir	1083
Kilmore Quay Jetty Installation	125
HQ Infrastructure repairs	25
Upper and Lower Erne Blueway Feasibility, including Enniskillen Blueway hub	60
Bann: Blueway Portglenone to Portglenone Forest	120
Castle Archdale	152
Devenish Island Extension	122
Davey Island Extension	117
Bann: bothy: Kilrea 2021	15
LELP Spiritual Trail	34
Total	1853

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) which schools in East Belfast are being considered for the introduction of 20mph speed limits; and (ii) when the introduction of this part-time speed limit will apply.
(AQW 11659/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can advise that within the East Belfast Parliamentary Constituency, it is proposed to provide part-time 20mph speed limits at the following three locations:

- Knocknagoney Primary School;
- Loughview Integrated Primary School; and
- Leadhill Primary School.

All 100 schools included in the part-time 20 mph programme for the current financial year have been informed and the process to develop the enabling legislation has commenced. You will be aware that the statutory process includes a public consultation, during which we may receive representation. Given this ongoing process it is not possible at this time to be definitive about the commencement dates for individual schools within the programme however officials will, subject to what representation is received, be working to deliver these schemes as soon as is practicable.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) her plans to alleviate parking and traffic congestion around the train and bus station in Bangor; and (ii) how increased active travel can be facilitated in this area.
(AQW 11665/17-22)

Ms Mallon:

- i) My Department is aware of the high demand for Park & Ride spaces in the Bangor area and that the existing provision of over 350 spaces at Bangor, Carnalea and Bangor West is filled on a typical day. I am committed to prioritising, planning and delivering Park & Ride and sustainable transport facilities and am keen to pursue additional capacity in Bangor should land become available.
- ii) I am also very keen to work with Councils on developing active travel in the areas that they see as priorities. Better active travel routes linking to bus and train stations is a particularly attractive option as it facilitates joined up end-to-end sustainable travel. My officials are engaged with Ards & North Down Borough Council to discuss a multi-agency approach to improving walking and cycling connectivity to public transport interchanges.

In support of this, a programme of enhanced cycle storage facilities is being rolled out at public transport stations and halts across the network and I can confirm that Bangor station is included in this programme. Other discussions are ongoing between officials and Council officers, Chamber of Commerce and local traders in relation to recovery plans in each of the five towns in the Borough, including Bangor.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure what percentage of Translink's current fleet do not meet the requirements of the Public Service Vehicles Accessibility Regulations (NI) 2003.[R]
(AQW 11668/17-22)

Ms Mallon: All Translink vehicles meet the requirements of the Public Service Vehicles Accessibility Regulations (NI) 2003.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many times she has attended meetings of the Committee for Infrastructure since 11 January 2020, broken down by (i) committee meetings attended in person; and (ii) committee meetings attended remotely.

(AQW 11689/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have appeared before the Committee for Infrastructure on six occasions since taking up post in January. I attended each meeting in person.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she plans to invest in road crossings outside school gates.

(AQW 11690/17-22)

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 providing road safety features at schools is extremely important.

My Department already provides pedestrian crossing facilities when the need is identified in response to a specific request or as part of the Active Schools Travel Programme through which a range of road safety measures including crossing may be identified. In addition, if any member is aware of any particular need, officials from my Department would be happy to assess the request for a crossing which may also be delivered as part of a package of other measures to improve roads safety at schools.

I am determined to make a significant improvement in this area and on the 7 September 2020 I announced the roll out of part-time 20mph speed limit schemes at 100 schools. This challenging programme will increase driver awareness and achieve reductions in vehicle speeds near these schools to ensure that parents, children and staff will be safer as they go to and from the schools. 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, part-time 20 mph speed limits will apply to roads outside many more schools.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many taxi drivers have received COVID-19-related support.

(AQW 11691/17-22)

Ms Mallon: New powers were granted to my Department by the First Minister and deputy First Minister on 3 November 2020 and I opened the taxi driver scheme for applications 10 days later on 13 November. The Taxi Driver Financial Assistance Scheme closed on 27 November and as of yesterday, almost 2500 payments have been issued to eligible taxi drivers.

Over 5000 applications have been received from taxi-drivers and staff in my Department are working at pace to process all applications as quickly as possible to enable payments to be made to those who are eligible without delay before Christmas.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) what discussions she has had with eFlow about potential issues arising from Brexit on billing schemes, including automated tolling, for customers from Northern Ireland using tolled roads in the Republic of Ireland; and (ii) how she has communicated to drivers the changes proposed by eFlow that Northern Irish drivers should make in order that they remain able to use the automated tolling process.

(AQW 11705/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am deeply concerned about the implications of Brexit for motorists on the island of Ireland and the free movement of goods and people.

In relation to eFlow, my Department does not hold the details of eFlow customers. I would advise motorists to contact the company directly over any concerns around the service provided.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the locations of all salt bins across West Tyrone.

(AQW 11710/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The electoral area of West Tyrone straddles two DFI Roads Section Office areas, namely Derry & Strabane Section Office and Fermanagh & Omagh East Section Office. As information is collated at Divisional and Section Office level the information requested is not available specifically for West Tyrone.

Information on the locations of the salt bins for each respective Section Office area are provided in the following tables:

Strabane			No. of Bins
Street Name	Street Description	Location	
MILLBROOK GDS	C675 KILLETER RD TO END CDS	ABOVE HSE 100	1
ASHLEIGH COURT	KILCLEAN ROAD C675 ST10 TO END	OPP HSE 8 13m PAST S/L 2	1
WILLOWCREST	CASTLEFIN ROAD U101/3 TO END AT CDS	S/L 12	1
WILLOWCREST	STRETCH 5 TO END AT CDS - 1ST CDS ON RHS	OPP HALFWAY BETWEEN HOUSES 6 & 7	1

Strabane			No. of Bins
Street Name	Street Description	Location	
STONEY HEIGHTS	STRETCH 22 TO END AT CDS	ON HILL OPP HSE 11	1
TRIENAMONGAN RD	C675 CARN RD TO C675 CORGARY RD	AT SCHOOL	1
GLENVIEW	B72 LEARMORE ROAD TO END CDS	OPP S/L 1	1
BREEZEMOUNT PARK	C676 LURGANBOY RD TO END CDS	AT ENTRANCE TO EDWARD'S PRIMARY SCHOOL	1
CRILLY PK	C674 WOODSIDE RD TO END AT REAR OF HOUSE NOS 27	S/L 116	1
OAKLAND HTS (SPAMOUNT)	B72 STRABANE RD TO END CDS		2
BREENVALE	B72 FYFIN RD TO TOP OF HILL	OPP HSE 17/18 - TOP OF HILL - GRASS AREA	1
BARRACK STREET	AT HSE NO 54 TO END HSE NO 66	WIDE PAVED AREA OPP SL 315 - BETWEEN THE 2 SCHOOLS	1
CHURCH VIEW	CHURCH VIEW U4005 TO END CDS AT HOUSE 1	SL 2 & SL 6	2
NEWTOWN ST	PATRICK ST U4003 TO GLEN RD U4003	AT JNC INGLESIDE	1
NANCYS LN	DERRY RD A5 TO END AT QUARRY ENTRANCE	END OF ADOPTION	1
NANCYS LN	DERRY RD A5 TO END AT QUARRY ENTRANCE	AT S/L 796 IN GARDEN	1
TULACORR DR	A5 ST. 67-DERRY ROAD TO END CDS	SL 2	1
TULACORR DR	STRETCH 16 TO END CDS	AT ROUNDABOUT	1
TULACORR HTS	STRETCH 22 TO END CDS	GABLE OF HSE 5	1
GRANGEWOOD	B49/1 WOODEND ROAD TO END AT CDS	20m FROM SL 8	1
GLENEVISH HILL	GLEN ROAD - U2045 TO ST. 6/7	JUST ABOVE 1st RBT	1
ALTISKANE HTS	ST.7 - GLENEVISH HILL TO END AT CDS	JNC U4004/7	1
ALTISKANE HTS	C/L ST.7 - GLENEVISH HILL TO END AT CDS	opp. Hse 25 @ s/l 58	1
ALTISKANE HTS	C/L ST.7 - GLENEVISH HILL TO END AT CDS	OPP S/L 52	1
MOUNT CARMEL HTS	U2024/4 NEWTOWNKENNEDY STREET TO STRETCH 12	S/L 2 - S/L 6 - OPP S/L 9	3
MOUNT CARMEL HTS	WESTERN CDS TO STRETCH 14	HSE 20	1
MOUNT CARMEL HTS	N.WESTERN CDS TO END OF ADOPTION	S/L 46 - S/L 55	2
EVISH HEIGHTS	MOUNT CARMEL HTS TO EVISH GROVE	OPP S/L 26	1
EVISH GROVE	EVISH HEIGHTS TO END OF CDS AT HSE 26	OPP S/L 30	1
EVISH GROVE	EVISH HEIGHTS TO END OF CDS AT HSE 26	S/L 34	1
SPRINGHILL PK	HSE NO 26 SPRINGHILL PK TO END CDS REAR HSE NO 8	S/L 100 @ HSE 30 PENSIONERS' BUNGALOWS	1
INNISFREE GDS	B536 FOUNTAIN ST. TO B536 FOUNTAIN ST.	IN GDN HSE 63	1
DRUMRALLAGH	FOUNTAIN ST B536 TO END AT HOUSE 43 LHS	AT MONUMENT	1
CEMETERY RD	TOWNSEND ST B72 TO END AT CEMETERY GATE	PLUS A FEW GRIT PILES	1
MAIN ST. DONEMANA	BROOK RD C604 LHS TO BERRYHILL RD B49	T\p 262	1
DUNNALONG RD	DUNNALONG RD U1809 TO VICTORIA RD A5	JNC A5	1
KEERY RD	VICTORIA RD A5 TO MASON RD U1810	JNC KEERY PK & S/L 137	2

Strabane			No. of Bins
Street Name	Street Description	Location	
CLOUGHCOR RD	VICTORIA RD A5 TO BALLYHEATHER RD C602	SCHOOL 15m UP FROM TP 9A ON F/WAY	1
ART RD	STATION RD U1825 TO BERRYHILL RD B49	OPP MILLBROOK	1
ALLAN PK	ALLAN PK U4104 TO ALLAN PK CLOCKWISE U4104	S/L 14	1
CAVANACOR VW	WOODEND RD B49 TO END CDS	OPP S/L 113	1
WOODBURY HTS	WOODEND ROAD B49 ST. 2 TO END (CDS)	HSE 10 SL 6	1
THE BRAMBLES	WOODEND RD B49/2 TO END (CDS)	OPP HSE 11	1
CHURCH VW	BERRYHILL RD B49 TO END CDS		1
MOUNT PLEASANT	ART RD U1825 TO END CDS	15m BELOW S/L 2	1
MILLBROOK PK	MILLBROOK PK U4201/3 TO END CDS	AT HSE 5 S/L 3 4	1
LECKPATRICK GDS	LECKPATRICK RD U1824 TO END CDS	AT HOUSE 4	1
DANTON MNR	U1824/1 LECKPATRICK RD TO STRETCH 5	OPP S/L 9 & @ S/L 20	2
LISCURRY GDNS	STRETCH 1 TO END(CDS)	S/L 9	1
HALL STEVENSON PK	LECKPATRICK RD U1824/1 TO U4203 STRETCH 6	HSE 8	1
HALL STEVENSON PK	CDS AT HSE NO'S 80/88 TO END AT CDS HSE NO'S 25/28	GABLE END HSE 14 (KEEP AWAY FROM WALL)	1
MILLVIEW PK	MOORLOUGH RD C604 TO END CDS AT HOUSE 16	AT HOUSE 11	1
SANDVILLE GREEN	DONAGHEADY RD TO END CDS AT HSE 11	BETWEEN S/L 7 AND S/L 8	1
GLENELLY VW	LISNARAGH RD B48 TO END CDS	S/L 148 & S/L 149.1	2
OLDCASTLE RD	U233 HONEYFORD LN TO C671 DUBLIN ST		1
CASTLE COURT	OLDCASTLE ROAD (U223) TO HSE 15	IN VERGE OPP HSE 14	1
ORR PK	U4552 ORR PK TO END CDS AT HOUSE NO 52	BETWEEN HSES 55 & 57	1
MOURNE PK	U4552 MILLBROOK LN TO END AT HOUSE NO 95		1
CASTLEVIEW	OLDCASTLE RD (U233) TO CDS		1
DAVIS CRE	B84 MILL ST TO U4552 MILLBROOK LN		1
MEADOW CLS	MILLBROOK LANE - STRETCH 04 TO END(CDS)		1
FORTHILL PK	ORR PARK - U4552/17 TO END (CDS)	WALK	1
HOLMVIEW HTS	B84/25 MOYLE RD TO END(CDS)		1
COOLAGHY ROAD	B164 DEERPARK ROAD TO C679 MILLTOWN ROAD	ABOVE PLAYPARK OPP ENT TO HILLVIEW	1
HILLVIEW (ARDSTRAW)	U221 COOLAGHTY RD TO END CDS	NEAR ENTRANCE TO BARLEYHILL	1
SPERRIN VW (GLEBE)	U4807/5 SCHOOL TERRACE TO END AT CDS	S/L 5	1
GARVAN ROAD	U211 PEACOCK RD TO B165 BELLSPARK	HALFWAY UP HILL BETWEEN SCHOOL & BELLSPARK RD	1
CLUNY GARDENS	B85 URNEY RD TO U4604 CLUNY GDS	OPP S/L 120	1
BRIDGE ST. STRABANE	BRADLEY WAY TO MAIN ST LHS	AT WATERSIDE STREET	1

Strabane			No. of Bins
Street Name	Street Description	Location	
MELMOUNT RD	MELMOUNT ROAD RBT TO URNEY ROAD	AT OR NEAR THE ENTRANCES TO THE 3 SCHOOLS	3
DRUMMAN CRT/LISNAFIN	SIDE HSE 13 DRUMMAN CRT TO REAR No.32 LISNAFIN PK	BOTTOM END OF LINK FOOTWAY	1
BALLYCOLMAN EST	BALLYCOLMAN RD HOUSE NO 25 TO BALLYCOLMAN RD HOUSE NO 6		4
BALLYCOLMAN EST	HOUSE NO 116 TO U4010/08 HOUSE NO 133	AT GAELSCOIL ENTRANCE	1
LAUREL DR	BALLYCOLMAN RD U4010 TO LAUREL DR HSE NO 59	HSE 95	1
LAUREL DR	1ST TURN RHS AT HSE NO 8 TO END CDS HSE NO 44	HSE 86	1
LAUREL DR	STRETCH 26 TO END AT CDS	OPP 158	1
BELLDOO	BALLYCOLMAN RD U2044 TO END CDS	HSES 34 & 95	2
BELLDOO	4TH TURN ON ST.38 TO END CDS HSE NO 48	OPP HSE 39	1
LINKSIDE PK	BALLYCOLMAN EST ST.5 TO END (CDS)	OPP HSE 19	1
TURNBERRY MANOR	B72/67 MELMOUNT ROAD TO END CDS	S/L 2	1
FERNDAL	ASHBROOK - ST. 9 TO END AT CDS	S/L 2	1
CARRICK STRAND	B72 ST. 68 - BRADLEY WAY TO END AT CDS - SITE NO. 17		1
MELMOUNT VLS	MELMOUNT VLS U4015 TO BALLYCOLMAN AV U2044	GABLE OF HSE 1	1
LISNAFIN PK	URNEY RD B85 TO END HSE NO 392		3
OAKLAND PARK	BEECHMOUNT AV TO END CDS	AT S/L 6	1
MELMOUNT GARDENS	MELMOUNT RD B72 ST. 67 TO TO END CDS	AT ENTRANCE TO KNOCKAVOE SCHOOL	1
MELMOUNT GARDENS	HSE 11 TO END AT HSE 36	NEAR HSE 21 (SMOKER'S ALLEY)	1
CARLTON DR	MELMOUNT RD A5 TO CARLTON DR U4017	OPP OLD SHOP SITE	1
GREEVES PK	KL U4017/23 CARLTON DR TO END 1ST CDS	HSE 46 AT SIDE	1
ARDNALEE	U4017/14 LISNAFIN PK TO END CDS @ HSE 14	ABOVE No.11 ARDNALEE	1

Omagh			
Road name	Number of bins	Sector number	Description
Carraigh Bheagh	1	7125B0004_17	Junction of Carraigh Beagh and Drumnakilly Road
Burrells Glen	1	7125B0050_16	Junction of Burrells Glen and Omagh Road
Lenagh Road	1	7125C0612_13	Junction Lenagh Road and Killyclogher Road at school
Saint Marys Road	1	7125C0625_01	Opposite house number 5
Camderry Road	1	7125C0665_04	End of footway adjacent to Drumlisk PS
Tattysallagh Road	1	7125C0665_09	Adjacent to PS at junction of Tattysallagh Road and Corradinna Road
Drumnaforbe Heights	1	7125C0670_07	Junction of Drumnaforbe Heights and Claragh Road

Omagh			
Road name	Number of bins	Sector number	Description
Longhill Road Dromore	1	7125C0683_02	At Diamond crossroads
Saint Patricks Street	1	7125F3001_02	Junction of St Patricks Street and Fairmount Road
Starrs Crescent	1	7125F3001_17	Adjacent to house number 26 LHS
Shandon Park	1	7125F3005_02_3	Parking area adjacent to house number 38
Hunters Crescent	1	7125F3009_01	Adjacent to house number 50 RHS
Edinburgh Villas	1	7125F3019_10_3	Adjacent to house number 7
Edinburgh Park	1	7125F3019_12	Adjacent to house number 7
Kilskeery Road Kilskeery	1	7125F3175_01	Footpath adjacent to house number 1
Drumrawn Road	1	7125U1504_02	Junction of Drumrawn Road and Omagh Road
Mullagharn Road	2	7125U1511_04	Junction Mullagharn Road and Tarlum Road
Mullagharn Road		7125U1511_04	Entrance to Gillygooley Presbyterian Church
Woodview Crescent	1	7125U1638_01	At junction of Woodview Crescent and Ballyard Road
Johnston Park	1	7125U3000_03	Adjacent to house number 21
Festival Park	1	7125U3000_07	Adjacent to playground
George Street	1	7125U3000_10	At gable of property number 14
High Street	1	7125U3000_13	At First Trust Bank
Sunningdale	1	7125U3001_02	Opposite house number 6
Sunningdale	2	7125U3001_03	Opposite entrance to Ashley Gardens
Sunningdale		7125U3001_03	Adjacent to house number 31
Ashley Gardens	1	7125U3001_04	Adjacent to house number 8
Cannonhill	3	7125U3001_09	Adjacent to house number 2
Cannonhill		7125U3001_09	Opposite house number 20 at junction with Coolnagard Drive
Cannonhill		7125U3001_10	Adjacent to house number 17
Orchard Terrace	1	7125U3001_11	Adjacent to house number 1
Glenview Road	1	7125U3001_12	Opposite Glenview Cottages
Saint Columbas Terrace	1	7125U3001_13	Adjacent to house number 16 RHS
Kevlin Glen	2	7125U3001_42	Opposite house number 2
Kevlin Glen		7125U3001_45	First junction on RHS adjacent to house number 1
Coolnagard Gardens	1	7125U3001_48	At lamp post no 15
Coolnagard Meadows	1	7125U3002_05	At house number 2
Ashbourne Close	1	7125U3002_23	Opposite house number 3 on verge
Ashbourne Heights	1	7125U3002_24	Adjacent to house number 2
Culmore Park	1	7125U3003_11	Opposite and adjacent to steps
Culmore Park	1	7125U3003_12	Adjacent to house number 22
Ardmore Avenue	1	7125U3003_19	Adjacent to house number 3

Omagh			
Road name	Number of bins	Sector number	Description
Ardmore Avenue	1	7125U3003_19	Junction of Ardmore Avenue and Ardmore Crescent
Ardmore Drive	1	7125U3003_20	Adjacent to house number 13
Ardmore Heights	1	7125U3003_21	Between houses number 10 and 12
Sperrin Park	1	7125U3003_25	Adjacent to house number 21
Sperrin Close	1	7125U3003_27	Adjacent to house number 5
Sperrin Close	1	7125U3003_28	Adjacent to house number 12
Lismore Park	1	7125U3003_30	Adjacent to house number 19
Sperrin View	1	7125U3003_32	Adjacent to house number 2
Clontarf Drive	1	7125U3003_34	Junction of Clontarf Drive and Lismore Park
Clontarf Drive	1	7125U3003_36	Adjacent to house number 22 LHS
Bracken Close	1	7125U3003_40	Adjacent to house number 27 at end CDS
Bracken Walk	1	7125U3003_42	Adjacent to house number 15 before CDS end LHS
Lambrook Road	1	7125U3003_46	Close to junction of Lambrook Road and Clanabogan Road
Drumannon Drive	1	7125U3003_47	Opposite house number 1
Drumannon View	1	7125U3003_48	Adjacent to house number 15
Drumannon Rise	1	7125U3003_49	Adjacent to house number 14
Drumannon Grove	1	7125U3003_50	Adjacent to house number 14
Lambrook Heights	1	7125U3003_53	Adjacent to house number 28
Lambrook Gardens	1	7125U3003_56	Adjacent to house number 12
Tamlaght Mews	1	7125U3003_58	Junction os Tamlaght Mews and Sperrin Park
Lammy Drive	1	7125U3005_01	Adjacent to house number 38
Shandon Park	1	7125U3005_05	Adjacent to house number 90
Glenard Road	1	7125U3005_06	Adjacent to house number 2
Shandon Park	1	7125U3005_08	Adjacent to house number 90
Summerfield Court	1	7125U3005_14	Adjacent to house number 38
Centenary Park	1	7125U3005_21	Opposite house number 51 LHS
Strule Park	1	7125U3005_23	Opposite house number 28 LHS
Brookmount Crescent	1	7125U3005_29	Corner adjacent to house number 13
Brookmount Heights	1	7125U3005_34	Adjacent to house number 68 at hammer head
Brookmount Heights	1	7125U3005_36	Adjacent to house number 29
Brookmount Heights	1	7125U3005_37	Adjacent to house number 81
Thornville Park	1	7125U3006_01	Opposite house number 1
Thornville Park	1	7125U3006_01	Adjacent to house number 17
Harmony Heights	2	7125U3006_03	Between house numbers 6 and 8
Harmony Heights		7125U3006_04	Adjacent to house number 18
Gortmore Park	2	7125U3006_05	Between house numbers 70 and 71
Gortmore Park		7125U3006_06	Between hoise numbers 42 and 43
Edenvale Park	2	7125U3006_08	Adjacent to house number 2
Edenvale Park		7125U3006_08	Adjacent to house number 7 RHS

Omagh			
Road name	Number of bins	Sector number	Description
Gortrush Park	1	7125U3006_09	Opposite house number 48
Randall Drive	1	7125U3006_15	Adjacent to house number 5 RHS
Brook Valley	1	7125U3006_18	Adjacent to house number 1
Brook Valley	1	7125U3006_18	Adjacent to house number 11
Watson Park	1	7125U3009_01	Junction of Watson Park and Coneywarren Drive
Ashgrove Park	1	7125U3009_09	Adjacent to house number 4 RHS
Townview Avenue North	2	7125U3009_09	At house number 11
Townview Avenue North		7125U3009_09	At house number 9
Gortmore Drive	1	7125U3009_12	Adjacent to house number 17
Gortmore Gardens	1	7125U3009_16	At junction with Derry Road LHS
Castle Place	1	7125U3009_18	Adjacent to house number 3
Gortview Close	2	7125U3011_03	Adjacent to house number 21
Gortview Close		7125U3011_08	Adjacent to Community Centre
Lisanelly Park	2	7125U3013_03	Corner adjacent to house number 44
Lisanelly Park		7125U3013_03	Corner between house numbers 28 and 30 LHS
Saint Julians Cottages	1	7125U3013_05	Close to junction with Saint Julians Road
Birchwood	8	7125U3014_09	Adjacent to house number 19
Birchwood		7125U3014_09	Adjacent to house number 37 RHS
Birchwood Drive		7125U3014_10	Adjacent to house number 1 Birchwood Drive
Birchwood Drive		7125U3014_10	Between house numbers 11 and 12 Birchwood Drive
Birchwood Drive		7125U3014_37	Opposite house number 2 Birchwood Drive
Birchwood		7125U3014_11	Adjacent to house number 7 RHS
Birchwood		7125U3014_11	Adjacent to house number 9
Birchwood		7125U3014_11	Adjacent to house number 36
Saint Julians Way	1	7125U3014_22	Adjacent to house number 32 RHS at CDS
Castlevew Crescent	1	7125U3014_29	Adjacent to house number 3
Camowen Terrace	1	7125U3015_03	At entrance to nursing home
Breezemount Park	1	7125U3016_03	Adjacent to house number 4 at corner
Kylemore Gardens	1	7125U3018_03	Adjacent to house number 13
Oakland Villas	1	7125U3018_08	Adjacent to house number 15
Castle Oaks	1	7125U3018_12	Adjacent to house number 3 at CDS on RHS
Pinewood Avenue	2	7125U3019_23	Adjacent to house number 1
Pinewood Avenue		7125U3019_23	Adjacent to house number 16
Knocksilla Park	2	7125U3020_02	Adjacent to house number 14
Knocksilla Park		7125U3020_02	Adjacent to house number 27
Edenfel Park	1	7125U3020_11	Turning head between house numbers 29 and 30
Winters Gardens	1	7125U3020_18	Opposite house number 37

Omagh			
Road name	Number of bins	Sector number	Description
Knockgreenan Park	1	7125U3020_24	At turning head in Knockgreenan Park
Knockgreenan Avenue	1	7125U3020_25	Adjacent to house number 23
Thornlea	5	7125U3020_33	Junction of Thornlea and Winters Lane
Thornlea		7125U3020_33	Adjacent to house number 41
Thornlea		7125U3020_33	At turning head adjacent to house number 105
Thornlea		7125U3020_34	Adjacent to house number 24
Thornlea		7125U3020_36	Between house numbers 45 and 47
Crevenagh Drive	1	7125U3020_41	Opposite house number 13
Crevenagh Way	1	7125U3020_42	Adjacent to house number 1
Crevenagh View	1	7125U3020_44	Adjacent to house number 3 at CDS RHS
Retreat Heights	2	7125U3024_01	Adjacent to house number 20 RHS
Retreat Heights		7125U3024_03	Between house numbers 29 and 31
Richmond Park	1	7125U3025_03	Adjacent to house number 51
Pinefield Brae	1	7125U3025_22	At house number 8 at corner
Mclvor Villas	1	7125U3026_02	Parking area adjacent to house number 18
Knocknamoe Heights	2	7125U3026_03	Opposite house number 1
Knocknamoe Heights		7125U3026_03	Opposite house number 3
Glendore Wood	1	7125U3026_04	Adjacent to house number 74 RHS
Gleannan Brae	1	7125U3026_15	Turning head between house numbers 6 and 7
Gleannan Park	2	7125U3026_16	Junction of Gleannan Park and Gleannan Close
Gleannan Park		7125U3026_16	Turning head adjacent to house number 12
Slieveard Rise	1	7125U3026_18	Opposite house number 16 RHS
Cranny Grove	1	7125U3029_03	Close to junction with Riverview Road
Belvedere Park	2	7125U3032_01	Adjacent to house number 1 close to Dublin Road junction
Belvedere Park		7125U3032_01	At entrance to electricity sub-station
Drumragh View	1	7125U3032_05	Junction of Drumragh View and Lissan Drive
Oak Rise	1	7125U3032_06	Close to junction of Oak Rise and Lissan Court
Kevlin Heights	1	7125U3032_09	Junction of Kevlin Heights and Kevlin Road
Dergmoney Heights	1	7125U3032_11	Opposite house number 1 LHS
Anderson Gardens	1	7125U3032_13	Edge of driveway of house number 5
Townview Avenue South	2	7125U3032_15	At house number 18
Townview Avenue South		7125U3032_18	At house number 24
Lissan View	2	7125U3032_20	Adjacent to house number 26
Lissan View		7125U3032_20	Adjacent to house number 29
Berkeley Heights	2	7125U3034_01	Adjacent to house number 6
Berkeley Heights		7125U3034_02	Adjacent to house number 31

Omagh			
Road name	Number of bins	Sector number	Description
Muldoon Park	1	7125U3100_01	Adjacent to playground
Fairview Gardens	2	7125U3100_03	Close to junction of Fairview Gardens and Stoneybatter Road
Fairview Gardens		7125U3100_11	Adjacent to house number 17
Fairview Heights	1	7125U3100_13	Adjacent to house number 30
Abbey Court	1	7125U3100_16	Adjacent to house number 4
Gardrum Heights	2	7125U3102_01	At turning head in CDS adjacent to house number 17
Gardrum Heights		7125U3102_02	Opposite house number 3
Shanmullagh Drive	1	7125U3105_02	At turning head adjacent to house number 8
Montague Villas	1	7125U3108_01	At junction with Omagh Road RHS
Cavanamara View	1	7125U3152_01	Adjacent to house number 4 CDS RHS
McKeowne Villas	1	7125U3587_02	Junction of McKeowne Villas and Termon Road
McNulty Park	1	7125U3800_01	Opposite house number 7
Loughmacrory Park	1	7125U3801_01	At rear of house number 14
Loughrey Terrace	1	7125U4647_02	Opposite house number 12 LHS at corner
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Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in relation to her responsibility for the safe and efficient use of airports, (i) what analysis her Department has carried out into the implications of category 3A and 3B safety standards with Belfast International Airport being closed during the day when other airports continue to accept traffic; (ii) what discussions and meetings she has had with her Department and Executive colleagues to secure additional support to ensure the airport returns to full operations as soon as possible; and (iii) when she expects to be in a position to distribute the remaining money the Executive has set aside for airports.

(AQW 11726/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister for Infrastructure my 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.

Powers to control land in the interest of the safe and efficient use of airports are contained within Part II of the Airports (NI) Order 1994 and relate to land exercisable in connection with airports. This covers adjacent surrounding land and roads, and not the airport itself. Airport safety is dealt with by the Civil Aviation Authority which regulates all UK airports to ensure they comply with relevant international and UK safety standards.

The Executive discussed the issue of temporary financial support for Belfast International and Belfast City airport and Minister Murphy has announced up to £7.8million is being made available for Belfast International and Belfast City Airport. Payments will be administered by the Department of Finance.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure how much financial support her Department has provided for the operation of the airport constabularies at (i) Belfast International Airport; (ii) Belfast City Airport; and (iii) City of Derry Airport, in the last ten years.

(AQW 11727/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister for Infrastructure my powers relating to NI's three main airports are limited to the Airports (NI) Order 1994.

My Department has not provided any financial support for the operation of the airport constabularies.

Mr Blair asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 10713 /17-22, to detail (i) the date of the meeting; (ii) who attended; and (iii) what actions have been taken as result to secure a specific support package for Belfast International Airport.

(AQW 11743/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Executive discussed a proposal tabled by the Finance Minister of 10 December 2020.

The Finance Minister has announced a temporary financial support package for the Belfast International and Belfast City Airports and up to £7.8million is being made available for both airports.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will consider amending the criteria by which roads are added to the gritting network to include roads of strategic significance for rural populations, specifically those such as the B47 which, without treatment, contribute to rural isolation.

(AQW 11745/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In accordance with the current Winter Service policy my Department generally salts roads that carry more than 1,500 vehicles per day. Under this policy small settlements of more than 100 dwellings in rural areas are also connected to the primary gritted network by means of a gritted route.

The B47 between Plumbridge and Cranagh is on the gritting schedule providing a gritted link to the village of Cranagh that is of great assistance to its residents during periods of icy conditions and winter weather. However, the section of the B47 between Cranagh and Draperstown is not gritted as it currently only carries around 600 vehicles per day which is less than half of the threshold required. In more severe weather conditions, this route is given a high priority for secondary treatment which is carried out after primary routes have been gritted and this service will continue.

The application of the current policy ensures that 28% of the total road network, which carries around 80% of traffic, is salted. Application of this policy costs approximately £7 million per annum but this can be as high as £10 million in more severe winter conditions. My Department also deploys grit piles and salt bins on unsalted roads as well as undertaking secondary gritting.

I fully understand and appreciate the concerns of those who use the more lightly trafficked roads and I would like to be able to expand our gritting service to many other routes, but it is simply not feasible to do so given the severe budget constraints facing my Department and continued reliance on in-year monitoring funds being made available to allow the current service to be met. I will nevertheless continue to make representations to the Executive for increased funding for infrastructure given its importance to communities, the economy and environment.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure, following the announcement of the Oxygen and Hydrogen Demonstrator Project, for her assessment on how hydrogen production could become part of the business model of NI Water.

(AQW 11747/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am committed to leading our green economic recovery, and I have supported NI Water's Oxygen and Hydrogen demonstrator project, which aims to use a 1 megawatt electrolyser at a wastewater treatment site in the Belfast area. The purpose of the project is to demonstrate the potential benefits of using oxygen on a large scale to enable wastewater plant efficiency, whilst also producing green hydrogen to use in decarbonising transport and heat production.

The equipment is currently being procured and is expected to be commissioned and on site in Autumn 2021. Following operation over a 12 month period, the project will inform how NI Water could contribute to the growing hydrogen economy whilst generating further efficiencies from using oxygen in the wastewater treatment process.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in relation to the underspend of the £19m support package, what further support she plans to put in place for (i) taxi operators; and (ii) taxi drivers.

(AQW 11771/17-22)

Ms Mallon: At present, the priority is to process the 5000 applications that have been received from taxi drivers for the current scheme. Staff in my Department are working at pace to process all the applications as quickly as possible to enable payments to be made to those who are eligible without delay before Christmas.

At the same time, I continue to keep the position under review and continue to press for the inclusion of the taxi sector in the various other support schemes being taken forward across the Executive.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the average cost to (i) install a street light; and (ii) remove a street light.

(AQW 11810/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can advise that the average cost to install a street light is approximately £2,200 and the average cost to remove a street light is approximately £120.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the average annual cost of street light maintenance per street light.

(AQW 11811/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can advise that the average annual cost for maintenance of a street light, including electricity charges, is approximately £61.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the development of the Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan.

(AQW 11829/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTNTP) will set out future investment and improvement for our strategic transport networks, by road, rail and bus, and reflect my commitment to improving connectivity for the benefit of our economy and communities across Northern Ireland.

My Department is currently progressing the RSTNTP to draft report stage in order to allow it to be presented for public consultation.

I am working closely with officials to monitor progress and intend to publish the draft RSTNTP for public consultation in late 2021, with a view to issuing the finalised Plan in spring 2022.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department will consider the use of alternatives to glyphosate as a weed killer on the road network.

(AQW 11830/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is aware of the concerns about the use of glyphosate and, while it remains an approved product which is effective in the control of weeds, we are keeping its use on the road network under review, in support of the next All-Ireland Pollinator Plan. This plan sets out a range of measures to minimise environmental impact and the next plan period will be 2021-2025.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 11368/17-22, to detail the exact proposals for the Craigantlet junctions.

(AQW 11835/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Whilst a number of preliminary options have been developed for this site, due to the scale and cost of the project and in light of current budgetary constraints, no detailed proposals have been prepared at this time.

I do recognise that this scheme would bring important benefits in terms of road safety and traffic progression and I continue to stress with my Executive colleagues the need for investment in the roads network as part of the current Budget process and for funding to be made available in 2021-22 to allow my Department to adequately manage the road network.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the current level of underspend for the road resurfacing budget for this financial year.

(AQW 11837/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The total budget available for road resurfacing schemes in 2020/21 is currently just over £52.7m, which includes approximately £0.5m allocated following the recent October monitoring round.

At the end of November just over £32m of this budget has been spent and as such my Department does not forecast any underspend of the road resurfacing budget at the end of the financial year.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure what roads are on the current resurfacing reserve list for Millisle.

(AQW 11838/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can confirm that the following roads in Millisle are on my Department's reserve list for resurfacing:

- Moss Road; and
- Ballyblack Road East.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure what roads are on the current resurfacing reserve list for Donaghadee.

(AQW 11839/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can confirm that the following roads in Donaghadee are on my Department's reserve list for resurfacing:

- William Street; and
- Meadowbank Avenue.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will include the extension of the rail line from Portadown to Armagh within the Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan.

(AQW 11840/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTNTP) will set out future investment and improvement for our strategic transport networks, by road, rail and bus, and reflect my commitment to improving connectivity for the benefit of our economy and communities across Northern Ireland.

My priority as Minister is to work on transport infrastructure that improves people's lives, connects communities, and tackles the climate emergency through prioritising active and sustainable transport options. I believe that rail has huge untapped potential to deliver multiple benefits across our island.

To this end, I have committed to providing funding in partnership with Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council for a Feasibility Study into the Portadown to Armagh rail project. The intention is that Council will procure and manage the

development of their Feasibility Study. The RSTNTP is currently in development, and I expect to issue an initial draft for public consultation in late 2021.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 11024/17-22, how many of these road bonds have existed for over four years.

(AQW 11841/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department maintains records of bonds relating to roads within private developments that are being proposed for adoption into the public road network but unfortunately we do not hold the information in a format that allows those that have existed for over 4 years to be easily identified.

There are currently 2991 live bonds in place and the time period for which they will remain in place is dependent on developers' progress in the construction of the associated private development roads. While there are no time constraints on developers to complete a bonded area, where progress is not being made my officials have an enforcement process which, if considered necessary, can be applied to bring the bonded area into the public road network.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure what progress has been made on securing additional funding for roads maintenance in North Down for the year 2021/22.

(AQW 11843/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The 2021-22 budget process has just recently been launched by the Department of Finance and will not conclude until March 2021 when the Finance Minister announces the Departmental budgets in the Assembly. During this process I continue to stress to my Executive colleagues the need for investment in road maintenance and for funding to be made available in 2021-22 to allow my Department to adequately maintain the road network.

The outcome of the 2021-22 Budget process will determine the level of funding available for my Department from which I will decide a road maintenance budget that in turn will be allocated on an equitable basis to all District Councils, including Ards & North Down.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure, with regard to large sections of road verges and footpaths remaining untreated, what evaluation has been carried out on the weed spraying contracts for North Down.

(AQW 11844/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can confirm that my Department completed its weed spraying treatment programme across the Ards and North Down Borough Council area over the spring and early summer period. Certain areas needed a second treatment due to regrowth which was carried out in late summer.

My officials ensure through spot checks that the Contractor's performance is reviewed against the contract requirements.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Infrastructure what action her Department can take to recover costs where damage has been caused to her Department's roads and pathways from a private or commercial party.

(AQW 11882/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The most common private or commercial parties carrying out works in public roads are utility companies who are responsible for permanent reinstatement of roads to an agreed specification. When dealing with utility companies which do not reinstate roads and pathways in a satisfactory manner, the Department applies the procedures for inspection of reinstatements and for dealing with reinstatement failures as set out in the Northern Ireland Road Authority and Utilities Committee (NIRAUC) Code of Practice for Inspections.

Where a utility company or private party fails to reinstate to an acceptable standard, the reinstatement defects are notified to the company responsible for repair or replacement. Additional inspections are carried out by my officials, at the company's expense, to ensure the defects have been corrected.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Infrastructure when MOT tests will return to pre-COVID-19 scheduling standards.

(AQW 11886/17-22)

Ms Mallon: From 20 July, the Driver and Vehicle Agency (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 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.

The DVA has had to make adaptations to vehicle testing processes to ensure the necessary and proportionate control measures are in place to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 which is impacting on capacity. The DVA is planning to increase its vehicle testing capacity from January 2021, to ensure they can test those vehicles whose 12 month TECs will start to expire early next year. To achieve this a range of measures are being adopted including the recruitment of additional

vehicle examiners, the use of overtime to provide cover for leave and sick absence, and the reduction of the current vehicle test time in line with revised risk assessments. The DVA will also continue to issue TECs to all eligible vehicles until normal vehicle testing services resume.

Like all public facing services, the Covid-19 restrictions mean that the DVA will continue 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 when roads and footways in the Kinnegar area of Holywood will be resurfaced.

(AQW 11903/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can confirm that Kinnegar Drive in Holywood is on my Department's reserve list for resurfacing. However, there are development proposals for the area that will necessitate road openings and alterations and therefore I trust you will understand it would not be prudent to consider its inclusion within a resurfacing works programme until these works are complete.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of the Stakeholder Evaluation of Planning in Northern Ireland 2020 survey that found that around 70 per cent of all respondents believed that the planning system in Northern Ireland serves the public interest poorly or very poorly.

(AQW 11904/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I recognise the value of this independent stakeholder evaluation of the planning system in Northern Ireland and it is disappointing to see the results from respondents of this survey. I asked my officials to engage with the survey team at QUB to discuss the results and inform our work in improving the planning system.

My Department is working hard to improve the planning system across a number of fronts. I recently announced the establishment of a Planning Engagement Partnership to look at how to enhance the quality and depth of community engagement in the planning process at both the regional and local planning levels. I am also taking forward a review of the implementation of the 2011 Planning Act to assess the extent to which the strategic objectives of planning reform have been achieved. The review will provide an opportunity to consider further improvements to the planning system for all stakeholders – including councils, developers, and the wider public. My Department is also working closely with statutory consultees through a cross-governmental Planning Forum to implement recommendations from a report on the role of statutory consultees in the planning process with a view to improving the effectiveness of the system in relation to major and economically sensitive applications.

Through all of this work my Department engages very closely with colleagues in local government to address issues which impact the effectiveness of the system across the board. I am fully committed to improving the planning system for all stakeholders.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many Assembly Written Questions her Department received during the period 2 March 2020 to 30 November 2020; and to detail the total cost of responding to these questions.

(AQW 11913/17-22)

Ms Mallon: During the period 2 March – 30 November 2020 I received a total of 1437 written questions.

The information sought in relation to cost is not readily available and may only be obtained at a disproportionate cost.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she has engaged with insurers to ensure drivers have all the necessary documentation to be able to travel on an all-island basis post 31 December 2020.

(AQW 11920/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Following the transition period, a green card will be required for vehicles from GB and NI, being driven in the South or other EU Member States, unless the European Commission declares otherwise. Negotiations are still ongoing.

My officials have been in constant communication with representatives of the Association of British Insurers and the Motor Insurers Bureau to ensure consistent messaging is issued to the public regarding their motor insurance requirements for travel after transition ends. My officials have also liaised with the Post Office in the development of their web information pages on Travelling and Driving in the EU from January 2021.

I recognise the concern of motorists who travel across the border on a regular basis and have made repeated representations to the British Government on the importance of maintaining hassle free transit across the border and have also raised the matter with the Irish Government.

Mr Wells asked the Minister for Infrastructure when she will make a decision on whether to refer the planning application for eight wind turbines at a site near Hilltown in the Mourne to a public inquiry .

(AQW 11932/17-22)

Ms Mallon: At this time consideration of the planning application is still ongoing. A small number of consultation responses are still awaited. When all statutory processes are complete, officials will provide me with a detailed submission for my consideration and I will decide at that time whether to proceed by way of a Public Inquiry or Notice of Opinion to approve or refuse the application.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 11522/17-22, why the guidance referred to prevents her from naming the nine reservoirs in need of urgent intervention.

(AQW 11975/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The 'National Protocol for the Handling, Transmission and Storage of Reservoir Information and Flood Maps (June 2018)' provides guidance on the release into the public domain of detail that may expose potential vulnerabilities in reservoirs. This includes being aware of the aggregation of information in the public domain which, when combined with information available from other sources, would provide information that would increase the security risk to those vulnerable reservoirs.

My officials' view is that disclosure of the exact locations of the nine reservoirs in need of urgent interventions would increase that risk.

Ms Ennis asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the options that her Department is exploring regarding the design of the Narrow Water Bridge Project.

(AQW 11992/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am committed to progressing the Narrow Water Bridge project and I am continuing to engage with Minister Ryan through the North South Ministerial Council to progress this important project.

My officials are working to update an economic appraisal of options for development in collaboration with Southern colleagues in the Department for Transport. Current options under consideration include road design in addition to pedestrian and cycling options alongside low and high level and opening bridge designs to provide a comprehensive consideration of alternatives.

Work has included stakeholder engagement including 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.

Ms Ennis asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on when construction on Narrow Water Bridge will commence.

(AQW 11993/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Further to the response to AQW 11992/17-22, 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.

Mr Stewart asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 5418/17-22, whether she has received an analysis from both a roads safety and an environmental perspective from the Department for Transport of the e-scooter rental pilot scheme in Great Britain.

(AQW 12007/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As I have advised previously it is currently illegal to use electric scooters on public roads or public spaces such as footpaths and cycle paths in Northern Ireland, which aligns with the current position in GB.

Following a public consultation, DfT has offered pilot schemes to local authorities on e-scooter usage, which started in July 2020 and were planned to last for 12 months. Other trials have not started yet, including multiple schemes in London which are due to start spring 2021 and will also last 12 months. The aim of these schemes is to trial e-scooter rental systems, which will help to assess their safety and impact on public spaces, and any environmental benefits.

As the trials do not extend to Northern Ireland, the Department is monitoring the DfT pilot schemes. Once the schemes have concluded, and an analysis of them is made available, I will carefully consider the results to help inform my thinking about the potential use of e-scooters here, including where they may be legally and safely operated.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Infrastructure what research has been done into the provision of a climbing lane at Gortcorbies on the A37 Limavady to Coleraine.

(AQW 12030/17-22)

Ms Mallon: A scheme for a climbing lane on the A37 between Limavady and Coleraine was developed to an advanced stage in 2012, but it did not proceed due to a lack of funding.

My officials are currently developing proposals for a new Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTNTP) which will set out future development proposals of the main road and rail networks to 2035. This plan will consider the climbing lane at Gortcorbies on the A37 between Limavady and Coleraine. I intend to publish the Draft RSTNTP for consultation in late 2021. This will give you the opportunity to support or challenge the proposals being brought forward.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether cross-border travel by Concessionary SmartPass holders will be affected as a result of EU exit with or without a deal.[R]

(AQW 12040/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can confirm that existing arrangements allowing senior citizens resident in Northern Ireland aged 65 or over to travel for free on the island of Ireland will be unaffected by EU Exit. The arrangements allowing senior citizens resident in the Republic of Ireland aged over 66 to travel for free in Northern Ireland will be similarly unaffected. This will be the case regardless of whether a trade deal is reached between the United Kingdom and the EU.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 7927/17-22 (i) whether her officials have carried out an assessment to date for the provision of a footway link between Millreagh Drive and the Upper Newtownards Road; and (ii) if so, the outcome of the assessment.

(AQW 12097/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am pleased to confirm that an assessment for the provision of a footway link between Millreagh Drive and the Upper Newtownards Road has been carried and has concluded that the scheme has merit and as such it will now proceed to the design stage.

I am very keen that schemes like this, which promote sustainable travel, are delivered as quickly as possible. I have therefore asked for this scheme to be taken forward into my Department's works programme with a view to having it started during the next financial year. This will however be subject to availability of funding and successful purchase of land required to facilitate the scheme.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the impact Brexit will have on cross-border travel.

(AQO 1381/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In the event of a non-negotiated outcome, the British Government's decision to leave the European Union has the potential to have a profound effect on the way we live our lives and go about our business on the island of Ireland. I have previously advised the Assembly of my concerns that any movement away from the common standards, practices and regulations which our motorists and transport operators have become accustomed to will have a detrimental impact in areas such as International Haulage Access and Cross Border Public Transport. North/South cooperation on transport is one of many clear obligations of the Protocol, and I expect these obligations must be delivered and protected.

Whilst some issues such as cross-border rail services have been resolved, albeit with additional financial and administrative burdens on NI Railways, a number of key issues are still to be resolved. These include:

- Mutual recognition of new safety authorisations in the post transition period;
- Mutual recognition of train driver licenses; and,
- Alignment of the rail safety certification regime.

I have written to the British Government's Secretary of State for Transport to highlight the specific transport issues we are facing on the island of Ireland and have sought assurances that our businesses and citizens will be neither impeded nor disadvantaged by leaving the European Union. I have also written to the Irish Government, seeking a commitment that detailed engagement between officials can take place in the coming weeks and in the context of the Ireland Protocol to consider alternative options should an agreement not be reached between the British Government and the EU.

While I welcome the European Commission's contingency measures in the event of a 'no-deal' which allow for basic road connectivity to continue for hauliers and bus operators I have some concerns that hauliers will not be able to conduct cabotage or cross-trade.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on her Department's actions to address the climate crisis, ensuring a greener recovery from COVID-19.

(AQO 1386/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Climate Change is the single biggest environmental challenge we face today so it is vital that we work together towards a zero carbon future that delivers better outcomes for our people, our economy and the environment. As Infrastructure Minister, I have set out a clear agenda on climate change. I am committed to using available resources to deliver green infrastructure and sustainable transport, availing of the opportunities that arise when we collaborate within and beyond government. Whilst the Covid-19 pandemic has introduced additional challenges, it has also provided an opportunity to do things differently and encourage a recovery that is green and sustainable.

I established the Blue/Green Infrastructure Fund which is being used to weave blue/green infrastructure together, including new cycle and footpath networks. As part of the green recovery plans, I also announced a number of Active Travel initiatives across Northern Ireland including piloting pop up cycle lanes, pedestrianisation and quiet streets and supporting innovative solutions like the Ormeau Road parklet. The newly designated Walking and Cycling Champion is leading on the identification of collaborative opportunities for investment in infrastructure. The uptake in cycling and walking during the pandemic period has been encouraging and over the next year, I want to build on this green recovery work to ensure that this momentum is sustained.

My Department is continuing to work with other Executive Departments to ensure that this green approach to recovery feeds into the wider work of the Executive. Alongside the Department for Communities and DAERA, the Department is funding the COVID-19 Town Revitalisation Programme, which will fund investment across all Council areas, to support the economic recovery from the COVID emergency, while promoting the physical and mental health of our citizens. The Department will continue to support and play its part in the development and delivery of collaborative strategies such as the Green Growth Strategy and Energy Strategy and development of a Climate Change Act for Northern Ireland to ensure that the future of our transport, water, energy sector and civic planning enables positive contributions to our environment as we continue with a green recovery.

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the timescale for the completion of the proposed realignment schemes as part of the A32 upgrade.

(AQO 1383/17-22)

Ms Mallon: A route improvement strategy for the A32 Omagh to Enniskillen, carried out several years ago, identified nine road improvement schemes along the route. Two of these schemes have been delivered to date, at a cost of approximately £10m; at Drumskinny, opening to traffic in 2011 and at Shannaragh, opening to traffic in late 2012. Of the remaining schemes, the proposed off-line realignment at Cornamuck is the next highest priority. Design and development work, together with necessary statutory processes are now complete on this scheme. Progression to procurement will depend on the availability of funding.

I recognise the importance of investment in our roads infrastructure to address regional imbalance, improve safety and to connect communities and I will continue to work collaboratively with Executive colleagues and through the budgetary process to seek to secure the required level of investment for my capital priorities.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will ring-fence money for the completion of the A32 route from Enniskillen to Omagh.

(AQO 1387/17-22)

Ms Mallon: A route improvement strategy for the A32 Omagh to Enniskillen, carried out several years ago, identified nine road improvement schemes along the route. Two of these schemes have been delivered to date, at a cost of approximately £10m; at Drumskinny, opening to traffic in 2011 and at Shannaragh, opening to traffic in late 2012. Of the remaining schemes, the proposed off-line realignment at Cornamuck is the next highest priority. Design and development work, together with necessary statutory processes are now complete on this scheme. Progression to procurement will depend on the availability of funding.

I recognise the importance of investment in our roads infrastructure to address regional imbalance, improve safety and to connect communities and I will continue to work collaboratively with Executive colleagues and through the budgetary process to seek to secure the required level of investment for my capital priorities.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline her Department's work to deliver fair and inclusive public transport.

(AQO 1382/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In recent years, my Department has made significant strides in improving the fairness and inclusivity of our public transport network and it is my ambition as Minister to ensure those improvements are delivered hand-in-hand with our stakeholders. There is active engagement, for example, with the Inclusive Mobility Transport Advisory Committee (IMTAC), who have provided essential advice to my Department for many years.

My Department delivers an extensive public transport network that reaches significant amounts of people across the North. This service helps provide opportunities for citizens to engage in society and we work hard to improve the infrastructure within this network.

In addition to delivering a public transport network, my Department funds a wide ranging concessionary fares scheme that assists in lowering the cost of travel for some of the most vulnerable in our society.

I continue to push for an inclusive public transport network and I am therefore pleased to announce the following accessibility changes to Translink's network:

- By July 2021 the requirement to reserve a wheelchair space 24 hours in advance will be removed from all Translink services. Permanent wheel chair spaces will be available on all bus and Goldliner vehicles.
- Audio and Visual 'next stop' announcements will be installed on all Goldline services by June 2022.

In addition, I have recently announced the purchase of 145 additional buses and coaches for our public transport network. All of them will have a permanent wheelchair space available for use and audio visual information on board. I can also confirm that all vehicle designs will be consulted upon with IMTAC.

I recognise that the public transport network does not meet the needs of everyone, and it is for that reason my Department funds a number of Community Transport organisations to deliver specialist transport services enabling some of the most vulnerable groups and communities in our society to access opportunities.

Whilst there is more work to do to improve the inclusivity of our public transport network ranging from the design of our buses and stations to the information we deliver to customers, I can assure members that I am committed to continuing to work on this important area.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline her Department's preparations to alleviate winter pressures on roads.

(AQO 1388/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am pleased to advise that the delivery of winter service functions by my Department has been ongoing this season since 19th October. As part of planning for the winter gritting programme, my Department ensures that adequate staff are available, all winter service equipment is in satisfactory working order and that there are adequate supplies of salt. There are also arrangements in place to supplement stocks of salt during the winter period, if necessary.

A full winter service will operate until 5th April 2021 and will have approximately 300 staff and 130 gritters available and ready to salt main roads as required in order to help drivers across Northern Ireland deal with the wintry conditions. So far this winter just over 6,100 tonnes of salt has been used with 53,500 tonnes stored in our salt barns and another 20,000 tonnes held separately as a Strategic Reserve. The average cost of providing winter service is £7.0 million but can be as high as £10.0 million in more severe winter conditions.

I have already allocated £3m from the Opening 2020/21 resource baseline budget as a contribution to funding for Winter Service and a recent COVID bidding exercise has provided a further £5m of funding for Winter Gritting Services. A further bid for £2m, which would be required to deal with a more severe winter, was unsuccessful in October Monitoring. Funding for the Winter Service will be reassessed as part of January Monitoring and a further bid will be submitted as required.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how she will address the problem of untreated sewage entering Lough Erne.

(AQO 1385/17-22)

Ms Mallon: If untreated sewage is entering Lough Erne, it is for the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) to investigate, identify the source and consider if the polluter may be liable for prosecution. In terms of my Department's responsibilities, I have been advised by NI Water that there is concern regarding Combined Sewer Overflows (CSOs) from its sewer network around Lough Erne. NI Water is progressing a drainage area study for Enniskillen, which when completed, will identify solutions to help reduce the risk of pollution from CSOs.

However, these solutions will only be delivered if NI Water receives adequate funding for the next price control period, PC21, during which a number of these schemes are planned to be delivered.

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many applications for connection to the water and sewerage network in North Antrim have been rejected due to a lack of operational capacity since December 2019.

(AQO 1384/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am advised that planning applications are sorted by council areas, which often overlap multiple Parliamentary Constituencies. In this instance, NI Water has checked fully processed planning decisions made by Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council, and Mid and East Antrim Borough Council. This broadly covers the North Antrim area as requested.

In terms of this, from the 1st December 2019 through to the 1st December 2020, 80 applications have been refused by Council Planners within these two council areas. Of those 80 applications, none was refused due to water or wastewater capacity issues.

Department of Justice

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice what consideration she has given to the provision of a shelter for male victims of domestic abuse and domestic violence and their children.

(AQW 6784/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): During 2019/20 a total of 1,147 households presented as homeless due to domestic violence, with 1,088 accepted as statutorily homeless (Full Duty Applicants). As the Housing Executive record data by type of household, i.e. Single Adults, Small Families, Large Families, etc., it has been possible to identify only those cases which come into the Single Adult (Male) category.

Based on the above and data availability, 123 single males presented as homeless, citing domestic violence during 2019/20, of which 120 were accepted as statutorily homeless.

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 is due to progress to a public consultation before the beginning of the next financial year.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice on how many occasions has the Legacy Inquest Unit been involved in data breaches in regard to inappropriate disclosure of personal details of security and ex-security forces.

(AQW 11144/17-22)

Mrs Long: Since its establishment in 2019-20, the Legacy Inquest Unit has reported two incidents of inadvertent disclosure regarding former security forces personnel. Both incidents were reported promptly to the DoJ's Records and Information Management Team, in accordance with data incident procedures and have been contained; the relevant material was tracked to ensure its immediate and permanent deletion

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice, in light of the claimed lessons learned by the Inquest Legacy Unit from the unlawful data breaches in the Jordan Inquest, how did a repeat performance occur in the McConville Inquest.

(AQW 11145/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Legacy Inquest Unit was established in 2019-20, a number of years after the data incident in the Jordan Inquest was reported. The specific issue in the McConville case related to material provided by a Disclosure Provider and the LIU took a series of measures in response including imposing a moratorium on issuing further disclosure without approval of the Head of Unit.

A full review of disclosure management procedures, including looking at the responsibilities and obligations of partner Disclosure Providers, is currently underway.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice whether (i) the serious data breach by the Legacy Inquest Unit was brought to their attention by an outside organisation; and (ii) the unit itself was unaware of their breach until it was reported to them.

(AQW 11146/17-22)

Mrs Long: On 2nd October 2020, the Crown Solicitors Office (CSO) communicated to the Legacy Inquest Unit (LIU) that a document sent to it by the Unit earlier that day contained the names of security forces personnel involved in the McConville inquest. The document had been disseminated by the LIU to the legal representatives acting on behalf of the family at the same time as it had been provided to CSO.

When the LIU became aware of the inadvertent disclosure, LIU staff took immediate steps, in line with data security procedures, in order to track the information and ensure its immediate and permanent deletion.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice what plans her Department has for tougher sentences for cases of continuous anti-social behaviour.

(AQW 11174/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Anti-social Behaviour (Northern Ireland) Order 2004 defines Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) as "acting in a manner that caused or was likely to cause harassment, alarm or distress to one or more persons not of the same household as himself".

The original premise of the term was to describe a range of behaviours which had a negative effect on quality of life issues, minor disorder and incivilities; behaviour which was below the threshold for criminal prosecution.

However the subjective nature of this definition has resulted in the term ASB being used intermittently to describe a wide range of behaviours which can be considered anti-social such as noise nuisance through to more serious crimes such as rioting.

There are a range of measures available to the relevant authorities to deal with those who continually engage in ASB. While a number of powers sit outside the Department of Justice, my department has responsibility for the legislation relating to Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs).

ASBOs are designed as a measure to prevent an individual from continuing with specified anti-social behaviour. If, without reasonable excuse, a person does anything which they are prohibited from doing by an anti-social behaviour order, they shall be guilty of an offence. An adult may be liable, on summary conviction, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding six months or to a fine not exceeding the statutory maximum, or to both; or on conviction on indictment, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding five years or to a fine, or to both.

Sentencing in individual cases is a matter for the independent judiciary. My Department's role is to provide an appropriate legislative framework within which the judiciary can effectively discharge that function.

In response to concerns on sentencing policy my department recently conducted a sentencing review consultation. This examined a range of sentencing issues, included a review of community sentencing, focussed on ways to enhance

community sentences and provide for their wider utilisation, and considered ways to ensure that the judiciary have a sufficient range of sentencing options available to them. The aim is to better enable the provision of appropriate, proportionate and fair sentences that fit the offence.

A summary of responses to the consultation can be seen at: <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/sentencing-policy-review-consultation-responses>

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Justice how her Department is assisting in addressing anti-social behaviour among minors in West Tyrone.

(AQW 11207/17-22)

Mrs Long: My Department, together with the Northern Ireland Policing Board, fund Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs) who play a key role in the Department's response to local communities concerns regarding anti-social behaviour (ASB).

Both Fermanagh and Omagh and Derry and Strabane PCSPs actively support initiatives within the West Tyrone Constituency to address this issue. This work has included Derry and Strabane PCSP funding a range of projects in Strabane Town, Derg DEA and Sperrin DEA which focussed on delivery of diversionary programmes, support for a Volunteer Safety Warden scheme, intergenerational projects and youth engagement programmes.

Fermanagh and Omagh PCSP are supporting the delivery of a Youth Community Resolution Programme aimed at young people who have been identified as being on the cusp of entering the criminal justice system through their behaviour. This involves the young person, together with a parent/guardian, examining the consequences of this behaviour on both themselves and others.

The PCSPs are also engaged with local partners, such as Councils, PSNI, Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the Education Authority amongst others, through a range of mechanisms including ASB forums, Support Hubs and other inter-agency meetings. These mechanisms provide an effective multi-agency response to ASB and support for vulnerable individuals in their local community.

The Youth Justice Agency works with children aged 10 – 17 years and delivers a number of initiatives in the area. These include a Children's Diversion Forum and delivery of Community Resolution Notice education sessions for young people, who come to police attention for ASB and low level offences, to help address issues around negative behaviour.

At a wider level, my Department chairs the multi-agency Community Safety Board which provides a structure that aims to link the strategic and operational response to community safety issues. This structure affords a joined up response at operational level, where necessary, by stepping up and standing down a Response Group on any particular issue where evidence shows this is needed.

In response to concerns around a possible escalation in ASB amongst young people over the Hallowe'en school holidays, a Response Group facilitated partnership working, helping to ensure delivery of bespoke diversionary measures and detached youth work across council areas over the two week period.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice what disciplinary procedures have been instigated, and against how many staff, arising from the Inquest Legacy Unit's serious data breach in the Jordan Inquest.

(AQW 11233/17-22)

Mrs Long: The data incident in the Jordan inquest occurred in 2016, before the establishment of the Legacy Inquest Unit in 2019-20.

Disciplinary procedures were not instigated against the member of staff involved in the inadvertent disclosure of material in the Jordan Inquest. Instead, line manager's advice and guidance issued and additional data awareness training was undertaken.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice what disciplinary procedures have been instigated, and against how many staff, arising from the Inquest Legacy Unit's serious data breach in the McConville Inquest.

(AQW 11234/17-22)

Mrs Long: Disciplinary procedures were not instigated against the member of staff involved in the inadvertent disclosure of material, which was subsequently contained, in the McConville Inquest. Instead, line manager's advice and guidance issued and additional data awareness training was undertaken.

This incident was immediately reported to the DoJ's Records and Information Management Team, in line with data incident procedures.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice whether the same staff were involved in the serious data breaches in the Jordan and McConville Inquests, or how many were implicated in each.

(AQW 11235/17-22)

Mrs Long: The data incident in the Jordan inquest was reported in 2016. The Legacy Inquest Unit was established in 2019-20. The incident in the McConville inquest occurred in October of this year. The incidents did not involve the same staff.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice whether any specific internal investigation, not a broader review, has commenced within the Department of Justice into the serious data breach in the McConville Inquest.

(AQW 11236/17-22)

Mrs Long: The data incident in the McConville Inquest was immediately reported to the DoJ's Records and Information Management Team (RIMT), in line with data incident procedures. The Legacy Inquest Unit (LIU) continues to work with the RIMT with a view to identifying the key issues concerning this incident and further bolstering disclosure management procedures.

The LIU will work to ensure that all parties, including Disclosure Providers, fully accept the responsibilities that are placed upon them, in terms of collating, indexing and redacting disclosure material.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice why the Legacy Inquest Unit or the Department of Justice has not self-referred itself to the Information Commissioner's Office arising from the unlawful data breach in the McConville Inquest.

(AQW 11330/17-22)

Mrs Long: The data incident in the McConville Inquest was immediately reported to the DoJ's Records and Information Management Team (RIMT), in line with data incident procedures.

Having reviewed the incident and the Legacy Inquest Unit's follow-up actions, DoJ's RIMT concluded that the threshold for reporting to the ICO had not been met.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice how did the Department of Justice reach the conclusion that the threshold for reporting the serious data breach in the McConville Inquest to the Information Commissioner's Office has not been met.

(AQW 11331/17-22)

Mrs Long: The data incident in the McConville Inquest was immediately reported to the DoJ's Records and Information Management Team (RIMT), in line with data incident procedures. When the LIU became aware of the inadvertent disclosure, LIU staff took immediate steps, in line with data security procedures, in order to track the information and ensure its immediate and permanent deletion.

The threshold for reporting to the ICO is that an incident should be reported if the incident itself introduces a risk to the rights and freedoms of the individual concerned. The assessment was that in this case the threshold had not been met.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice what representations were made following the serious data breach in the McConville Inquest to the Legacy Inquest Unit by the Crown Solicitors Office (CSO); and whether the CSO requested the Legacy Inquest Unit to refer themselves to the Information Commissioner's Office.

(AQW 11332/17-22)

Mrs Long: Following the reporting of the data incident in the McConville Inquest, the Legacy Inquest Unit (LIU) and the Crown Solicitors Office corresponded to seek to address a number of the concerns raised by the individuals affected. This included the appropriate handling and dissemination of information and possible reporting to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO).

The data incident in the McConville Inquest was immediately reported to the DoJ's Records and Information Management Team (RIMT), in line with data incident procedures. In this instance RIMT advised that the threshold for reporting to the ICO had not been met.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice have the PSNI been advised of the serious data breach in the McConville Inquest.

(AQW 11333/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Crown Solicitors Office (CSO), who represent the individuals involved, reported the data incident in the McConville inquest to the PSNI immediately it became aware of the incident, on 2 October 2020.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice what assurance she can give security force personnel that, after the breaches in the McConville Inquest, there will not be future data protection breaches of sensitive personal information.

(AQW 11419/17-22)

Mrs Long: In response to this incident, the Legacy Inquest Unit (LIU) took a series of measures including imposing a moratorium on issuing further disclosure without approval of the Head of Unit, a review of the process for checking material to be disseminated and providing additional data awareness training for all staff.

A full review of disclosure management procedures, including looking at the responsibilities and obligations of partner Disclosure Providers, is currently underway. Information management and data security is a standing agenda item in all LIU weekly team meetings.

The LIU will continue to work with the DoJ's Records and Information Management Team (RIMT) with a view to identifying the key issues concerning this incident and further bolstering disclosure management procedures.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice, given recent developments, what steps her Department will take regarding the Knock Iveagh wind turbine site.

(AQW 11561/17-22)

Mrs Long: My Department has no powers in relation to the Knock Iveagh wind turbine. It is a matter for the local Council and the Department for Infrastructure to consider such powers as they may have under the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice, following the review into the 15 sexual offence cases where earlier convictions were quashed, how many of the 17 victims indicated they did not wish fresh prosecutions.

(AQW 11587/17-22)

Mrs Long: Decisions on prosecutions, and the tests for prosecution undertaken in reaching those decisions, are a matter for the independent Public Prosecution Service.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice, following the review into the 15 sexual offence cases where earlier convictions were quashed, to detail the charges which will now be pursued in the 3 cases where fresh proceedings are being initiated.

(AQW 11588/17-22)

Mrs Long: I refer the Member to the response to AQW 11587/17-22.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice what plans she has to further reform the legal aid system.

(AQW 11611/17-22)

Mrs Long: The purpose of legal aid reform has been to ensure access to justice while improving value for money. A lot has already been achieved to reduce costs and improve delivery but there is still much more to do and I expect to build on the good work already done during the remainder of the mandate. The current focus of reform is on the introduction of standard fees in the most common types of family law cases, which will reduce costs and improve predictability; the introduction of a statutory registration scheme to improve and provide assurances on the quality and value for money for legally aided services; and a pilot scheme to allow for the appointment of expert witnesses in some circumstances without prior authority of the Legal Services Agency.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice, in light of the Spotlight programme and the information that the IRA still has access to weapons, (i) what discussions she is having with the PSNI to ascertain the true extent of this information; and (ii) whether she will make an announcement to the Assembly on those discussions and findings.

(AQW 11612/17-22)

Mrs Long: My Department does not comment on leaked documents. I am clear that there is no place for paramilitarism in Northern Ireland. The criminal activity of those involved in paramilitary groups and those associated with them are primarily operational matters for the Police Service of Northern Ireland. The Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime programme commits all Executive parties to provide strong political leadership and to support a cross-Executive approach to tackling the harm caused by those who continue to use the cloak of Paramilitarism to pursue their own ends through organised crime and criminality.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice, following the review into the 15 sexual offence cases where earlier convictions were quashed, whether she will, in due course, advise the Assembly if any claims by those not being re-prosecuted are lodged and the relevant outcomes.

(AQW 11650/17-22)

Mrs Long: Following a review of the 15 cases where the convictions had to be set aside because of a legislative error which caused them to be invalid, the Public Prosecution Service concluded that 12 of the cases no longer met the test for prosecution.

I will inform the Assembly of any claims lodged in respect of these cases and of their outcome.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of the roll-out of spit and bite guards by the PSNI, despite the Northern Ireland Policing Board's recommendation to phase out their use by the end of 2020.

(AQW 11666/17-22)

Mrs Long: I am aware of the Chief Constable's decision to issue all operational police officers with spit and bite guards as a temporary measure for the duration of the Covid-19 pandemic. I am also aware of the detail in the Northern Ireland Policing Board's thematic review of the policing response to Covid-19 including the recommendation to phase out the use of spit and mouth guards by 31 December 2020.

The use of spit and bite guards is an operational matter for the Chief Constable and I am committed to respecting his operational independence.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) the number of Children's Order cases appealed from the Family Proceedings Courts to the Family Care Centre across Northern Ireland; (ii) the number of these cases where respondents applied for Legal Aid and detailed either domestic abuse or domestic violence in their statement of case in their application to the Legal Services Agency Northern Ireland; and (iii) the number of these respondents who subsequently received Legal Aid in such cases, for each year for the past ten years.

(AQW 11700/17-22)

Mrs Long:

- (i) the number of Children's Order cases appealed from the Family Proceedings Courts to the Family Care Centre across Northern Ireland for each of the last ten years is set out below

Year	Number of Appeals Disposed
2010	111
2011	118
2012	157
2013	166
2014	189
2015	215
2016	192
2017	145
2018	159
2019	142
Total	1594

- (ii) as it is only possible to link the number of court disposals with applications for legal aid by a case by case analysis, the information provided below indicates the number of applications for legal aid in respect of matters appealed to Family Care Centres over the same period. The information is retained by reference to whether legal aid was sought to bring or to defend an appeal and the nature of the proceedings. As such it is not possible to indicate whether the application was brought by someone who was originally a respondent in the Family Proceedings Courts and detailed domestic abuse or domestic violence in the application as this information would require a review of each individual application.

Year	Application to Bring an Appeal	Application to Resist an Appeal	Application to Bring and Resist an Appeal	Application to be Represented	Total
2010	65	62			127
2011	94	128			222
2012	115	133			248
2013	141	124			265
2014	173	149	2		324
2015	145	111			256
2016	135	86			221
2017	118	90			208
2018	134	111			245
2019	102	100	1	16	219
Total	1222	1094	3	16	2335

(iii) the number of applications outlined in (ii) which subsequently received legal aid is detailed below

Year	Application to Bring an Appeal	Application to Resist an Appeal	Application to Bring and Resist an Appeal	Application to be Represented	Total
2010	48	62			110
2011	83	127			210
2012	95	132			227
2013	126	124			250
2014	152	149	2		303
2015	119	111			230
2016	98	86			184
2017	104	88			192
2018	118	109			227
2019	59	76		10	145
Total	1002	1064	2	10	2078

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of antisocial behaviour orders issued in each year since its introduction in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 11708/17-22)

Mrs Long: Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) were introduced to Northern Ireland under the Anti-social Behaviour (Northern Ireland) Order 2004. Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS) has provided the following breakdown on the number of ASBOs issued, both on conviction and application, from 2007 - 2019. NICTS has advised that information on the number of ASBOs issued prior to 2007 would require a manual trawl of Court files and therefore could only be provided at a disproportionate cost.

Anti-Social Behaviour Orders: 2007 - 2019

Year	Anti-Social Behaviour Orders issued (both on conviction and on application)
2007	26
2008	45
2009	29
2010	26
2011	18
2012	12
2013	11
2014	13
2015	2
2016	2
2017	5
2018	3
2019	5
Total	197

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Justice what discussions she has had with the Chief Constable in relation to prosecutions by the Police Service of Northern Ireland's Wildlife Crime Unit.

(AQW 11740/17-22)

Mrs Long: I meet with the Chief Constable on a regular basis and we discuss a range of issues. However, you will appreciate that prosecutions by the Police Service of Northern Ireland's Wildlife Crime Unit are an operational matter for the Chief Constable. Nonetheless, I am aware that all reports of wildlife crime are taken seriously by PSNI.

I should also stress that I condemn, in the strongest possible terms, any crime carried out against wildlife.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice what work her Department has undertaken with the Department of Education to establish (i) whether a correlation exists; and (ii) a link between offending or reoffending and non-attendance at school.
(AQW 11885/17-22)

Mrs Long: It is long accepted that a correlation exists between a child coming to the attention of the criminal justice system and where school attendance/educational engagement is sporadic or poor. My Department therefore recognises the importance of working with the Department of Education and the Education Authority (EA) in order to maximise the educational achievement and participation of young people who are in conflict with the law, or who are on the cusp of the criminal justice system.

The Youth Justice Agency (YJA) is tasked with supporting and challenging children and young people – both in the community and in custody – to avoid offending and reoffending and to engage across Departments to ensure a joined up approach to improve outcomes for these children. To this end YJA deliver on a number of initiatives with the Department of Education and the EA. For example:

- Our community teams work alongside EA colleagues in supporting attendance and engagement in all its forms i.e. in mainstream school, at Education Other Than School (EOTAS) or at Training Programmes. YJA staff work on a case by case basis with EA colleagues and with children to problem solve, to develop realistic time tables and to negotiate phased returns to the class room following periods of absence or exclusion;
- Community YJA teams work alongside parents and carers and EA professionals in order to contribute to specialist assessments including those for ADHD and autism in order to agree how best to keep these children in education;
- Community YJA teams also contribute to the development of safety planning processes in those instances where a serious offence has occurred in the school setting in order to allow the victim to remain safe in school and for the perpetrator to remain in school on a managed basis;
- YJA has also developed and are delivering an Early Stage Intervention (ESI) Schools programme. In the last business year sessions, programmes and interventions were delivered to over 5000 school age pupils across a wide variety of schools in Northern Ireland. Interventions included drug and alcohol awareness, sexting, responsible citizenship and bespoke programmes delivered to children on the edge of suspension and expulsion. Programmes involve local PSNI and YJA staff working closely with teaching staff to re-engage these children in an accredited programme of active citizenship and improved school attendance. In light of Covid developments some of these sessions are now delivered virtually via "google classrooms";
- YJA has developed a Children's Diversion Forum (CDF) in partnership with the EA, PSNI and the Trusts. The overall aim is to provide a joint platform for discussion and to put in place supports for children in order that they do not progress to the formal justice system. The EA are typically represented by Education and Welfare Officers who can identify those children who are absent or not engaging with education so that early supports can be put in place; and, finally,
- Statutory education provision within custodial services (Woodlands EOTAS) is delivered by the EA. The importance of quality education in custody is noted, but so too is the transition back to mainstream education in the community on release in order to minimise reoffending. To this end Woodlands and EA have a range of protocols in place to ensure continuity of educational placement(s). The attainment of qualifications whilst in Woodlands assists the young person in returning to education, or to ensure a training place or employment.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of (i) badger-baiting crimes recorded in Northern Ireland; and (ii) prosecutions, in each of the last three years.
(AQW 11888/17-22)

Mrs Long: The recording of information on the number of badger baiting crimes and 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 that part of your question to the PSNI.

Prosecutions and convictions data held in Departmental datasets are on the basis of offence description and there is no specific offence for badger baiting. However, offences relating to badgers are listed as being eligible for prosecution under the Protection of Badgers Act 1992. There have been no cases completed at courts in the period 2017 – 2019, which involved a prosecution for an offence under this legislation.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of (i) organised dog fighting crimes recorded in Northern Ireland; and (ii) prosecutions, in each of the last three years.
(AQW 11889/17-22)

Mrs Long: The recording of information on the number of organised dog fighting crimes and 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 that part of your question to the PSNI.

The information requested in part (ii) is not readily available. Prosecutions and convictions data held in Departmental datasets are on the basis of offence description and there is no specific offence for organised dog fighting.

To identify all potential cases which related to organised dog fighting would require a manual search of case records for offences which involved animal cruelty or offences under the Dogs Order (Northern Ireland) 1983, of which there have been more than 60 dealt with at courts in each of the last three years. We estimate that to locate, retrieve and extract any information that might be relevant to your request would involve work of more than the appropriate limit.

The appropriate limit is specified in regulations and for central government is set at £700. There were over 260 potentially relevant cases over the period. It is estimated that to search systems manually for relevant information to identify whether offences for which a conviction was handed down related to organised dog fighting, it will take one member of staff approximately ten minutes per case, giving a total of over 43 hours work. At a cost of £25 per hour, this equates to over £1,075 which is higher than the appropriate limit.

However, there have been fewer than three cases completed at courts in the period 2017 – 2019, which involved a prosecution for an offence which involved a reference to animal fighting in the offence description and none of these resulted in a conviction. Such offences may be prosecuted under the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 or the Dogs (Northern Ireland) Order 1983.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of the Northern Ireland Audit Office report on Managing children who offend: follow up review.

(AQW 11902/17-22)

Mrs Long: I welcome this report and its recommendations. I also welcome the Audit Office's acknowledgement of the good progress made to date and I will ensure that my Department continues to build on this going forward.

However, since it is possible that this NIAO report could be the subject of a PAC hearing, it would be inappropriate for me to comment in detail in advance of a potential PAC hearing and the DoF Minister's response.

Department for the Economy

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy how her Department will review the effectiveness and future role of the Economic Advisory Group, following the initial twelve month period, as indicated in the terms of reference.

(AQW 9368/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): The Terms of Reference for the Economic Advisory Group (EAG) makes a commitment to review the effectiveness and role of the group going forward, after an initial twelve month period. The approach to this review is yet to be determined.

My officials will engage with EAG members on the review, in the New Year.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for the Economy whether she intends to bring forward a grant scheme to assist businesses experiencing a downturn in trade as a result of COVID-19 public health restrictions but are not legally required to close.

(AQW 9413/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department of Finance's Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS) seeks to support those businesses in commercial premises which were severely restricted in use or forced to close directly by the Health Protection Regulations.

I recognise that not all businesses who have been directly affected by the restrictions are able to access support through this scheme. I have therefore introduced the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme (CRBSS) to provide support to restricted businesses which do not qualify for support through LRSS and businesses in the supply chain of restricted businesses.

Part B of the CRBSS was introduced to support businesses who are not required to close as a result of the Health Protection Regulations but have been directly impacted. This part of the scheme is open to business who supply goods or services to a business named in the regulations, or is reliant upon such a business being open and fully operational in order to trade, and has been severely impacted as result. Details of the scheme are available at <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/covid-restrictions-business-support-scheme-part-b>.

I will continue to examine and pursue further means to support the local economy and business sectors in whatever way possible. In considering further interventions, including additional funding or packages of financial support, it will be for the Executive collectively, to determine how this will be allocated to best support economic recovery moving forward.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of whether the recommendation of a letter from a qualified and registered accountant, lawyer or a current bank manager confirming certain details in applying for the COVID-19 Restrictions Business Support Scheme, may place small and micro businesses at a disadvantage in applying.

(AQW 9571/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Applicants to the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme may supply a template completed by a registered accountant in order to independently verify the eligibility criteria. The option to provide evidence from a lawyer or bank is no longer available.

A completed template may strengthen an application and quicken the verification process. However, this is not mandatory and is therefore only a recommendation and, where necessary, applicants will be contacted if additional information is required to confirm eligibility. This option allows the application process to be streamlined and for much needed payments to be made to businesses more quickly.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the process by which her Department will recover any COVID-19 Business Support Grant payments paid to ineligible recipients, including wind turbine owners.

(AQW 9573/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I would refer the Member to the reply I gave to AQW 9546/17-22.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the legal mechanism through which grants awarded to ineligible businesses may be recovered.

(AQW 9595/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I would refer the Member to the reply I gave to AQW 9546/17-22.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy, in relation to the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme, to detail (i) the number of completed applications submitted thus far; and (ii) the number of applications started, but not yet submitted.

(AQW 9760/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) As of 9 December 2020, 3,718 completed application have been submitted to Part A and 606 have been submitted to Part B.
- (ii) As of 9 December 2020, 739 applications for Part A, and 391 applications for Part B, have been started but not submitted.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy, in relation to the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme, for an estimation of the amount of time it will take from application to the payment of grants.

(AQW 9761/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: All applications received to the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme will be assessed and verified as soon as possible.

Part A opened for applications on 28 October 2020. The first payments were issued on 6 November 2020.

Part B opened for applications on 19 November 2020. The first payments were issued on 8 December 2020.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will engage with the media to support its ongoing financial viability and sustainability.

(AQW 10128/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The 'media' covers a vast range of platforms and businesses, and my Department does not have any specific policy or operational responsibility for this industry.

That said, throughout this pandemic, I have received and responded to a significant volume of correspondence from, or on behalf of, many sectors and occupational areas, including many of our local media organisations.

My Department is also receiving communications and calls from a growing number of sectors and individuals, all of whom believe that they require additional support over and above that already offered by the Executive. Therefore, in considering any further interventions, including new funding or packages of financial support, it will be for the Executive collectively to determine how this limited budget will be allocated, to best encourage and drive economic recovery moving forward.

Mr Frew asked the Minister for the Economy when AQW 7793/17-22 will be answered.

(AQW 10167/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: AQW 7793/17-22 was answered on 03/12/2020.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for the Economy to (i) provide an update on the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme for businesses ordered to close from 16 October 2020; (ii) detail the number of online applications submitted each day; (iii) detail when the first run of payments was authorised or made; (iv) detail the number of payments made thus far; and (v) detail why it has taken so long for these urgent payments to be processed.

(AQW 10282/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) Part A of the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme opened for applications on 28 October 2020. Details are available at <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/covid-restrictions-business-support-scheme-part>.

Part B opened for applications on 19 November 2020. Details are available at <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/covid-restrictions-business-support-scheme-part-b>

The closing date for applications for both parts of the scheme is 16 December 2020.

- (ii) The below table provides daily breakdown of applications received up to and including 9 December 2020.

Date	CRBSS Applications Submitted	
	Part A	Part B
28th Oct 20	253	
29th Oct 20	553	
30th Oct 20	252	
31st Oct 20	72	
1st Nov 20	99	
2nd Nov 20	268	
3rd Nov 20	209	
4th Nov 20	159	
5th Nov 20	143	
6th Nov 20	100	
7th Nov 20	30	
8th Nov 20	32	
9th Nov 20	74	
10th Nov 20	89	
11th Nov 20	100	
12th Nov 20	74	
13th Nov 20	42	
14th Nov 20	18	
15th Nov 20	14	
16th Nov 20	54	
17th Nov 20	66	
18th Nov 20	47	
19th Nov 20	25	19
20th Nov 20	129	68
21st Nov 20	9	8
22nd Nov 20	33	12
23rd Nov 20	47	52
24th Nov 20	83	40
25th Nov 20	86	35
26th Nov 20	77	29

Date	CRBSS Applications Submitted	
	Part A	Part B
27th Nov 20	76	47
28th Nov 20	11	6
29th Nov 20	13	3
30th Nov 20	57	31
1st Dec 20	47	33
2nd Dec 20	44	34
3rd Dec 20	51	34
4th Dec 20	47	43
5th Dec 20	5	3
6th Dec 20	4	3
7th Dec 20	39	27
8th Dec 20	41	42
9th Dec 20	46	37
Grand Total	3,718	606

- (iii) For Part A, the first payments were issued 6 November 2020. For part B, the first payments were issued on 8 December 2020.
- (iv) As of 9 December 2020, 2,862 payments have been issued under Part A totalling around £13.6 million of support. A total of 108 payments have been issued under Part B with a total value of £194,400.
- (v) Invest NI aim to make payments as quickly as possible to successful applicants that have met the eligibility criteria. I have asked officials in Invest NI and my Department to be as flexible and inclusive as possible in the administration of the scheme, to accelerate the processing of applications. I have been encouraged by the progress made to deliver support to eligible businesses to date. Whilst I appreciate the need to ensure funding is allocated in a timely manner, it is imperative that as custodians of public money, reasonable requirements are in place to ensure that funding is directed to those that need it most and to safeguard against fraud.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for the Economy how much government funding is allocated to support medical research charities and organisations.

(AQW 10487/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department does not have policy responsibility for charities and I can confirm that it has not allocated any funding to support medical research charities and organisations.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has considered introducing a COVID-19 safety compliance scheme, similar to food hygiene scores on the doors, to improve safety and public confidence.

(AQW 10500/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Responsibility for such a proposal does not fall within the responsibility of my department. Indeed, as with the food hygiene scores referred to, such an initiative would be for the local councils to implement.

From an Executive perspective, the Department for Communities (DfC) have policy and operational lead responsibility for the eleven councils throughout Northern Ireland.

In July 2020, DfC, along with the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) announced the launch of the COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation Programme. This programme was designed to enable councils to invest in their town and city centres to create spaces that were safer and more inviting to shoppers, visitors and workers.

The first tranche of funding was issued to councils in August, and was used to provide immediate interventions, such as small grants to allow businesses to introduce social distancing measures, the provision of hand sanitiser stations, Covid-related signage, and other infrastructure.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will change the criteria of Part B of the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme, which requires businesses to have been trading immediately prior to 16 October 2020, in order

to support supply chain businesses that have been unable to trade since March due to a long-term reduction in orders and bookings as a result of COVID-19 restrictions on their customers.

(AQW 10587/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme initially required evidence that businesses were trading immediately prior to 16 October 2020 or 5 October 2020 for businesses with the Derry City and Strabane District Council Area. However, this was found to be too restrictive and was therefore relaxed with businesses asked to provide proof of recent trading.

The scheme has been developed with the aim of providing financial support to businesses that have been directly and indirectly impacted by the Health Protection Regulations put in place by the Executive, effective from the 16 October. Therefore, the scheme includes the criteria that businesses have experienced at least a 40% reduction in turnover as a result of the restrictions being in place.

Businesses that have seen a long-term reduction in business may not be prevented from applying to the scheme by the recent trading requirement. However, in applying, evidence must be provided that they have seen a significant reduction in turnover as a result of the restrictions which is in keeping with the policy intention and scheme eligibility criteria, as agreed by the Executive.

In considering further interventions, including additional funding or packages of financial support, it will be for the Executive collectively, to determine how this will be allocated to best support economic recovery moving forward.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy whether businesses forced to close due to 27 November 2020 COVID-19-related restrictions will be allowed to provide a click and collect service from their premises or other agreed pick up point.

(AQW 10686/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Under the latest Covid 19 restrictions, which came into operation on Friday 27 November 2020, businesses are permitted to provide a controlled click and collect service. Guidance has been produced to help businesses provide this service.

Details of the latest version of The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 can be found here:

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 | Department of Health (<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/health-protection-coronavirus-restrictions-no2-regulations-northern-ireland-2020>)

Details of guidance of how businesses should operate their click and collect service can be found here: <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/circuitbreaker-clickandcollect>

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for the Economy what plans she has in place to financially support businesses as they emerge from the current restrictions and as we seek to rebuild our economy.

(AQW 10838/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Executive support during and beyond current restrictions

On Monday 23rd November 2020, the Executive announced a significant business support package worth £213 million.

Amongst the specific measures contained within this package were:

- £55 million to extend the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme to include non-essential retail, leisure, and entertainment businesses now required to close from Friday 27th November;
- £95 million for a High Street Voucher Scheme for a pre-paid card for use in local 'bricks and mortar' businesses throughout Northern Ireland from early 2021;
- £20 million to support company directors who have been without support up until now;
- £20 million to extend the 12 month rate holiday to the manufacturing sector;
- £10.6 million to support 1,000 wet pubs which are experiencing additional financial hardship;
- £5 million to top-up the Tourism and Hospitality Scheme;
- £4.1 million for Bed and Breakfast which previously missed out on business support because they pay domestic rates; and
- £3 million to help local businesses grow their online sales.

My Department will be responsible for the implementation of a number of these new initiatives, all of which are being introduced to help sustain businesses and support the economy as we look to build a clear pathway towards economic recovery.

High Street Stimulus Scheme

This new scheme will provide individuals with a prepaid card to be spent at 'bricks and mortar' businesses including retail, restaurants and hotels before the end of March 2021. It will not be available for online sales, so has a very clear policy objective of spending and supporting 'local'.

The delivery of the scheme will inject £95m into our local economy. The multiplier effect of this innovative financial support offering – from people spending more than the value of the card and the ripple effects from purchases – will deliver even greater economic benefits and make a significant step to kick-starting our recovery.

In developing the specific parameters of the Northern Ireland High Street Stimulus scheme, the Department will implement learnings from Jersey, Malta and other jurisdictions that have rolled out similar initiatives. This will include considerations such as the value of each card and how the scheme will operate in practice.

It is anticipated that the scheme will to 'go live' in early 2021 and its implementation will take into account all public health guidance.

Economic Recovery

In recognition of the fact that COVID-19 will continue to be with us for the months to come, the Executive has also agreed to hold £150 million centrally for longer-term rate relief for the business sectors most severely impacted by the economic consequences of the pandemic. The Finance Minister hopes to make further statements on this in the near future.

Beyond this immediate economic and health crisis, my Department is leading on a piece of work which aims to build the foundations for longer term recovery. To that end, I have set out a vision for "Rebuilding a Stronger Economy" which was published in June 2020.

The key aspect of this work is to address the three key structural weaknesses in our economy namely:

- too few higher paying jobs;
- the skills gap; and
- a regional imbalance.

In the medium and longer term, the Department will seek to embolden the economic recovery by continuing to support individuals, businesses and trade & investment.

In doing so it is essential that the policy responses include opportunities for everyone in Northern Ireland so that the economic recovery is inclusive and regionally balanced. Likewise the economic recovery should be sustainable and environmentally responsible, reducing greenhouse emissions and move the economy towards renewable and green energy production.

My Department and I will continue to work with the Minister for Finance and his officials as part of the Spending Review process to secure the additional resources necessary to assist this economic recovery and growth in the coming years.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister for the Economy when AQW 7362/17-22 will be answered.
(AQW 10969/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: AQW 7362/17-22 was answered on Friday 4th December 2020.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy (i) to detail the mechanism by which the £200 High Street Voucher Scheme will be distributed to households; (ii) which businesses will the voucher be able to be used in; and (iii) how the term household will be determined.

(AQW 10972/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department for the Economy has been provided with a financial allocation for a Northern Ireland wide High Street Stimulus scheme and has a clear policy objective for this funding.

The scheme is not being designed for households. Rather, it will provide individual citizens with a prepaid card to be spent at 'bricks and mortar' businesses including retail, restaurants and hotels before the end of March 2021. It will not be available for online sales.

The delivery of the scheme will inject £95m into our local economy. The multiplier effect of this innovative financial support offering – from people spending more than the value of the card and the ripple effects from purchases – will deliver even greater economic benefits and make a significant step to kick-starting our recovery.

In developing the specifics of the Northern Ireland High Street Stimulus scheme, the Department will implement learnings from Jersey, Malta and other jurisdictions that have rolled out similar initiatives. This will include considerations such as the card value per individual, and how the card will operate in practice.

It is anticipated that the scheme will to 'go live' in early 2021 and its implementation will take into account all public health guidance.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister for the Economy what support there has been for apprenticeships in the Foyle constituency.
(AQW 11005/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department funds ApprenticeshipsNI and Higher Level Apprenticeships programmes across Northern Ireland.

I have introduced an Apprenticeship Recovery Package to minimise apprenticeship job losses, maintain and grow the supply of apprenticeship opportunities and support apprentices who have been displaced and lost their apprenticeship all of which are open to employers in the Foyle constituency.

The Return, Retain, Result Scheme is designed to encourage the return to work and retention to successful apprenticeship completion of up to 4,500 furloughed apprentices across the AppsNI and HLA programmes.

It offers up to £3,700 of support, per apprentice, to employers who return an apprentice from furlough and retain them until they have completed their apprenticeship. This scheme opened for applications on the 1st December, the earliest date a successful application could be made, and therefore no data is currently available on the number of apprenticeship opportunities that this scheme is supporting in the Foyle constituency.

The Recruitment Incentive Scheme offers support of £3,000 to employers for each new apprenticeship opportunity created between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021. This scheme opened for applications on the 16th October 2020. Five applications with a potential value of £14,000 have been submitted from the Foyle constituency to date; one has been fully processed, 3 had not yet met the criteria but will be provided the Apprentice achieves the 90 day retention target, and one has been referred to our Furlough initiative. Employers are eligible for the first payment 90 days after the apprenticeship begins, and with the majority of apprenticeships beginning in September we expect a large increase in the number of applications received in the coming months. Further information on the number of apprenticeship opportunities which this scheme has supported in the Foyle constituency will not be available until early 2021.

In order to aid recovery within the Apprenticeship system my Department also launched an Apprenticeships Challenge Fund with funding allocated to test and trial new innovative approaches to the recruitment and delivery of apprenticeships.

Derry and Strabane District Council were successful in their application for funding to engage with local employers and, in partnership with the Londonderry Chamber of Commerce, to deliver a new marketing campaign that will promote the use and support the delivery of apprenticeships within the council area.

North West Regional College is also involved in another Challenge Fund projects which is an apprenticeship mentoring programme involving all FE colleges.

The launch of these schemes has been supported by an advertising campaign across TV, radio and social media, my Department has also been working with training providers to ensure that employers are made aware of the support available. I would encourage you to utilise your networks to help ensure that employers within the Foyle constituency, and across Northern Ireland, are aware of the support that is available for apprenticeships via the new Apprentice Recruitment Incentive and the Return Retain Result scheme. Further information on both schemes can be found at the following address:

<https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/coronavirus-apprenticeship-recovery-package>

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of whether, following further announcements on the functioning of the Shared Prosperity Fund, enough financial support will be available to maintain projects currently funded via the European Social Fund.

(AQW 11033/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Under the terms of the EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement, the 66 Priority 1 & 2 projects and the Priority 3 Apprenticeships NI programme currently funded via the NI European Social Fund (ESF) Programme 2014-20 will continue to be funded until concluded in March 2022 and December 2023 respectively.

There is insufficient detail in the Shared Prosperity Fund announcements to inform potential future impact. I continue to liaise with the Minister for Finance who leads on the negotiations on the functioning and quantum of replacement funding.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister for the Economy (i) how much her Department is subsidising wind turbines in respect of (a) electricity generation; (b) off-peak electricity generation; and (ii) how much it would cost to stop electricity generation.

(AQW 11053/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department does not offer any subsidies to wind turbines, and it is therefore not possible to provide answers to your specific questions.

Renewable electricity generation is supported through the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation (NIRO). This is a market-based scheme and operates on the basis of trading Renewable Obligation Certificates (ROCs). ROCs are traded through UK-wide auctions or sold to suppliers through private contracts. The price that individual station operators receive for their ROCs is commercially sensitive and as such is not available. Renewable generators will also earn revenue from selling their electricity directly to electricity suppliers or through the Single Electricity Market (SEM).

Onshore wind accounts for almost 85% of total renewable generation in Northern Ireland, and is therefore largely responsible for meeting the NI Executive's 40% renewable electricity target. Stopping such generation would be inconsistent with the legislative requirement for net zero emissions by 2050, negatively impact on the economy and lead to higher electricity prices for consumers.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for the Economy (i) on what date the Business, Planning & Financial Support programme for tourism businesses opened for applications; (ii) on what date the first payment was made; (iii) how many applications were

received, broken down by Assembly constituency, up to and including Friday 27 November; (iv) how many payments were made by this date; and (v) to detail the total amount paid.

(AQW 11108/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) The Tourism NI Covid Business and Financial Planning Support Programme 2020-2021, was launched on 6th October 2020 and opened for applications from tourism businesses on 7th October 2020. Full details of the scheme including nature of support and eligibility are published on Tourism NI's dedicated industry website: <https://covid19.tourismni.com/support-centre/business-support-advice/financial-support/covid-tourism-recovery-planning-support-programme/>
- (ii) The programme is designed to work directly with eligible tourism providers to develop business and financial plans to help their businesses to recover and compete as we emerge from the impact of the current pandemic. The programme does not provide direct financial payments to businesses, but is delivered as part of a managed service framework which Tourism NI has in place to provide support and mentoring to the tourism industry. Applicants to the programme will be able to draw down support from experts on the framework to support them with the development of their business and financial plans.
- (iii) The programme is in two parts, with an initial Expression of Interest to determine eligibility for the scheme. The programme received 81 Expressions of Interest by the deadline of 2nd November 2020. In the second stage of the process, these eligible businesses were asked to submit full applications to the programme by 30th November 2020. Only those businesses that had submitted an expression of interest by the 2nd November deadline could apply. These applications are currently being assessed for eligibility and the level of support required. The 81 Expressions of Interest broken down by constituency are as follows:

Constituency	No. of Expressions of Interest
Belfast North	5
Belfast South	11
Belfast West	1
East Antrim	1
East Londonderry	14
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	9
Foyle	5
Lagan Valley	4
Mid Ulster	3
Newry and Armagh	4
North Antrim	4
North Down	3
South Antrim	3
South Down	8
Strangford	2
West Tyrone	3
Cross Constituency	1
Total	81

For businesses who are not eligible for this direct one-to-one support, Tourism NI has put in place a programme of support including industry webinars and a business helpline with access to specialist advisors. Details of this support are also published on Tourism NI's tourism industry website www.covid19.tourismni.com.

- (iv) As detailed in the answer to point (ii), no payments will be made directly to businesses through this programme.
- (v) No direct payments to businesses will be made from this programme. Applications for business and financial planning support are currently being assessed and as such, the individual cost of support to individual businesses has not yet been determined. However, the programme allows for support to individual businesses up to a maximum cost of £8k per business.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for the Economy (i) on what date the New Apprenticeships Incentive Scheme opened for applications; (ii) on what date the first payment was made; (iii) how many applications were received from the Upper Bann

constituency up to and including Friday 27 November; (iv) how many payments were made by this date; and (v) what is the total amount paid to this constituency under this scheme.

(AQW 11211/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) There are three separate elements to the Apprenticeships Recovery Package:
- New Apprenticeship Recruitment Incentive – A new incentive programme providing up to £3,000 for each new apprenticeship opportunity created between 1st April 2020 and 31st March 2021. This scheme opened for applications on the 16th October 2020.
 - Return Retain Result (RRR) – An Incentive scheme providing up to £3,700 to support employers to return apprentices from furlough and retain their employment through to the 31st March 2021 and on to successful completion of their apprenticeship. This scheme opened for applications on the 1st December 2020, the earliest date a successful application could be made; and
 - Challenge Fund – A one off grant scheme to promote the development and testing of new and innovative models of apprenticeship recruitment and delivery. The Challenge Fund opened for applications on 28th September 2020 and closed on 23rd October 2020.
- (ii) Since the launch of the schemes the Department has been working at pace to put in place the people, processes and systems required to administer the schemes and process payments. The first round of payments, for the New Apprenticeship Recruitment Incentive, were processed on Friday 27th November 2020 with payments expected to reach bank accounts no later than Thursday 3rd December 2020.
- (iii) As of the 3rd December 2020 a total of 144 applications had been received for the Recruitment of New Apprenticeships Incentive Scheme of which 3 were from employers based in the Upper Bann constituency.
- As the Return, Retain and Result Scheme opened for applications on 1st December 2020 no applications had been received.
- The Challenge Fund received 46 applications with 13 successful projects. Successful applicants have been notified and the Department is working closely to agree costs and activities ahead of Letter of Offer issue. A number of projects are NI wide and therefore cannot be broken down into constituencies.
- (iv) To date 12 payments have been processed for the New Apprenticeship Recruitment Incentive scheme. No payments have been made from the Challenge Fund, as final activities and costs are in the process of being agreed, and no payments have been made for RRR which just opened for applications on the 1st December 2020.
- (v) To date no payments have been made to employers from the Upper Bann constituency for the New Apprenticeships Recruitment scheme. A key aspect of this scheme is to promote longer term outcomes with employers becoming eligible for a payment of £2,000 90 days after the beginning of the new apprenticeship followed by a payment of £1,000 200 days from the beginning of the apprenticeship. The Department is working with all those who have submitted applications deemed ineligible to ensure applications are re-submitted with required evidence once the 90 day milestone has been reached at which point payment will be made.

The launch of these schemes has been supported by an advertising campaign across TV, radio and social media, my Department has also been working with training providers to ensure that employers are made aware of the support available. I would encourage you to utilise your networks to help ensure that employers within your constituency, and across Northern Ireland, are aware of the support that is available for apprenticeships via the new Apprentice Recruitment Incentive and the Return Retain Result scheme. Further information on both schemes can be found at the following address:

<https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/coronavirus-apprenticeship-recovery-package>

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) the date New Apprenticeships Incentive Scheme opened for applications; (ii) the date the first payment was made; (iii) how many applications were received from the South Down constituency up to and including Friday 27 November; (iiii) how many payments were made by this date; and (v) the total amount paid to this constituency under this scheme.

(AQW 11222/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (vi) There are three separate elements to the Apprenticeships Recovery Package:
- New Apprenticeship Recruitment Incentive – A new incentive programme providing up to £3,000 for each new apprenticeship opportunity created between 1st April 2020 and 31st March 2021. This scheme opened for applications on the 16th October 2020.
 - Return Retain Result (RRR) – An Incentive scheme providing up to £3,700 to support employers to return apprentices from furlough and retain their employment through to the 31st March 2021 and on to successful completion of their apprenticeship. This scheme opened for applications on the 1st December 2020, the earliest date a successful application could be made; and

- Challenge Fund – A one off grant scheme to promote the development and testing of new and innovative models of apprenticeship recruitment and delivery. The Challenge Fund opened for applications on 28th September 2020 and closed on 23rd October 2020.
- (vii) Since the launch of the schemes the Department has been working at pace to put in place the people, processes and systems required to administer the schemes and process payments. The first round of payments, for the New Apprenticeship Recruitment Incentive, were processed on Friday 27th November 2020 with payments expected to reach bank accounts no later than Thursday 3rd December 2020.
- (viii) As of the 3rd December 2020 a total of 144 applications had been received for the Recruitment of New Apprenticeships Incentive Scheme of which 14 were from employers based in the South Down constituency.
- As the Return, Retain and Result Scheme opened for applications on 1st December 2020 no applications had been received.
- The Challenge Fund received 46 applications with 13 successful projects. Successful applicants have been notified and the Department is working closely to agree costs and activities ahead of Letter of Offer issue. A number of projects are NI wide and therefore cannot be broken down into constituencies.
- (ix) To date 12 payments have been processed for the New Apprenticeship Recruitment Incentive scheme. No payments have been made from the Challenge Fund, as final activities and costs are in the process of being agreed, and no payments have been made for RRR which just opened for applications on the 1st December 2020.
- (x) In total £2,000 had been made to employers from the South Down constituency for the New Apprenticeships Recruitment scheme. A key aspect of this scheme is to promote longer term outcomes with employers becoming eligible for a payment of £2,000 90 days after the beginning of the new apprenticeship followed by a payment of £1,000 200 days from the beginning of the apprenticeship. The Department is working with all those who have submitted applications deemed ineligible to ensure applications are re-submitted with required evidence once the 90 day milestone has been reached at which point payment will be made.

The launch of these schemes has been supported by an advertising campaign across TV, radio and social media, my Department has also been working with training providers to ensure that employers are made aware of the support available. I would encourage you to utilise your networks to help ensure that employers within your constituency, and across Northern Ireland, are aware of the support that is available for apprenticeships via the new Apprentice Recruitment Incentive and the Return Retain Result scheme. Further information on both schemes can be found at the following address:

<https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/coronavirus-apprenticeship-recovery-package>

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) the date the Business, Planning & Financial Support Grant scheme opened for applications; (ii) the date the first payment was made; (iii) how many applications were made from the South Down constituency up to and including Friday 27 November; (iv) how many payments were made by this date; and (v) the total amount paid.

(AQW 11223/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Business & Financial Planning Grant is a scheme to provide financial support to businesses to work with a consultant to assess the impact of COVID-19 and develop a strategic recovery plan with financial forecasts.

This is different to an emergency support scheme, such as those provided by the NI Executive and the UK government.

- (i) The Business and Financial Planning Grant scheme opened to applications on 7 October.
- (ii) Grant amounts are offered based on applications submitted with payments made once the work is completed. Payments will be made against receipted expenses which must be submitted by the business by 26 February 2021. All payments are expected to be made by 31 March 2021.
- (iii) When the scheme closed at 5pm on Monday 30 November there had been 9 applications submitted from the South Down constituency. A further 6 applications were in progress at that time and Invest NI has allowed a further week, until 5pm on Monday 7 December, for these applications to be submitted.
- (iv) All applications must be assessed and approved before a Letter of Offer can be made. We aim to have this completed within 3 weeks of the application closing date.
- Of those applications approved to date, 5 Letters of Offer have been issued. Payment of grants will be made against receipted expenses which must be submitted by the business by 26 February 2021.
- (v) Payments will be made against receipted expenses which must be submitted by the business by 26 February 2021. All payments are expected to be made by 31 March 2021.

Mr Catney asked the Minister for the Economy (i) on what date the New Apprenticeships Incentive Scheme opened for applications; (ii) on what date the first payment was made; (iii) how many applications were received from the Lagan Valley constituency up to and including Friday 27 November; (iv) how many payments were made by this date; and (v) what is the total amount paid to this constituency under this scheme.

(AQW 11242/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) There are three separate elements to the Apprenticeships Recovery Package:
- New Apprenticeship Recruitment Incentive – A new incentive programme providing up to £3,000 for each new apprenticeship opportunity created between 1st April 2020 and 31st March 2021. This scheme opened for applications on the 16th October 2020.
 - Return Retain Result (RRR) – An Incentive scheme providing up to £3,700 to support employers to return apprentices from furlough and retain their employment through to the 31st March 2021 and on to successful completion of their apprenticeship. This scheme opened for applications on the 1st December 2020, the earliest date a successful application could be made; and
 - Challenge Fund – A one off grant scheme to promote the development and testing of new and innovative models of apprenticeship recruitment and delivery. The Challenge Fund opened for applications on 28th September 2020 and closed on 23rd October 2020.
- (ii) Since the launch of the schemes the Department has been working at pace to put in place the people, processes and systems required to administer the schemes and process payments. The first round of payments, for the New Apprenticeship Recruitment Incentive, were processed on Friday 27th November 2020 with payments expected to reach bank accounts no later than Thursday 3rd December 2020.
- (iii) As of the 3rd December 2020 a total of 144 applications had been received for the Recruitment of New Apprenticeships Incentive Scheme of which one was from an employer based in the Lagan Valley constituency.
- As the Return, Retain and Result Scheme opened for applications on 1st December 2020 no applications had been received.
- The Challenge Fund received 46 applications with 13 projects chosen to receive funding. Successful applicants have been notified and officials are working closely to agree costs and activities ahead of Letter of Offer issue. A number of projects are NI wide and therefore cannot be broken down into constituencies.
- (iv) To date 12 payments have been processed for the New Apprenticeship Recruitment Incentive scheme. No payments have been made from the Challenge Fund, as final activities and costs are in the process of being agreed, and no payments have been made for RRR which just opened for applications on the 1st December 2020.
- (v) To date no payments have been made to employers from the Lagan Valley constituency for the New Apprenticeships Recruitment scheme. A key aspect of this scheme is to promote longer term outcomes with employers becoming eligible for a payment of £2,000 90 days after the beginning of the new apprenticeship followed by a payment of £1,000 200 days from the beginning of the apprenticeship. The Department is working with all those who have submitted applications deemed ineligible to ensure applications are re-submitted with required evidence once the 90 day milestone has been reached at which point payment will be made.
- The launch of these schemes has been supported by an advertising campaign across TV, radio and social media, my Department has also been working with training providers to ensure that employers are made aware of the support available. I would encourage you to utilise your networks to help ensure that employers within your constituency, and across Northern Ireland, are aware of the support that is available for apprenticeships via the new Apprentice Recruitment Incentive and the Return Retain Result scheme. Further information on both schemes can be found at the following address:

<https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/coronavirus-apprenticeship-recovery-package>

Mr Muir asked the Minister for the Economy whether a business case has been approved for the High Street Voucher scheme.

(AQW 11256/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: On 23 November 2020, the Executive announced a £300 million support package, including over £200 million for businesses and £98 million of COVID-19 funding to support the most vulnerable.

This overall package included £95 million for a High Street Stimulus Scheme, which the Department for the Economy have been asked to take forward, and it is anticipated that the scheme will be implemented in early 2021.

This is a significant policy intervention, which will inject £95 million into our local economy. The multiplier effect of this innovative financial support offering – from people spending more than the value of the card and the ripple effects from purchases – will deliver even greater economic benefits and make a significant step to kick-starting our recovery.

It is recognised that a proportionate business case will be required to fully appraise the options and undertake the necessary analysis that will inform the final policy parameters of this scheme.

Officials are currently working on the development of the business case, and it is hoped to have this finalised before the end of this year.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy (i) on what date the Business, Planning & Financial Support Grant scheme opened for applications; (ii) on what date the first payment was made; (iii) how many applications were made from the

Foyle constituency, up to and including Friday 27 November 2020; (iv) how many payments were made by this date; and (v) what is the total amount paid.

(AQW 11260/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Business & Financial Planning Grant is a scheme to provide financial support to businesses to work with a consultant to assess the impact of COVID-19 and develop a strategic recovery plan with financial forecasts.

This is different to an emergency support scheme, such as those provided by the NI Executive and the UK government.

- (vi) The Business and Financial Planning Grant scheme opened to applications on 7 October.
- (vii) Grant amounts are offered based on applications submitted with payments made once the work is completed. Payments will be made against receipted expenses which must be submitted by the business by 26 February 2021. All payments are expected to be made by 31 March 2021.
- (viii) When the scheme closed at 5pm on Monday 30 November there had been 3 applications submitted from the Foyle constituency. One further application was in progress at that time and Invest NI has allowed a further week, until 5pm on Monday 7 December, for applications to be submitted.
- (ix) All applications must be assessed and approved before a Letter of Offer can be made. We aim to have this completed within 3 weeks of the application closing date. Payment of grants will be made against receipted expenses which must be submitted by the business by 26 February 2021.
- (x) Payments will be made against receipted expenses which must be submitted by the business by 26 February 2021. All payments are expected to be made by 31 March 2021.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 9679 17-22, to detail the change in circumstances that subsequently indicated the project might not reach an outcome that fully covers the investment made by Invest NI.

(AQW 11290/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Glenmore Anaerobic Digestion Facility has experienced a number of challenges at various stages, including design challenges and operational difficulties.

Construction of the plant was commenced in February 2016 by Williams Industrial Services (WIS). Basic construction works were materially complete by June 2017, but plant commissioning challenges were encountered. WIS was also contracted by Glenmore Generation Limited (GGL) to operate and maintain the plant, but went into administration in February 2018.

An independent Management and Operations Review was commissioned in 2019 and a new operator was appointed in early 2020, with the company preparing a turnaround plan.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for the Economy what plans he has in place to (i) financially support high street retailers when they emerge from the current restrictions; and (ii) support their sustainability into the future.

(AQW 11294/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Executive support during and beyond current restrictions

On Monday 23rd November 2020, the Executive announced a significant business support package worth £213 million.

Amongst the specific measures contained within this package were:

- £55 million to extend the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme to include non-essential retail, leisure, and entertainment businesses now required to close from Friday 27th November;
- £95 million for a High Street Voucher Scheme for a pre-paid card for use in local 'bricks and mortar' businesses throughout Northern Ireland from early 2021;
- £20 million to support company directors who have been without support up until now;
- £20 million to extend the 12 month rate holiday to the manufacturing sector;
- £10.6 million to support 1,000 wet pubs which are experiencing additional financial hardship;
- £5 million to top-up the Tourism and Hospitality Scheme;
- £4.1 million for Bed and Breakfast which previously missed out on business support because they pay domestic rates; and
- £3 million to help local businesses grow their online sales.

My Department will be responsible for the implementation of a number of these new initiatives, all of which are being introduced to help sustain businesses and support the economy as we look to build a clear pathway towards economic recovery.

High Street Stimulus Scheme

This new scheme will provide individuals with a prepaid card to be spent at 'bricks and mortar' businesses including retail, restaurants and hotels before the end of March 2021. It will not be available for online sales, so has a very clear policy objective of spending and supporting 'local'.

The delivery of the scheme will inject £95m into our local economy. The multiplier effect of this innovative financial support offering – from people spending more than the value of the card and the ripple effects from purchases – will deliver even greater economic benefits and make a significant step to kick-starting our recovery.

In developing the specific parameters of the Northern Ireland High Street Stimulus scheme, the Department will implement learnings from Jersey, Malta and other jurisdictions that have rolled out similar initiatives. This will include considerations such as the value of each card and how the scheme will operate in practice.

It is anticipated that the scheme will to 'go live' in early 2021 and its implementation will take into account all public health guidance.

Economic Recovery

In recognition of the fact that COVID-19 will continue to be with us for the months to come, the Executive has also agreed to hold £150 million centrally for longer-term rate relief for the business sectors most severely impacted by the economic consequences of the pandemic. The Finance Minister hopes to make further statements on this in the near future.

Beyond this immediate economic and health crisis, my Department is leading on a piece of work which aims to build the foundations for longer term recovery. To that end, I have set out a vision for "Rebuilding a Stronger Economy" which was published in June 2020.

The key aspect of this work is to address the three key structural weaknesses in our economy namely:

- too few higher paying jobs;
- the skills gap; and
- a regional imbalance.

In the medium and longer term, the Department will seek to embolden the economic recovery by continuing to support individuals, businesses and trade & investment.

In doing so it is essential that the policy responses include opportunities for everyone in Northern Ireland so that the economic recovery is inclusive and regionally balanced. Likewise the economic recovery should be sustainable and environmentally responsible, reducing greenhouse emissions and move the economy towards renewable and green energy production.

My Department and I will continue to work with the Minister for Finance and his officials as part of the Spending Review process to secure the additional resources necessary to assist this economic recovery and growth in the coming years.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy (i) on what date the Covid Restrictions Business Support Part A and Part B schemes opened for applications; (ii) on what date the first payment under each part of the scheme was made; (iii) how many applications were received for each part of the scheme from the West Tyrone constituency up to Friday 27 November; (iv) how many payments were made by this date; and (v) what is the total amount paid.

(AQW 11310/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) Part A of the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme opened for applications on 28 October 2020. Part B opened on 19 November 2020.
- (ii) First payments relating to Part A of the scheme were issued on 6 November 2020. First payments of Part B were issued on 8 December 2020.

See below table for information in response to parts (iii) to (v). Information correct as of 8 December 2020.

Scheme	Parliamentary constituency	Applications received	Payments issued	Value of payments
CRBSS Part A	West Tyrone	176	131	£600,600
CRBSS Part B	West Tyrone	28	9	£16,200

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy (i) on what date the New Apprenticeships Incentive scheme opened for applications; (ii) on what date the first payment was made; (iii) how many applications were received from the West Tyrone constituency up to and including Friday 27 November; (iv) how many payments were made by this date; and (v) what is the total amount paid to this constituency under this scheme.

(AQW 11311/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (xi) There are three separate elements to the Apprenticeships Recovery Package:
 - New Apprenticeship Recruitment Incentive – A new incentive programme providing up to £3,000 for each new apprenticeship opportunity created between 1st April 2020 and 31st March 2021. This scheme opened for applications on the 16th October 2020.

- Return Retain Result (RRR) – An Incentive scheme providing up to £3,700 to support employers to return apprentices from furlough and retain their employment through to the 31st March 2021 and on to successful completion of their apprenticeship. This scheme opened for applications on the 1st December 2020, the earliest date a successful application could be made; and
 - Challenge Fund – A one off grant scheme to promote the development and testing of new and innovative models of apprenticeship recruitment and delivery. The Challenge Fund opened for applications on 28th September 2020 and closed on 23rd October 2020.
- (xii) Since the launch of the schemes the Department has been working at pace to put in place the people, processes and systems required to administer the schemes and process payments. The first round of payments, for the New Apprenticeship Recruitment Incentive, were processed on Friday 27th November 2020 with payments expected to reach bank accounts no later than Thursday 3rd December 2020.
- (xiii) As of the 3rd December 2020 a total of 144 applications had been received for the Recruitment of New Apprenticeships Incentive Scheme of which 6 were from employers based in the West Tyrone constituency.
- As the Return, Retain and Result Scheme opened for applications on 1st December 2020 no applications had been received.

The Challenge Fund received 46 applications with 13 successful projects. Successful applicants have been notified and the Department is working closely to agree costs and activities ahead of Letter of Offer issue. A number of projects are NI wide and therefore cannot be broken down into constituencies.

- (xiv) To date 12 payments have been processed for the New Apprenticeship Recruitment Incentive scheme. No payments have been made from the Challenge Fund, as final activities and costs are in the process of being agreed, and no payments have been made for RRR which just opened for applications on the 1st December 2020.
- (xv) To date no payments have been made to employers from the West Tyrone constituency for the Recruitment of New Apprenticeships Scheme. A key aspect of this scheme is to promote longer term outcomes with employers becoming eligible for a payment of £2,000 90 days after the beginning of the new apprenticeship followed by a payment of £1,000 200 days from the beginning of the apprenticeship. The Department is working with all those who have submitted applications deemed ineligible to ensure applications are re-submitted with required evidence once the 90 day milestone has been reached at which point payment will be made.

The launch of these schemes has been supported by an advertising campaign across TV, radio and social media, my Department has also been working with training providers to ensure that employers are made aware of the support available. I would encourage you to utilise your networks to help ensure that employers within your constituency, and across Northern Ireland, are aware of the support that is available for apprenticeships via the new Apprentice Recruitment Incentive and the Return Retain Result scheme. Further information on both schemes can be found at the following address:

<https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/coronavirus-apprenticeship-recovery-package>

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy (i) on what date the New Apprenticeships Incentive scheme opened for applications; (ii) on what date the first payment was made; (iii) how many applications were received from the Foyle constituency up to and including Friday 27 November; (iv) how many payments were made by this date; and (v) what is the total amount paid to this constituency under this scheme.

(AQW 11360/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (xvi) There are three separate elements to the Apprenticeships Recovery Package:
- New Apprenticeship Recruitment Incentive – A new incentive programme providing up to £3,000 for each new apprenticeship opportunity created between 1st April 2020 and 31st March 2021. This scheme opened for applications on the 16th October 2020.
 - Return Retain Result (RRR) – An Incentive scheme providing up to £3,700 to support employers to return apprentices from furlough and retain their employment through to the 31st March 2021 and on to successful completion of their apprenticeship. This scheme opened for applications on the 1st December 2020, the earliest date a successful application could be made; and
 - Challenge Fund – A one off grant scheme to promote the development and testing of new and innovative models of apprenticeship recruitment and delivery. The Challenge Fund opened for applications on 28th September 2020 and closed on 23rd October 2020.
- (xvii) Since the launch of the schemes the Department has been working at pace to put in place the people, processes and systems required to administer the schemes and process payments. The first round of payments, for the New Apprenticeship Recruitment Incentive, were processed on Friday 27th November 2020 with payments expected to reach bank accounts no later than Thursday 3rd December 2020.
- (xviii) As of the 3rd December 2020 a total of 144 applications had been received for the Recruitment of New Apprenticeships Incentive Scheme of which 6 were from employers based in the Foyle constituency.

As the Return, Retain and Result Scheme opened for applications on 1st December 2020 no applications had been received.

The Challenge Fund received 46 applications with 13 successful projects. Successful applicants have been notified and the Department is working closely to agree costs and activities ahead of Letter of Offer issue. A number of projects are NI wide and therefore cannot be broken down into constituencies.

- (xix) To date 12 payments have been processed for the New Apprenticeship Recruitment Incentive scheme. No payments have been made from the Challenge Fund, as final activities and costs are in the process of being agreed, and no payments have been made for RRR which just opened for applications on the 1st December 2020.
- (xx) To date £6,000 has been paid to employers from the Foyle constituency for the Recruitment of New Apprenticeships Scheme. A key aspect of this scheme is to promote longer term outcomes with employers becoming eligible for a payment of £2,000 90 days after the beginning of the new apprenticeship followed by a payment of £1,000 200 days from the beginning of the apprenticeship. The Department is working with all those who have submitted applications deemed ineligible to ensure applications are re-submitted with required evidence once the 90 day milestone has been reached at which point payment will be made.

The launch of these schemes has been supported by an advertising campaign across TV, radio and social media, my Department has also been working with training providers to ensure that employers are made aware of the support available. I would encourage you to utilise your networks to help ensure that employers within your constituency, and across Northern Ireland, are aware of the support that is available for apprenticeships via the new Apprentice Recruitment Incentive and the Return Retain Result scheme. Further information on both schemes can be found at the following address:

<https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/coronavirus-apprenticeship-recovery-package>

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for the Economy how many applications to Part A of the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme remain unpaid.

(AQW 11411/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As of 9 December, a total of 623 applications out of the 3,718 submitted to Part A of the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme, remain to be either paid, fully processed or rejected.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on the schemes that have been rolled out specifically to support apprenticeships during COVID-19.

(AQW 11449/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: There are three separate elements to the Apprenticeships Recovery Package:

1 New Apprenticeship Recruitment Incentive

This new incentive programme provides up to £3,000 for each new apprenticeship opportunity created between 1st April 2020 and 31st March 2021. This scheme opened for applications on the 16th October 2020. To date 144 applications have been received, 12 applications have been fully processed and a further 8 applications are awaiting payment.

A total of 124 applications have not yet met the criteria. A key aspect of this scheme is to promote longer term outcomes with employers becoming eligible for a payment of £2,000 90 days after the beginning of the new apprenticeship followed by a payment of £1,000 200 days from the beginning of the apprenticeship. The Department is working with all those who have submitted unsuccessful applications to ensure they are re-submitted with required evidence once the 90 day milestone has been reached at which point payment can be made. Those that have submitted an application which has been deemed ineligible, as the apprentice was formerly furloughed, have been signposted to the Return Retain Result scheme for which they are eligible.

2 Return Retain Result (RRR)

The RRR scheme provides a maximum of £3,700 to employers per eligible apprentice with separate incentives for return to work (£500), employment retention between 1st December 2020 and 31st March 2021 (up to £2,000) and for successful completion of their apprenticeship (£1,200). This scheme just opened for applications on the 1st December 2020, the earliest date a successful application could be made, and therefore information is not yet available on the number of apprenticeship opportunities which the scheme is supporting.

3 Challenge Fund

This Challenge Fund was designed to promote the development and testing of new and innovative models of apprenticeship recruitment and delivery. The scheme opened for applications on 28th September 2020 and closed on 23rd October 2020. The Challenge Fund received 46 applications with 13 projects chosen to receive funding. Successful applicants have been notified and are working closely with officials to agree costs and activities ahead of Letter of Offer issue.

The launch of these schemes has been supported by an advertising campaign across TV, radio and social media. My Department has also been working with training providers, Councils, The NI Careers Service and other stakeholders to

ensure that employers are made aware of the support available. I would encourage you to utilise your networks to help ensure that employers within your constituency, and across Northern Ireland, are aware of the support that is available for apprenticeships via the new Apprentice Recruitment Incentive and the Return Retain Result scheme.

Further information on both schemes can be found at the following address:

<https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/coronavirus-apprenticeship-recovery-package>

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister for the Economy when her Department will open a financial support scheme for the newly self-employed, company directors and all other workers who have been excluded from financial support to date.

(AQW 11454/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I am pleased to announce the Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme (NSESS) launched 3 December 2020 and will provide £10 million in financial support to newly self-employed individuals (sole traders and those in partnerships) whose business is adversely impacted by Covid and who have not been able to access support from the UK government's Self-Employed Income Support Scheme.

A one-off taxable grant of £3,500 will be provided. This will enable support to be provided to approximately 2,900 newly self-employed individuals.

Further eligibility details and an eligibility tracker are available at this website:

<https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/newly-self-employed-support-scheme>

The NSESS will close for applications at 6pm 7 January 2020

Additionally, the Executive has agreed a funding allocation of £20million to support sole limited company directors who have been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic but were not eligible for the UK Government's Self Employed Income Support Scheme.

My Department continues to work on bringing forward further details of this scheme as a matter of a priority and these will be made available on the NI Business Info website in due course.

I am committed to continue to work with my Executive colleagues to identify further means of support for as many local businesses as possible during this difficult time.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 10294/17-22, (i) what plans she has to use the remaining budget of £22.2 million for people in Northern Ireland, as opposed to it being returned to the UK Government Treasury; and (ii) to detail her concerns about how the review and changes outlined in her answer will negatively affect farms and farmers in terms of their financial viability and survival.

(AQW 11484/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- i) As I advised in my response to AQW 10294/17-22, the AME budget which has been set aside for the Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme has not all been drawn down from HM Treasury. This budget can only be used to incentivise the use of renewable heat and again we cannot simply adopt a tariff that maximises use of available budget.
- ii) The Buglass report included a finding that the reduction in cash flow resulting from the reduced tariffs has been challenging for some. I welcomed the report's conclusion that the most important principle to be adopted is that of fair and equal treatment for all those who have participated in the scheme legitimately. The New Decade, New Approach contains a commitment to close the Non-Domestic RHI scheme. Ahead of any final decisions on the method of closure, a series of complex issues are being considered which includes the impact on participants of the scheme and their expectations.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy to detail her plans to make further and higher education courses more flexible to meet the requirements of businesses in order to attract them to Northern Ireland.

(AQW 11485/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department and its delivery partners carry out an extensive amount of work in this area as outlined below.

Skills Strategy

My Department is currently working on the development of a new Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland for consultation and publication in 2021. The overarching focus of the Strategy is on developing a skills system which drives economic prosperity and tackles social inequality.

We have developed three major policy objectives: addressing skills imbalances, creating a culture of lifelong learning and enhancing digital education and inclusion across society. Through these objectives, we aim to ensure economic success is balanced, by providing everyone with the education and training opportunities that enable them to participate in a rapidly changing labour market.

During the evidence gathering phase of the Strategy project, feedback from stakeholders in Northern Ireland consistently emphasised the need for a more agile, responsive approach to skills development. The new Skills Strategy will, therefore, include a 2-5-10 year implementation plan, developed in close collaboration with key stakeholders and designed to adapt to change, increase transparency and cultivate a more collaborative approach to economic and social development. This will require a flexible approach to skills delivery, with input from employers key to its success.

Higher Education

While Northern Ireland's higher education institutions are autonomous and, as such, are ultimately responsible for the content, structure and delivery of their own courses, I fully recognise the importance of matching the supply of graduate level skills to those demanded by the local economy.

The Northern Ireland Skills Barometer indicates that HE skills are, in general, only marginally undersupplied. However, there is an imbalance across individual subject areas, with the some of the largest undersupply predicted in STEM-related subjects.

Northern Ireland's universities are aware of this undersupply, and have taken measures to rebalance provision, with the result that enrolments and qualifications in STEM subjects have been increasing over the past number of years. In 2012/13, 22% of students at Northern Ireland's higher education institutions were studying a Narrow STEM related subject, and 45% were studying a Broad STEM related subject. In 2018/19, these figures had risen to 25.9% and 50.5% respectively.

My Department is currently reviewing possible interventions, and will continue to work with the local universities, to examine how best to ensure that the supply of graduates is aligned with the needs of the local economy.

Further Education

Further Education (FE) colleges are the main providers of professional and technical skills in Northern Ireland and play a pivotal role in generating a strong and vibrant economy by supporting employers to innovate, grow and build their skills base.

The six Colleges have a total of 30 campuses located across Northern Ireland and use the strong links they have established with local employers and other stakeholders to ensure that the curriculum offered is sufficiently agile to meet the changing skills needs of indigenous and foreign direct investment companies in their areas.

In addition, seven FE Curriculum Hubs have been established in key occupational areas to draw on the collective experience and expertise of all six FE colleges in order to ensure curriculum is high quality, consistent, current and responsive to the needs and demands of individual companies and the broader economy.

Assured Skills, InnovateUS and Skills Focus

The Department's Assured Skills pre-employment training programme works closely with Invest Northern Ireland to deliver a range of in-demand skills to meet the needs of potential inward investment companies or locally based expanding companies.

The Assured Skills programme, delivered through an Academy model, by both further and higher education institutions, offers training in complex, cutting edge, subjects such as robotics, cybersecurity and data analytics. This engagement with business affords FE and HE the opportunity to upskill lecturers to deliver the latest in skills demanded by growing industries.

Once established in Northern Ireland, companies can avail of the post-employment skills development programmes through Skills Focus (fewer than 250 employees) and InnovateUs (fewer than 50 employees) ensuring a continuous learning route for SME's. The training, delivered by FE, is tailored to suit the needs of the individual business to upskill employees and engage in developing innovative products, processes and services.

Sectoral Partnerships

Sectoral Partnerships have been established across a number of sectors and bring together employers, curriculum experts from further and higher education and policy advisors to ensure apprenticeship and traineeship curriculum and qualifications meets the current and future skills needs of industry.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy to detail any conversations she has had with stakeholders in the business community regarding plans to increase the manufacturing sector; and what plans she has for increasing this sector. (AQW 11486/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Manufacturing is very important to Northern Ireland. Manufacturing businesses employ over 87,000, and contribute *£6.5 Billion to exports. NI is known for its strengths in Aerospace, Materials Handling and Photonics manufacturing.

While Covid-19 has impacted many manufacturing companies, the impact is variable across sectors and has been felt most keenly in aerospace. My economic recovery plan sets out my ambition to rebuild our economy through decisive interventions that deliver higher paid jobs, a highly skilled and agile workforce; and a regionally balanced economy.

My Department and Invest NI continue to work with and support companies to help them increase their manufacturing base through innovation, skills, trade and management development, and with the latest advances in digital manufacturing. My Department and Invest NI are also working with key stakeholders from manufacturing to ensure proposed manufacturing innovation centres within City Deals, meet the needs of the manufacturing industry.

I have closely engaged with representatives of Northern Ireland Industry, Manufacturing NI, MPANI, trade unions and representatives of wider business, and will continue dialogue with these groups so that I fully understand the issues that confront the manufacturing sector, as well as hearing their suggestions and ideas for sectoral growth.

Given the substantial impact the pandemic has had on the aerospace sector, I am also engaged with my Scottish, Welsh and Whitehall counterparts, and with sector organisations such as ADS and the Aerospace Growth Partnership, to look at the needs of aerospace during this difficult time. While there are actions that we can take regionally to support aerospace through the pandemic and into recovery, I and my Executive colleagues, including the First and Deputy First Minister are engaged with Whitehall Ministers to ensure the difficulties faced by NI companies are heard and understood.

I am fully committed to ensuring we build on our manufacturing strengths, seize opportunities to diversify where necessary, and support Northern Ireland companies to scale and compete globally as we recover from the pandemic.

* Northern Ireland Broad Economy Sales and Export Statistics 2018, published 19 December 2019

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for the Economy (i) on what date the Business, Planning & Financial Support Grant scheme opened for applications; (ii) on what date the first payment was made; (iii) how many applications were made from the Upper Bann constituency, up to and including Friday 27 November 2020; (iv) how many payments were made by this date; and (v) what is the total amount paid.

(AQW 11490/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Business & Financial Planning Grant is a scheme to provide financial support to businesses to work with a consultant to assess the impact of COVID-19 and develop a strategic recovery plan with financial forecasts.

This is different to an emergency support scheme, such as those provided by the NI Executive and the UK government.

- (i) The Business and Financial Planning Grant scheme opened to applications on 7 October.
- (ii) Grant amounts are offered based on applications submitted with payments made once the work is completed. Payments will be made against receipted expenses which must be submitted by the business by 26 February 2021. All payments are expected to be made by 31 March 2021.
- (iii) When the scheme closed at 5pm on Monday 30 November there had been 8 applications submitted from the Upper Bann constituency. One further application was in progress at that time and Invest NI has allowed a further week, until 5pm on Monday 7 December, for this application to be submitted.
- (iv) All applications must be assessed and approved before a Letter of Offer can be made. We aim to have this completed within 3 weeks of the application closing date.

Of those applications approved to date, 3 Letters of Offer have been issued. Payment of grants will be made against receipted expenses which must be submitted by the business by 26 February 2021.

- (v) Payments will be made against receipted expenses which must be submitted by the business by 26 February 2021. All payments are expected to be made by 31 March 2021.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 9679/17-22, to detail (i) the total amount in loans provided by the Department for the Economy, and its predecessor, the Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment, for projects under Sustainable Utilisation of Poultry Litter Scheme; and (ii) the amount that has been repaid to date.

(AQW 11548/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The aim of the Sustainable Utilisation of Poultry Litter (SUPL) Scheme was to help resolve a significant local environmental and economic issue, and to help Northern Ireland comply with EU nitrates targets to positively impact the poultry sector and the wider Northern Ireland economy.

The total amount of loans for projects under the Sustainable Utilisation of Poultry Litter Scheme was £17.8m.

To date £1.2m has been repaid.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 9679/17-22, for her assessment of whether the cancellation of this project will have an impact on the poultry sector in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 11549/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Glenmore Anaerobic Digestion Facility has experienced a number of challenges at various stages including design challenges and operational difficulties. It is currently operational and uses poultry litter from Northern Ireland as a feedstock, and provides cheaper, green energy for two large Northern Ireland manufacturers.

Some 200,000 tonnes per annum of poultry litter is produced in Northern Ireland. Due to the nutrient content of this litter, the poultry sector needs to utilise it in a sustainable way. Therefore, alternative processing outlets are needed as not all the poultry litter produced can be sustainably spread on land as a fertiliser in Northern Ireland.

Since the plant commenced operations in 2017, it has processed over 37,000 tonnes or about 6% of the Northern Ireland poultry litter produced. If this outlet was not available, the poultry sector would need to source additional outlets to sustainably

utilise the poultry litter currently being processed at the plant. However, given the percentage of poultry litter currently processed at the plant, this may not have a significant impact on the poultry sector.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 9679/17-22, to detail (i) the location of the Anaerobic Digestion plant; (ii) the terms of the loan; (iii) how much of the loan has been repaid to date; (iv) the private investor that also contributed funding; and (v) what progress there had been in constructing the plant.

(AQW 11550/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Glenmore Anaerobic Digestion plant is a private and public sector funded initiative to support the build of an operational Anaerobic Digestion (AD) plant in Donegal.

The aim of the project was to help resolve a significant local environmental and economic issue, and to help Northern Ireland comply with EU nitrates targets to positively impact the poultry sector and the wider Northern Ireland economy.

The plant uses poultry litter from Northern Ireland as a feedstock, and provides cheaper, green energy for two large Northern Ireland manufacturers.

Funding for the scheme is via both private and public sector investment. Invest NI provided £9.3m funding as a commercial loan via the Sustainable Utilisation of Poultry Litter (SUPL) Scheme. This was alongside a £14m commercial loan from SQN Asset Finance (SQN) and a £1m equity injection. Both commercial loans were provided under the same terms and conditions and SQN has since invested further funds into the project.

The loan was made on the basis that once the plant was operational and profitable the loan would be repaid by quarterly capital and interest repayments. No loan repayments have been made to date.

Construction of the plant is complete. The project is currently operational and uses poultry litter from Northern Ireland as a feedstock, and provides cheaper, green energy for two large Northern Ireland manufacturers.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for the Economy (i) on what date the Business, Planning and Financial Support Grant scheme opened for applications; (ii) on what date the first payment was made; (iii) how many applications were made from the South Belfast constituency up to and including Friday 27 November; (iv) how many payments were made by this date; and (v) what is the total amount paid.

(AQW 11607/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Business & Financial Planning Grant is a scheme to provide financial support to businesses to work with a consultant to assess the impact of COVID-19 and develop a strategic recovery plan with financial forecasts.

This is different to an emergency support scheme, such as those provided by the NI Executive and the UK government.

- (i) The Business and Financial Planning Grant scheme opened to applications on 7 October.
- (ii) Grant amounts are offered based on applications submitted with payments made once the work is completed. Payments will be made against receipted expenses which must be submitted by the business by 26 February 2021. All payments are expected to be made by 31 March 2021.
- (iii) When the scheme closed at 5pm on Monday 30 November there had been 12 applications submitted from the South Belfast constituency. 5 further applications were in progress at that time and Invest NI has allowed a further week, until 5pm on Monday 7 December, for these applications to be submitted.
- (iv) All applications must be assessed and approved before a Letter of Offer can be made. We aim to have this completed within 3 weeks of the application closing date.

Of those applications approved to date, 6 Letters of Offer have been issued. Payment of grants will be made against receipted expenses which must be submitted by the business by 26 February 2021.

- (v) Payments will be made against receipted expenses which must be submitted by the business by 26 February 2021. All payments are expected to be made by 31 March 2021.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of the implications for licence applications for gas exploration and extraction in Northern Ireland of the UK Prime Minister's plans to end the use of natural gas for home heating.

(AQW 11673/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Government proposals to end connection of new homes to the gas network in Great Britain do not extend automatically to Northern Ireland where future plans will be developed as part of wider considerations towards a new Energy Strategy. This will include continuing progress away from more polluting fuels to lower carbon alternatives, and how the natural gas network may accommodate renewable energy.

As I have indicated in the Assembly, my Department has commenced a review of petroleum licensing. That review will be informed by independent research into the impacts of oil and gas exploration and development in Northern Ireland. The research will also consider the future demand and supply position for oil and gas and how that may be impacted by strategic policy developments.

The research will inform the development of future petroleum licensing policy options which will be considered in the context of climate change commitments, green growth proposals and the Department's developing Energy Strategy. These options will be subject to full public consultation and, as I have previously committed in the Assembly, decisions on any future policy will be referred to the Executive for decision.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for the Economy for an annual breakdown of how much money has been invested in Derry for training and upskilling purposes since 2016.

(AQW 11683/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department invests significantly right across Northern Ireland, in what could be regarded as training and upskilling. These terms are loosely defined and cover a broad range of provision including Apprenticeships, Youth Training, Further Education Colleges, Universities, European Social Funds and various Skills interventions.

It is not possible to disaggregate expenditure on such provision to a city level, or indeed, on an annualised basis.

Furthermore, it is important to be cognisant of the fact that funding channelled into a specific area may benefit those residing outside that area and who choose to travel into the area to avail of such provision. Similarly, people residing in a particular area will most likely be free to avail of provision located outside the area in which they reside.

Recipients of funding from my Department and based in the City are outlined below.

Further and Higher Education

The Further Education colleges deliver a range of academic, professional, technical education and training across Northern Ireland. My Department provides financial investment to North West Regional College (NWRC) but this is for the entire catchment area covered by NWRC's campus network and not just for a specific campus or site. My Department also provides financial investment to the University of Ulster which includes the Magee Campus.

Apprenticeships and Youth Training

The Department's Apprenticeship and Youth Training programmes are delivered by a network of Further Education Colleges, universities and contracted non-statutory training providers which offer access to all communities across Northern Ireland.

Within the City, Apprenticeships and Training for Success programmes are delivered by North West Regional College, Derry Youth and Community Workshop, Rutledge Training, Craft Recruitment, and Customized Training Services. It is not possible to provide information on the amount that these commercial businesses received.

Peace4Youth Funding

The Department's Peace4Youth funding cannot be disaggregated to investment within a specific area. The Programme provides for young people aged 14-24 and is delivered across Northern Ireland including the City and the surrounding areas. It includes funding on a cross border basis.

European Social Fund

There are eight training organisations in receipt of ESF monies which primarily operate in the City.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy whether maternity pay has been given an exemption under the Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme so that those taking leave to raise children will not be excluded from this scheme.

(AQW 11752/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I would refer you to the answer given for AQW – 11734-2020.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for the Economy to detail how many wind turbine sites, in the receipt of Renewable Obligation Certificate's, have been replaced by larger derated turbines.

(AQW 11779/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

242 de-rated wind turbines are currently in use in Northern Ireland. 8 of those turbines replaced previously installed turbines and the remainder have been in place since accreditation.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for the Economy what is the current estimated payback for a developer to replace a wind turbine in receipt of a Renewable Obligation Certificate with a larger de-rated turbine capable of greater subsidy.

(AQW 11780/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Generators wishing to install de-rated equipment must satisfy Ofgem, as administrator of the NIRO, that the capacity of the generating stations is in accordance with the requirements of the associated legislation.

The number of Renewable Obligation Certificates (ROCs) issued to generators is directly dependent on the amount of renewable electricity they can generate. Work is ongoing to establish whether load factors, which refers to the level of electricity output compared to the capacity of the station, are consistently higher for de-rated turbines. In order to properly assess a payback period on investment it would be necessary to consider all actual capital and operational costs incurred by

generators as well as actual revenues earned for each generating station. All three of these elements include many variables, including the additional capital cost to replace the original equipment and, therefore, pay back periods will almost certainly vary significantly within stations. Much of the information needed to assess rates of returns and determine pay back periods is commercially sensitive and is not available more widely.

The NI Audit Office report includes a recommendation to carry out a review of all types of renewable generators to ensure that the levels of support available and rates of return for renewable electricity generators are compatible with projections. The Department has accepted this recommendation and will ensure that de-rated onshore wind turbines will be considered in that context.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the estimated annual cost paid by electricity consumers as a result of additional Renewable Obligation Certificates generated by replacing a single 250MW wind turbine with a larger derated turbine.

(AQW 11781/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The number of Renewable Obligation Certificates (ROCs) issued to all generators is directly dependent on the amount of eligible renewable electricity they generate.

Additional ROCs will only be issued in the scenario described in the question if the load factor, which refers to the level of electricity output compared to the capacity of the station, for the replacement de-rated small scale wind turbine is consistently higher than the equipment replaced. Work is ongoing to establish the position in this regard.

Please note that the market value of ROCs issued to a generating station does not correlate exactly with the cost of the NIRO to electricity consumers. The cost to consumers is driven by the annual obligation level placed on licensed electricity suppliers. The calculation, which is carried out by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, is complex and includes consideration of UK wide forecasts of electricity likely to be supplied and the number of ROCs likely to be issued. These forecasts are dependent on a number of variables including installed capacity, average load factors and forecasted weather conditions.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy pursuant to AQW 8409/17-22, for an update on any outcomes from the joint project with the Department for Communities that has been established to consider the policy and delivery options once the current European Social Fund (ESF) projects conclude.

(AQW 11783/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The joint project established with the Department for Communities, has recently been established and is making progress in a number of areas.

Most recently a landscape review has been commissioned through the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) to help inform the scope and need, as well as potential options, in relation to future provision. An initial presentation on findings is due to be considered at the December meeting of the Project Board. This evidence base will help inform the Strategic Insight Lab scheduled for early 2021.

Whilst funding for the programme continues until March 2022 there is a significant time constraint to complete all of the necessary steps to implement a replacement scheme. We are exploring all options to bridge any gap in provision and have been engaging with the Department of Finance on this.

Officials will provide a full update to the Economy Committee in early 2021.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for the Economy what support will be provided to hospitality premises with a Net Added Value (NAV) of £51,000 and above.

(AQW 11799/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department has been allocated a total of £15m to develop a support scheme for large tourism and hospitality businesses, many of which have faced restrictions while having large overheads and fixed costs. Officials are currently finalising details of the scheme as a matter of priority. Further details of the scheme will be announced in due course.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy (i) how many hydroelectric projects are currently benefitting from subsidies under the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation (NIRO); (ii) how these subsidies compare to other jurisdictions in the U.K; and (iii) what is the overall predicted cost to the public purse from subsidies for these hydroelectric projects over the period of the incentive.

(AQW 11824/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: There are currently 90 hydroelectric generators accredited to the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation (NIRO), all of which are below 1MW in size.

The ROC banding level for hydroelectric projects under the NIRO is 4 ROCS per megawatt hour (MWh) up to 20kW; 3 ROCS per MWh over 20kW up to 250kW; and 2 ROCS per MWh over 250kW up to 1MW. The comparable support scheme in Great Britain is the Feed-in Tariff (FIT). Information on tariffs available under the FIT can be found at:

<https://www.ofgem.gov.uk/environmental-programmes/fit/fit-tariff-rates>

Please note that the NIRO does not offer direct payments to generators and is not funded through public expenditure. The cost to consumers is determined by the overall obligation placed on licensed electricity suppliers to provide evidence that a proportion of the electricity they supply to consumers is generated from renewable sources. It is therefore not possible to provide the figure requested in part (iii) of your question.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of whether there is adequate time to design new supported employment programmes that are currently funded by the European Social Fund, before the end of this funding period.

(AQW 11853/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Funding for existing projects supported by the Northern Ireland European Social Fund (ESF) Programme (2014-2020) continues until March 2022.

The UK Shared Prosperity Fund was identified by the UK Government as a replacement for structural funds. To date, however, the details of the scheme continue to be limited and the timescales are of real concern.

In the absence this clarity from the UK Government, we have established a joint project, with the Department for Communities, to consider and develop a range of options for a successor Programme that will need to be considered by the NI Executive.

Whilst progress is being made on the project, the timetable for the development of a successor programme and securing the necessary funding is an extremely challenging one. Officials within my Department continue to explore options with the Department of Finance to bridge any the potential gap in provision that may arise.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for the Economy how many Assembly Written Questions her Department received during the period 2 March 2020 to 30 November 2020; and to detail the total cost of responding to these questions.

(AQW 11916/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department received a total of 1182 written questions during the period 2 March – 30 November 2020.

The information sought in relation to cost is not readily available and may only be obtained at a disproportionate cost.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) what job evaluations were carried out in regards to all posts in further education colleges in 2007; and (ii) the outcome of any evaluations.

(AQW 11935/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department does not hold information on any job evaluations undertaken by Further Education (FE) Colleges in 2007. FE colleges, as established under the Further Education (NI) Order 1997, are managed by a Governing Body (GB), which is a body corporate under the 1997 Order. As the employing authority for all its staff, the GB has the responsibility for managing and implementing employment policies and procedures, and carrying out any necessary job evaluations. The Chair of the Colleges Employers' Forum, Nicholas O'Shiel (also Chair of South West College), should be contacted for any further information, by addressing any queries initially to the Secretary to the Governing Body of South West College, fiona.mccauley@swc.ac.uk.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy when a decision will be made on petroleum licence application PLA1/16.

(AQW 12054/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department is currently assessing Petroleum Licence Application, PLA1/16. I have made it clear that no decision will be made on this application prior to the completion of the ongoing review of the petroleum licensing regime in Northern Ireland.

A key component of the review is the ongoing independent research into the economic, societal and environmental impacts of onshore petroleum exploration and development production.

It is anticipated that this research will take six months; the Department will use the data gathered to consider options and develop, through stakeholder engagement and consultation, evidence based petroleum licensing policy proposals.

All policy proposals will also be subject to environmental and regulatory impact assessment before being taken forward to full public consultation. I have already committed to taking all decisions in relation to petroleum licensing to the Executive.

As I have previously stated in the Assembly, when the policy review process is complete, I will bring recommendations to the Executive on the award, or not, of the two Petroleum Licence applications currently held by the Department: PLA1/16 and PLA2/16.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for the Economy, in light of the Minister of Education's announcement on AS and A level examinations, when she will announce the measures she is taking in regards to mitigating BTEC examinations against the impact of COVID-19 on learning.

(AQW 12065/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The vocational education system in Northern Ireland is complex, involving thousands of qualifications and multiple awarding organisations, the vast majority of which are English based. To ensure that qualifications remain portable for learners across the UK, and that quality standards are consistently maintained, there is a joint regulatory framework in place between OFQUAL, Qualifications Wales and CCEA Regulation in Northern Ireland.

My Department has been working closely with colleagues in England and Wales and national regulators throughout the pandemic to consider a range of appropriate mitigation measures in response to the ongoing disruption experienced in further education colleges, training organisations and schools to ensure that vocational learners are afforded a fair and equitable opportunity to achieve vocational learning outcomes in 2020/21 academic year to enable them to progress.

A key principle of the vocational regulatory framework is that learners taking vocational qualifications should not be disadvantaged compared to learners taking general qualifications. I can therefore confirm that a range of additional flexibilities have now been agreed as follows:

- awarding organisations will be able to reduce the number of optional units that are assessed. This will be particularly relevant for BTecs and OCR National/Technical;
- increased flexibility around invigilation – using subject teachers instead of independent invigilators;
- the same level of generosity on vocational qualification grading standards from 2020 awarding will be applied also for 2021; and
- awarding organisations will be encouraged to use the full flexibilities available under the Extended Extraordinary Regulatory Framework to assist learning centres delivering qualifications.

My Department is continuing to work closely with key delivery partners in Northern Ireland, including the further education sector, training organisations, schools and CCEA Regulation, through a Task and Finish Group to monitor implementation of these arrangements and assess further developments in light of the ongoing fluidity of situation.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will put arrangements in place to enable vouchers for the retail sector to be donated to charitable organisations to spend.

(AQW 12113/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department for the Economy has been provided with a financial allocation for a Northern Ireland wide High Street Stimulus scheme and has a clear policy objective for this funding.

It will provide individual citizens with a prepaid card to be spent at 'bricks and mortar' businesses, including those in the retail and hospitality sectors. The card can be used for purchases in local charity shops. It will not be available for online sales.

The development and specifics of the Northern Ireland High Street Stimulus scheme are still being finalised. This will include considerations such as the card value per individual and how the card will operate in practice.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Ms Ennis asked the Assembly Commission how many Assembly committees continue to provide printed committee packs to Members.

(AQO 1320/17-22)

Mr Butler (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): All Assembly committees are provided with their committee packs electronically. One committee (the Business Committee) also provides printed committee packs to its Members. This is because business for the following week can be tabled until an hour before the meeting and therefore the pack is generally only issued a short time in advance.

Two other committees provide printed committee packs to their chairpersons only.

Mr Easton asked the Assembly Commission when a new Independent Financial Review Panel will be appointed.

(AQO 1330/17-22)

Mr Butler (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): On 14 December 2020, the Assembly Commission introduced a Bill to amend the remit of the Panel following the conferral of a function by the Assembly on the Assembly Commission to determine the allowances payable to Members.

As well as renaming the Panel, the Bill will seek to limit its functions to determining the salaries and pensions payable to Members. Subject to the will of the Assembly, once that Bill is passed, recruitment will be undertaken immediately to recruit members to a new body.

It is hoped that the Bill's passage through the Assembly will be concluded before the summer recess in 2021.

Ms Armstrong asked the Assembly Commission when the Financial Assistance for Political Parties Scheme and Whips' Office allocation will be reviewed.

(AQO 1327/17-22)

Mr Butler (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): Financial assistance is available for an authorised purpose as set out in the Financial Assistance for Political Parties Act (Northern Ireland) 2000. That authorised purpose is defined as “assisting members of the Assembly who are connected with such parties to perform their Assembly duties”. That is the sole purpose set out in the Act.

Financial assistance is provided under the terms of the Financial Assistance for Political Parties Scheme 2016 (referred to as the FAPP Scheme).

While the FAPP Scheme does not contain a formal review mechanism, the Commission had already agreed to review the scope of the Scheme (within the parameters set by the enabling legislation) and to also review the level of payments. In addition, paragraph 3.7 of ‘New Decade, New Approach’ makes reference to funding for an opposition and to the Statement of Entitlements for an Official Opposition.

In light of this recommendation in NDNA, the Commission has agreed to work jointly with the Assembly and Executive Review Committee (AERC) to facilitate implementation of the NDNA recommendation.

The AERC will consult with the Commission on any financial implications and with the Committee on Procedures on any procedural implications arising from the review recommendations and, in accordance with the Assembly resolution of 13 October 2020, the AERC will report to the Assembly on the outcome of the review.

While recognising the remit and role of the AERC and without prejudice to the outcome of AERC’s deliberations, the Commission has also agreed to consider a review of the funding available under the current Scheme.

Mr Beattie asked the Assembly Commission to outline any plans to continue flexible or home working for Assembly staff post-pandemic.
(AQO 1323/17-22)

Mr Blair (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): Over the years, the Assembly Commission has facilitated staff to work flexibly with approximately a quarter of staff utilising an agreed flexible working pattern prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, as with many other organisations, COVID-19 led to a need to quickly reduce the numbers of people in Parliament Buildings and facilitate the majority of Assembly Commission staff to carry out their work from home. This has required the Assembly Commission to invest in mobile computing devices and to quickly establish new ways of working to support Assembly business.

During the period of COVID-19, the Assembly Commission has been keen to engage with staff regarding many aspects of the pandemic including the temporary move to working from home. In June 2020, a Wellbeing and Communications Survey was issued to staff to seek their views across a range of topics including their experience of homeworking.

The findings from the Survey revealed that 73% of respondents who had some form of homeworking arrangement agreed they were able to work effectively from home and that 95% felt trusted to work productively at home.

As a direct result of the Survey findings, the Commission has given a commitment to staff look at developing a permanent general homeworking policy. The development of such a policy will be subject to consultation with Trade Union Side using the normal industrial relations mechanisms so any plans that the Commission develops to continue flexible or home working in the future will be shaped by those considerations.

Mr Allen asked the Assembly Commission to outline the major improvement and maintenance works carried out in Parliament Buildings since 2015.
(AQO 1326/17-22)

Mr Butler (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The Commission has completed numerous improvement and maintenance projects since 2015 in Parliament Buildings. The Commission is very aware, that it has a responsibility to maintain the building in a way that meets the requirements of all building users, that is in full compliance with all relevant legislation and, importantly, that is in keeping with its listed status.

Significant improvements since 2015 have included major renovations to further improve accessibility, such as building an internal ramp at the front reception area; the provision of automatic-opening corridor doors throughout the basement, ground and first floors; the creation of a fire evacuation lift; and accessibility improvements in the Members’ Bar.

Other projects have included the creation of a new café/ Post Office, the creation of an Education Suite, the provision of IT and general staff training rooms, a rest facility for Usher Services staff, and a TV Studio in the Basement.

External works have included major repairs to the front steps and the installation of a new energy efficient external lighting system that enables the Commission to colour wash the building to show support for events and charitable causes.

Other environmental projects have included the ongoing replacement of internal lighting with LED fittings; the installation of electric vehicle charging points; and electronic metering for building utilities such as water, gas and electricity.

During the ongoing pandemic, the Commission made a number of alterations to create a safe working environment in order to facilitate Assembly business. This has included measures to ensure that social distancing is maintained in the building; the

installation of equipment to facilitate remote participation at Committee meetings; the installation of screens; the provision of hand sanitiser and a range of COVID-19 associated signage.

The Commission has also just replaced the aging telephone system with a new state of the art Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) system.

Ms S Bradley asked the Assembly Commission what consideration has been given to restoring live TV coverage of Assembly proceedings in the Great Hall, to help facilitate Members making a timely arrival to the limited seating in the Chamber.
(AQO 1328/17-22)

Mr K Buchanan (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The TV screen in the Great Hall was originally installed as a courtesy to enable members of the public and committee witnesses to view live proceedings from the Assembly Chamber.

The Assembly Commission took the decision to close Parliament Buildings to the public from 18 March 2020 in light of the public health situation and as a result the original need for the TV screen was removed. In addition, fewer committee witnesses were physically attending Parliament Buildings and consequently the TV screen was put into storage.

With more Members and staff now working in Parliament Buildings and some witnesses resuming attending committee meetings in person, I can confirm that the

TV screen and live coverage of Assembly proceedings were reinstated in the Great Hall on 30 November 2020.

Mr Humphrey asked the Assembly Commission what is being done to improve the wi-fi signal in Parliament Buildings.
(AQO 1329/17-22)

Mr O'Dowd (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The current Wi-Fi network was installed in Parliament Buildings in 2013 and originally consisted of 84 wireless access points located throughout the building. As the current system supported a maximum of 100 access points, an additional 16 were purchased and installed in 2015 in order to improve the overall Wi-Fi signal coverage for building users.

The current COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in significantly increased demand for Wi-Fi services by Members and staff. The IS Office is aware that Wi-Fi connectivity and signal quality has been an issue for some Members, particularly in regard to video conferencing.

In response, the IS Office has considered and tested alternative means to provide more reliable video conferencing facilities and has purchased web cams for use by MLAs and party support staff. These will be deployed on desktop PCs in Parliament Buildings and the IS Office is currently rolling these out. As these will use the Assembly wired network, they should provide a much more reliable service.

Should Members experience any difficulty with Wi-Fi access or performance in Parliament Buildings, they should contact the IS Office Service Desk, ideally at the

time when the difficulty is experienced, so that the matter can be investigated.

The IS Office will continue to monitor the current Wi-Fi service in Parliament Buildings and will respond appropriately to any specific issues as they arise.

Ms Sugden asked the Assembly Commission to outline its plans for reopening Parliament Buildings to the public.
(AQO 1331/17-22)

Mr Butler (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The Commission took the decision to close Parliament Buildings to the public from 9pm on Wednesday 18 March, in light of the coronavirus pandemic.

While no public tours, events or visitor activities have taken place since then and only permanent Assembly passholders and those essential to the delivery of Assembly business have had access to the building since then, the focus has been on ensuring that the Assembly can continue to meet to carry out its legislative and scrutiny functions.

At its meeting on 9 December 2020, the Commission agreed that in light of the ongoing health risks and restrictions in place, that Parliament Buildings should remain closed to the public until 28 February 2021 and that the situation would, again be reviewed at that time.

That consideration will, of course, take account of the prevailing public health situation and, as ever, will continue to follow the guidance issued by relevant entities such as the Public Health Agency and will fully comply with all Regulations in place.

It was clearly regrettable that the Building had to close and that there was disruption to public engagement activities so soon after the Assembly resumed normal business in January. The Speaker and the Commission are currently giving consideration to activities and initiatives that could be undertaken next year once we are in a position to do so.

Unfortunately, the Commission cannot be more definitive about when the building will be able to re-open fully to the public but, like everyone else, the Commission is hopeful that the reported success of potential vaccines and continuing vigilance by everyone will help that re-opening happen sooner rather than later.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 25 December 2020

Written Answers to Questions

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail (i) what plans he has to deal with the issue of fly-grazing, particularly regarding horses when they are left or dumped on land not owned by the owners of the horses; (ii) whether he has plans to create or initiate a control of horses act, similar to that of England and Wales; (iii) what powers his Department currently has to act on the issue of fly-grazing; and (iv) for his assessment on whether there is a difference between this practice and other kinds of dumping, fly-tipping and illegal waste disposal on public or private land. **(AQW 10976/17-22)**

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): While my Department does not hold specific powers with regard to the fly-grazing of horses, under existing legislation, if someone finds a horse fly-grazing on their land they may detain it. If the owner or keeper of the horse is unknown, they must notify the Police Service of Northern Ireland within 48 hours. After 14 days, if no owner is identified, the land owner/occupier can sell the horse at a market or public auction.

The legislation that governs fly-grazing falls under the remit of the Department of Finance. I currently consider it to be sufficiently robust to deal with the matter and, therefore, have no immediate plans to approach the Department of Finance to request any additional legislation on the matter.

Fly-grazing is different from other kinds of dumping such as fly-tipping and illegal waste disposal, in that cognisance must be given to the welfare of the animals involved in fly-grazing incidents.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) whether the 1993 NI Peatlands Policy is still the basis for relevant policy today; (ii) whether any of the recommendations of the 2005 Peatland Conservation Policy Steering Group Review of the 1993 policy were implemented, and, if so, which ones; and (iii) what policy advice has been given to local councils to ensure the equitable and environmentally sustainable consideration of planning applications to extract peat on a commercial basis. **(AQW 11736/17-22)**

Mr Poots: Since the publication of the document 'Conserving Peatland in Northern Ireland - A Statement of Policy' in 1993, there has been an increasing understanding and appreciation of the ecosystem services that healthy peatlands provide, in addition to emerging UK Government policy around Nature Conservation and Climate Change e.g. Net Zero commitment.

The UK Peatland Strategy was published in 2018 and it sets a framework for the conservation and restoration of peatlands across the UK. DAERA is currently developing a Peatland Strategy for Northern Ireland with the intention to consult publicly on the draft strategy document in early 2021.

Unfortunately, the 1993 document did not contain a specific reporting mechanism and this is an issue which we hope to address in any governance process associated with the proposed Peatland Strategy. The review in 2005 did not result in any formally adopted recommendations but it will help to provide an information source which will be used to inform the new proposed strategy.

In regards to advice to local councils, DAERA is a statutory consultee for Local Development Plans (LDPs) and have commented on the Draft Plan Strategies that have been published to-date. These strategies may include draft policies that relate to peat extraction.

All such plans must take into account relevant procedural, legislative and policy considerations, including the Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) which sets out regional considerations with regard to commercial peat extraction.

DAERA have advised on the soundness of these plans and alignment with the SPPS and, where appropriate, have advised on policy wording where we feel further clarity is required. The Department's responses to LDP Draft Plan Strategies are made on a plan by plan basis and all responses can be viewed on the relevant council websites.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what communication has been delivered (i) publically; and (ii) individually regarding (a) the laws and penalties around the persecution of certain breeds of birds of prey, in

particular with groups and organisations who regard these birds as a threat or pests; and (b) the benefits and enjoyment that can be had from the survival and thriving of these birds.

(AQW 11861/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department delivers the majority of its wildlife crime awareness publicity, including that relating to birds of prey, through its work the Partnership for Action Against Wildlife Crime, Northern Ireland (PAW NI). This partnership approach to providing information to the public is more productive with the combined partners' memberships and social media following, leading to a potential audience exceeding half a million people across Northern Ireland.

The membership of PAW NI comprises representatives from government departments, conservation organisations, farming and country sports bodies enabling messaging to be conveyed back to their memberships. There is a separate PAW NI raptor sub-group, which brings together those organisations with a particular interest in birds of prey.

Through this work the Department has helped develop and fund 12 wildlife crime leaflets, with another two in development. These leaflets cover the common wildlife crime issues, aiming to inform the public what a wildlife crime is and how to report it. The Department funds and maintains the PAW NI website (<http://www.wildlifecrimeni.org/>) which hosts general advice on what constitutes a wildlife crime and how to report it, links to the leaflets and reports detailing incidents of wildlife crime impacting birds of prey and badgers across Northern Ireland.

All our birds of prey are protected under the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985. The Department has published a layman's guide to wildlife law called, 'Wildlife Law and You' and this provides a generic overview for the public of a complex area of legislation. This publication is available on the DAERA, PSNI and PAW NI websites, as well as linked from many of those of our partners.

NIEA Wildlife Officers answer a large volume of telephone and email enquiries from the public. They also attend a number of public events throughout the year where they get a chance to meet and talk to the public and various interest groups. They promote key messages on birds of prey being an important component of our ecosystems, acting as important indicators of the general state of our biodiversity and health of our environment, and their vulnerability to persecution. Where a group or organisation requests a talk on an appropriate topic, DAERA staff will endeavour to accommodate these requests.

Department for Communities

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Communities to outline what discussions have taken place regarding the conclusion of the 2019/2020 Northern Ireland Football League season.

(AQW 4278/17-22)

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): The arrangements for concluding the Football League 2019/20 season were a matter for the IFA, the league operators NIFL and the clubs to decide.

The Department was not involved in any discussions on this matter.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities what funding opportunities are available for local councils to apply for to celebrate 100 years since the formation of Northern Ireland.

(AQW 7173/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department previously provided funding to the 11 local councils for the Community Festivals Fund. Councils provided match funding to this and administered the scheme on our behalf. While this funding was put on hold in 2020/2021 due to Covid, it is anticipated that it will resume again in 2021/2022. Community organisations may be eligible to apply through their local council.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Communities whether she submitted a bid to the Department of Finance for the entire £33 million support package for the arts sector.

(AQW 7212/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The bid submitted to the Department of Finance to secure meaningful financial support here to support culture, language, arts and heritage organisations, local musicians, freelancers and artists at a time when they are struggling to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic was for £33m.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister for Communities whether her Department will give funding to local councils seeking to hold events and other projects to mark the Centenary of Northern Ireland in 2021.

(AQW 7284/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department previously provided funding to the 11 local councils for the Community Festivals Fund. Councils provided match funding to this and administered the scheme on our behalf. While this funding was put on hold in 2020/2021 due to Covid, it is anticipated that it will resume again in 2021/2022. Community may be eligible to apply through their local council.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities whether she plans to replicate the one-off payment of £500 through the Test and Trace Support Payment scheme when a person is required to stay at home and self-isolate but cannot work from home. (AQW 7566/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: We introduced a new Discretionary Support Self-Isolation Grant for people who have been diagnosed with COVID-19 or are advised to self-isolate in accordance with official guidance. With the introduction of this new grant on 25 March 2020 we ensured that people who are on a low income were amongst the first to be able to access specific financial support. There simply has been no comparable support available to people in Britain.

On 16 November, Minister Ni Chuilin increased the daily amount payable through the Discretionary Support Self-Isolation Grant as well as providing more flexibility for awards to be paid for longer periods. This grant can be claimed online and is available to people as soon as they need it.

Unlike the Test and Trace scheme in Britain, these payments are not taxable, are not linked to enforcement, are not time limited to 14 days and include a specific amount for all dependent children in the household. This means in fact payments here can exceed £500 according to individual and family circumstances.

People here can also apply regardless of whether notification is received from the StopCOVID App or the Test/Trace contact system.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Communities how many people in Derry have (i) applied for a complex needs assessment for housing; and (ii) been allocated appropriate temporary or permanent housing in line with their more complex needs in the last 12 months. (AQW 7666/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has advised that 492 applicants or transfers have been awarded Complex Needs points within the last 12 months. However it is not possible to ascertain how many were considered for, but then did not receive Complex Needs points as this information is not recorded on the Housing Executive's Housing Management System. As the Housing Executive is only able to report the requested information by either its own Area or by Council District it has provided figures for its West Area, which incorporates Derry City and Strabane District Council.

The Housing Executive has confirmed that from 1st December 2019 to 30th November 2020 a total of 1,190 placements in temporary accommodation were made to households in the Housing Executive's West Area. Of these households a total of 198 placements were made to households who had received Complex Needs points in line with the Housing Selection Scheme. It should be noted that these figures may include some households which have received more than one placement in temporary accommodation between 1st December 2019 and 30th November 2020.

In terms of permanent allocations for the same period a total of 284 permanent allocations were made to applicants and transfers in West Area with Complex Needs points. Of these 157 were made by Housing Executive and 127 were made by Housing Associations.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities whether there are enough resources within her Department to deal with the next wave of applications to Universal Credit expected when furlough ends; and whether redundancy payments received during the assessment period will be taken into consideration when officers calculate Universal Credit benefit level. (AQW 7696/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department has prioritised the payment of benefit to ensure that the Covid-19 crisis does not lengthen the time that any person, including those on Universal Credit has to wait to receive their benefit payment. Indeed, throughout the Covid-19 period over 98% of customers due a Universal Credit payment have received their payment on time.

As to the level of resources to manage any future increase in the number of applications to Universal Credit, I can advise that my Department always keeps the level of resourcing under review.

As to the treatment of redundancy payments, Universal Credit is calculated using assessment periods and any earnings, income or capital received in a household during that assessment period will be taken into consideration when calculating a person(s) entitlement. Therefore, if a person were to receive a redundancy payment during their Universal Credit assessment period this would be considered as capital and would be included as part of the overall calculation of the level of their Universal Credit award.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities to detail the Housing Executive's potential to be able to build new social housing. (AQW 7772/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My officials have commenced work to assess revitalisation options for the Housing Executive. When this work is at a more advanced stage, and when there is a clearer picture of how the Housing Executive will meet its investment challenge in maintaining its 85,000 existing social homes, it will then be possible to consider how, at what rate will be the development of new homes.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of new social houses (i) being considered by the planning service; (ii) that have been granted planning approval but have yet to be completed; and (iii) have received conditional planning approval subject to independent sewage treatment separate from the public sewerage system, broken down by postcode.

(AQW 7790/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The information you requested is not available by Postcode, as specified in your question. I have provided the information by Council Planning office.

i) detail the number of new social houses being considered by the planning service;

Table 1 below summarises the social housing planning applications which have been submitted to Council Planning offices, but have yet to receive planning approval; relating to schemes which are currently included on the Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP).

Table 1: Summary of social housing Planning Applications yet to be approved, by Council area

Council Planning Office	No. Planning Applications	Total associated social housing units
Antrim & Newtownabbey	1	36
Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon	0	0
Belfast	7	149*
Causeway Coast & Glens	5	57
Derry & Strabane	6	291
Fermanagh & Omagh	0	0
Lisburn City & Castlereagh	4	101
Mid & East Antrim	2	155
Mid Ulster	2	68
Newry, Mourne & Down	6	358
Ards & North Down	2	46
Totals	35	1,261

* The 521-unit Apex Housing proposals for Glenmona, West Belfast are not included in these figures. Belfast City Council Planning Committee approved these proposals on 17th November 2020, with confirmation of the Planning Approval 'Green Form' to follow.

ii) detail the number of new social houses that have been granted planning approval but have yet to be completed

Tables 2a and 2b below summarise the social housing Planning Applications which have been submitted to Council Planning offices and have been awarded Planning Approval; divided into 'schemes under construction' (Table 2a) and 'schemes programmed to start' (i.e. not yet under construction) as part of the SHDP (Table 2b).

Table 2a: Social housing schemes which have been awarded Planning Approval and are under construction

Council Planning Office	No. Planning Approvals	Total associated social housing units
Antrim & Newtownabbey	5	157
Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon	7	92
Belfast	29	942
Causeway Coast & Glens	3	107
Derry & Strabane	19	957
Fermanagh & Omagh	1	5
Lisburn City & Castlereagh	7	123
Mid & East Antrim	7	146
Mid Ulster	2	50
Newry, Mourne & Down	6	188

Council Planning Office	No. Planning Approvals	Total associated social housing units
Ards & North Down	4	41
Totals	90	2,808

Table 2b: Social housing schemes which have been awarded Planning Approval and are programmed to start as part of the SHDP

Council Planning Office	No. Planning Approvals	Total associated social housing units
Antrim & Newtownabbey	7	138
Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon	2	45
Belfast	7	109
Causeway Coast & Glens	2	16
Derry & Strabane	4	225
Fermanagh & Omagh	0	0
Lisburn City & Castlereagh	0	0
Mid & East Antrim	4	66
Mid Ulster	1	9
Newry, Mourne & Down	3	84
Ards & North Down	1	1
Totals	31	693

- iii) detail the number of new social houses have received conditional planning approval subject to independent sewage treatment separate from the public sewerage system, broken down by postcode.

The Housing Executive is aware that some social housing schemes are affected by the wider infrastructure concerns regarding sewage capacity. In some instances, housing associations (or developers) are required to provide a standalone Waste Water Treatment Works (WWTW) in order to secure Planning Approval for the proposed development. This tends to be the case in relation to larger social housing schemes, but can also affect smaller proposals. In such instances, housing associations (or developers) work with the relevant Council Planning office and NI Water representatives in order to develop an appropriate solution.

The Housing Executive is monitoring the progress of all social housing Planning Applications which have yet to be approved by Council Planning offices in relation to issues raised by all Statutory Consultees, including NI Water; and is regularly engaged with both housing associations and Council Planning representatives regarding such issues. However, the Housing Executive does not hold records for all social housing Planning Approvals (relating to schemes under construction and schemes programmed to start) for which a Planning Condition regarding provision of a standalone WWTW has been included as part of the Planning Approval.

The potential implications for the development of social housing schemes due to the identified issues affecting the water/sewage infrastructure is a concern for me, particularly given the increasing levels of housing stress.

My officials have and will continue to engage with the Department for Infrastructure and Housing Executive colleagues to establish options to minimise risks. This issue will also need an Executive approach, to ensure some form of prioritisation of areas of high housing need requiring investment that will be consistent with the commitments given in the New Decade New Approach agreement.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Communities what approach is being taken to increase capacity in the Employment and Support Allowance call centre.
(AQW 8960/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: As a result of Covid-19, there had been a reduction in the number of telephony agents in Employment and Support Allowance due to the social distancing rules in the office environment, with resultant impacts on telephony response rates and call waiting times.

I can confirm however that in recent weeks the Employment and Support Allowance Centre has now acquired mobile devices and telephony software to increase the Centre's capability for remote working. This has meant staff rotas have been able to be removed and full staffing capacity restored. A subsequent pilot to test remote working at scale has proven successful and

I am pleased to confirm that telephony response rates have increased significantly as a result to an average of 96% in the week commencing 7 December, with call waiting times reduced to 52 seconds in the same period.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities whether a decision has been made on the Housing Executive being exempt from corporation tax.

(AQW 8986/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: A decision on the Housing Executive being exempt from paying corporation tax has not yet been reached. The statement made to the Assembly on 3rd November announced the intention to revitalise the Housing Executive, and a key part of this is the commitment to address its corporation tax liabilities.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Communities where new proposals on lease arrangements for flats purchased under the right to buy scheme will be included in future housing legislation.

(AQW 9666/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has advised that its Board, at its meeting on 28 October 2020, approved a new policy enabling Leaseholders of sold Housing Executive flats to purchase extensions to their lease of at least 50 years, subject to payment of an appropriate consideration. This policy will ensure that sold Housing Executive flats remain marketable and afford good security for mortgage purposes.

These proposals do not require legislation, and the Housing Executive will now develop the procedures and processes to support the implementation of its new policy, and is currently considering the timescale required for this.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities, following her statement to the Assembly on 17 November 202, regarding the Discretionary Support Self-Isolation Grant, whether she is considering options for Universal Basic Income level to be brought into Northern Ireland.

(AQW 10593/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, there have been a number of measures introduced to build on and strengthen the social security system to protect the health, welfare and wellbeing of all of the people here and to take timely decisions in our efforts to mitigate the impact of COVID-19.

Due to the challenging circumstances that we are all operating in at present, there has been a need to be responsive to a fast moving and ever-changing situation.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 10092/17-22, to detail the frequency and nature of the reviews.

(AQW 10889/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: As is standard practice for grant recipients, Conradh na Gaeilge is subject to the usual requirements for award of public funds, which are set out in a letter of offer including, providing to DfC, upon demand, such evidence as DfC shall require, to demonstrate successful completion, delivery and operation of the project. Grant recipients must also inform the Department as soon as possible of any changes to the terms of the letter of offer.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for Communities why she did not replicate the COVID-19 Self Isolation Grant administered by local authorities in England.

(AQW 11034/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: We introduced a new Discretionary Support Self-Isolation Grant for people who have been diagnosed with Covid-19 or are advised to self-isolate in accordance with official guidance. With the introduction of this new grant on 25 March 2020 we ensured that people here who are on a low income were amongst the first to be able to access specific financial support.

On 16 November, the daily amount payable through the Discretionary Support Self-Isolation Grant was increased as well as more flexibility for awards to be paid for longer periods provided. This grant can be claimed online and is available to people as soon as they need it.

Unlike the Test and Trace scheme in other regions, these payments are not taxable, are not linked to enforcement, are not time limited to 14 days and include a specific amount for all dependent children in the household. This means in fact payments here can exceed £500 according to individual and family circumstances.

People here can also apply regardless of whether notification is received from the StopCOVID App or the Test/Trace contact system.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 10377/17-22, when in 2021 the review will take place; and what consultation will take place with caravan owners.

(AQW 11275/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department for Communities is required by Section 4 of the Caravan Act 2011 to review Parts I and 2 of the Schedule every 5 years. The Act was last reviewed in 2016.

These provisions will be reviewed again by the Department in 2021 (exact time to be confirmed) and will invite input from caravan owners along with other interested parties such as MLA's, DfE, local Councils, the Caravan and Camping Forum, National Caravan Council, site owners, residents, etc.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities whether current employees of the Housing Executive will have the same employment contract under the new mutual organisation.

(AQW 11285/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Revitalisation plans are at an early stage. I am committed to a co-design approach in developing options. Engagement with tenants and staff including their representatives and Trade Unions will be central to this process.

My officials have commenced work to assess options to effect this change.

I intend to bring proposals to the Executive before the end of this mandate.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Communities what percentage of private tenants in receipt of housing benefit have been evicted, or faced eviction, for non-payment of rent, previous to the temporary COVID-19 eviction law changes; and what assistance she is giving, and plans to give, to these tenants from falling behind in the payment of their rent.

(AQW 11487/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive does not record or hold information relating to private tenants in receipt of housing benefit who have been evicted, or faced eviction. It does however record the number of households who present as homeless due to loss of private rented accommodation (for whatever reason) and it has provided the table below which compares the numbers between April and November in 2019 and 2020, both in terms of presenters and those who were accepted as statutorily homeless.

NIHE Homeless Figures Due to Loss of Private Rented Accommodation

	Presenters		Acceptances	
	2019/20	202/21	2019/20	2020/21
April	200	65	127	28
May	208	65	129	33
June	182	137	109	78
July	185	120	113	59
August	179	115	120	69
September	180	177	106	102
October	194	138	108	76
November	144	133	89	71

In April, Local Housing Allowance rates for Universal Credit and Housing Benefit claimants were increased to cover the lowest 30% of local market rents, following a four year freeze. This will increase choice and improve accessibility for benefit recipients in the private rented sector.

In certain circumstances Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) may provide additional financial assistance with housing costs to those already in receipt of either Housing Benefit or Universal Credit. The Housing Executive, as the administering authority, can consider making a DHP award to a claimant who is faces a shortfall in meeting the cost of their contractual rent because some form of restriction has been applied.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Communities whether community spaces such as church halls, community centres, and village halls can be used for private educational purposes, such as for those in further education to sit exams or aptitude tests, or for teaching English to migrants.

(AQW 11629/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department provides funding to develop, support and maintain a wide range of community owned and run facilities. The Department is not the owner of these facilities and does not seek to dictate or constrain their use. The premises listed in the question are in a variety of ownerships and their use will be determined by a number of factors, including management capacity, the charitable purposes of an organisation and an assessment of risk in line with any conditions of insurance or grant.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities to detail, since January 2020, the number of social housing units (i) approved by her Department but on which construction has not yet commenced; (ii) on which construction has commenced but is not completed; (iii) on which construction has been completed and the housing association has received a Completion Certificate from a contractor; and (iv) which have been allocated to new tenants by housing associations in the Foyle constituency. **(AQW 11641/17-22)**

Ms Ní Chuilín: I can advise that within the Foyle Parliamentary Constituency there have been 49 social housing units approved since the beginning of 2020, but on which construction has not yet commenced. I have included details of these in Table 1 below.

There are currently 967 social housing units under construction. Details of these units are included in Table 2 below.

There have been 63 social housing completions, since the beginning of 2020 to-date. For context, “completion” means that work on the dwelling is complete and that these units have been handed over to a housing association (following receipt of a Completion Certificate from a contractor).

The housing associations have confirmed that 60 of the 63 units have been allocated to new tenants. The status of the remaining 3 units is not available as we have not as yet received this information. Details of these units are included in Table 3 below.

Table 1: Social housing units approved since 1st January 2020, but construction not commenced (49 units)

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Need Group	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Apex Housing	Alder Road, Ballynagard	Derry	General Needs	46	2020/21	2022/23
Habinteg	Abercorn Road	Derry	General Needs	3	2020/21	2021/22

Table 2: Social housing units under construction (967 units)

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Need Group	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Apex Housing	Galliagh Phase 2	Derry	General Needs	178	2017/18	2020/21
Apex Housing	Galliagh Phase 2	Derry	Wheelchair	9	2017/18	2020/21
Apex Housing	Galliagh Phase 4	Derry	General Needs	135	2018/19	2021/22
Apex Housing	Galliagh Phase 4	Derry	Wheelchair	11	2018/19	2021/22
Apex Housing	Beragh Hill Road (Skeoge Link H1B Lands)	Derry	General Needs	231	2018/19	2021/22
Apex Housing	Beragh Hill Road (Skeoge Link H1B Lands)	Derry	CAT1 Elderly	20	2018/19	2021/22
Apex Housing	Beragh Hill Road (Skeoge Link H1B Lands)	Derry	Wheelchair	12	2018/19	2021/22
Apex Housing	Galliagh Northern Infill Site	Derry	General Needs	7	2019/20	2020/21
Apex Housing	7-9 Bishop Street, Londonderry (Womens Aid)	Derry	4	9	2020/21	2021/22
Apex Housing	Galliagh, Phase 5	Derry	General Needs	28	2020/21	2022/23
Apex Housing	Galliagh Southern Infill Site	Derry	General Needs	9	2020/21	2020/21
Ark	28 Great James Street	Derry	General Needs	9	2019/20	2020/21
Ark	125-139 Strand Road	Derry	CAT1 Elderly	26	2020/21	2021/22

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Need Group	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Ark	125-139 Strand Road	Derry	Wheelchair	1	2020/21	2021/22
Choice	Bishop Street	Derry	General Needs	24	2018/19	2022/23
Choice	Bishop Street	Derry	General Needs	16	2018/19	2022/23
Choice	Bishop Street	Derry	CAT1 Elderly	21	2018/19	2022/23
Choice	Bishop Street	Derry	Wheelchair	3	2018/19	2022/23
Clanmil	Foxhill	Derry	General Needs	3	2020/21	2021/22
Clanmil	50-54 Waterloo Street	Derry	CAT1 Elderly	19	2020/21	2021/22
Habinteg	Mews Lane	Derry	General Needs	16	2017/18	2020/21
Habinteg	Site adjacent to 66 Duke Street	Derry	CAT1 Elderly	41	2018/19	2021/22
Habinteg	Site adjacent to 66 Duke Street	Derry	Wheelchair	1	2018/19	2021/22
Habinteg	Central Drive	Derry	General Needs	6	2019/20	2020/21
Radius	Ebrington Primary School	Derry	General Needs	38	2020/21	2022/23
Radius	Ebrington Primary School	Derry	CAT1 Elderly	4	2020/21	2022/23
Radius	Ebrington Primary School	Derry	Wheelchair	7	2020/21	2022/23
Rural	Clonmeen Drive	Strathfoyle	General Needs	6	2020/21	2021/22
South Ulster	Mimosa Court	Derry	General Needs	15	2019/20	2021/22
South Ulster	Mimosa Court	Derry	CAT1 Elderly	12	2019/20	2021/22
Triangle	6-7 Patrick Street	Derry	General Needs	28	2018/19	2021/22
Triangle	Lawrence Hill	Derry	General Needs	15	2019/20	2021/22
Triangle	18-20 Bishop Street	Derry	General Needs	7	2019/20	2021/22

Table 3: Social housing unit completions since 1st January 2020 (63 units)

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Need Group	Units	Onsite Year	Completed Year	Status
Choice	Nelson Drive, Phase 3 (T)	Derry	General Needs	40	2017/18	2019/20	Allocated
Choice	Nelson Drive, Phase 3 (T)	Derry	CAT1 Elderly	7	2017/18	2019/20	Allocated
Choice	Nelson Drive, Phase 3 (T)	Derry	Wheelchair	4	2017/18	2019/20	Allocated
Apex Housing	6 Gartan Square	Derry	General Needs	1	2018/19	2020/21	Allocated

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Need Group	Units	Onsite Year	Completed Year	Status
Apex Housing	27 Slievemore Park	Derry	General Needs	1	2018/19	2020/21	Allocated
Apex Housing	19 Benevenagh Gardens	Derry	General Needs	1	2018/19	2020/21	Allocated
Apex Housing	5 Glendale Drive	Derry	General Needs	1	2018/19	2020/21	Allocated
Apex Housing	57 Cornshell Fields	Derry	General Needs	1	2018/19	2020/21	Allocated
Apex Housing	Sites 1-4 Lower Galliagh Road	Derry	General Needs	4	2019/20	2020/21	Allocated
Rural	52,53,54 Gortin Meadows	Newbuildings	General Needs	3	2020/21	2020/21	*

* Housing Association has not provided a response to NIHE's request for this information.

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 Allister asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 10777/17-22, to place in the Assembly Library a copy of the approved business case for the COVID-19 Culture, Languages, Arts and Heritage Support Programme 2020/2021.
(AQW 11648/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: A strategic Outline Case and Outline Business Case were developed and approved in accordance with Expenditure Appraisal and Evaluation Guidance.

Departmental business cases are not routinely published, and I have no plans to place this business case in the Assembly library.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for Communities whether she plans to replicate the UK Government's plans to partly finance the decarbonisation of owner-occupied homes in England through its Homes Upgrade Grants.
(AQW 11674/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Department of Finance have confirmed that Treasury has indicated that funding for decarbonisation of owner-occupied homes, including Green Homes Grant scheme, is to be found from existing budgets for 2020-21. I will continue to keep options under review.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for Communities whether her Department will support district councils in submitting requests for funds for the decarbonisation of social housing through the UK Government's Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund.
(AQW 11675/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The British Government's Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund is a grant programme to support social landlords to demonstrate innovative approaches to retrofitting social housing.

Local Councils are not social landlords here and are therefore unable to apply for funding under this programme.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities how many people that are entitled to the Winter Fuel payment in North Down have yet to receive their payment.
(AQW 11684/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) administer Winter Fuel Payments on behalf of the Department for Communities. DWP has advised that it is unable to provide details on the number of people that are entitled to Winter Fuel Payment in North Down who have yet to receive their payment for 2020-21 year.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Communities whether dance studios will be able to open again from 12 December 2020, and under what circumstances.
(AQW 11706/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: From 11th December until Boxing Day, dance studios and classes are able to resume but in very specific circumstances.

As COVID-19 is spread by respiratory droplets, group indoor sports, exercise activities and dance that have high levels of exertion (that is those which cause participants to get out of breath) are not permitted under the current regulations.

The current law provides that indoors, individual activity (including with a coach/ trainer, or carer), and non-contact activities of up to 15 people that do not cause an individual to get out of breath are permitted.

It would be an option for dance teachers to consider a programme designed not to leave participants out-of-breath. Dance studios are responsible for ensuring that any activity they organise is within the limits of the law.

The Executive has determined that for the six weeks from Boxing Day, restrictions will be placed on a range of activities. Dance is one of the activities that will be included in those restrictions and dance studios will be required to close during that six week period.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities how her Department is tackling anti-social behaviour in West Tyrone. (AQW 11707/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Funding is made available on an annual basis from the Community Safety budget to a range of community based groups and PCSPs to enable the development of local solutions to address anti-social behaviour in Housing Executive estates.

The Housing Executive works with its partner agencies across the statutory, voluntary and community sectors to address anti-social behaviour where it occurs in its estates. Where individuals are experiencing anti-social behaviour, they should record and report all incidents to their local Housing Executive office, and any other relevant agency such as the PSNI or Environmental Health, so that complaints can be investigated and progressed appropriately.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities how much funding Armagh Junior Camogie team has received from her Department in each of the last five years. (AQW 11729/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department for Communities has not provided any funding to the Armagh Camogie team in the last five years.

In 2017, Armagh County Camogie received an Automated External Defibrillator and associated training to the value of £700 from Sport NI.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for Communities to detail, since January 2020, the number of social housing units (i) approved by her Department but on which construction has not yet commenced; (ii) on which constructions has commenced but is not completed; (iii) on which construction has been completed and the housing association has received a Completion Certificate from a contractor; and (iv) which have been allocated to new tenants by housing associations in (a) Belfast North; (b) Belfast South; (c) Belfast East; and (d) Belfast West. (AQW 11757/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín:

Belfast North

Within the Belfast North Parliamentary Constituency there have been 117 social housing units approved since beginning of 2020, but construction has yet to commence. Details of these units are included in Table 1 below.

There are currently 270 social housing units under construction. Details of these units are included in Table 2 below.

There have been 115 social housing completions, since the beginning of 2020. In this context, "completion" means that work on the dwelling is complete and that these 115 units have been handed over to a housing association (following receipt of a Completion Certificate from a contractor).

The housing associations have confirmed that 76 of the 115 units have been allocated to new tenant(s). The status of the remaining 39 units is not available as we have not as yet received this information. Details of these units are included in Table 3 below.

Belfast South

Within the Belfast South Parliamentary Constituency there have been 38 social housing units approved since beginning of 2020, but construction has yet to commence. Details of these units are included in Table 1 below.

There are currently 114 social housing units under construction. Details of these units are included in Table 2 below.

There has been 4 social housing completions, since beginning of 2020, to date. In this context, "completion" has the same meaning as given above.

The housing associations have confirmed that 1 of the 4 units have been allocated to new tenant(s). The status of the remaining 3 units is not available as we have not as yet received this information. Details of these units are included in Table 3 below.

Belfast East

Within the Belfast East Parliamentary Constituency there have been 37 social housing units approved since the beginning of 2020, but construction has yet to commence. Details of these units are included in Table 1 below.

There are currently 165 social housing units under construction. Details of these units are included in Table 2 below.

There have been 54 social housing completions since the beginning of 2020. In this context, "completion" has the same meaning as given above.

The housing associations have confirmed that 32 of the 54 units have been allocated to new tenant(s). The status of the remaining 22 units is not available as we have not as yet received this information. Details of these units are included in Table 3 below.

Belfast West

Within the Belfast West Parliamentary Constituency there have been 535 social housing units approved since beginning of 2020, but construction has yet to commence. Details of these units are included in Table 1 below.

There are currently 516 social housing units under construction. Details of these units are included in Table 2 below.

There have been 131 social housing completions, since the beginning of 2020 to date. In this context, "completion" has the same meaning as given above.

The housing associations have confirmed that 60 of the 131 units have been allocated to new tenant(s). The status of the remaining 71 units is not available as we have not as yet received this information. Details of these units are included in Table 3 below.

Table 1: Social housing units approved since 1st January 2020, but construction not commenced (727 units)

Parliamentary Constituency	Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Belfast North	Apex Housing	Newtownabbey High School *	Newtownabbey	New Build	76	2021/22	2023/24
Belfast North	Apex Housing	Newtownabbey High School *	Newtownabbey	New Build	22	2021/22	2023/24
Belfast North	Apex Housing	Newtownabbey High School *	Newtownabbey	New Build	12	2021/22	2023/24
Belfast North	North Belfast	Emersons Mill	Belfast	Off The Shelf	5	2020/21	2020/21
Belfast North	North Belfast	14 Ardoyne Place	Belfast	Rehabilitation	1	2020/21	2021/22
Belfast North	North Belfast	147 Ligoniel Road	Belfast	Rehabilitation	1	2020/21	2021/22
Belfast South	Choice	163 Ormeau Road, Phase 2	Belfast	Design & Build	13	2020/21	2021/22
Belfast South	Choice	163 Ormeau Road, Phase 2	Belfast	Design & Build	2	2020/21	2021/22
Belfast South	Choice	Lisburn Road / Ashley Avenue	Belfast	Design & Build	21	2020/21	2021/22
Belfast South	Choice	Lisburn Road / Ashley Avenue	Belfast	Design & Build	2	2020/21	2021/22
Belfast East	Ark	1-3 Evelyn Avenue	Belfast	New Build	6	2020/21	2021/22
Belfast East	Ark	Church Road	Dundonald	Off The Shelf	7	2020/21	2020/21
Belfast East	Choice	Park Avenue	Belfast	Design & Build	21	2020/21	2021/22
Belfast East	Choice	50 Reaville Park	Dundonald	Rehabilitation	1	2020/21	2020/21
Belfast East	Connswater	2 Knocknagoney Avenue	Belfast	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	1	2020/21	2021/22

Parliamentary Constituency	Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Belfast East	Connswater	2A Knocknagoney Avenue	Belfast	Off The Shelf	1	2020/21	2021/22
Belfast West	Apex Housing	Glenmona	Belfast	New Build	442	2020/21	2024/25
Belfast West	Apex Housing	Glenmona	Belfast	New Build	40	2020/21	2024/25
Belfast West	Apex Housing	Glenmona	Belfast	New Build	38	2020/21	2024/25
Belfast West	Habinteg	6 Suffolk Road	Belfast	Design & Build	15	2020/21	2021/22

* Newtownabbey High School (Apex Housing) proposal was approved by the Department in March 2020 as an Advance Land Purchase; scheme is programmed to commence construction of units in 2021/22 Programme Year.

Table 2: Social housing units under construction (1,065 units)

Parliamentary Constituency	Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Belfast North	Choice	Stanhope Street Phase 3 (T)	Belfast	New Build	10	2018/19	2020/21
Belfast North	Choice	Cairmartin, Phase 2 (T)	Belfast	New Build	16	2020/21	2022/23
Belfast North	Choice	Cairmartin, Phase 2 (T)	Belfast	New Build	10	2020/21	2022/23
Belfast North	Choice	10B Oldpark Terrace	Belfast	New Build	16	2020/21	2021/22
Belfast North	Clanmil	Former Tesco Site, Carnmoney Road	Glengormley	New Build	28	2017/18	2020/21
Belfast North	Clanmil	Former Tesco Site, Carnmoney Road	Glengormley	New Build	20	2017/18	2020/21
Belfast North	Clanmil	Apartments 1 & 2, 9 Eia Street	Belfast	Rehabilitation	2	2017/18	2020/21
Belfast North	Clanmil	Apartments 1-8, 434 Antrim Road	Belfast	Rehabilitation	7	2017/18	2020/21
Belfast North	Clanmil	19 Jamaica Road	Belfast	Rehabilitation	1	2017/18	2020/21
Belfast North	Clanmil	58 Newington Avenue	Belfast	Rehabilitation	1	2017/18	2020/21
Belfast North	Clanmil	44 Newington Avenue	Belfast	Rehabilitation	1	2017/18	2020/21
Belfast North	Clanmil	12 Newington Street	Belfast	Rehabilitation	1	2017/18	2020/21
Belfast North	Clanmil	15 Pineview Gardens	Belfast	Rehabilitation	1	2017/18	2020/21

Parliamentary Constituency	Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Belfast North	Clanmil	239 Alliance Avenue	Belfast	Rehabilitation	1	2017/18	2020/21
Belfast North	Clanmil	37 Torrens Avenue	Belfast	Rehabilitation	1	2017/18	2020/21
Belfast North	Clanmil	430 Antrim Road	Belfast	Rehabilitation	6	2018/19	2020/21
Belfast North	Clanmil	St Gemma's High School Site	Belfast	Design & Build	50	2019/20	2021/22
Belfast North	Clanmil	St Gemma's High School Site	Belfast	Design & Build	3	2019/20	2021/22
Belfast North	Clanmil	Brookfield Mill	Belfast	Design & Build	77	2019/20	2021/22
Belfast North	Clanmil	Glenbryn, Phase 3 (Surplus Public Sector Site)	Belfast	New Build	11	2020/21	2022/23
Belfast North	Clanmil	Glenbryn, Phase 3 (Surplus Public Sector Site)	Belfast	New Build	1	2020/21	2022/23
Belfast North	Connswater	19 Dunloy Gardens	Newtownabbey	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	1	2019/20	2020/21
Belfast North	Connswater	25 Braden Heights	Newtownabbey	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	1	2020/21	2020/21
Belfast North	Newington (Apex Housing)	48 Brucevale Park	Belfast	Rehabilitation	1	2019/20	2020/21
Belfast North	Newington (Apex Housing)	40 Clifton Crescent	Belfast	Rehabilitation	1	2019/20	2020/21
Belfast North	Newington (Apex Housing)	2A Victoria Parade	Belfast	Rehabilitation	1	2019/20	2020/21
Belfast North	North Belfast HA	7 Cranbrook Court	Belfast	Rehabilitation	1	2020/21	2020/21
Belfast South	Ark	454-458 Donegall Road	Belfast	Off The Shelf	10	2020/21	2021/22
Belfast South	Ark	136-138 University Avenue	Belfast	Design & Build	13	2020/21	2021/22
Belfast South	Choice	Killynure Phase 2 (T)	Carryduff	New Build	16	2018/19	2020/21
Belfast South	Choice	Killynure Phase 2 (T)	Carryduff	New Build	6	2018/19	2020/21

Parliamentary Constituency	Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Belfast South	Choice	Killynure Phase 2 (T)	Carryduff	New Build	2	2018/19	2020/21
Belfast South	Choice	PSNI Site, 277 Woodstock Road (Surplus Public Site)	Belfast	New Build	17	2018/19	2020/21
Belfast South	Choice	PSNI Site, 277 Woodstock Road (Surplus Public Site)	Belfast	New Build	2	2018/19	2020/21
Belfast South	Choice	163 Ormeau Road (H & J Martin site)	Belfast	Design & Build	39	2018/19	2020/21
Belfast South	Choice	163 Ormeau Road (H & J Martin site)	Belfast	Design & Build	3	2018/19	2020/21
Belfast South	Clanmil	136 University Street	Belfast	Rehabilitation	2	2018/19	2020/21
Belfast South	Clanmil	62 University Street	Belfast	Rehabilitation	3	2018/19	2020/21
Belfast South	Clanmil	23 Shaftesbury Avenue	Belfast	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	1	2020/21	2020/21
Belfast East	Alpha	123 Barnetts Road	Belfast	Design & Build	14	2019/20	2020/21
Belfast East	Ark	Ravensdale Street	Belfast	Design & Build	6	2020/21	2021/22
Belfast East	Choice	Ballybeen Square Phase 2 (T)	Belfast	New Build	26	2018/19	2020/21
Belfast East	Choice	Ballybeen Square Phase 2 (T)	Belfast	New Build	2	2018/19	2020/21
Belfast East	Choice	179, 181, 187, 197, 199-203 Beersbridge Road	Belfast	Design & Build	18	2018/19	2020/21
Belfast East	Choice	4A Galway Mews	Dundonald	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	1	2020/21	2020/21
Belfast East	Choice	Lewis Square	Belfast	Design & Build	27	2020/21	2022/23
Belfast East	Choice	Lewis Square	Belfast	Design & Build	2	2020/21	2022/23
Belfast East	Connswater	Lands adjacent to 91 Gilnahirk Road	Belfast	Design & Build	6	2019/20	2021/22

Parliamentary Constituency	Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Belfast East	Connswater	15 Ballygowan Road	Belfast	Rehabilitation	1	2020/21	2020/21
Belfast East	Radius	288 Beersbridge Road	Belfast	New Build	2	2018/19	2021/22
Belfast East	Radius	288 Beersbridge Road	Belfast	New Build	20	2018/19	2021/22
Belfast East	St Matthews	50 Harper Street	Belfast	Rehabilitation	1	2018/19	2020/21
Belfast East	South Ulster	Redcar Street	Belfast	Design & Build	12	2018/19	2020/21
Belfast East	Triangle	98 Hollywood Road (formerly East Belfast Competitive Design & Build)	Belfast	Design & Build	25	2018/19	2020/21
Belfast East	Triangle	98 Hollywood Road (formerly East Belfast Competitive Design & Build)	Belfast	Design & Build	2	2018/19	2020/21
Belfast West	Apex Housing	Areema Drive (T)	Dunmurry	New Build	16	2019/20	2021/22
Belfast West	Apex Housing	Areema Drive (T)	Dunmurry	New Build	4	2019/20	2021/22
Belfast West	Apex Housing	Areema Drive (T)	Dunmurry	New Build	2	2019/20	2021/22
Belfast West	Choice	Belvedere, Upper Dunmurry Lane	Belfast	New Build	43	2018/19	2022/23
Belfast West	Choice	Belvedere, Upper Dunmurry Lane	Belfast	New Build	8	2018/19	2022/23
Belfast West	Choice	Belvedere, Upper Dunmurry Lane	Belfast	New Build	2	2018/19	2022/23
Belfast West	Choice	Altigarron Court	Belfast	New Build	14	2018/19	2020/21
Belfast West	Choice	Kilwee, Upper Dunmurry Lane	Belfast	New Build	73	2019/20	2021/22
Belfast West	Choice	Kilwee, Upper Dunmurry Lane	Belfast	New Build	12	2019/20	2021/22

Parliamentary Constituency	Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Belfast West	Choice	Kilwee, Upper Dunmurry Lane	Belfast	New Build	5	2019/20	2021/22
Belfast West	Choice	Moyard Playpark (T)	Belfast	New Build	14	2020/21	2021/22
Belfast West	Clanmil	Apt 10 Springfield Mill	Belfast	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	1	2019/20	2020/21
Belfast West	North Belfast HA	13 Gortnamona Heights	Belfast	Rehabilitation	1	2019/20	2020/21
Belfast West	North Belfast HA	35 Colinbrook Crescent	Belfast	Rehabilitation	1	2020/21	2021/22
Belfast West	Oaklee/Trinity	Hannahstown Phase 1A	Belfast	New Build	89	2014/15	2021/22
Belfast West	Oaklee/Trinity	Hannahstown Phase 1A	Belfast	New Build	3	2014/15	2021/22
Belfast West	Radius	Visteon, Blacks Road	Belfast	New Build	186	2017/18	2021/22
Belfast West	Radius	Visteon, Blacks Road	Belfast	New Build	10	2017/18	2021/22
Belfast West	Radius	Gardenmore Road/ Summerhill Road (T)	Twinbrook	New Build	13	2020/21	2021/22
Belfast West	Radius	Gardenmore Road/ Summerhill Road (T)	Twinbrook	New Build	1	2020/21	2021/22
Belfast West	Radius	Hopewell Street (T)	Belfast	New Build	16	2020/21	2022/23
Belfast West	Radius	Hopewell Street (T)	Belfast	New Build	2	2020/21	2022/23

Table 3: Social housing unit completions since 1st January 2020 (304 units)

Parliamentary Constituency	Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Units	Onsite Year	Completed Year	Status
Belfast North	Clanmil	35 Etna Drive	Belfast	1	2017/18	2019/20	*
Belfast North	Clanmil	45 Etna Drive	Belfast	1	2017/18	2019/20	*
Belfast North	Clanmil	51 Eskdale Gardens	Belfast	1	2017/18	2019/20	*
Belfast North	Clanmil	45 Stratford Gardens	Belfast	1	2017/18	2019/20	*
Belfast North	Clanmil	28 Northwick Drive	Belfast	1	2017/18	2019/20	*
Belfast North	Clanmil	111 Farringdon Gardens	Belfast	1	2017/18	2019/20	*

Parliamentary Constituency	Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Units	Onsite Year	Completed Year	Status
Belfast North	Clanmil	373 Oldpark Road	Belfast	1	2017/18	2019/20	*
Belfast North	Clanmil	118 Brompton Park	Belfast	1	2017/18	2019/20	*
Belfast North	Clanmil	162 Brompton Park	Belfast	1	2017/18	2019/20	*
Belfast North	Clanmil	187 Brompton Park	Belfast	1	2017/18	2019/20	*
Belfast North	Clanmil	Jamaica Inn, Jamaica Road	Belfast	20	2017/18	2019/20	*
Belfast North	Clanmil	Jamaica Inn, Jamaica Road	Belfast	1	2017/18	2019/20	*
Belfast North	Apex Housing	Hogarth Street, Tigers Bay (T)	Belfast	20	2017/18	2020/21	Allocated
Belfast North	Apex Housing	Rathmullan Drive (T)	Rathcoole	24	2017/18	2020/21	Allocated
Belfast North	Apex Housing	Grays Lane, 792 Shore Road (T)	Belfast	5	2018/19	2020/21	Allocated
Belfast North	Choice	Mountainhill Road, Ligoniel	Belfast	8	2018/19	2020/21	*
Belfast North	Ark	Glebecoole Park	Newtownabbey	4	2018/19	2020/21	Allocated
Belfast North	North Belfast HA	1 Hopefield Avenue	Belfast	9	2018/19	2020/21	Allocated
Belfast North	Connswater	142 East Way	Newtownabbey	1	2019/20	2019/20	Allocated
Belfast North	Ark	539 Antrim Road	Belfast	5	2019/20	2019/20	Allocated
Belfast North	Ark	255 Ligoniel Road	Belfast	6	2019/20	2019/20	Allocated
Belfast North	Connswater	22 Braden Heights	Newtownabbey	1	2019/20	2020/21	Allocated
Belfast North	North Belfast HA	28 Ardilea Court	Belfast	1	2019/20	2020/21	Allocated
Belfast South	Choice	Apts 1,2,3; 155 Ormeau Road	Belfast	3	2019/20	2020/21	*
Belfast South	Radius	4 Cairnshill Court	Belfast	1	2019/20	2019/20	Allocated

Parliamentary Constituency	Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Units	Onsite Year	Completed Year	Status
Belfast East	Choice	136-152; 183-191; 211-217 Beersbridge Road	Belfast	18	2017/18	2019/20	Allocated
Belfast East	Choice	136-152; 183-191; 211-217 Beersbridge Road	Belfast	1	2017/18	2019/20	Allocated
Belfast East	Clanmil	5-7 Connsbrook Avenue	Belfast	21	2017/18	2020/21	*
Belfast East	Connswater	3 Connswater Mews	Belfast	1	2019/20	2019/20	Allocated
Belfast East	Choice	55 Belle Bashford Court	Belfast	1	2019/20	2020/21	Allocated
Belfast East	Radius	Leaseholds, Phase 7 (Abbey Court)	Belfast	7	2019/20	2019/20	Allocated
Belfast East	St Matthews	71 Beechfield Street	Belfast	1	2019/20	2020/21	Allocated
Belfast East	Ark	5 Hornby Crescent	Belfast	1	2019/20	2020/21	Allocated
Belfast East	Connswater	15 Connswater Grove	Belfast	1	2019/20	2020/21	Allocated
Belfast East	Choice	71 Inverary Avenue	Belfast	1	2019/20	2020/21	*
Belfast East	St Matthews	22 Beechfield Street	Belfast	1	2019/20	2020/21	Allocated
Belfast West	Clanmil	Durham Street (Blood Transfusion Service Surplus Site)	Belfast	10	2015/16	2019/20	*
Belfast West	Clanmil	Durham Street (Blood Transfusion Service Surplus Site)	Belfast	12	2015/16	2019/20	*
Belfast West	Clanmil	Durham Street (Blood Transfusion Service Surplus Site)	Belfast	1	2015/16	2019/20	*
Belfast West	North Belfast HA	119 Forthriver Road	Belfast	18	2017/18	2020/21	Allocated

Parliamentary Constituency	Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Units	Onsite Year	Completed Year	Status
Belfast West	Choice	Gardenmore Road (Former St Mark's PS)	Belfast	48	2018/19	2020/21	*
Belfast West	North Belfast HA	119a Forthriver Road	Belfast	6	2018/19	2020/21	Allocated
Belfast West	South Ulster	Gibson Street	Belfast	4	2018/19	2019/20	Allocated
Belfast West	South Ulster	Gibson Street	Belfast	1	2018/19	2019/20	Allocated
Belfast West	Radius	Lands north of 159 Mount Eagles Avenue, Belfast (Lagmore Avenue)	Belfast	29	2019/20	2020/21	Allocated
Belfast West	Choice	37 White Glen	Belfast	1	2019/20	2019/20	Allocated
Belfast West	Ark	22 Mount Eagles Square	Belfast	1	2019/20	2020/21	Allocated

* Housing Association has not provided a response to NIHE's request for this information.

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 O'Toole asked the Minister for Communities how many applications for Discretionary Support payments her Department received from (i) Belfast East; (ii) Belfast South; (iii) Belfast North; and (iv) Belfast West, in each year between 2015 and 2020; and how many were approved.

(AQW 11759/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Discretionary Support was introduced in November 2016; application and payment data is available therefore from 2016/17 through to 2019/20.

Management information on Discretionary Support applications received since its implementation in November 2016, broken down by Belfast's Parliamentary Constituency areas is provided in the table below: -

Parliamentary Constituency	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Belfast East	1310	3050	3520	3280
Belfast North	4410	9400	11080	10090
Belfast South	1480	3360	3730	3400
Belfast West	3590	7880	9500	8550

Management information on Discretionary Support applications paid since its implementation in November 2016, broken down by Belfast's

Parliamentary Constituency areas is provided in the table below: -

Parliamentary Constituency	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Belfast East	930	2120	2440	2340
Belfast North	2760	6180	7260	6990
Belfast South	990	2280	2560	2380

Parliamentary Constituency	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Belfast West	2200	5080	6310	5930

Management information is not yet available by Parliamentary Constituency for 2020/21.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities why the Housing Executive property at 5 Willowbrook Park, Bangor has not had the issues with damp resolved.

(AQW 11763/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have written directly to the Member today on this matter, to protect the personal information relating to the tenants.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 9865/17-22, whether the Housing Executive action plan for cavity wall insulation will be published before the end of 2020.

(AQW 11764/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The process of producing and publishing this Draft Cavity Wall Insulation action plan has been delayed due to Covid-19, however the Housing Executive is committed to issuing this for public consultation, and will do so before the end of this calendar year.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AWQ 10572/17-22, why the oversight arrangements in place for maintenance has not yet been able to bring about completion of remedial work on the majority of the 135 homes identified in the SERC report of March 2014.

(AQW 11765/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: While my Department has oversight of the Housing Executive and their maintenance programmes, oversight does not consist of providing our independent housing authority with its maintenance priorities. Operational responsibility for how to prioritise maintenance in line with the funding available remains a matter for the Housing Executive.

However the Housing Executive has advised that it has addressed a small number of these properties under Response Maintenance. Any of the other properties in which cavity wall insulation issues arise will be dealt with via the Housing Executive's new Cavity Wall Insulation Action Plan for its stock.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 10572/17/22, why the oversight arrangements have not yet been able to bring about completion of the remedial works on almost 300 houses in the Creggan area where independent consultants in 2016 recommended that these houses required an upgrade to their cavity wall insulation.

(AQW 11766/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: While my Department has oversight of the Housing Executive and their maintenance programmes, oversight does not consist of providing our independent housing authority with its maintenance priorities. Operational responsibility for how to prioritise maintenance in line with the funding available remains a matter for the Housing Executive

The Housing Executive has advised that preparation of a number of Cavity Wall Insulation schemes, including one for the Creggan area in 2018, was deferred as the Housing Executive was commissioning a province-wide Cavity Wall Insulation research programme.

The purpose of this programme was to ascertain the extent of Cavity Wall Insulation problems and bring forward a new action plan as necessary. The Housing Executive will be issuing its Draft Cavity Wall Insulation Action Plan for public and industry consultation this month.

I hope this information is useful.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 10572,17/22, why the oversight arrangements in place for maintenance have not prioritised the upgrade work to the 519 properties, identified in surveys carried out by independent experts the British Board of Agreements between August 2017 and December 2018, as having voids or debris in their cavity walls.

(AQW 11767/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: While my Department has oversight of the Housing Executive and their maintenance programmes, oversight does not consist of providing our independent housing authority with its maintenance priorities. Operational responsibility for how to prioritise maintenance in line with the funding available remains a matter for the Housing Executive.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Communities (i) what consideration she has given to reducing the five-week wait for a first Universal Credit claim; (ii) what action has she taken on this issue; and (iii) when action on this waiting period will happen.

(AQW 11792/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: There are a number of measures in place to mitigate the impact of the 5 week wait for payment of UC. 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. To guard against hardship, the repayment amount was reduced from 40% to 30% of the standard allowance in October 2019. Furthermore, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the standard allowance entitlement was increased, from 6 April for one year, by £86.67 per month for everyone claiming Universal Credit.

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 run-on is also in place for Housing Benefit claimants who move to Universal Credit as a result of a change of circumstances.

In addition a person claiming UC can apply for a Contingency payment. 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. 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.

My Department continues to monitor the effectiveness of the various support measures that are available for people claiming Universal Credit.

Mr Catney asked the Minister for Communities to detail, since January 2020, the number of social housing units in Lagan Valley (i) approved by her Department but on which construction has not yet commenced; (ii) on which constructions has commenced but is not completed; (iii) on which construction has been completed and the housing association has received a Completion Certificate from a contractor; and (iv) which have been allocated to new tenants by housing associations.

(AQW 11807/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Within the Lagan Valley Parliamentary Constituency there have been 176 social housing units approved since the beginning of 2020, but construction has yet to commence. Details of these units are included in Table 1 below.

There are currently 110 social housing units under construction. Details of these units are included in Table 2 below.

There have been 179 social housing completions, since the beginning of 2020. In this context, "completion" means that work on the dwelling is complete and that these 179 units have been handed over to a housing association (following receipt of a Completion Certificate from a contractor).

The housing associations have confirmed that 109 of the 179 units have been allocated to new tenant(s). The status of the remaining 70 units is not available as we have not as yet received this information. Details of these units are included in Table 3 below.

Table 1: Social housing units approved since 1st January 2020, but construction not commenced (176 units)

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Apex Housing	Ballinderry Road	Lisburn	New Build	121	2021/22	2023/24
Apex Housing	Ballinderry Road	Lisburn	New Build	4	2021/22	2023/24
Ark	58 Hillsborough Road	Lisburn	Design & Build	12	2020/21	2021/22
Clanmil	Brokerstown Road	Lisburn	Off The Shelf	34	2020/21	2021/22
South Ulster	Glenview Close, Glenavy Road	Lisburn	Off The Shelf	5	2020/21	2020/21

* Ballinderry Road (Apex Housing) proposal was approved by the Department in March 2020 as an Advance Land Purchase; scheme is programmed to commence construction of units in 2021/22 Programme Year.

Table 2: Social housing units under construction (110 units)

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Choice	198-200 Moira Road	Lisburn	Design & Build	17	2020/21	2020/21
Clanmil	Mountview Drive / Skyline Drive	Lisburn	Rehabilitation	30	2018/19	2020/21
Clanmil	Redwoods, Phase 6	Dumurry	Design & Build	24	2018/19	2020/21
Clanmil	Redwoods, Phase 6	Dunmurry	Design & Build	6	2019/20	2020/21
Clanmil	10 Larch Lane	Lisburn	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	1	2019/20	2020/21
Connswater	3A & 3B Graham Street	Lisburn	New Build	15	2018/19	2020/21
Habinteg	27 Laganville Park	Lisburn	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	1	2019/20	2020/21
South Ulster	Causeway End Road	Lisburn	Design & Build	14	2018/19	2021/22
Triangle	47A & 47B Castlevue Park	Moira	Off The Shelf	2	2019/20	2020/21

Table 3: Social housing unit completions since 1st January 2020 (179 units)

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Units	Onsite Year	Completed Year	Status
Connswater	Dunmurry High School	Lisburn	92	2014/15	2019/20	Allocated
Connswater	Dunmurry High School	Lisburn	6	2014/15	2019/20	Allocated
Clanmil	12-16 Graham Gardens	Lisburn	36	2016/17	2019/20	*
Clanmil	105 Mountview Drive	Lisburn	1	2017/18	2019/20	*
Clanmil	Wardsborough Avenue	Lisburn	28	2017/18	2020/21	*
South Ulster	3 Knockburn Court	Lisburn	1	2018/19	2019/20	Allocated
South Ulster	1 Ashmount Park	Lisburn	1	2018/19	2019/20	Allocated
Choice	83 Causeway Meadows	Lisburn	1	2019/20	2019/20	*
South Ulster	80 Hilden Court	Lisburn	1	2019/20	2019/20	Allocated
Choice	9 Laganville Park	Lisburn	1	2019/20	2019/20	*
Choice	14 Laganville Park	Lisburn	1	2019/20	2019/20	*

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Units	Onsite Year	Completed Year	Status
Connswater	6A Rathvarna Close	Lisburn	1	2019/20	2019/20	Allocated
Ark	14A Mornington Gardens	Lisburn	1	2019/20	2019/20	Allocated
Ark	17 Mornington Lane	Lisburn	1	2019/20	2019/20	Allocated
Ark	21 Mornington Lane	Lisburn	1	2019/20	2020/21	Allocated
Ark	23 Mornington Lane	Lisburn	1	2019/20	2020/21	Allocated
Connswater	124 Hilden Court	Lisburn	1	2019/20	2020/21	Allocated
Ark	21 & 22 Woodvale Green	Lisburn	2	2020/21	2020/21	Allocated
Clanmil	19 Market Square, Phase 2	Lisburn	2	2020/21	2020/21	*

* Housing Association has not provided a response to NIHE's request for this information.

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 Catney asked the Minister for Communities how many applications were received for discretionary support payments in Lagan Valley; and how many were approved.

(AQW 11808/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Discretionary Support management information on applications is available for full years from 2016/17 through to 2019/20. For Lagan Valley, this information shows that in 2016/17 there were 990 applications received, 2,220 in 2017/18, 2,500 in 2018/19 and 2,270 in 2019/20.

Management information on payments, for Lagan Valley, shows that in 2016/17 there were 650 payments, 1,490 in 2017/18, 1,670 in 2018/19 and 1,620 in 2019/20.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Communities how many people have been asked to pay historic debts on Tax Credits in Northern Ireland since 2010.

(AQW 11812/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The information requested is not held by my Department. Revenue and Customs administer the Tax Credit system and the associated recovery of Tax Credit debt. However from 2017, if a Tax Credit debtor claimed Universal Credit, my Department is responsible for continuing with recovery action through their Universal Credit award. In addition from June 2019 if Revenue and Customs had exhausted all other avenues to recover a tax credit debt it can be passed to the Department.

Since 2017 my Department has engaged with 35,727 people about repaying their Tax Credit debts. Other than these two instances recovery activity on all other forms of Tax Credit debt still rests with Revenue and Customs.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Communities how many social housing tenants have refused social housing due to rental cost in (i) 2018; (ii) 2019; and (iii) 2020.

(AQW 11813/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has advised that there is not currently a refusal reason specifically relating to rental cost which can be recorded against an Offer Refusal in its Housing Management System.

However, there is a broader refusal reason for "Financial Reasons". This will cover any reason relating to the financial circumstances of the Applicant, which may include that an Applicant has refused the offer of a tenancy on the basis of unaffordable rental cost.

The Housing Executive has provided the following table which details the numbers of Offer Refusals with reason recorded as "Financial Reasons", in each financial year since 2017/2018. The table also shows the total number of Offers made in each financial year, including those with the following statuses (as at 15 December 2020); Refused, Accepted, Confirmed, Withdrawn and Pending. The figures reported also relate to direct offers only, and do not include multiple (preliminary) offers.

Financial Year	No. of Refusals due to "Financial Reasons"	No. of Offers made
2017/2018	116	23,043
2018/2019	107	22,814
2019/2020	116	20,330
2020/2021 YTD	46	12,408
Total	385	78,595

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Communities to detail the process by which social housing providers determine rental price in (i) a Housing Executive owned property; and (ii) each housing association.

(AQW 11814/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín:

- (i) The process by which rental price is determined in a Housing Executive owned property is as follows:

Article 17 of the Housing (NI) Order 1981 requires the Housing Executive to "submit to the Department of the Environment (DOE), now DfC, a scheme for determining the rent to be charged by the Executive for any housing accommodation provided by it".

The Rent Scheme is based on a system where points are awarded for dwelling type, number and size of rooms, heating, age, absence of amenities, access and presence of a garage within the curtilage of the dwelling. Rent charges are determined by multiplying the number of points a property has by the current value of a point (updated each year in accordance with the approved % rent increase).

- (ii) The rental price is determined by each Registered Housing Association as follows:

Housing Associations set the amount of rent to be charged for accommodations it provides based on individual rent setting policy. HA have provided a summary in the table below.

Registered Housing Associations	Rent setting policy
Abbeyfield & Wesley Housing Association	<p>Abbeyfield & Wesley is committed to providing accommodation and services for older people at charges which are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. affordable; ii. good value for money; iii. applied fairly and without discrimination; and iv. sufficient to cover costs, after any subsidy. <p>The rental element of the charge will take account of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Maintenance costs and provision for future maintenance ■ Housing management costs ■ Provision for voids and bad debts ■ Size and amenities of schemes

Registered Housing Associations	Rent setting policy
Alpha Housing Association	<p>Alpha Housing uses a points scheme to set the rents for its properties.</p> <p>Each apartment, bungalow or house attracts points based on its age, type, number of rooms, bed spaces, layout, heating, improvements and facilities.</p> <p>The amount of the rent is based on these points. Points may be deducted if a dwelling lacks certain basic amenities. The value of a point is reviewed annually by the Alpha Board and this, multiplied by the number of points allocated to the property, determines the amount each tenant is charged.</p> <p>Rents will only be adjusted at the start of each financial year (April) and tenants will be given at least four weeks' notice of any changes to their rent charges.</p> <p>The scheme is designed to ensure that similar properties in a similar condition attract the same rent regardless of location.</p>
Apex Housing Association	<p>The rent setting procedure is based on a 'pooled' rent policy whereby all properties are allocated rent points which are collated and the total points are then divided by the total costs of housing management, maintenance and financing costs to arrive at an average rent point rate for the year. Each property has its rent set then using the annual rent point rate multiplied by that particular property's rent points.</p>
Ark Housing Association	<p>Ark uses a points system to set rent charges. Points are awarded according to age, type of property, number of rooms and facilities of each house.</p> <p>Additional points are added to meet the cost of private finance to ensure each scheme is financially viable.</p>
Choice Housing Association	<p>Rents are set by the association in order to recover the following costs (1) the privately financed element of development costs (2) bank interest (3) scheme running costs and (4) component replacement costs. The recovery period is 35 years. For new schemes, rent is calculated as a set percentage of the standard development cost for the scheme's geographic location. This rent is then adjusted by the Consumer Price Index on an annual basis. Any legacy rents which are higher than the new policy rents are being brought into alignment by a process of rent reduction or rent freezing over an 8 year period.</p>
Clanmil Housing Association	<p>Rent Point levels are set for individual Clanmil properties on completion of construction/purchase based on a number of factors, including size of property/ number of bedrooms, its facilities (e.g. communal facilities) and its attributes (e.g. car parking space, solar panels, etc). The level of rent charged is reviewed annually and approved by the Board, considering a range of further factors including inflation, affordability and the costs of property maintenance and borrowing.</p>
Connswater Homes	<p>Connswater Homes has a rent setting policy which details the procedure used in determining rents and allocating rent points to a property based on a points table. Points are allocated under various categories such as dwelling type, amenities, size of dwelling, etc. Development schemes attracting grant funding from NIHE will carry a rental charge that doesn't exceed 85% of current Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates. The rent points assessed are multiplied by the current rent point value to give a weekly charge and this is compared to the current LHA.</p>
Covenanter Residential Association	<p>The Board sets the rent each year effective from 1st April. The Board takes into account value for money, the rent set by similar properties in the local area, RPI rises and any other mitigating circumstances the Board may decide to consider.</p>

Registered Housing Associations	Rent setting policy
Craigowen Housing Association	<p>Calculate annually the projected expenditure to be financed from rental income in the following areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ housing management; ■ responsive and cyclical maintenance where these are the responsibility of the HA; ■ planned programmed maintenance and development; ■ planned reserve; ■ employee and administration costs; ■ office costs and overheads; and ■ any other costs associated with running the organisation. <p>Assess the relevant costs for rental charges and calculate the rent to be charged to individual licensees by dividing the total costs by the number of accommodation units that have been approved for occupation by licensees.</p>
Grove Housing Association	Rents set using a points system along with a set multiplier to cover costs of long term private finance.
Habinteg Housing Association	<p>Habinteg uses a point system to review the attributes of the property and measure this against the long term viability of the scheme.</p> <p>Habinteg benchmarks new rents against the LHA and existing properties in the area.</p>
Newington Housing Association	Rents are set annually taking into account: the anticipated budgeted maintenance and management costs for the year; provision for long term maintenance and reinvestment in the property; and the capital and interest repayments of loans required to provide properties. Rents for new and fully rehabilitated dwellings are calculated by multiplying Newington's annual rental point by the points calculated via the completion of the Association's rent assessment calculation which takes account of the type of property, age and facilities (bedrooms, bathrooms etc.) in the property.
North Belfast Housing Association	<p>The Association set its own rents for mixed funded schemes to cover costs that are incurred, with loans from private lenders or the associations own reserves.</p> <p>The costs that North Belfast Housing seeks to meet from rental income are as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ All costs, including overheads, associated with managing our properties. This includes staff salaries, stationery, office costs, office running costs, etc. ■ Day to day maintenance requirements of our properties. This figure is based on our annual budget and advice issued by the DfC. ■ The income lost through void properties and bad debt. ■ The association puts aside revenue for future planned and major repair work. ■ The costs associated with servicing of loan repayments and interest charges. ■ Insurance costs.
Northern Ireland Co-ownership Housing Association	Rent is set at 2.5% of the share of the property owned by Co-ownership. This rent is reviewed annually in line with inflation and is set by the Department.
Radius Housing Association	Radius uses a points based system based on the Housing Executive's system, adding additional points for features such as lifetime homes & private finance. The points are then multiplied by a multiplier that is reviewed annually by the Board.

Registered Housing Associations	Rent setting policy
Rural Housing Association	<p>The rent is calculated to cover the following elements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Loan repayment ■ Management costs ■ Routine maintenance costs ■ Major repairs costs ■ Allowance for voids <p>The Association seeks to set affordable rents and so keep them within the reach of those with low incomes. In deciding how much should be paid for one house when compared with another, the Association considers the cost, size and amenities of each property.</p> <p>As at 1 July 2018, if the calculated rent for a new scheme or property in respect of its size is above the expected LHA for that area, the rent charged will be capped at 90% of the LHA (subject to annual increases) as published by the NIHE.</p>
South Ulster Housing Association	<p>Rents on mixed funded projects (DfC and private finance) are made up of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Loan repayments ■ Interest Costs ■ Management and Response Maintenance ■ Major repairs ■ Voids and bad debts ■ Surplus towards planned component replacement and development ■ Maintenance of private lender covenants
St Matthews Housing Association	<p>The Association sets rent on new housing stock based on the costs associated with the scheme. In relation to historic rents, a points based formula is used for this housing stock.</p>
Triangle Housing Association	<p>Triangle's rents are calculated using a standardised points system. Points are awarded according to the age and type of property, number and size of rooms and facilities such as heating. The points are then converted into a weekly rent charge using a multiplier. Rents are reviewed each April to take account of inflation etc.</p> <p>Supported housing rents and any annual rent increases are all agreed by the Housing Benefit Policy Unit within NIHE.</p>
Woodvale & Shankill Community Housing Association	<p>Rent setting is on a points based system, with points being allocated for the size of the house, rooms, amenities, etc.</p>

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Communities to detail the maximum rental cost for tenants in (i) a Housing Executive owned property; and (ii) each housing association.

(AQW 11815/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín:

- (i) The maximum rent charge for a Housing Executive dwelling is £119.47 per week. However it should be highlighted that there are only two properties with this maximum rent charge, and approximately only 34 properties with a rent charge in excess of £100 out of a total housing stock of approximately 85,000.
- (ii) The maximum rental charge for each Registered Housing Association (RHA) as provided by RHAs, is set out below:

Registered Housing Associations	General needs (£)	Sheltered (£)	Supported (£)
Abbeyfield & Wesley Housing Association	91.92	77.51	138.97
Alpha Housing Association	113.93	99.05	N/A
Apex Housing Association	152.74	105.01	82.48
Ark Housing Association	129.44	65.29	103.56
Choice Housing Association	169.32	117.83	109.33

Registered Housing Associations	General needs (£)	Sheltered (£)	Supported (£)
Clanmil Housing Association	162.57	110.39	100.35
Connswater Homes	144.33	N/A	N/A
Covenanter Residential Association	N/A	141.00	N/A
Craigowen Housing Association	N/A	N/A	110.66
Grove Housing Association	118.90	N/A	N/A
Habinteg Housing Association	127.24	74.57	N/A
Newington Housing Association	122.46	79.33	49.41
North Belfast Housing Association	127.61	75.00	86.10
Radius Housing Association	154.21	137.54	138.72
Rural Housing Association	162.21	N/A	N/A
South Ulster Housing Association	161.66	80.00	114.30
St Matthews Housing Association	116.55	86.24	N/A
Triangle Housing Association	138.30	83.35	130.72
Woodvale & Shankill Community Housing Association	108.64	75.19	N/A

Co-ownership Housing Association sets rents at 2.5% of the share of properties it owns.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Communities to detail the average rental cost for tenants in (i) a Housing Executive owned property; and (ii) each housing association.

(AQW 11816/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín:

- (i) The average rent charge for a Housing Executive dwelling is £68.40 per week.
- (ii) The average rental cost (including service charges) per week by accommodation type for each Registered Housing Association is as follows for 2018/19:

Registered Housing Associations	General needs (£)	Supported (£)	Sheltered (£)	RHA average (£)
Abbeyfield & Wesley Housing Association	96.92	398.89	97.16	290.75
Alpha Housing Association	85.77	N/A	79.03	79.51
Apex Housing Association	94.12	116.64	82.67	96.07
Ark Housing Association	92.50	108.65	75.72	92.06
Choice Housing Association	87.54	76.03	74.85	83.91
Clanmil Housing Association	97.83	214.92	93.32	99.96
Connswater Homes	95.20	N/A	N/A	95.20
Covenanter Residential Association	N/A	N/A	124.64	124.64
Craigowen Housing Association	N/A	103.09	N/A	103.09
Grove Community Housing Association	90.87	N/A	N/A	90.87
Habinteg Housing Association	92.12	67.44	101.88	91.65
Newington Housing Association	95.87	46.53	86.43	93.93
North Belfast Housing Association	88.01	91.46	91.03	88.44
Radius Housing Association	91.27	93.14	81.41	88.92
Rural Housing Association	100.83	N/A	N/A	100.83

Registered Housing Associations	General needs (£)	Supported (£)	Sheltered (£)	RHA average (£)
South Ulster Housing Association	85.23	77.17	78.20	84.80
St Matthews Housing Association	79.86	N/A	88.98	80.68
Triangle Housing Association	90.86	63.87	75.66	84.63
Woodvale & Shankill Community Housing Association	76.14	N/A	84.79	77.98

Co-ownership Housing Association sets rents at 2.5% of the share of properties it owns.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for Communities what assessment has been made of the number of women in Northern Ireland potentially affected by an underpayment of state pensions, due to an error in assessment relating to the National Insurance Contributions of their spouse.

(AQW 11818/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Under the State Pension rules that apply before 6 April 2016, individuals may be able to derive entitlement or a top up to their State Pension using their husband's National Insurance contributions once he reaches his State Pension age. My Department is aware that in some instances the proper action was not taken in all cases in line with legislation in place at the time.

My Department is currently working through information, obtained from the benefit IT systems, that was commissioned specifically to identify customers potentially affected by this issue. Some necessary refinement of the data is ongoing so my Department is not in a position to provide actual numbers at this time although early analysis indicates the number of cases impacted and requiring a revised award is very small. My Department will publish statistical information on the exercise in due course.

In the intervening period if a married woman contacts the Pension Centre enquiring about their State Pension award, staff will check the award and revise if necessary.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the development and roll-out of a culture and community fund for community halls, which was a New Decade, New Approach commitment.

(AQW 11845/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The establishment of a Culture and Community Fund was a commitment made by the British Government in the "New Decade, New Approach" agreement. To my knowledge, this commitment has not yet been fulfilled.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities whether dance studios and performing arts, involving all forms of dancing, have to close during the period from 11 December 2020 under the COVID-19 restrictions.

(AQW 11858/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Restrictions are subject to periodic change to take account of changing circumstances. Groups engaged in dance should check NIDirect and follow the up-to-date advice. They should also take into account the guidance published by the Arts Council for the reopening of the Arts.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 9854/17-22, what plans she has to extend the use for deaf people of the video relay service to the private sector.

(AQW 11863/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department is committed to addressing issues of accessibility for the Deaf community and officials continue to consider options to improve and expand local British Sign Language and Irish Sign Language interpreter support. This includes consideration of expanding current Video Relay Service provision across all sectors, including the private sector.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities whether the findings in relation to the complaint lodged by Mr Jamie Bryson will be considered in the review of the Charity Commission which she has announced.

(AQW 11877/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The independent review of charity regulation will consider the regulatory framework as well as the effectiveness of the current regulator. The scope of the review has yet to be finalised, however, it will undoubtedly consider weaknesses or failures in procedures adopted by the Commission.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the level of abuse associated with the COVID-19 isolation grant.

(AQW 11879/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: It is important to note that self – isolation grant applications are assessed within the Department’s existing Discretionary Support scheme which already had, prior to the addition of the self – isolation grant in March, well established processes and controls to prevent fraud.

While applications can be made online, an important fraud prevention step in the Discretionary Support process is that in every case contact is made with the applicant. During these recorded calls a series of security and identity checks are completed, and applicants are required to declare that the information they have provided is correct and complete and that if they knowingly give information that is incorrect or incomplete they may be liable to prosecution or other action.

In addition, a separate team of Departmental checkers carry out financial and procedural accuracy checks on a sample of cases and complete post payment verification checks on awards made to check for loss of income.

My Department has also worked closely with Department of Health officials on recent developments to the StopCOVID proximity app, which means verification of those required to self - isolate is now shared with DfC where individual consent to share this information is obtained.

Requests for other forms of evidence of self-isolation will be made where the decision maker seeks to increase the validity of the information provided by an applicant.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of COVID-19 isolation grant payments made, broken down by constituency or local government area.

(AQW 11880/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Since the introduction of the self-isolation grants on 25 March 2020 my Department has made 15,276 Discretionary Support Self-Isolation payments totalling £2.142m.

It is not currently possible to provide management information on the number of Discretionary Support Self-Isolation grant payments broken down by constituency or local government area for this current year.

Note - The management information included in this response while accurate at the time it is provided may change when subjected to final reconciliation/verification checks prior to publication as applicable.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 11305/17-22, what assessment she has made of the remuneration received by musical artists from streaming sites; and what action she has taken, or intends to take, to help increase this remuneration.

(AQW 11940/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My department has a regular engagement with the Arts Council and with representatives of the music industry on the issues faced by music sector.

The Arts Council upports the suggestion of an overhaul of the economics of the music streaming model and to make the case for a fairer deal for songwriters, composers and performers.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Communities how many emergency heating repair orders issued to contractors by the Housing Executive for their housing stock in the Mid-Ulster Area remained unrepaired after two working days in (i) 2018; (ii) 2019; and (iii) 2020.

(AQW 11945/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has provided the table below, which has been collated from a report produced from its Housing Management System. The table contains the data on emergency heating repair orders issued to contractors by the Housing Executive for their housing stock in the Mid-Ulster Area remaining unrepaired after two working days in (i) 2018; (ii) 2019; and (iii) 2020.

Mid-Ulster Area

	EMERGENCY Heating Jobs Issued	Completed more than 2 working days after reported as per HMS	Percentage of jobs completed more than 2 working days after reported
2018	2025	36	1.78%
2019	1769	11	0.62%
2020 (thus far)	1825	29	1.59%

I hope this information is useful.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities for a breakdown of successful applications to the Affordable Warmth Scheme by council area.

(AQW 11951/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has provided the following information.

The Affordable Warmth Scheme is administered by the Housing Executive on behalf of the Department for Communities in partnership with local councils. Local councils refer all cases to the Housing Executive for processing.

Since its introduction in September 2014 to November 2020 there have been 21,371 successful applications to Affordable Warmth Scheme for the installation of energy efficiency measures.

The number successful applications to the Scheme by council area is detailed in the table below:

Council	Total
Antrim and Newtownabbey	1,626
Ards and North Down	1,942
Armagh Banbridge and Craigavon	1,989
Belfast	2,222
Causeway Coast and Glens	2,046
Derry and Strabane	2,123
Fermanagh and Omagh	1,773
Lisburn and Castlereagh	1,909
Mid and East Antrim	1,727
Mid Ulster	2,016
Newry Mourne and Down	1,998
Totals	21,371

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities for a breakdown of successful applications to the Affordable Warmth Scheme by community background.

(AQW 11952/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Affordable Warmth Scheme is administered by the Housing Executive on behalf of the Department for Communities in partnership with local councils. Local councils refer all cases to the Housing Executive for processing.

The Housing Executive do not request information on community background as part of the application process for the Affordable Warmth Scheme and as such are not in position to provide number of successful applications to the scheme on that basis.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities what checks are carried out before an applicant is paid the COVID-19 isolation grant.

(AQW 11953/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Discretionary Support Self-Isolation Grant, is one part of the range of support available to people negatively impacted by Covid-19. Self – isolation grant applications are assessed within the Department's existing Discretionary Support scheme which already had, prior to the addition of the self – isolation grant in March, well established processes and controls to prevent fraud and error.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities to detail the departmental grants for which community groups can apply.

(AQW 11987/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Information on the Department's grant and other contracted programmes can be found on the Department's website at: <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/>

NICVA provides the GrantTracker funding database - <https://www.grant-tracker.org/>

It is the most up to date and comprehensive source for details of all funding schemes for voluntary and community; and NIVCA promotes the opportunities through a multi-media channel communications approach. It currently lists 883 funding schemes from a wide range of funders, available to community organisations.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 10494/17-22, how many people received the grant more than once.

(AQW 11996/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Management information on the self-isolation grants awarded for the period 1 July 2020 - 30 November 2020 shows that 2,641 grants were paid totalling £390k. Of the 2,641 grants paid, 336 (12%) related to cases where customers received more than one grant. More notably, the spend for customers receiving more than one grant equated to £135k or 35% of the total spend for that period.

This management information helps demonstrate how vitally important it is that people make their application for a self-isolation grant as early as possible in order to maximise the amount payable. My Department is working closely with Department of Health officials to ensure those advised to self-isolate are signposted to this support as soon as possible.

The management information included in this response while accurate at the time it is provided may change when subjected to final reconciliation/verification checks prior to publication as applicable.

Further statistical information is available at <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/communities/dfc-management-information-dfc-since-covid19-061120.pdf>

Mr Stewart asked the Minister for Communities whether she will initiate a formal public consultation exercise as part of the scheduled five yearly review required by Section 4 of the Caravan Act 2011.

(AQW 12006/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department for Communities is required by Section 4 of the Caravan Act 2011 to review Parts I and 2 of the Schedule every 5 years. The Act was last reviewed in 2016 and no changes were recommended.

These provisions will be reviewed again by the Department during 2021. The Department will invite input from caravan owners along with other interested parties such as MLAs, the Department for the Economy, local Councils, the Caravan and Camping Forum, National Caravan Council site owners, residents and others.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Communities, in relation to her Department's Guidance for Sport and Physical Activity statement, (i) to provide clearer guidance on which activities have high levels of exertion; and (ii) whether any exercise can be carried out indoors until a person becomes out of breath.

(AQW 12009/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The COVID Regulations Guidance – Sport and Physical Activity (<http://www.sportni.net/return-to-sport/>) published on 11th December state "As Covid is spread by respiratory droplets, group indoor sports/exercise activities that have high levels of exertion (i.e. that cause participants to get out of breath) are not permitted at this time".

When assessing the risk associated with activities, qualified sports coaches / Instructors will be aware of the following very basic guidelines which are: -

- At moderate exercise intensity / levels of exertion:-
 - Your breathing quickens, but you're not out of breath.
 - You develop a light sweat after about 10 minutes of activity.
 - You can carry on a conversation, but you can't sing.
- At high exercise intensity / levels of exertion (70%+ of maximum heart rate):-
 - Your breathing is deep and rapid.
 - You develop a sweat after only a few minutes of activity.
 - You can't say more than a few words without pausing for breath.

Governing Bodies of sport and their sports clubs plus other exercise providers have a responsibility to select activity type, duration and frequency within the design of any training session to ensure that it does not expose the participants to high exercise intensity / levels of exertion.

Ultimately, those involved in delivering structured/organised sport and physical activity have a duty of care and must act responsibly given the gravity of the current situation and the implications for not just the participants but their wider family circle and community.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities to detail the contractors employed by the Housing Executive to perform grant aided work, by council area.

(AQW 12024/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has confirmed that it does not approve, recommend or employ contractors to carry out grant aided work. In all grant-aid cases it is the applicant's responsibility to source and employ contractor(s).

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities for a breakdown of successful applications to the Housing Executive repair grant scheme by community background.

(AQW 12025/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has advised the Department that it does not hold data for successful applications for the Repair Grant by community background.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities for a breakdown of successful applications to the Housing Executive repair grant scheme by council area.

(AQW 12026/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has advised that between 1 April 2015 and 31 March 2020, there have been 2,712 successful applications to the repair grant scheme; that is the number of cases where the Housing Executive has issued formal approvals of the schemes.

By council area, these break down as follows:

Council	No of Grants
Antrim and Newtownabbey	50
Ards and North Down	193
Armagh City Banbridge and Craigavon	284
Belfast	1,161
Causeway Coast and Glens	9
Derry City and Strabane	48
Fermanagh and Omagh	451
Lisburn and Castlereagh	66
Mid and East Antrim	165
Mid Ulster	136
Newry Mourne and Down	149
	2,712

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities for a breakdown of successful applications to the Housing Executive renovation grant scheme by council area.

(AQW 12027/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has advised that between 1 April 2015 and 31 March 2020, there have been 756 successful applications to the renovation grant scheme; that is the number of cases where the Housing Executive has issued formal approvals of the schemes.

The Housing Executive has provided the following table detailing the successful applications by council area.

Council	No of Grants
Antrim and Newtownabbey	8
Ards and North Down	16
Armagh City Banbridge and Craigavon	61
Belfast	98
Causeway Coast and Glens	18
Derry City and Strabane	36
Fermanagh and Omagh	225
Lisburn and Castlereagh	16
Mid and East Antrim	17
Mid Ulster	181
Newry Mourne and Down	80
Total	756

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities for a breakdown of successful applications to the Housing Executive renovation grant scheme by community background.

(AQW 12028/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has confirmed that it does not hold data for successful applications for the Renovation Grant by community background.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities (i) for her assessment of the Second Independent Review of Personal Independence Payments; and (ii) to detail the next steps for her Department in implementing the recommendations.

(AQW 12039/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Independent Reviewer, Ms Marie Cavanagh provided my Department with a copy of her final Report on 11 December 2020.

My Department will now carefully consider Ms Cavanagh's recommendations and the Report in full. In line with the approach adopted for the first Independent Review, my Department will publish a formal response. The response will be published in spring 2021.

My Officials will now carefully consider Ms Cavanagh's recommendations and the Report in full. In line with the approach adopted for the first Independent Review, my Department will publish a formal response. The response will be published in spring 2021.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities when the review of the Caravan Act NI 2011 will start.

(AQW 12043/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department for Communities is required by Section 4 of the Caravan Act 2011 to review Parts I and 2 of the Schedule every 5 years. The Act was last reviewed in 2016 and no changes were recommended.

It is the Department's intention to review the Act in 2021.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Communities how many Assembly Written Questions her Department received during the period 2 March 2020 to 30 November 2020; and to detail the total cost of responding to these questions.

(AQW 12047/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department has received 1087 Assembly Written Questions during the period 2 March 2020 to 30 November 2020.

We do not routinely estimate the cost of answering Assembly Questions and so the information requested is not available.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Communities whether she will commit to a review of the Caravans Act 2011, including consideration of the need for more protections for static caravan owners.

(AQW 12056/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department for Communities is required by Section 4 of the Caravan Act 2011 to review Parts I and 2 of the Schedule every 5 years. The Act was last reviewed in 2016.

It is the intention of the Department that these provisions will be reviewed again by the Department during 2021.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities whether there are plans to review the effectiveness of Community Planning within Local Government; and whether she will consider updating their process to require a duty to cooperate.

(AQW 12061/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department is considering carrying out a review of the local government reform legislation, which will include a review of the effectiveness of Community Planning.

Any decisions on subsequent changes to the legislation, including a duty to cooperate, would be considered once any review has been completed.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities to detail the times and dates on which her benefits officers will not be available by phone or online over the Christmas and New Year period for new or existing claimants to be able to seek advice and help.

(AQW 12062/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Telephone lines within Disability Carers Service, Pensions Centre and Personal Independence Payment will be operational from 10am to 4pm on every day except 24, 25 and 28 December, and 1 January 2021.

Universal Credit is an interactive digital online service which is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and 365 days a year.

Customers can make a claim and maintain their Universal Credit account online. They can also interact with their Work Coach or Case Manager through their online journal. However, Universal Credit staff will not be available to engage with and respond

to customer journal entries on 24, 25, 28 December 2020 and 1 January 2021. We will endeavour to respond to any journal messages received from customers during this period as promptly as possible following our return to work on 29 December 2020 and 4 January 2021.

Universal Credit telephony services which usually operate Monday to Friday between 10am and 4pm, will close at 4pm on 23 December 2020 and reopen at 10am on 29 December 2021. Lines will also close at 4pm on 31 December 2020 and reopen at 10am on 4 January 2021.

Anyone due a Universal Credit payment on 24, 25, 28 and 29 December 2020 or 1 January 2021 will still be paid by that date.

The Employment and Support Allowance Centre will be closed 24 December to 28 December inclusive and again on 1 January 2021. Business will operate as normal up to and including 23 December and from 29 to 31 December. Operating hours for new online claims are 7am – 5pm and 9am – 4pm for telephony services for new and existing claimants.

Finance Support staff will not be available on 24 December 2020, 25 December 2020, 28 December 2020 or 01 January 2021. Apart from these specified dates, telephone lines for Finance Support will be open Monday - Friday from 9am - 4pm and the Discretionary Support online form will be available 24/7 at <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/services/claim-discretionary-support>.

The Income Support and Jobseekers Allowance Benefit Processing Centres (BPCs) Freephone number is 0800 022 4250 and is open Monday to Friday from 9am to 4pm. BPCs will be closed on 24, 25 and 28 December 2020 and 1 January 2021.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities for an update on legislation affording craft brewers an opportunity to sell produce directly to customers.

(AQW 12074/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill was introduced in the Assembly on 19 October 2020.

The Bill will introduce a new category of premises for local producers of alcoholic drinks, allowing them to apply to the courts for a liquor licence. This will allow local producers to sell their own products directly to the public, for consumption at home.

The Bill is currently at Committee Stage.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities for a breakdown of successful applications to the Housing Executive replacement grant scheme by council area.

(AQW 12090/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has advised that between 1 April 2015 and 31 March 2020, there have been 23 successful applications to the replacement grant scheme. This is the number of cases where the Housing Executive has issued formal approvals of the schemes.

The Housing Executive has provided the following table which details these by council area.

Council Area	No of Grants
Antrim and Newtownabbey	0
Ards and North Down	0
Armagh City Banbridge and Craigavon	4
Belfast	0
Causeway Coast and Glens	2
Derry City and Strabane	3
Fermanagh and Omagh	8
Lisburn and Castlereagh	1
Mid and East Antrim	0
Mid Ulster	1
Newry Mourne and Down	4
Total	23

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities for a breakdown of successful applications to the Housing Executive replacement grant scheme by community background.

(AQW 12091/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive does not hold data for successful applications for the replacement grant by community background.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities for a breakdown of successful applications to the Housing Executive home repair assistance grant scheme by council area.

(AQW 12092/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has advised that between 1 April 2015 and 31 March 2020, there have been 701 successful applications to the home repair assistance grant scheme. This is the number of cases where the Housing Executive has issued formal approvals of the schemes.

The Housing Executive has provided the following table which details these by council area.

Council Area	No of Grants
Antrim and Newtownabbey	36
Ards and North Down	27
Armagh City Banbridge and Craigavon	11
Belfast	200
Causeway Coast and Glens	34
Derry City and Strabane	19
Fermanagh and Omagh	207
Lisburn and Castlereagh	35
Mid and East Antrim	34
Mid Ulster	84
Newry Mourne and Down	14
Total	701

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities for a breakdown of successful applications to the Housing Executive home repair assistance grant scheme by community background.

(AQW 12093/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive does not hold data for successful applications for the home repair assistance grant by community background.

Mr Blair asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the need for a ban on fox hunting for sport.

(AQW 12101/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Country sport activities such as hunting are not recognised by Sport NI as sports and as such do not fall within the remit of my Department. This policy area has previously been taken forward by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs due to the animal welfare aspect of the issue.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Communities to detail any further financial support that will be provided to district councils to deal with impact of COVID-19 upon their finances.[R]

(AQW 12107/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: On 23 November 2020, the Executive allocated a further £10 million to my Department to support local councils for the period from mid-March 2020 to March 2021. This was in addition to £75.3 million that was previously allocated for councils for this financial year of which £40.3 million has been paid to date.

My Department will continue to carry out analysis of the figures to be provided by each council reflecting their projected financial losses and COVID-19 costs for this financial year taking into account updated estimates and actual spend.

Once my Department has carried out due diligence exercises on further 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 for the remaining £45 million funding which includes the recent allocation of £10 million will be confirmed once information has been provided by councils and due diligence exercises have been completed.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister for Communities (i) on what date the Heritage Recovery Fund opened for applications; (ii) on what date the first payment under the scheme was made; (iii) how many applications have been received from the East Derry constituency up to and including Friday 27 November 2020; (iv) how many payments were made by this date; and (v) what is the total amount paid.

(AQW 12119/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Applications to the Heritage Recovery Fund have been received from 62 organisations and 42 individuals. The Fund opened on 2 November 2020 and closed on 27 November 2020. You will appreciate that it will take some time to complete initial processing of the applications and carry out initial checks to determine eligibility; I am therefore not at this stage in a position to provide you with a geographic breakdown of applications.

When eligibility checks has been completed, applications will be assessed during December and early January, with final decision made by the end of January 2021.

I anticipate that payments will reach bank accounts in February 2021. A list of all awards made from the Fund will be published at that stage.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the Riverine project in Strabane.

(AQW 12149/17-22)

Ms Hargey: In June 2019, the **Riverine Community Park** project was awarded £7.59m under Action 3.1 (Shared Spaces Capital Development) of the European Union Programme for Peace and Reconciliation (PEACE IV 2014-20). Delivery of the project is led by Donegal County Council in partnership with Derry City & Strabane District Council.

Nine Project Board meetings have been held to date with the latest on 19 November 2020. McAdam Design Ltd was appointed as the Integrated Consultancy Team (ICT) on 12 October 2020 to provide design and construction management services for the project.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of people who have applied for discretionary support in each of the last 12 months; and the number of claims rejected.

(AQW 12151/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Management information indicates that 80% of claims to Discretionary Support in the last 12 months have resulted in an award.

The number of people who have applied for Discretionary Support in each of the last 12 months is shown in the table below:

Month	No. Applied	No. not awarded
Dec 19	5107	1124
Jan 20	6175	1321
Feb 20	5379	1161
Mar 20	5616	1202
Apr 20	9178	925
May 20	15816	2082
Jun 20	9451	2496
Jul 20	7885	1852
Aug 20	6903	1385
Sept 20	8609	1685
Oct 20	10741	2130
Nov 20	10941	3446

The number of claims not awarded includes those that did not meet eligibility criteria, those that were refused by the applicant and those where no contact was established with the applicant to allow the award to be paid.

Notably, while the average monthly volume of claims received in 20/21 is 78% higher than the average monthly volume of claims received in the months December 2019 to March 2020, the percentage of claims awarded remains unchanged at 80%.

The management information included in this response while accurate at the time it is provided may change when subjected to final reconciliation/verification checks prior to publication as applicable.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 11322 17-22, how many children deemed to be living in (i) relative poverty; and (ii) absolute poverty in 2018-19 lived in a household with at least one adult in employment.

(AQW 12152/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Official measures of absolute and relative poverty are derived from the Family Resources Survey. Both measures can be presented on a before and after housing costs basis. The number of children estimated to be living in poverty, who live in a household with at least one adult in employment, are presented in the table below.

Child Poverty Type	2018/19
Relative Poverty Before Housing Costs	75,000
Relative Poverty After Housing Costs	81,000
Absolute Poverty Before Housing Costs	66,000
Absolute Poverty After Housing Costs	72,000

Further information regarding the Family Resources Survey (Households Below Average Income) can be found at the link below.

Households below Average Income Northern Ireland 2018/19 | Department for Communities (communities-ni.gov.uk)

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities when she will publish her response to the Second Independent Review of the Personal Independence Payment Assessment Process in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 12153/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Independent Reviewer, Ms Marie Cavanagh provided my Department with a copy of her final Report on Friday 11 December 2020.

My Department will now carefully consider Ms Cavanagh's recommendations and the Report in full. In line with the approach adopted for the first Independent Review, my Department will publish a formal response. The response will be published in spring 2021.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities to detail the public libraries managed by Libraries NI in each constituency; and to detail the number of hours each library is open per week.

(AQW 12155/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The following table sets out for each Parliamentary Constituency the public libraries managed by Libraries NI and the normal weekly opening hours for each facility.

		Normal Opening Hours per week
Constituency of: Belfast East	Ballyhackamore Library	40
	Cregagh Library	40
	Hollywood Arches Library	40
	Tullycarnet Library	25
	Woodstock Library	40
Constituency of: Belfast North	Belfast Central Library	54
	Chichester Library	40
	Grove Library	40
	Rathcoole Library	35
Constituency of: Belfast South	Finaghy Library	50
	Lisburn Road Library	40
	Newtownbreda Library	40
	Ormeau Road Library	45
Constituency of: Belfast West	Ardoyne Library	35
	Colin Glen Library	40
	Falls Road Library	40
	Shankill Road Library	40

		Normal Opening Hours per week
	Suffolk Library	40
	Whiterock Library.	35
Constituency of: East Antrim	Carnlough Library	18
	Carrickfergus Library	50
	Cloughfern Library	18
	Greenisland Library	25
	Larne Library	40
	Whitehead Library	28 (plus 34 hours in out of hours service mode)
Constituency of: East Derry	Coleraine Library	50
	Dungiven Library	25 (plus 34 hours in out of hours service mode)
	Garvagh Library	18
	Kilrea Library	18
	Limavady Library	40
	Portrush Library	28
	Portstewart Library	35
Constituency of: Fermanagh and South Tyrone	Dungannon Library	50
	Enniskillen Library	50
	Fivemiletown Library	18
	Irvinestown Library	30 (plus 36 hours in out of hours service mode)
	Lisnaskea Library	30 (plus 35 hours in out of hours service mode)
Constituency of: Foyle	Creggan Library	28
	Derry Central Library	54
	Shantallow Library	40
	Strathfoyle Library	25
	Waterside Library	45
Constituency of: Lagan Valley	Dromore Library	28
	Lisburn City Library	54
	Moira Library	25
Constituency of: Mid Ulster	Coalisland library	35
	Cookstown Library	45
	Draperstown Library	18
	Maghera Library	38 (plus 33 hours in out of hours service mode)
	Magherafelt Library	45
Constituency of: Newry and Armagh	Armagh Library	45
	Bessbrook Library	25
	Crossmaglen Library	18
	Irish and Local Studies	35
	Keady Library	28

		Normal Opening Hours per week
	Newry Library	50
	Richhill Library	18
	Tandragee Library	25
Constituency of: North Antrim	Ballycastle Library	35
	Ballymena Central Library	50
	Ballymoney Library	40
	Broughshane Library	18
	Cushendall Library	18
	Kells & Connor Library	18
	Portglenone Library	18
Constituency of: North Down	Bangor Library	54
	Donaghadee Library	35
	Holywood Library	40
Constituency of: South Antrim	Antrim Library	45
	Ballyclare Library	40
	Crumlin Library	18
	Glengormley Library	50
	Greystone Library	28
	Randalstown Library	25
Constituency of: South Down	Ballynahinch Library	35
	Castlewellan Library	25
	Downpatrick Library	45
	Kilkeel Library	40
	Newcastle Library	40
	Rathfriland Library	25
	Warrenpoint Library	40
Constituency of: Strangford	Carryduff Library	25
	Comber Library	35
	Dundonald Library	40
	Killyleagh Library	18
	Newtownards Library	40
	Portaferry Library	18
	Saintfield Library	25 (plus 38 hours in out of hours service mode)
Constituency of: Upper Bann	Banbridge Library	45
	Brownlow Library	35
	Lurgan Library	50
	Portadown Library	45
Constituency of: West Tyrone	Castledearg Branch Library	25
	Fintona Library	18
	Newtownstewart Library	18

		Normal Opening Hours per week
	Omagh Library	54
	Strabane Library	45

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities how many individuals have an underlying entitlement to (i) Personal Independence Payment; or (ii) Disability Living Allowance.

(AQW 12167/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Department does not hold data on the number of people who are eligible for Personal Independence Payment (PIP) but for whom the award is not currently in payment because of their circumstance. The IT system used to administer PIP does not capture this information

A total of 2060 individuals are eligible for Disability Living Allowance but for whom the award is not currently in payment due to their circumstances.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister for Communities how the areas identified for new-build social housing in her recent statement were chosen.

(AQW 12173/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Housing Executive is the public body with the responsibility for determining housing need and identifying where new housing should be located. It does this via the annual Social Housing Needs Assessment.

In her statement made to the Assembly on November 3 my predecessor Carál Ní Chuilín MLA made reference to North and West Belfast, Derry City and also all other areas with acute housing need and that these areas need to be prioritised. This was by way of example. The areas specifically mentioned are recognised as those in most need of social housing.

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister for Communities (i) when legislation on gender pay gap reporting will be introduced to the Assembly; and (ii) how the legislation will monitor and act on the gender pay gap in all sizes of businesses, given that the majority of businesses in Northern Ireland fall under the threshold of 250 employees that is used to mandate reporting in legislation in England and Wales.

(AQW 12225/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The transfer from the Executive Office to my Department of responsibility for Section 19 of the Employment Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 relating to gender pay gap information has not yet taken place.

Following the transfer, the Department for Communities will consider the content of the regulations to be made under section 19 (s19), including the limit to the total number of employees and workers in an organisation below which, employers will not be subject to the reporting requirements.

It is therefore not possible at this stage to specify a date on which the Regulations will be introduced to the Assembly.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 4834/17-22, whether her Department's contract with Capita for the delivery of Personal Independence Payment health assessments has been extended beyond 31 July 2021.

(AQW 12229/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Department's Personal Independence Payment Assessment Services contract with Capita is due to expire on 31 July 2021. Due to the extenuating circumstances arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department is currently exploring an extension to this contract for up to 24 months.

To ensure the service provision continues to improve, the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) have been commissioned to conduct an independent evaluation of the performance of the contract and to identify potential service enhancements that can be considered and implemented in the contract extension period.

In addition, the Department is preparing a business case, for approval in early 2021, appraising a number of options for the future delivery of health assessments from August 2023, to include in-housed delivery options.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities when she was provided with draft answers from officials to (i) AQW 10889/17-22; (ii) AQW 9954/17-22; (iii) AQW 7221/17-22; (iv) AQW 8006/17-22; and (v) AQW 9088/17-22; and these questions will be answered.

(AQW 12238/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The table below shows the information requested by the Member:

AQW Number	Draft Answer Received by Minister	AQW Answered and provided to Member
10889 / 17-22	17/12/2020	21/12/2020

AQW Number	Draft Answer Received by Minister	AQW Answered and provided to Member
9954 / 17-22	11/12/2020	15/12/2020
7221 / 17-22	15/12/2020	15/12/2020
8006 / 17-22	15/12/2020	15/12/2020
9088 / 17-22	15/12/2020	15/12/2020

Ms Hunter asked the Minister for Communities (i) on what date the Stability and Renewal for Arts Fund opened for applications; (ii) on what date the first payment under the scheme was made; (iii) how many applications were received from the East Derry constituency up to and including 16 December 2020; (iv) how many payments were made by this date; and (v) to detail the total amount paid.

(AQW 12264/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Stability & Renewal Programme for Organisations opened for applications on 28th October 2020 with a closing deadline for applications of 27th November. To date no payments have been made. Decisions will be made at the end of January 2021. Up to and including closing date of 27th November 2020 five applications have been received from the East Derry constituency.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities what date the COVID-19 heating payments will begin for those in receipt of pension credit, personal independence payments, disability living allowance and attendance allowance.

(AQW 12267/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department plans to make the one-off Covid-19 Heating Payment by the end of January 2021 to those in receipt of one or more of the following benefits who were eligible in the qualifying week (30 November to 6 December inclusive):

- State Pension Credit;
- the higher rate of Attendance Allowance;
- the highest rate care component or higher rate mobility component (or both) of Disability Living Allowance;
- the enhanced rate daily living component or enhanced rate mobility component (or both) of Personal Independence Payment.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities why people on a war pension mobility supplement are not entitled to the COVID-19 heating payments; and how she plans to address this issue.

(AQW 12268/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Covid-19 Heating Payment will provide a one-off payment of £200 to those in receipt of one or more of the following social security benefits administered by the Department for Communities during the qualifying week

- State Pension Credit;
- The higher rate of Attendance Allowance;
- The highest rate care component or higher rate mobility component (or both) of Disability Living Allowance;
- The enhanced rate of the daily living component or enhanced rate mobility component (or both) of Personal Independence Payment.

The Executive have given approval that the Scheme can proceed and made the funding available based on the criteria above.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities why the Health and Safety capital grant scheme requires arts organisations, that have not been able to generate income during the pandemic, to purchase all items in advance when they do not have the cash flow; and why there is not an option for direct payment to suppliers imbedded in the grant.

(AQW 12282/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Health & Safety Capital Programme is administered by the Arts Council on behalf of my Department.

The conditions attached to the grant offers are in line with the Arts Council's established good practice in the distribution of capital equipment grants.

Applicants are made aware in the published guidance notes for the programme that payments will be made retrospectively. Every effort is made to pay organisations promptly as per the conditions in Letters of Offer (within 10 working days of receipt of proof of payment) as it is recognised that timely payment is important to organisations' cashflows and that delays can cause problems, which we seek to avoid.

The Arts Council's relationship is with the funded client (the grant recipient), not with any supplier to the grant-aided organisation. It would not be practical for the Arts Council to enter into contractual relationships with suppliers on behalf of clients in order to make direct payments or take responsibility for supplied goods.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities how many households will be eligible for the one-off COVID-19 heating payment. (AQW 12301/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The one-off Covid-19 Heating Payment will be made on an individual rather than a household basis. There are currently approximately 220,780 people eligible for the Covid-19 Heating Payment.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister for Communities how many people in the East Derry constituency are eligible for the one-off heating payment of £200 for disabled people on higher rate allowance and older people in receipt of pension credit; and when this payment will be made.

(AQW 12322/17-22)

Ms Hargey: High level analysis shows there are approximately 221,000 people eligible for the Covid-19 Heating Payment. The qualifying week for this payment is the 30th November to 6th December 2020 inclusive. Data is not yet available for this period to indicate the number of eligible recipients, including any geographical breakdowns. Once this information is available, my Department will be happy to provide this.

My Department plans to make the one-off payment by end of January 2021.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister for Communities how much of the £10 million for councils and sport will be paid to Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council; and when this payment will be made.

(AQW 12323/17-22)

Ms Hargey: On 23 November 2020, the Executive allocated a further £10m to my Department to support local councils for the period from mid-March 2020 to March 2021. This was in addition to £75.3m which was previously allocated for councils for this financial year and of which £40.3m has been paid to date. The funding allocated and paid to Causeway Coast and Glens for the periods from mid-March to 30 June 2020, and 1 July 2020 to 31 October 2020 was £1,965,989 and £1,601,625 respectively.

My Department will continue to carry out analysis of the figures provided by each council reflecting their projected financial losses and COVID-19 costs for this financial year taking into account updated estimates and actual spend.

Once my Department has carried out due diligence exercises on further 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 for the remaining £45m funding which includes the recent allocation of £10m will be confirmed once information has been provided by councils and due diligence exercises completed.

I am acutely aware of the financial impact that the COVID-19 interventions have had on many in the sports sector and it is my intention to launch the Fund on 4 December 2020, with a closure date of 20 January 2021, to allow Governing Bodies and clubs time to gather the necessary information and complete a validated application as well as collate the necessary evidence to support their claim for assistance. It is planned that the assessment and verification phase will take place during January with payments commencing in February. This funding is in addition to the £2m my Department has already secured for the sports sector at the June Monitoring Round, which was split between the Sports Hardship Fund and the COVID-19 Safe Sports PPE Packs. The Sports Hardship Fund, which so far has provided essential support to nearly 800 smaller clubs and sporting organisations (including 62 from Causeway Coast and Glens) and almost 1200 clubs will receive COVID-19 PPE packs in the coming weeks, an initiative that will cost £1m.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister for Communities (i) how many applications were made from the East Derry constituency to the Social Enterprise Fund; (ii) how many were approved; (iii) how many were declined; and (iv) how many payments have been made.

(AQW 12324/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Social Enterprise Fund opened on 28 September 2020 and closed on 23 October 2020; in total it received 394 applications. I am unable to provide a breakdown of information by constituency but I am able to provide this by district council area.

In the Causeway Coast and Glens Council area, there were 30 applications received with 27 of these being approved. Therefore 3 applications were declined. All payments will have been processed by 24 December.

Department of Education

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education whether AQE/PPTC administered tests, hosted at grant-aided grammar schools and some further education facilities, are to be regarded legally as bound to the Department of Education's Coronavirus (COVID-19) Guidance for Schools and Educational Settings in Northern Ireland or to the general PHA guidance.

(AQW 10382/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (“the Regulations”) place specific requirements on the test providers and host schools. This includes complying with any relevant guidance issued by a Northern Ireland Department. These requirements are enforceable under the Regulations.

Therefore, while guidance issued by my Department is non-statutory, the providers and host schools are, nonetheless, expected to have regard to it where it is relevant to them organising and hosting the transfer tests. The Member will be aware that I have already written to the test providers to highlight these requirements. I have also highlighted the need to ensure information is given to parents and pupils about the arrangements for the test days to provide assurance that medical and public health guidance is being followed.

In terms of how sitting the tests might impact on the subsequent incidence of transmission levels of Covid-19, it is important to note that around 10,000 pupils will be sitting the tests compared to a normal school day where there are approximately 320,000 pupils registered to be in school. In light of the requirements of the Regulations, I believe the focus now for the test providers and host schools should be on ensuring statutory risk assessments are carried out and that all reasonable measures to limit the risk of transmission of the coronavirus, including implementing the preventive and protective measures identified in those risk assessments are taken.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education whether the Chief Scientific Officer has statistically modelled out AQE/PPTC tests to estimate how the tests may affect subsequent incidence and transmission levels of COVID -19.
(AQW 10383/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (“the Regulations”) place specific requirements on the test providers and host schools. This includes complying with any relevant guidance issued by a Northern Ireland Department. These requirements are enforceable under the Regulations.

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Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education whether there has been additional Public Health Agency or Department of Education guidance drafted for the use of schools as test centres for private, non-state regulated tests.
(AQW 10384/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (“the Regulations”) place specific requirements on the test providers and host schools. This includes complying with any relevant guidance issued by a Northern Ireland Department. These requirements are enforceable under the Regulations.

Therefore, while guidance issued by my Department is non-statutory, the providers and host schools are, nonetheless, expected to have regard to it where it is relevant to them organising and hosting the transfer tests. The Member will be aware that I have already written to the test providers to highlight these requirements. I have also highlighted the need to ensure information is given to parents and pupils about the arrangements for the test days to provide assurance that medical and public health guidance is being followed.

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Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education what steps are being taken to work with AQE on assuring they are offering schools correct public health and safety advice in testing centres.
(AQW 11028/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (“the Regulations”) place specific requirements on the test providers and host schools. This includes complying with any relevant guidance issued by a Northern Ireland Department. These requirements are enforceable under the Regulations.

Therefore, while guidance issued by my Department is non-statutory, the providers and host schools are, nonetheless, expected to have regard to it where it is relevant to them organising and hosting the transfer tests. The Member will be aware that I have already written to the test providers to highlight these requirements. I have also highlighted the need to ensure information is given to parents and pupils about the arrangements for the test days to provide assurance that medical and public health guidance is being followed.

In terms of how sitting the tests might impact on the subsequent incidence of transmission levels of Covid-19, it is important to note that around 10,000 pupils will be sitting the tests compared to a normal school day where there are approximately 320,000 pupils registered to be in school. In light of the requirements of the Regulations, I believe the focus now for the test providers and host schools should be on ensuring statutory risk assessments are carried out and that all reasonable measures to limit the risk of transmission of the coronavirus, including implementing the preventive and protective measures identified in those risk assessments are taken.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Education whether he has considered funding the provision of free sanitary products in schools.

(AQW 11512/17-22)

Mr Weir: My proposal to fund a pilot scheme to address period poverty in schools was agreed by the NI Executive on 17 December 2020.

The pilot scheme will address the specific needs of the school sector and will address all three elements of what is often described as the 'toxic-trio of period-poverty' i.e.: the cost of sanitary products; a lack of education about periods; and, shame, stigma and taboo.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education, as many experts are predicting a significant rise in infection rates in January, (i) what additional provision will be on standby to support Special Educational Needs and vulnerable children who often have complex needs if they cannot attend school for a period due to COVID-19 issues; (ii) what general lessons have been learned by his Department, the Education Authority and the Department of Health in respect of provision of health and educational support to vulnerable children when they cannot be at school and how has he applied those.

(AQW 11868/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) All schools and education settings are required to have plans in place to provide remote education and maintain contact with vulnerable children and young people in the event that they cannot attend school for a period due to COVID-19. Details of this can be found at Page 52 of the Department's Education Restart Guidance for Schools and Education Settings in NI ([https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Coronavirus Guidance for Schools and Educational Settings - December 2020.pdf](https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Coronavirus%20Guidance%20for%20Schools%20and%20Educational%20Settings%20-%20December%202020.pdf))

Further guidance on supporting remote learning in these circumstances has been provided by the Department as outlined in DE Circular Number: 2020/05 Guidance for School on Supporting Remote Learning to Provide Educational Continuity ([https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Circular 2020-5-Guidance for Schools on Supporting Remote Learning.pdf](https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Circular%202020-5-Guidance%20for%20Schools%20on%20Supporting%20Remote%20Learning.pdf))

It is recognised that some pupils with complex needs may not be able to access remote education without appropriate adult intervention. Teachers are best placed to provide advice to parents, and put in place reasonable adjustments as necessary, on how the pupil's needs can be most effectively met to ensure they continue to make progress through remote learning.

As part of the ongoing work between health and education, the Joint Health/Education Oversight Group is working to develop an overarching framework for how schools and education settings in Northern Ireland can support access to school for vulnerable children, where appropriate, in the event of any future COVID restrictions. This work has taken consideration of feedback received in relation to the previous lockdown and Halloween break.

- (ii) A recent survey (25 November) carried out by the EA with Special School Principals in relation to the process for vulnerable children has indicated that there are lessons to be learned in the following areas:
- level of input from school leaders in the planning process;
 - level of communication by Education and Health with stakeholders; and
 - clarity on the Health/Education offer of support.

As part of the ongoing work between health and education, the Joint Health/Education Oversight Group is currently considering plans for a review of learning from experiences of parents of vulnerable children, particularly those with the most complex needs, during COVID 19.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education (i), in the light of recent infection rates in schools, for his assessment of whether children and young people contribute little to the transmission of COVID-19; (ii) whether his Department is gathering data about the cause of outbreaks in schools and whether he will provide an overview of this situation to the public; (iii)

whether he will review and revise the safety guidance issued to schools before the beginning of the new term, especially in relation to the more senior pupils as recommended by the scientists who sit on the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies. (AQW 11869/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- i The PHA education support team gather information on all confirmed cases of COVID reported to them by schools. This information is used to undertake a risk assessment of the individual case and a wider look at cases in the school. Where there is more than one case the team looks for links and assesses whether transmission has occurred in school. As part of the response to cases and clusters the PHA explores factors which could lead to transmission and works with the school to reduce the risk of any further transmission in the school.
- ii. The PHA is publishing weekly and monthly bulletins on the COVID-19 pandemic in Northern Ireland. Information on school COVID incidents is based on situations reported to PHA COVID School Team. PHA publish information on cases associated with schools every week in the weekly bulletin. The information gathered by the PHA schools team, together with information produced by expert groups across the UK and beyond is used to brief Ministers in the NI Executive to inform their decision making in relation to measures to control COVID.
- iii. My Department has developed and published several pieces of key guidance to schools and educational settings to assist them through this difficult period. This includes Northern Ireland Re-opening Schools Guidance – New School Day which was first published on 19 June, and subsequently on 13 August 2020. A further updated version of the guidance – Coronavirus (COVID-19) Guidance for Schools and Educational Settings in Northern Ireland was published on 29 September 2020. Other key guidance includes support for staff to return to schools and guidance on public examinations. Development and update of the guidance has been an open and transparent process. Inputs and views have been sought from and provided by the Public Health Agency, Trade Unions and a Practitioner’s group of over 20 schools principals. Guidance for Schools and Educational settings is constantly under review and will be updated as needed and driven by health advice provided by the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Adviser.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) how he is ensuring that parents are confident their children are getting the educational and mental health and wellbeing support they need to catch up from school closures; and (ii) the resources provided to parents to advise them on how to help their children catch up. (AQW 11943/17-22)

Mr Weir: I introduced the Engage Programme this year to help address the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children’s learning. It provides schools with extra funding so that they can secure additional qualified teachers, enabling the provision of child-centred one to one, small group or team teaching support. This support is targeted at pupils identified by their school as most benefitting from additional support following the lockdown period, and in accordance with their particular needs.

With regards to the emotional health and wellbeing of pupils returning to school after lockdown, it is important to note that a range of resources have been made available to schools to assist them in responding to pupil need which in turn helps them to engage in learning. The following examples of support have been/are available to schools:

- ‘Supporting wellbeing through education restart’: an online portal of resources available to schools with information on supporting learners, leaders and staff;
- Resources on the EA website to support the emotional health and wellbeing of learners and information for parents;
- ‘Flourishing schools’ webinars – in partnership with SBNI. These were for school principals and focused on trauma sensitive practice (Early Year, Primary and Special schools webinars have taken place, and post primary schools;
- Shane Martin Webinars for School Leaders: Cultivating Resilience within School Communities. The aim of this webinar was to help support school leaders through the challenges of Restart with a specific emphasis on resilience;
- EA youth service online resource ‘youth online’ where children and young people can access information, advice and support;
- EA services including the Independent Counselling Service for Schools in post primary mainstream and Special Schools; Education Welfare Service; Behaviour Support and Provisions Helpline; Primary Behaviour Support Team High Five newsletter; Critical Incident Response Team and Nurturing Approaches in Schools Service and the Children Looked After project including TAP – The Attach Programme;
- Wellbeing Helpline – facilitated by the Education Psychology Service. This was a temporary resource to schools to support them as they respond to a range of pupil need in school;

Finally, I can advise that I recently launched the Wellbeing Fund providing £5m in 2020/21 direct to all schools (nursery, primary, post primary, special), as well as EOTAS and Youth Settings to help address Wellbeing pressures arising as a result of Covid-19. By receiving their own allocation, settings will benefit from having the flexibility to use the money to provide health and wellbeing support for their pupils and/or staff.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education how many secondary school pupils have received a statement of special educational needs in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 11949/17-22)

Mr Weir: Information collected via the annual school census data collection only provides a 'snapshot' of information relating to one particular day each year in October. The information detailed below shows the number of pupils who were recorded as having a statement of special educational needs on census day of one academic year but did not on census day the previous academic year. They could have received this statement at any point during year between the two census dates.

Number of post primary pupils who are recorded as having a statement of Special Educational Needs, who did not have a statement in the previous academic year 2017/18 – 2019/20

Year	Number of pupils
2017/18	451
2018/19	453
2019/20	502

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education how many children with a statement of special educational needs are being educated in mainstream schools at (i) pre-school; (ii) primary; and (iii) post-primary level, broken down by education sector.

(AQW 11950/17-22)

Mr Weir: The information requested is detailed in the tables below.

(i) Mainstream pre-school pupils with a statement of special educational needs by management type of school – 2019/20

School Management Type	Number of pupils with a statement of SEN
Controlled	78
Catholic Maintained	54
Other Maintained	*
GMI	#
Total	141

(ii) Mainstream primary (Y1-7) pupils with a statement of special educational needs by management type of school – 2019/20

School Management Type	Number of pupils with a statement of SEN
Controlled	2,883
Voluntary Grammar	22
Catholic Maintained	2,841
Other Maintained	79
Controlled Integrated	164
GMI	229
Total	6,218

(iii) Mainstream post primary pupils with a statement of special educational needs by management type of school – 2019/20

School Management Type	Number of pupils with a statement of SEN
Controlled	2,217
Voluntary Grammar	952
Catholic Maintained	2,717
Other Maintained	46
Controlled Integrated	268
GMI	817
Total	7,017

Source: NI school census

Note: Figures for preschool include nursery units, nursery schools and reception.

'*' denotes figure fewer than 5

'#' denotes figure greater than or equal to 5 suppressed to avoid possible identification of individuals.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education to detail the advertising criteria for all Education Authority pre-consultations.
(AQW 12004/17-22)

Mr Weir: There is no statutory requirement for the Education Authority (EA) to advertise at the pre-publication consultation phase (phase 2) of the (4-phase) Development Proposal (DP) process. At this phase, and in the case of an existing school, there is a statutory requirement for the proposer of a DP to consult with the Board of Governors, parents and teachers or representatives of each. Consultation with non-teaching staff and engagement with pupils to seek their views may also be undertaken.

Where a DP is published (phase 3 of the process), the EA is required by legislation (The Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986) to publish an advertisement in one or more newspapers circulating in the area affected by the proposal. The EA has discretion as to which daily or weekly newspapers to use to reach the target audience.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) how free school meals policy differs between Northern Ireland, Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland; and (ii) whether he has any plans for policy reform in this area.
(AQW 12016/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) Whilst the main policy aims of the provision of nutritious free school meals to pupils from low income families when at school is similar in all areas of the United Kingdom, the qualifying criteria for eligibility to free school meals differs in each region. For example the Universal Credit criterion earnings thresholds is higher here than in other regions. Northern Ireland and Scotland include a criterion for families in receipt of Working Tax Credit with the associated income threshold higher in NI than in Scotland. In Scotland a school / local authority has discretionary powers to award free school meals to families who are experiencing financial hardship but do not meet the criteria while schools here may provide a free school meal, on humanitarian grounds, if a child presents hungry at school. A notable difference is that free school meals policy here is based on need and does not extend to the provision of universal infant free school meals to all pupils years 1 to 3 as it does in the other regions.

For ease of reference the links to the free school meal policy for areas within the United Kingdom are listed below:

Northern Ireland: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/nutrition-and-school-lunches>

England: <https://www.gov.uk/apply-free-school-meals>

Scotland: <https://www.mygov.scot/school-meals/>

Wales: <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-04/free-school-meals-in-wales-information-for-parents-and-guardians.pdf>

Free School Meals in the Republic of Ireland are provided under the School Meals (Local Projects) Scheme. The Scheme provides funding to primary and post-primary schools, local groups, voluntary organisations and community-based not-for-profit preschools operating their own school meals projects.

- (ii) The Department of Education (DE) will participate in a food poverty project being led by Department for Communities and as part of that DE will consider the current FSM criteria.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 10695/17-22, and noting that the Engage Programme was launched in September 2020, (i) to provide an update on the work within his Department, the Education Authority and Special Schools Leadership Group to develop a comparable programme for our special schools; and (ii) to detail when he anticipates it will be launched.
(AQW 12019/17-22)

Mr Weir: A draft programme has been developed. Timing of its launch is currently subject to securing business case approval and funding.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Education whether it is acceptable that the AQE selection examinations, due to take place in January and February 2021, are permitted activities to take place in school buildings during a pandemic given that the AQE is a private organisation.
(AQW 12022/17-22)

Mr Weir: The scores from the Common Entrance Assessments provided by the Association for Quality Education Ltd are used by selective schools as part of their admissions criteria. These schools use their premises as test centres in order to facilitate those assessments as part of a private arrangement with the test providers.

Clearly Covid-19 has presented significant challenges to schools. I have therefore been very clear that in conducting the tests this year, the providers and host schools should comply with the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020. This includes ensuring statutory risk assessments are carried out and that all reasonable measures to limit the risk of transmission of the coronavirus, including implementing the preventive and protective measures identified in those risk assessments are taken.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Education (i) whether he is aware that AQE will not allow entrants to use a CPen to help with their dyslexia during examinations this year, even though it could be used in previous years; and (ii) for his assessment of whether this is acceptable practice in terms of disability discrimination.

(AQW 12023/17-22)

Mr Weir: I support any actions that reduce the stress on any pupil taking the transfer tests, especially those who require additional or specialist support on the days of the tests. However, I do not have the legal authority to direct private test providers to adopt specific access arrangements including the use of CPens.

I believe that if an individual can demonstrate a need then any reasonable adjustments should be considered. I understand that a range of adjustments is already available for those pupils assessed as needing additional support. In relation to CPens specifically, I have not been made aware of the reason behind why an individual would not be able to have access to one.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education, whether he will consider making adjustments to special considerations for exams so that students, who have multiple COVID-19 absences from school due to being forced to isolate while not being ill themselves, can, in the future, benefit from the allowances made through the special considerations provision.

(AQW 12077/17-22)

Mr Weir: As I set out in my statement on 15 December 2020, I will explore the possibility of a COVID allowance or tariff for young people who have missed a significant number of days face-to-face teaching due to self-isolating. This will be separate from, and additional to, the existing special consideration scheme. I have asked CCEA to work closely with other Awarding Bodies to develop a UK wide approach to any potential scheme.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education, in light of the announcement regarding contingency exam arrangements, whether pupils have the choice to only submit coursework or the controlled assessment mark and not take the exam.

(AQW 12098/17-22)

Mr Weir: The choice of units pupils will be assessed in is a matter for each school. The only limitation is that the unit or units chosen must represent at least 40% of the assessment for the AS or A2, with the exception of A2 Digital Technology and A2 History where either unit may be chosen.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education for his most recent assessment of the number of (i) boys; and (ii) girls leaving primary school and post-primary school with low or no literacy skills.

(AQW 12156/17-22)

Mr Weir: At a system level my department collects information at the end of Key Stage 2 which outlines the proportion of pupils at the expected level of progression in communication, using mathematics and using ICT. The data for 2018/19 shows that in Communication, the proportion of girls and boys not achieving the expected level was 16.6% and 25.8% respectively (Key Stage 2 data only covers a sample of schools, and the associated confidence levels are ± 1.9 and ± 2.4 percentage points).

The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) is an assessment of the reading literacy skills of pupils aged 9-10 years (Year 6 in Northern Ireland) and was undertaken here for the first time in 2011. The 2016 cycle of the study showed that pupils in Northern Ireland significantly outperformed 41 of the 49 participating countries in reading. It also highlighted that in reading, over a fifth of our Y6 pupils (22%) were performing at the advanced international benchmark, the highest level possible, and this was the third highest percentage internationally. In relation to the low benchmark, just 3% of our pupils failed to reach this standard compared to an international average of 4%.

Northern Ireland, in line with gender differences seen internationally, had a significant gender difference in reading attainment, favouring girls.

Information on the qualifications of all school leavers in Northern Ireland is collected annually and includes pupils that studied GCSE English at the end of Key Stage 4. In 2018/19, 95.5% (20634) of school leavers in Northern Ireland achieved grades A*-G in GCSE English. The percentage of boys and girls who had not achieved GCSE English grades A* - G was 6.0% (657) and 2.9% (310) respectively.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Education for an update on the capital build project at Elmgrove Primary School.

(AQW 12171/17-22)

Mr Weir: I am pleased to advise that since my previous correspondence on 16 December, Woodvale Construction has been awarded the contract to deliver the new Elmgrove Primary School.

It is anticipated that construction will commence on site end February/early March 2021.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to detail the budget for each school in the North Down constituency.

(AQW 12195/17-22)

Mr Weir: The value of each school's accumulated surplus or deficit position as at 31 March 2020, and the schools' 2020-21 delegated budget distributed via the Common Funding Formula (CFF) in the North Down constituency, is detailed in the table below:

DE Reference Number	School Name	2020-21 CFF £	Accumulated Surplus/ (Deficit) position as at 31 March 2020* £
411-0029	Bangor Central Nursery	219,224	10,408
411-0030	Hollywood Nursery	172,814	17,209
411-6175	Trinity Nursery	195,686	(15,973)
401-1265	Ballyvester Primary	377,480	34,141
401-1631	Hollywood Primary	1,350,430	(26,245)
401-1645	Crawfordsburn Primary	588,256	(7,897)
401-1650	Ballyholme Primary	1,659,468	(14,131)
401-1654	Donaghadee Primary	1,184,387	(147,602)
401-1670	Clandeboy Primary	1,107,423	116,882
401-1681	Millisle Primary	715,502	(109,931)
401-3023	Bloomfield Primary	1,369,229	91,403
401-3045	Grange Park Primary	1,087,936	470,325
401-6002	Kilcooley Primary	632,466	(1,673)
401-6067	Rathmore Primary	1,716,720	(130,699)
401-6111	Towerview Primary	1,206,299	(63,173)
401-6192	Kilmaine Primary	1,790,190	(58,633)
401-6430	Ballymagee Primary	1,168,373	23,626
405-1680	Bangor Central Integrated Primary	1,697,839	77,830
405-3020	Glencraig Integrated Primary	624,037	30,359
403-1628	St Patrick's Primary Hollywood	838,438	(212,417)
403-3008	St Anne's Primary, Donaghadee	239,423	(31,404)
403-6146	St Comgall's Primary, Bangor	835,865	(145,859)
403-6148	St Malachy's Primary Bangor	1,265,112	(13,045)
421-0296	Bangor Academy and 6th Form College	7,233,512	(664,714)
425-0024	Priory Integrated College	3,197,266	(3,745)
423-0107	St Columbanus' College	3,425,421	(376,583)
441-0097	Glenlola Collegiate	4,443,798	(476,632)
442-0015	Bangor Grammar School	4,210,629	N/A
442-0044	Sullivan Upper School, Hollywood	5,174,638	N/A

The accumulated surplus and deficit position provided is in respect of Controlled/Maintained schools only. Similar data is not available for Voluntary Grammar and Grant-Maintained Integrated schools, as different financing arrangements apply.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education for an update on the School Enhancement Programme for St Columbanus' College, Bangor.

(AQW 12198/17-22)

Mr Weir: St Columbanus' College, Bangor, was included in the second tranche of projects announced in January 2019 to advance in planning under the Second Call to the School Enhancement Programme (SEP2). Departmental officials have agreed the scope of the proposed project with the school, which will involve the development of a new standalone teaching block on the site.

The SEP2 project is progressing and an Integrated Consultant Team (ICT) is currently being procured. It is anticipated that the ICT will be appointed in January 2021 and will take the project through the design and construction phases.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the discussions he has had with other Executive Departments in relation to ending period poverty; and (ii) his estimate of the number of school days lost by students who miss school because they cannot afford sanitary products.

(AQW 12216/17-22)

Mr Weir: My officials have liaised with colleagues in Department of Health, Communities, Economy and Justice on this issue. They will continue to do so through the cross-departmental working group co-ordinated by the Department of Finance.

Specific data is not available on the number of school days lost by students who miss school because they cannot afford sanitary products as pupil absences are not recorded in such precise terms.

The NI Executive's decision on 17 December 2020 to fund a pilot scheme to address period poverty in schools will help to address this issue. The scheme, which will make products freely available when needed, will support learners to confidently manage their periods in school.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) when the Children's Strategy will be published; and (ii) whether it will be the delivery mechanism for the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

(AQW 12221/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030 will be published and laid before the Assembly early in the New Year.

The UNCRC was ratified by the UK Government in 1991 requiring all four jurisdictions to respect children's rights and take account of the convention when providing services for children.

The Executive Children and Young People's Strategy is the strategic framework through which departments will improve children's well-being as required by the Children's Services Co-operation Act.

The strategy was developed utilising a co-design process with stakeholders, parents and young people and focuses on issues which they have identified as the most important. The strategy describes how these issues sit within the context of the United Nations human rights conventions, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. As the Executive's ten-year strategy for improving the well-being of children and young people in Northern Ireland it will be the main vehicle for further progressing children's rights.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education when he will publish contingency plans for the operation of post-primary transfer tests scheduled for January 2021.

(AQW 12222/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Member will be aware that the transfer tests are unregulated by my Department and it therefore plays no role in their operation. I do not have any legislative authority to require the test providers to develop or publish any contingency plans in relation to the operation of the tests. That is a matter for the test providers.

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education what awareness or educational courses are provided for young people to raise awareness of judicial, legal and court services in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 12234/17-22)

Mr Weir: Local and Global Citizenship is a key component of the statutory Northern Ireland curriculum under Learning for Life and Work at Key Stage 3. It provides a framework for teaching pupils about lawfulness and for developing the skills required to enable young people to make a positive contribution to society. Beyond the statutory minimum content, schools and teachers have the flexibility to adapt what they teach and to use approaches that best suit the learning needs of their pupils.

The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) has produced a number of resources that address the issue of lawfulness and the justice system in Northern Ireland. These resources focus on the development of an understanding of democracy, justice and the impact of criminality and have been developed to support teachers in teaching controversial issues such as paramilitary style attacks and the concept of justice and policing in Northern Ireland.

In May 2018 CCEA received additional funding to support the delivery of the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme through the Active Citizenship Project. Work on this Project is ongoing and to date has included the development of new resources to support teachers delivering citizenship education in schools.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Education whether he intends to (i) implement a policy change; or (ii) legislate on a flexible school starting age in this Assembly mandate.

(AQW 12251/17-22)

Mr Weir: The requirement for children who have reached the age of four by the 1st July to start primary school in September of that year is set out in Article 46 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986.

I have previously stated that I would consider whether changes to provide for a legal deferral of school starting age is the most appropriate way forward. In determining this, it is essential that an in-depth analysis is undertaken to consider the immediate and longer term effects, including assessing the impact any change might have on the overall number of years a pupil spends in compulsory education and the potential impact on pre-school provision.

I will want to fully assess the available options and I will then set out how I intend to proceed, including any possible changes in terms of legislation and whether this can successfully complete its passage in the Assembly by the end of the current mandate.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education (i) for an update on the development proposal for an additional multi-purpose resource space and toilets at Drumrane Primary School, Limavady; (ii) when he is likely to make a decision on the proposal; and (iii) for the estimated cost of the work.

(AQW 12285/17-22)

Mr Weir: I approved Development Proposal 616 on 14 December 2020. The proposal was to increase the admissions number at Drumrane Primary from 17 to 20 with a phased increase in enrolment from 116 to 140.

No additional classrooms were required as the school currently has five classrooms which is the correct size for a maximum enrolment of 140.

The provision of a multi-purpose room and toilets is the responsibility of the Education Authority (EA) and would be subject to the EA completing a feasibility report to identify the need and a business case setting out the preferred option.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education whether he will implement measures to ensure fairness in upcoming transfer tests, similar to those announced for GCSE and A level examinations.

(AQW 12302/17-22)

Mr Weir: Unlike GCSE and A-level examinations the majority of which are set by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment as part of its statutory functions, the operation of the transfer tests is a matter for the Association for Quality Education Ltd and the Post Primary Transfer Consortium Ltd rather than the Department. Any decision to make changes to the content or marking of the transfer tests is therefore a matter for the respective test providers.

Department of Finance

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Finance (i) on what date the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme opened for applications; (ii) on what date the first payment under the scheme was made; (iii) how many applications have been received from the South Belfast constituency up to and including Friday 27 November 2020; (iv) how many payments were made by this date; and (v) what is the total amount paid.

(AQW 11604/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): The Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS) provides support for businesses that have been directly affected by the Health Protection restrictions. It opened to businesses in Derry City and Strabane District Council Area on Wednesday 14th October and to other council areas on Monday 19th October. The first payment made under the scheme was on Tuesday 21st October. It has changed four times since it was first set up, extending its geographic range to all council areas and increased the amount of payments issued and the types of businesses that are eligible. This has added to the complexity of administering the scheme.

It is not possible to give figures for the Localised Restriction Support Scheme for a constituency area, all figures are recorded based on District Council area.

As of 21st December, for the Belfast City Council area there were:

Applications received:	2,827
Payments made:	1,531
Applications rejected:	754
Cases still to be processed:	542
Total amount paid:	£11.2 million

Since the Scheme was expanded to include non-essential retail businesses, LPS has received a further 435 applications from businesses in the Belfast City Council area, and 288 of these have been paid out to a value of £546K.

Of the remaining cases still to be processed across all council areas, approximately a third include duplicate and / or incomplete applications. This has impacted on progress in processing applications.

Land and Property Services is continuing to progress applications as quickly as possible.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Finance whether community wealth building will be considered by the Procurement Board, as part of the new Policy on Social Value; and to detail the proposed weighting social value will have on the procurement exercises.

(AQW 11667/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The new Policy on Social Value will enhance community wealth by strengthening requirements to deliver community benefits. The detail of the weighting is under consideration and will be brought to the Executive for approval in the New Year.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister of Finance (i) how many applications have been received from the Upper Bann constituency for the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme up to and including Friday 27 November 2020; and (ii) how many payments were made by this date.

(AQW 11701/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS) provides support for business that have been directly affected by the Health Protection restrictions. It opened to businesses in Derry City and Strabane District Council Area on Wednesday 14th October and to other council areas on Monday 19th October. The first payment made under the scheme was on Tuesday 21st October. It has changed four times since it was first set up, extending its geographic range to all council areas and increased the amount of payments issued and the types of businesses that are eligible. This has added to the complexity of administering the scheme.

It is not possible to give figures for the Localised Restriction Support Scheme for a constituency area, all figures are recorded based on District Council area.

As of 22nd December, for the Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council area there were:

Applications received:	1,363
Payments made:	759
Applications rejected:	397
Cases still to be processed:	207
Total amount paid:	£5.1 million

Since the Scheme was expanded to include non-essential retail businesses, LPS has received a further 315 applications from businesses in the Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council area, and 207 of these have been paid out to a value of £386K.

Of the remaining cases still to be processed across all council areas, approximately a third include duplicate and / or incomplete applications. This has impacted on progress in processing applications.

Land and Property Services is continuing to progress applications as quickly as possible.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Finance whether equality screening exercises or equality impact assessments were conducted in the development of the Civil Service Transitioning at Work Trans Equality Policy in line with commitments contained in Section 6.05 of the NICS staff handbook.

(AQW 11731/17-22)

Mr Murphy: An equality screening was conducted in line with commitments contained in Section 6.05 of the NICS staff handbook.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance whether he intends to revise the criteria for support from the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme to assist those required to close under the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 but embedded within a larger business that was not required to close.

(AQW 11749/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS) was established with the sole purpose of providing financial support to any business specified in the Health Protection Regulations which has been required to restrict or cease trading. Where such a specified business is an occupier, (as defined by paragraph 1 of the Schedule within The Financial Assistance (Coronavirus)(No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020), of part only of larger rateable premises, that business may apply under this Scheme and be liable for the lower rate. I do not intend to revise that criteria. Further details on the Scheme and how to apply are available at:

<https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/LocalisedRestrictionsSupport>

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Finance whether there were Barnett Consequentials for Northern Ireland from the Green Homes Grant Scheme in England.

(AQW 11784/17-22)

Mr Murphy: There are no additional Barnett consequentialists confirmed in 2020-21 for the Green Homes Grant in England.

For 2021-22, the Spending Review provided Barnett consequentialists for English departmental-level changes and not for individual programmes. In that respect it is not possible to determine if individual programmes give rise to Barnett consequentialists.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Finance, pursuant to AQW 11410/17-22, and in terms of the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme eligibility criteria, what would constitute as 'severely limited operations'.

(AQW 11796/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Localised Restrictions Support Scheme is regulated by The Financial Assistance (Coronavirus) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020. It applies to a business or service which is restricted or subject to closure as a result of the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020. Certain business restrictions are expressly excluded from support under paragraph 7(e) of the Financial Regulations as the restrictions were considered to be limited. The phrase 'severely limited operations' is not contained within the Regulations; rather it is used in material to explain the purpose of the scheme.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance whether he intends to require (i) the purchase; and (ii) lease of all new vehicles by the public sector to be zero emissions vehicles.

(AQW 11827/17-22)

Mr Murphy: CPD through its Fleet contracts can procure any type of vehicle from electric, to plug in hybrid to standard fossil fuel. However the choice is a matter for the Department and/or Arms Length Body who hold the budget.

I tabled a paper on social value, which included a target of working towards net zero greenhouse gas emissions, to the Procurement Board on 16 December 2020. I have invited comments from the Board and once agreed, I will seek endorsement from Executive colleagues. This will impact on future specifications for the purchase and lease of new vehicles.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance what action he will take to close the gender pay gap in the Civil Service.

(AQW 11849/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As outlined in NISRA's "Pay in the Northern Ireland Civil Service Statistical Bulletin" for the year ending March 2020, a gender pay gap exists within the Civil Service as a result of a higher proportion of females at lower paid grades.

My department has implemented and continues to develop actions to seek to remove barriers to women's progression and promote their equal representation at every level of the Civil Service, all of which will aim to assist in addressing the gender pay gap.

This work includes the development of a Gender Action Plan to promote gender diversity at all grades in the NICS; delivery of and participation in women's mentoring and leadership development programmes; improved recruitment advertising and the use of positive action statements to encourage females to apply for specific roles/grades where they are under-represented; and the ongoing development and support of a NICS Women's Network and a range of family friendly policies.

My department also monitors and assesses the composition of the Civil Service recruitment applicant pools and workforce and is currently finalising the Article 55 and Gender Reviews on behalf of the NICS. The findings of the reviews will be published and will inform Civil Service actions on diversity and inclusion.

My department will continue to closely monitor this area and implement a programme of outreach activity aimed at addressing any under-representation.

Further interventions will be considered as part of the civil service reform programme.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Finance what initiatives he plans to take forward to recognise the contribution made by public sector employees who worked throughout the pandemic.

(AQW 11855/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I fully recognise the vital role played by public sector workers in delivering public services throughout the pandemic. That is why in putting the 2020/21 Public Sector Pay Policy in place in September, I ensured it was flexible and enabled pay increases to be made this year. With the policy in place, it is for individual Ministers agree pay awards for their areas of responsibility that are in line with that.

Looking forward to 2021/22, I was hugely disappointed that the Chancellor announced that he was freezing the pay of many hard working public sector employees outside of those in the health service in 2021/22. And while pay policy is devolved, the Treasury has also effectively frozen our resource budget, so any pay increases next year would inevitably have an impact on the spending on other vital public services. So clearly this is a matter that the whole Executive will need to carefully consider in the time ahead.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Finance when the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme will be paid to small local businesses.

(AQW 11954/17-22)

Mr Murphy: LPS is working through outstanding applications as quickly as possible. The current status of applications is as follows:

Total Applications Received:	14,415
Paid:	7,681
Rejected:	4,854
Unprocessed:	1,880

Of the remaining outstanding applications, there still remains a sizeable number of duplicate applications. Most of these applications which are not duplicates, are complex applications with difficulties in resolving. Every endeavour is being made to progress these as quickly as possible.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance why (i) Gwendoline Bridal, Bangor; (ii) Base Sandwiches, Bangor; and (iii) Central Bakery, Bangor are yet to receive confirmation on their Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme grant.

(AQW 11986/17-22)

Mr Murphy:

- (i) Gwendoline Bridal was passed for payment on 16th December 2020.
- (ii) LPS is unable to find an application from a business named Base Sandwiches. If an address or application reference is supplied this can be investigated further.
- (iii) This application will be rejected. Bakeries were not required to close under the Health Regulations in place between 16th October 2020 and 10th December 2020 and therefore are not eligible for the Localised Restriction Support Scheme.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Finance for the estimated cost of implementing the terms of the McCloud judgement for all Government employees for the period 2015 to 2022.

(AQW 12001/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The estimated cost of removing unlawful discrimination for members of the devolved public sector here for the period 2015 to 2022 was published in the Department of Finance consultation on 19 August 2020. The document can be accessed at the Department of Finance website at: <https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/consultations/consultation-proposed-changes-transitional-arrangements-2015-schemes>. The figure given of £700 million reflects the expected cost of members receiving benefits from whichever scheme provides the highest value to them for the remedy period. The current cost estimate does not include any additional administration costs associated with implementing the remedy, which will require separate further assessment.

The Treasury estimate for the non-devolved public sector was provided in its comparable consultation published on 16 July 2020 at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/public-service-pension-schemes-consultation-changes-to-the-transitional-arrangements-to-the-2015-schemes>.

The figure provided in the Treasury consultation is £17 billion.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Finance how the figure of £20.5 million for the Dormant Accounts Fund was calculated.

(AQW 12008/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Dormant Bank and Building Society Accounts Act 2008 (http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2008/31/pdfs/ukpga_20080031_en.pdf) enables banks and building societies, who opt into the scheme, to transfer the money held in dormant accounts to a central Reclaim Fund. The central Reclaim Fund is then responsible for managing money, meeting any reclaims and passing on surplus money for reinvestment in the community usually through the National Lottery Community Fund.

The North receives 2.8% of the total amount of money received by the central Reclaim Fund in a financial year as set out in the Distribution of Dormant Account Money (Apportionment) Order 2011. Amounts allocated are carried forward until spent, there is no requirement to spend it in the period it is received.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Finance, in relation to his Dormant Accounts Fund statement, (i) what expansions to the definition of Dormant Accounts are being considered by his Department; (ii) what communications with the owners of these dormant accounts are being considered; and (iii) what time period will the owners of the dormant accounts have to secure the funds in their accounts.

(AQW 12010/17-22)

Mr Murphy:

- (i) The Department for Culture, Media and Sports (DCMS) is responsible for the legal definition of Dormant Assets. DCMS is finalising their response to the consultation on expanding the definition of Dormant Assets and this should be published in the new year.
- (ii) DCMS has held a public consultation with all key stakeholders.
- (iii) Dormant Assets remain the rightful property of their owners, and the legislation guarantees their right to reclaim the amount owed to them at any time.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Finance, pursuant to AQW 11163/17-22, to detail the weightings given to cost, quality and sustainability within the current Public Procurement Policy.

(AQW 12038/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Public Procurement Policy is not prescriptive regarding the allocation of weightings to assessment criteria.

The weightings given to cost, quality and sustainability are decided at a local level when commissioning procurement projects by the relevant Department. The weightings are tailored to individual requirements and are based on the scale, complexity and risk associated with the contract.

I brought a proposal to the Procurement Board on 16 December 2020 to mandate a minimum weighting for social value in government contracts. The detail of the weighting is under consideration and I will bring this new policy to the Executive for approval.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance how many workplaces have under the threshold of 25 workers employed on their books.

(AQW 12053/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The number of businesses operating here is sourced from the Inter Departmental Business Register (IDBR). The IDBR does not hold details on those small businesses that fall below the VAT threshold (annual turnover of £85,000 in 2019/2020) or do not operate a PAYE scheme.

A business is referred to as a Reporting Unit. The total number of employees working for a business is provided at the Reporting Unit level. There are 73,845 Reporting Units or businesses operating with less than 25 employees.

A business may operate from more than one site or workplace. Such individual workplaces are referred to as Local Units. There are 85,740 Local Units or workplaces with less than 25 employees.

Table 1: Number of businesses (reporting units) and workplaces (local units) operating in Northern Ireland with less than 25 employees, December 2020

Business Level	Less than 25 employees	All employees
No. of Reporting Units	73,845	77,365
No. of Local Units	85,740	91,565

Source: Inter Departmental Business Register, which does not hold details on those small businesses that fall below the VAT threshold (annual turnover of £85,000 in 2019/2020) or do not operate a PAYE scheme.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance when he will publish the Memorandum of Understanding between his Department and the Department for the Economy so businesses can better assess the cause of delays in COVID-19 support funds.

(AQW 12055/17-22)

Mr Murphy: In respect of the current Localised Restrictions Support Scheme, this is entirely administered by the Department of Finance. My Department has no direct involvement in the administration of current grant schemes run by other Departments. Therefore no Memorandums of Understanding are in place between the Department of Finance and the Department for Economy in respect of current Support Schemes.

However a Data Sharing Agreement is in place between my Department and the Department for the Economy (DfE) to allow data to be shared to inform the policy development of DfE Covid-19 Support Schemes.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Finance to detail the stakeholders involved as part of the co-production and co-design of amendments to Building Regulations.

(AQW 12058/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The local Building Regulations Advisory Committee (NIBRAC) is a statutory body set up under Article 4 of the Building Regulations (NI) Order 1979 to advise the Department on the amendment of building regulations and other associated matters.

The Department works with NIBRAC to develop proposals for stakeholder engagement and consultation to inform proposals for amending regulations and associated technical guidance. The Department maintains a list of 396 stakeholders who are notified for consultation purposes.

NIBRAC technical sub-committees are also established, as required, and should additional expertise be necessary, external experts are co-opted as required. NIBRAC members chair technical sub-committees, which are expected to report regularly to the full committee so that progress can be monitored and considered.

Currently three technical sub-committees have been established and have commenced work in the areas of (i) Fire safety; (ii) Conservation of fuel and power; and (iii) Access to and use of Buildings (to introduce requirements for Changing Places Toilets).

NIBRAC sub-committees members have been drawn from academia; the Fire and Rescue Service; District Councils; local charities who work with people with disabilities; the Construction Industry; the Northern Ireland Housing Executive; and Housing Associations.

The Department liaises with the local construction industry on Building Regulations issues through the Construction Industry Forum (CIFNI) which established Building Regulations Task Groups in 2019/20 specifically for this purpose. The Department also engages with District Councils' Building Control, who are responsible for enforcement of the Building Regulations within their council boundaries, through regular Building Control liaison meetings.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Finance whether all COVID-19 monies underspends will be reallocated to enable people who have yet to see any financial support to receive such support, such as unpaid carers.

(AQW 12059/17-22)

Mr Murphy: All available funding will be considered in light of the needs identified by Ministers as part of the in-year monitoring process. It is for the Executive to determine allocations in line with local needs and priorities.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Finance how long the Dormant Account Scheme grant will be open for applications; and whether section 167 charities will be able to apply to support the work they deliver.

(AQW 12060/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Dormant Accounts Fund will open for applications on the 12 January 2021. There is no closing date for applications to the Fund.

Organisations, including Section 167 charities delivering services here can apply to the Fund. It is for the National Lottery Community Fund to set the eligibility criteria for the Fund in line with the policy directions provided to it by the Department of Finance. Full details of the Fund can be found on TNL website at www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/funding/northern-ireland

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Finance how much has been spent by his Department to fund same sex weddings.

(AQW 12063/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The introduction of same sex marriages and opposite sex civil partnerships required changes to the General Register Office computerised registration system and the cost to the Department of Finance was £537k.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Finance whether the dormant accounts fund will be open to sporting clubs.

(AQW 12073/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Yes, the Dormant Accounts Fund will be open to sporting clubs that fall into the following categories:

- an unregistered community or voluntary organisation
- a registered charity (unincorporated)
- a registered charity and not-for-profit company
- a not-for-profit company
- a Community Interest Company
- a Charitable Incorporated Organisation.

Organisations should contact the National Lottery Fund if they require further advice on applying to the Fund.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance to detail the average timescale for the processing of Localised Restrictions Support Scheme Grant Applications, from the point of application to processing of payment.

(AQW 12106/17-22)

Mr Murphy: In the interests of making processing of applications its first priority, LPS has not spent time recording metrics which would enable the accurate calculation of a figure for the average timescale of processing an application.

The main body of applications was received for the period from 15th October 2020 to 10th December 2020. LPS was not in a position to start issuing payments for these until regulations were in place on 30th October 2020. In the 7 week period from 30th October 2020 to 18th December 2020, LPS has processed 12,535 applications. The total number of applications

received to date is 14,415, with new applications being submitted daily. The average number of applications processed per week is 1,790.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance whether licensed premises, required to close under the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020, operated by and contained within golf clubs are eligible for support for Localised Restrictions Support Scheme.

(AQW 12108/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS) was established with the purpose of providing financial support to any business specified in the Health Protection Regulations which has been required to restrict or cease trading. Where such premises (licensed or otherwise) within a golf club constitutes a separate business occupier, as defined by paragraph 1 of the Schedule within The Financial Assistance (Coronavirus)(No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020, and is part only of larger rateable premises, that business may apply under this Scheme and be liable for the lower rate. DfC Sports Sustainability Fund is in place to help address the economic consequences of the pandemic affecting the sports sector. It will provide the financial interventions needed to stabilise and sustain sports core governing bodies. Affiliated sports clubs may apply for funding through their governing body by providing all information regarding current and historic income and expenditure.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance to publish the specific criteria for when a (i) business case is required to approve capital expenditure or additional revenue expenditure; and (ii) situation is regarded as an emergency and a business case is no longer required.

(AQW 12109/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The principles of appraisal must be applied to all proposals that involve spending or saving public money. However, it is important that these principles are applied with proportionate effort, taking into account such factors as the cost and complexity of the proposal under consideration.

In March 2020, in light of the evolving situation with respect to Covid-19, my department issued guidance to other departments around the process that would be followed for the approval of expenditure relating to Covid-19 measures, including cases where an urgent response was required. This guidance included templates for the appraisal of such proposals.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Finance (i) on what date the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme opened for applications; (ii) on what date the first payment under the scheme was made; (iii) how many applications have been received from the East Derry constituency up to and including Friday 27 November 2020; (iv) how many payments were made by this date; and (v) what is the total amount paid.

(AQW 12120/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS) provides support for business that have been directly affected by the Health Protection restrictions. It opened to businesses in Derry City and Strabane District Council Area on Wednesday 14th October and to other council areas on Monday 19th October. The first payment made under the scheme was on Tuesday 21st October. It has changed four times since it was first set up, extending its geographic range to all council areas and increased the amount of payments issued and the types of businesses that are eligible. This has added to the complexity of administering the scheme.

It is not possible to give figures for the Localised Restriction Support Scheme for a constituency area, all figures are recorded based on District Council area.

As of 22nd December, for the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council area there were:

Applications received:	1,292
Payments made:	730
Applications rejected:	465
Cases still to be processed:	97
Total amount paid:	£4.9 million

Since the Scheme was expanded to include non-essential retail businesses, LPS has received a further 313 applications from businesses in the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council area, and 201 of these have been paid out to a value of £354K.

Of the remaining cases still to be processed across all council areas, approximately a third include duplicate and / or incomplete applications. This has impacted on progress in processing applications.

Land and Property Services is continuing to progress applications as quickly as possible.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Finance for an update on City Deal funding for Derry and Strabane.

(AQW 12148/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Derry City and Strabane District Council City Deal equates to £210 million, made up of £100 million City Deal funding and £110 million Inclusive Future Fund, funded equally from the Executive and the British Government. The Deal is very close to signing Heads of Terms. Work can then begin to progress to a Deal Document, after which funding will be able to flow.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance to place in the Assembly library copies of the slides and material used in unconscious bias training in the Civil Service.

(AQW 12165/17-22)

Mr Murphy: A copy of the slides used for the NICS SCS classroom based training along with the content of the e-Learning package for all other staff have been issued to NI Assembly to be placed in the Assembly library.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance, pursuant to AQW 10776/17-22, for a breakdown of how and where the money was spent.

(AQW 12166/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As previously advised, costs were incurred in relation to the delivery of classroom based Unconscious Bias training to members of the NICS SCS in the period November 2016 to September 2017. This classroom based training was delivered by Pearn Kandola and completed by 197 SCS staff.

The breakdown of spend across the relevant financial years is as below:

Financial Year	Total (£)
2016 - 2017	3,176.77
2017 - 2018	25,527.55
2018 - 2019	Nil
2019 - 2020	Nil
2020 – to date	Nil
Total	28,704.32

No further classroom training has been delivered since September 2017.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Finance whether all £700 million announced by his Department in May 2020 for infrastructure, regeneration, and tourism projects has been allocated; and whether any was allocated to funding and supporting a green recovery.

(AQW 12182/17-22)

Mr Murphy: In May 2020 I announced the following allocations on behalf of the Executive for City/ Growth Deals, matching the British Government's contribution to the programme:

Deal	£ million			
	Executive Funding			Deal Total (inc British Govt Funding)
	City/ Growth Deals	Inclusive Future Fund	Total	
Belfast Region City Deal	350	0	350	700
Derry City Strabane District Council City Deal	50	55	105	210
Mid South West Growth Deal	126	0	126	252
Causeway Coast and Glens Growth Deal	36	0	36	72
Total	562	55	617	1234

The Executive also agreed to a £100 million Complementary Fund. This £100 million is still to be allocated based on viable projects across the three City/ Growth Deals excluding the Derry City and Strabane District Council Deal, which is in receipt of Inclusive Future Funding. This represents a total City/ Growth Deals investment of £1,334 million, £717 million from the Executive and £617 million from the British Government. Government funding can flow once a Deal Document has been signed.

Projects for all four City/ Growth Deals, which are over 10 - 15 years, are still being finalised. I understand there will be elements of projects that support green recovery across Deals.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance, pursuant to AQW 11259/17-22, to detail the reasons for the majority of applications under the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area being rejected.

(AQW 12190/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The following is a breakdown of the rejection reasons for the Derry & Strabane District Council area.

Business not occupying the address the application was made against	21.5%
Business type not eligible	25.5%
Duplicate application	43.8%
Self-declared they were not open and trading	5.7%
Other	3.3%

In the case of applications where the business was not occupying the address, many applicants had applied using the wrong address and subsequently reapplied and were approved. Similarly for applicants rejected because the business type was not eligible and applicants who indicated they were closed, many of these reapplied and submitted evidence to support their application which resulted in an application being approved.

The overall effect of these errors and issues with applications is that there were a large number of legitimately rejected applications, many of those rejected re-applied with the correct information and were subsequently approved, and net result is that the total number of applications is significantly greater than the number of eligible businesses.

Mr Stewart asked the Minister of Finance, pursuant to AQW 11071/17-22, whether gyms, operating severely limited and restricted classes from 11 December 2020, are still eligible for grant support under the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme.

(AQW 12215/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Yes. Top up payments will be issued automatically for those approved for the period up to 26 November.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance when he was provided with draft answers from officials to (i) AQW 10228/17-22; and (ii) AQW 6186/17-22; and when these questions will be answered.

(AQW 12239/17-22)

Mr Murphy: In respect of AQW 10228/17-22, my officials provided a draft response on Friday 20th November 2020 which I approved on Wednesday 25th November. It was sent to the Assembly Business Office for publication that day. Unfortunately, a response was not issued to you directly but to another Member in error. I apologise for this and attach a copy of your records.

In respect of AQW 6186/17/22, my officials provided a draft response on Tuesday 15th September 2020 which I approved on Wednesday 16th September. The response was sent to you directly via email on Thursday 17th September, as was a copy to the Assembly Business Office for publication.

Department of Health

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health what is the current status of the implementation of care partners in nursing homes.

(AQW 10612/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): The Care Partners initiative was included in my Department's revised visiting guidance published on 23 September 2020. Care partners are more than simply visitors. They are likely to 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.

It is considered that without this input, a number of residents in Homes are likely to experience significant and/or continued distress. Currently, detailed information is not held on the implementation of the Care Partners initiative by the DOH.

Guidance on the principles for visiting in care settings in Northern Ireland, including care homes, was published on 23rd September. Supplementary information was provided on 13th November with a letter issued to providers and Trusts the same day. In addition, on 11th December 2020, the Department issued correspondence to all independent providers setting out additional guidance for visiting arrangements in care home settings over the Christmas period. This guidance is in addition to the extant regional visiting guidance which identifies a range of options for visiting to take place in line with a care home's visiting policy.

It remains my position that care home visiting and the subsequent implementation of care partners can be safely facilitated through compliance with the regional principles for visiting in care settings clearly set out in the existing guidance. As I have publicly stated, I find it difficult to understand how some care homes have been able to facilitate visits while others have not.

My Department has again written to every care home in Northern Ireland on the 16th December reiterating my clear expectation they will take a dynamic, risk assessed approach to the implementation of the Visiting Guidance. There is a need for care homes to understand and appreciate the right to a family life for those living in a care home setting, and in particular to acknowledge the critical importance of sustaining relationships between residents and their family and friends, particularly at this time of year. This time is precious and if lost could be irrecoverable.

To help ensure the right balance is being struck by individual care homes, in line with regional guidance, the RQIA will assess the approach being used when undertaking inspections of residential and nursing homes, and considering compliance with the relevant care standards: .

Support and funding continues to be available to help homes implement the approach set out in regional guidance. Trusts have been asked to assure themselves that care homes that accommodate their clients are operating in accordance with guidance and have implemented a dynamic risk assessed approach to visiting at their premises. In addition, Trusts should be providing support and advice where there are difficult to navigate situations relevant to a particular Trust client.

The PHA will continue to provide advice to homes in the event of outbreaks and both the Trust, RQIA, HSCB and PHA will continue to provide advice and support through existing forums and directly to care homes as and when needed. A number of homes have already undertaken training and support made available to help them complete their dynamic risk assessments.

However, in recognition of the concerns felt by many homes about visiting and care partner arrangements, the Department is moving to provide further support and assurance to care homes for an interim period. Should a provider, in order to enable visiting to take place, perceive a need for additional risk mitigation within the care home setting, then COVID-19 testing will be made available for visitors who are not displaying symptoms of infection. It is important to note that this extension to the existing COVID-19 testing arrangements is limited to 1 visitor (or care partner) per resident per week and will be accessible until Friday 8 January 2021.

Care homes which are experiencing an outbreak of infection must follow the directions of the Public Health Agency in managing the outbreak.

- "Outbreak" is defined as two or more confirmed or suspected cases in either residents or staff;
- visiting will be permitted at this time in exceptional circumstances only (e.g. for residents approaching end of life) under strict IPC and PPE measures;
- the care home will remain in "outbreak until the terminal clean is completed;

We continue to live and work with the threat of Covid-19. While we wait as the vaccination programme is rolled out it is still important to take measures to minimize risks of spread of infection alongside providing safely managed but meaningful visits for residents with their loved ones.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health how many nursing homes currently have care partners in place.
(AQW 10613/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Care Partners initiative was included in my Department's revised visiting guidance published on 23 September 2020. Care partners are more than simply visitors. They are likely to 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.

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Support and funding continues to be available to help homes implement the approach set out in regional guidance. Trusts have been asked to assure themselves that care homes that accommodate their clients are operating in accordance with

guidance and have implemented a dynamic risk assessed approach to visiting at their premises. In addition, Trusts should be providing support and advice where there are difficult to navigate situations relevant to a particular Trust client.

The PHA will continue to provide advice to homes in the event of outbreaks and both the Trust, RQIA, HSCB and PHA will continue to provide advice and support through existing forums and directly to care homes as and when needed. A number of homes have already undertaken training and support made available to help them complete their dynamic risk assessments.

However, in recognition of the concerns felt by many homes about visiting and care partner arrangements, the Department is moving to provide further support and assurance to care homes for an interim period. Should a provider, in order to enable visiting to take place, perceive a need for additional risk mitigation within the care home setting, then COVID-19 testing will be made available for visitors who are not displaying symptoms of infection. It is important to note that this extension to the existing COVID-19 testing arrangements is limited to 1 visitor (or care partner) per resident per week and will be accessible until Friday 8 January 2021.

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- the care home will remain in "outbreak until the terminal clean is completed;"

We continue to live and work with the threat of Covid-19. While we wait as the vaccination programme is rolled out it is still important to take measures to minimize risks of spread of infection alongside providing safely managed but meaningful visits for residents with their loved ones.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health to detail the process by which care homes notify the Department that they are introducing care partners.

(AQW 10614/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Care Partners initiative was included in my Department's revised visiting guidance published on 23 September 2020. Care partners are more than simply visitors. They are likely to 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.

It is considered that without this input, a number of residents in Homes are likely to experience significant and/or continued distress. Currently, detailed information is not held on the implementation of the Care Partners initiative by the DOH.

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Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health whether the Department holds a list of live care partners.
(AQW 10615/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Care Partners initiative was included in my Department’s revised visiting guidance published on 23 September 2020. Care partners are more than simply visitors. They are likely to 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.

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- visiting will be permitted at this time in exceptional circumstances only (e.g. for residents approaching end of life) under strict IPC and PPE measures;
- the care home will remain in “outbreak until the terminal clean is completed”;

We continue to live and work with the threat of Covid-19. While we wait as the vaccination programme is rolled out it is still important to take measures to minimize risks of spread of infection alongside providing safely managed but meaningful visits for residents with their loved ones.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health, in the instance that an outbreak or cluster is identified in a nursing home that has care partners in place, to detail (i) the procedures carried out; and (ii) whether the care partner protocol will continue.
(AQW 10616/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Care Partners initiative was included in my Department's revised visiting guidance published on 23 September 2020. Care partners are more than simply visitors. They are likely to 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.

It is considered that without this input, a number of residents in Homes are likely to experience significant and/or continued distress. Currently, detailed information is not held on the implementation of the Care Partners initiative by the DOH.

Guidance on the principles for visiting in care settings in Northern Ireland, including care homes, was published on 23rd September. Supplementary information was provided on 13th November with a letter issued to providers and Trusts the same day. In addition, on 11th December 2020, the Department issued correspondence to all independent providers setting out additional guidance for visiting arrangements in care home settings over the Christmas period. This guidance is in addition to the extant regional visiting guidance which identifies a range of options for visiting to take place in line with a care home's visiting policy.

It remains my position that care home visiting and the subsequent implementation of care partners can be safely facilitated through compliance with the regional principles for visiting in care settings clearly set out in the existing guidance. As I have publicly stated, I find it difficult to understand how some care homes have been able to facilitate visits while others have not.

My Department has again written to every care home in Northern Ireland on the 16th December reiterating my clear expectation they will take a dynamic, risk assessed approach to the implementation of the Visiting Guidance. There is a need for care homes to understand and appreciate the right to a family life for those living in a care home setting, and in particular to acknowledge the critical importance of sustaining relationships between residents and their family and friends, particularly at this time of year. This time is precious and if lost could be irrecoverable.

To help ensure the right balance is being struck by individual care homes, in line with regional guidance, the RQIA will assess the approach being used when undertaking inspections of residential and nursing homes, and considering compliance with the relevant care standards: .

Support and funding continues to be available to help homes implement the approach set out in regional guidance. Trusts have been asked to assure themselves that care homes that accommodate their clients are operating in accordance with guidance and have implemented a dynamic risk assessed approach to visiting at their premises. In addition, Trusts should be providing support and advice where there are difficult to navigate situations relevant to a particular Trust client.

The PHA will continue to provide advice to homes in the event of outbreaks and both the Trust, RQIA, HSCB and PHA will continue to provide advice and support through existing forums and directly to care homes as and when needed. A number of homes have already undertaken training and support made available to help them complete their dynamic risk assessments.

However, in recognition of the concerns felt by many homes about visiting and care partner arrangements, the Department is moving to provide further support and assurance to care homes for an interim period. Should a provider, in order to enable visiting to take place, perceive a need for additional risk mitigation within the care home setting, then COVID-19 testing will be made available for visitors who are not displaying symptoms of infection. It is important to note that this extension to the existing COVID-19 testing arrangements is limited to 1 visitor (or care partner) per resident per week and will be accessible until Friday 8 January 2021.

Care homes which are experiencing an outbreak of infection must follow the directions of the Public Health Agency in managing the outbreak.

- "Outbreak" is defined as two or more confirmed or suspected cases in either residents or staff;
- visiting will be permitted at this time in exceptional circumstances only (e.g. for residents approaching end of life) under strict IPC and PPE measures;
- the care home will remain in "outbreak until the terminal clean is completed;

We continue to live and work with the threat of Covid-19. While we wait as the vaccination programme is rolled out it is still important to take measures to minimize risks of spread of infection alongside providing safely managed but meaningful visits for residents with their loved ones.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 9705/17-22, how many geriatric inpatient beds there are in each Health and Social Care Trust.
(AQW 10700/17-22)

Mr Swann:

Information on the number of geriatric inpatient beds for the year 2020 broken down by Health and Social Care Trust has been provided in tabulated form below.

Number of Available beds in HSC Hospitals in Northern Ireland under the Geriatric Medicine Specialty, QE September 2020^P

Trust	Available Beds
Belfast	12,046
Northern	7,525
South Eastern	9,202
Southern	12,398
Western	13,553

Source: KH03a

^P Data is Provisional and subject to change.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how many people have been trained to administer a COVID-19 vaccination. (AQW 10923/17-22)

Mr Swann: At this point, information on the number of people taking the COVID-19 specific training is not available.

Campaign commenced Monday 16 November consisting of:-

- Health Service Workforce Appeal
- Nearly 600 expressions of interest in the first week
- 400 +applications.

This has now risen to over 800 completed applications being submitted.

Trust workforce consisting of:

- 880 peer vaccinators in Trusts
- Other Trust staff stepping forward.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister of Health, following a carers assessment, to detail how unmet need is (i) recorded; and (ii) used. (AQW 11082/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) After all options to meet a carer's need are considered, any unmet need is recorded on the individual's Carer's Assessment and attached to their record. Options to meet a carer's assessed need may include but are not limited to short break provision, carer cash grants, and Direct Payments.

In many instances the unmet need is also recorded on an electronic database. However, some Programmes of Care across the HSC Trusts have introduced the Carer's Conversation Wheel (CCW) to replace Carer's Assessments. The CCW is subject to an evaluation review and going forward, a number of revisions are likely to be made, including the inclusion of documenting unmet need.

- (ii) Across the HSC Trusts, generally speaking, unmet need is reviewed regularly via a local process within Trust teams who will continue to seek to put in place the support required. Unmet need may be escalated to a senior line manager for advice or for decision-making purposes.

Trusts' senior managers also review trends and plan future actions to address unmet needs in a strategic way.

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister of Health why dog groomers are prohibited from (i) performing essential welfare grooming; and (ii) operating during the period 27 November to 10 December 2020. (AQW 11134/17-22)

Mr Swann: During the period 27 November to 10 December 2020 the Covid-19 regulations determined that non-essential business and services must close, however they were permitted to operate a 'click and collect' service without customers having to enter a closed premises.

As dog groomers were included in the non-essential category at that time their premises were to remain closed to the public. However they were permitted to operate a 'click and collect' service on an appointment basis to ensure that social distancing could be maintained.

The Executive have announced that dog groomers have now been added to the essential retailers list and can continue to operate during the next period of restrictions from 26 December 2020.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister of Health whether he will address the issue of health care staff that work in the primary health care sector, such as staff in general practices, not having NHS staff identity and, as a result, are not able to apply for NHS loyalty schemes.

(AQW 11443/17-22)

Mr Swann: GPs are independent contractors who contract with the Health and Social Care Board to provide primary medical services to their patients under the General Medical Services contract. As independent contractors GPs can employ staff directly to meet their practice requirements.

There are a number of schemes that provide opportunities for individuals who work across a range of health care areas to claim discounts, including for example in retail goods and services. The eligibility criteria for such schemes, including who can avail of them, may vary and are a matter for the scheme operators.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health what is the daily target for the number of people to receive the COVID-19 vaccine.

(AQW 11466/17-22)

Mr Swann: There is no set daily target for the number of people to receive the COVID-19 vaccine. It is important the programme is delivered swiftly but safely.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health to detail the average caseload currently held by members of the district nursing workforce, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 11496/17-22)

Mr Swann: The District Nurse is the caseload holder of all the patients and is supported by community staff nurses and senior healthcare assistants to provide a district nursing service. The table below shows the total caseload size per Trust, the number of district nursing caseloads and the average caseload size per HSC Trust.

HSC Trust	Total number of people admitted to the District Nursing Caseload	No of District Nursing Caseloads	Average caseload size (i.e. people admitted to the caseload)
BHSCT	4146	53	78
NHSCT	6075	37	164
SEHSCT	7394*	41	180
SHSCT	5668	59	96
WHSCT	4216	33	131

* District nursing caseloads in all HSC Trusts will include people who require continence management. The numbers are much higher in South Eastern Trust due to the continence service delivery model, accounting for approximately 3000 patients (April 2019 data).

These figures exclude people who require one-off visits as they are not admitted to the caseload.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health to detail the current number of vacant posts in district nursing among those (i) requiring; and (ii) not requiring, the district nursing specialist qualification.

(AQW 11497/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the current number of vacant posts in district nursing teams is detailed in the table below.

Current Vacancies in District Nursing Teams

HSC Trust	Requirement for District Nursing Specialist qualification	
	Yes	No
Belfast *	8.8 WTE (Band 6 District Nursing Sister)	40.5 WTE: (34.7 WTE Band 5 Community Staff Nurse & 5.8 WTE Band 3 Senior Nursing Assistant)
Northern	2 temporary posts	16 posts: (8 temporary posts & 8 permanent posts)
South Eastern	2.3 WTE	17.7 WTE
Southern	3 posts: (2 Band 6 posts & 1 District Nursing Lead Band 7 post)	8 posts (Band 5)

HSC Trust	Requirement for District Nursing Specialist qualification	
	Yes	No
Western	1 post (Band 7)	18 posts (Band 5)

Source: HSC Trusts

* The District Nursing Service in the Belfast HSC Trust has an active Band 5 Community Staff Nurse rolling advertisement to manage the Band 5 vacancies.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of nurses, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust, categorised as district nurses by his Department who (i) hold the district nursing specialist qualification; and (ii) do not hold the district nursing specialist qualification; and to specify the Agenda for Change banding and level of remuneration for each of these two groups.

(AQW 11498/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number of district nursing staff (band 5 and above) employed in each Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust is detailed in the table below.

District Nursing Staff Employed

HSC Trust	With district nursing specialist qualification	Without district nursing specialist qualification
Belfast	55	102
Northern	43.0 WTE	180.5 WTE
South Eastern	58.1 WTE	128.8 WTE
Southern	69	144
Western	56	188

Source: HSC Trusts

Current district nursing staff employed in a role requiring a district nursing specialist qualification are Agenda for Change (AfC) bands 6 to 8A (basic salary £31,365 - £51,668). Some staff employed at AfC band 5 (basic salary £24,907 - £30,615) hold the qualification but are waiting to apply for a specialist district nurse vacancy when one becomes available.

Other nursing staff in district nursing teams employed in a role not requiring a district nursing specialist qualification are on AfC bands ranging from 5 to 8B currently (basic salary £24,907 - £62,001).

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Health what steps have been taken to ensure that care workers who have been on the front line during the course of this pandemic are able to access proper respite, including their full entitlement of annual leave.

(AQW 11594/17-22)

Mr Swann: It is important to take proper breaks from work and all public sector HSC staff have been actively encouraged to take their entitlement of annual leave during 2020. Line managers have been instructed to set a good example in this respect and to facilitate leave in line with business needs as much as possible.

If staff are specifically prevented by management from taking their full annual leave allowance due to business need, the member of staff will be allowed to carry over into the next leave year the full amount of leave untaken.

Terms and conditions for care staff who work in the independent sector are set by their employer and therefore differ to those employed in the public sector. However, I remain committed to supporting care workers in the independent sector and a number of measures have been introduced or made available to help with their wellbeing and respite as a result of the pandemic. These include financial support for independent providers to employ additional agency staff to ease work pressures, enhanced sick pay to ensure that staff who have been off work due to a COVID related issue do not feel financially pressured to return to work early and access to HSC Trust Psychological Support Helplines (which are staffed by psychologists and psychological therapists).

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health whether care home residents are ever expected to pay for staff members accompanying them to appointments.

(AQW 11661/17-22)

Mr Swann: Care home residents should not be expected to pay for staff to accompany them to appointments. Costs for this type of support are already factored into the overall rate that care homes charge residents for their accommodation and care needs.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Health how many Northern Ireland residents have been referred to England by Health and Social Care Trusts for Autologous Serum Eyedrops treatment in the last 36 months.

(AQW 11756/17-22)

Mr Swann: Records of Extra Contractual Referrals (ECRs) to GB are managed by the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB). The HSCB does not record the precise treatment for which patients are referred, and rather the record captures any approval for assessment and treatment of a specific condition, in this case severe ocular surface disease. In the 36 months in question, no approvals or referrals were recorded for ECRs to England for ASEs to treat ocular surface disease. This information has been provided by the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB).

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health to outline progress on any consideration of locations for a mother and baby perinatal mental health unit.

(AQW 11762/17-22)

Mr Swann: Appraisal of options on the future location of a Mother and Baby Perinatal Mental Health Inpatient Unit will form a key element of the business case development process, which will be progressed as soon as practicable.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to list each (i) appointment; and (ii) extension of a term, that he has made to each arm's-length body since coming into post, including the date the appointment or extension was made and the length of the vacancy that was filled.

(AQW 11823/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on public appointments and extensions to terms for Non-Executive Chairs and Non-Executive Members/Directors (NEM/NED) that I have made since my appointment as Minister for Health including the commencement date of the appointment or extension to each Arm's Length Body (ALB) and the length of the vacancy that was filled is detailed in the tables below.

All public appointments are published to the Department of Health website at: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/>

(i) appointments (new)

ALB	Appointee & Position	Commencement Date	Length of Vacancy Filled
NI Guardian Ad Litem Agency	Gemma Loughran, Chair	23/03/2020	N/A
NI Guardian Ad Litem Agency	Veronica Callaghan, NED	23/03/2020	4 months & 12 days
Western HSC Trust	Hugh McKenna, NED	13/03/2020	1 month & 12 days
Western HSC Trust	Judith McGaffin, NED	13/03/2020	1 month & 12 days
HSC Board	Les Drew, Chair	01/04/2020	N/A
NI Fire & Rescue Service	Bonnie Anley, NEM	01/04/2020	1 year, 2 months & 4 days
NI Fire & Rescue Service	Lindsey Smith, NEM	01/04/2020	1 year, 2 months & 4 days
NI Fire & Rescue Service	Jim Quinn, NEM	01/04/2020	1 year, 2 months & 4 days
NI Fire & Rescue Service	Jonathan Craig, NEM	01/04/2020	1 year, 2 months & 4 days
NI Fire & Rescue Service	Hilary Singleton, NEM	01/04/2020	1 year, 2 months & 4 days
NI Fire & Rescue Service	Thomas O'Hanlon, NEM	01/04/2020	N/A
HSC Board	Theresa Donaldson, NEM	01/08/2020	4 months
HSC Board	Catherine McCallum, NEM	01/08/2020	N/A
HSC Board	Norman McKinley, NEM	01/08/2020	N/A
HSC Board	Nazia Latif, NEM	01/09/2020	4 months
HSC Board	Thomas Moore, NEM	01/09/2020	N/A
Regulation & Quality Improvement Authority	Neil Bodger, NEM	30/10/2020	4 months, 13 days
Regulation & Quality Improvement Authority	Stuart Elborn, NEM	30/10/2020	3 years, 5 months, 25 days
Regulation & Quality Improvement Authority	Alan Hunter, NEM	30/10/2020	4 months, 13 days

ALB	Appointee & Position	Commencement Date	Length of Vacancy Filled
Regulation & Quality Improvement Authority	Jacqueline McGarvey, NEM	30/10/2020	6 years, 4 months, 29 days
Regulation & Quality Improvement Authority	Suzanne Rice, NEM	30/10/2020	4 months, 21 days
Regulation & Quality Improvement Authority	Bronagh Scott, NEM	30/10/2020	4 months, 13 days
Southern HSC Trust	Eileen Mullan, Chair	01/12/2020	N/A

(ii) extensions (including re-appointments)

ALB	Appointee & Position	Commencement Date	Length of Vacancy Filled
Southern HSC Trust	Roberta Brownlee, Chair	07/03/2020	N/A (extension)
HSC Board	Stephen Leach, NEM	01/04/2020	N/A (extension)
HSC Board	Melissa McCullough, NEM	01/04/2020	N/A (extension)
HSC Board	John Mone, NEM	01/04/2020	N/A (extension)
Public Health Agency	Andrew Dougal, Chair	01/06/2020	N/A (extension)
NI Practice & Education Council	Carol Curran, Chair	20/06/2020	N/A (extension)
NI Fire & Rescue Service	Carmel McKinney, Chair	01/07/2020	N/A (re-appointment)
NI Practice & Education Council	Alison Baxendale, NEM	18/07/2020	N/A (extension)
NI Practice & Education Council	Paul Davidson, NEM	01/08/2020	N/A (extension)
NI Practice & Education Council	Vinod Tohani, NEM	01/10/2020	N/A (extension)
NI Practice & Education Council	Deirdre O'Donnell, NEM	01/10/2020	N/A (extension)
NI Practice & Education Council	Deborah Oktar-Campbell, NEM	01/10/2020	N/A (extension)
NI Practice & Education Council	Lisa Houlihan, NEM	01/10/2020	N/A (extension)
Patient & Client Council	Martin Reilly, NEM	01/08/2020	N/A (extension)
Southern HSC Trust	Roberta Brownlee, Chair	07/09/2020	N/A (extension)
NI Blood Transfusion Service	Lorraine Lindsay, NEM	07/02/2020	N/A (extension)
NI Blood Transfusion Service	Ian Henderson, NEM	21/02/2020	N/A (extension)
NI Medical & Dental Training Agency	Lee Wilson, NEM	13/02/2020	N/A (extension)
NI Medical & Dental Training Agency	Derek Maguire, NEM	18/03/2020	N/A (extension)
NI Medical & Dental Training Agency	Alistair Joynes, Chair	01/10/2020	N/A (extension)
NI Medical & Dental Training Agency	Deane Morrice, NEM	01/11/2020	N/A (extension)
Western HSC Trust	Catherine O'Mullan, NED	01/10/2020	N/A (extension)
Pharmaceutical Society NI	Patrick Murphy	01/10/2020	N/A (re-appointment)

ALB	Appointee & Position	Commencement Date	Length of Vacancy Filled
Pharmaceutical Society NI	Colleen Duffy	01/10/2020	N/A (re-appointment)
Business Services Organisation	Julie Erskine, Chair	01/12/2020	N/A (re-appointment)
Business Services Organisation	Robert Bannon, NEM	01/12/2020	N/A (re-appointment)
Business Services Organisation	Dorothy Whittington, NEM	01/12/2020	N/A (re-appointment)
Business Services Organisation	Patricia Gordon, NEM	12/12/2020	N/A (re-appointment)
Business Services Organisation	Mark Campbell, NEM	09/01/2020	N/A (re-appointment)

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health what action he is taking to (i) reduce stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS; and (ii) reduce the trauma and anxiety currently being reported by those with HIV/AIDS due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 11862/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Public Health Agency provides public information about sexual health issues, including HIV. The delivery of HIV Awareness Training in HSC Trusts contributes to addressing the stigma surrounding HIV. Each year PHA working in partnership with the Sexual Health Information Network raise awareness across Northern Ireland during World Aids Day (1st Dec) and during Northern Ireland's sexual health week (February).

My Department funds a number of voluntary organisations that raise awareness of HIV, and provide information and support services to those living with or affected by HIV.

During COVID-19 funded organisations such as Rainbow, Sail and Positive Life have seen increase demand on the support services they deliver through PHA contracts across Northern Ireland. Our providers have had to be creative not only moving their service to online as well as limited face to face sessions but also providing innovative virtual workshops and sessions to meet new demands. All our providers have insured there has been no disruption to their services and that their usual delivery and increased delivery continues on a virtual and face to face basis.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health how many people diagnosed with idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis were prescribed pirfenidone or nintedanib last year.

(AQW 11874/17-22)

Mr Swann: There were 240 people diagnosed with idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis who were prescribed pirfenidone or nintedanib from 1st January 2020 to 17th December 2020, the latest data available.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Health (i) to detail the number of Health Service nursing staff who, during 2020, (a) left the profession through retirement; and (b) left for any other reason; and (ii) to detail the number of student nurses currently undergoing training.

(AQW 11887/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) Information on the number of permanent registered nursing staff who have retired from Health and Social Care (HSC) organisations or left HSC for other reasons, between 1st January 2020 and 30th November 2020, is detailed in the table below.

HSC Trust	Reason for Leaving each HSC organisation	
	Retirement	Other *
Belfast	141	257
Northern	89	141
South Eastern	63	123
Southern	93	156
Western	73	134
Regional Organisations	3	12

Source: HSC Trust & Regional Organisations

Excludes temporary and bank staff, and staff on career break/seconded out.

- * Includes ill health retirement or termination, death in service, resignation, end of fixed term contract, or transfer to another HSC organisation.

These figures represent leavers from each HSC organisation, however they may not necessarily be leavers from the HSC entirely or their profession.

- (ii) There are currently 3,322 commissioned pre-registration nursing and midwifery students in education as of December 2020. This figure is due to peak at 4,182 students in 2022/23.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Health for an update on the availability of the pilot PrEP clinic in the (i) Northern; (ii) Southern; and (iii) South Eastern Health and Social Care Trusts; and the recommencement of the Belfast clinic
(AQW 11895/17-22)

Mr Swann: The pilot PrEP clinics became available as follows:

- Northern Health & Social Care Trust – 9th November 2020;
- Southern Health & Social Care Trust – 10th November 2020;
- South Eastern Health & Social Care Trust – 3rd November 2020; and
- The Belfast Health & Social Care Trust PrEP clinic will recommence in February 2021

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health to detail his plans for mental health services or specialisms within the review of urgent and emergency care.

(AQW 11906/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department will publish the review of urgent and emergency care early in 2021. The review includes a chapter on mental health and addiction services.

A key principle of the review is ensuring that patients receive the right care, first time.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the current rates of (i) HIV; (ii) Hepatitis B; and (iii) Hepatitis C, including the variations in the rates since January 2018.

(AQW 11909/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) The HIV surveillance report is published annually on the Public Health Agency Website: <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/directorate-public-health/health-protection/sexually-transmitted-infections>.

Release of the 2020 report describing 2019 data for Northern Ireland is imminent, and a summary of this has been reported in the recently released PHE Country HIV tables which can be accessed at <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hiv-annual-data-tables>.

During 2019, there were 52 new first diagnoses of HIV in residents of Northern Ireland. This is lower than the 80 diagnoses identified in Northern Ireland in 2018, and remains lower than the peak of 102 new diagnoses recorded in 2015.

- (ii) The Public Health Agency and Northern Ireland Regional Hepatitis B and C Managed Clinical Network also publish their annual surveillance report on the Public Health Agency website. This can be accessed at: <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications/ni-regional-hepatitis-bc-managed-clinical-network-annual-report>. The 2020 report was published in July 2020, and is reflective of 2019 data.

The report shows that Northern Ireland is currently a very low prevalence country for hepatitis B infection. The epidemiology of hepatitis B is demonstrated over a 10-year period between 2009 to 2019. In 2019, there were 115 new diagnoses of hepatitis B in Northern Ireland. This is slightly higher than 2018 when 100 cases were diagnosed, and is lower than the peak of 127 diagnosed in 2014.

- (iii) Additionally, Northern Ireland is a low prevalence country for hepatitis C infection. The epidemiology of hepatitis C is also demonstrated in the report between 2009 and 2019. The number of cases identified in 2019 was 130. Whilst this is higher than that of the previous year (93 cases), this is likely to reflect the increases in testing and diagnosis being supported by the network, with hepatitis C being mostly asymptomatic in the early stages.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the effectiveness of the Belfast Trust Drug Outreach Team services, including the impact of COVID-19 on the delivery of those services.

(AQW 11910/17-22)

Mr Swann: Belfast Health & Social Care Trust's Drug Outreach Team offers Tier 2 enhanced specialist interventions for drug users and others at high risk. The Outreach service contributes to the Community Addiction Service's management

of complex needs cases and crisis response where immediate risk issues develop. The outreach role is enhanced through casework, risk management and highly skilled and experienced practitioners delivering training, consultation and a range of outputs.

The Drug Outreach Team has continued to provide services effectively throughout the COVID-19 pandemic with the service putting measures in place to ensure the safety of clients and staff whilst adhering to government guidelines. The Drug Outreach Team continues to provide harm reduction advice and needle exchange. The service does not have a waiting list and therefore clients can access the service immediately.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health what course of action his Department will take if care homes refuse to implement the care partner programme.

(AQW 11923/17-22)

Mr Swann: The decision to permit visitors into a care home and how this is organised remains the responsibility of the care home manager. Such decisions should be based on a dynamic risk assessment, taking into account the particular circumstances of the individual care home, in order to ensure the safety of all residents and visitors.

However it remains my Department's position that care home visiting and care partners can be safely facilitated through compliance with the regional principles for visiting in care settings clearly set out in the existing guidance.

I fully understand why some care homes remain cautious about implementing the care partner concept based on their experiences to date of managing the transmission and the impact of COVID-19.

Nevertheless, there is a need for care homes to understand and appreciate the right to a family life for those living in a care home setting, and in particular to acknowledge the critical importance of sustaining relationships between residents and their family and friends, particularly at this time of year.

To help ensure the right balance is being struck by individual care homes, Health and Social Care Trusts will continue to work with them to provide the support they might require to move forward with the risk assessment process to facilitate safely managed and meaningful visiting arrangements and implementation of the care partner concept. They have also been asked to provide assurance to my Department, through the Chief Social Work Officer and Chief Nursing Officer, that Care Homes are implementing the visiting guidance appropriately. Funding continues to be available to help homes implement the approach set out in the regional guidance.

The RQIA will also assess the approach being used when undertaking inspections of care homes, and considering compliance with the relevant care standards: Care Standards for Nursing Homes 2015 and Residential Care Home Standards 2011.

Visiting policy and practice will therefore be a material consideration in the inspection and regulation of each care home.

Officials are also considering the future of the income guarantee for care homes, regardless of occupancy. Any continuation of the income guarantee is likely to be linked to the implementation of appropriate visiting arrangements.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail the timeframe for bringing forward amendments to the Regulation and Improvement Authority, including the fees and frequency of inspections.

(AQW 11961/17-22)

Mr Swann: In order to sustain the continued response to Covid-19, I have had to prioritise the work of my Department with a focus on maintaining and supporting critical business and HSC services. As a result, many departmental functions have been paused or slowed to allow staff to concentrate on key areas.

I am keen to progress the review of regulation and the further development of a risk-based, evidenced approach, including any appropriate amendments to the fees and frequency of inspections regulations, as soon as is reasonably practicable.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health when he will publish in full the CPEA report into social care.

(AQW 11962/17-22)

Mr Swann: I can confirm that the Independent Review conducted by CPEA Ltd is in its final stages and although the process has been delayed by the pandemic it is anticipated the report will be released in full during the early part of 2021.

Once we are in a position to do so the Health Committee will be provided with an advance copy of the final report prior to publication.

It is fully acknowledged that the quality of nursing and residential homes and treatment of our older people must be improved if we are to learn from the events which took place at Dunmurry Manor.

I look forward to working together with all stakeholders to ensure these changes are made in a timely and sustainable way on behalf of Northern Ireland's older people.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail the process of secondments within the health and social care system, including (i) who is eligible; (ii) average length of secondment; (iii) the relevant policy documents; and (iv) the number secondments took place within the last three years.

(AQW 11963/17-22)

Mr Swann: HSC Trusts have provided the information for this response; however, it should be noted that the NHSC and SEHSC could not respond at this time. The SEHSC highlighted the vaccine roll-out was being given precedence in the Trust, with resource being directed towards supporting the roll-out as a first priority.

- (i) HSC Trusts have advised that all Trust employees are eligible for secondments. This includes agency workers in BHSCT. The WHSCT highlighted that for Senior Executives and Medical & Dental staff, separate provisions will apply
- (ii) Secondment length varies by Trust, from a minimum of 3 months to a maximum of 3 years. Average length also varies across the region, with BHSCT reporting an average length of 8 months.
- (iii) A number of Trust-specific policy documents are in place across the region, however not all Trusts have a formal policy in place.
- (iv) The number of secondments across the Health and Social Care Trusts varies by region, for example 687 in BHSCT, 490 in SHSCT and 83 in WHSCT.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health whether there is a shortage of Transtec patches; and whether there are changes to the supply expected in 2021.

(AQW 11965/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department is unaware of any ongoing issues affecting the supply of Transtec transdermal patches nor at this stage does it anticipate any changes to the supply of Transtec patches in 2021.

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 11970/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on (i) the number of prisoners transferred to a secure Mental Health Unit, and (ii) the number transferred to a secure Mental Health Unit after being accommodated in a Care and Supervision Unit, is not available.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health how many patients and relatives the Patient and Client Council assisted with complaints in relation to Muckamore Abbey from 2015 to 2020.

(AQW 11994/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Patient Client Council opened 20 cases between 01/01/15 and 15/12/20 which involved the provision of advocacy, advice or information to patients of Muckamore Abbey Hospital and / or their carers / loved ones.

Of these 20 cases, eight escalated into a formal complaints process. One formal complaint was brought to the Ombudsman.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health to detail the total amount paid in bonuses to Directors and Chief Executives of departmental arm's-length bodies since 2015.

(AQW 11995/17-22)

Mr Swann: Details of the remuneration, including bonuses, paid to each Director and Chief Executive of the Department's Arm's Length Bodies are published annually in their respective Annual Reports and Accounts. Each may be viewed on their individual websites.

For ease, web-links to each Arm's Length Bodies Annual Reports and Accounts, from 2015/16 to 2019/20, which include details of remuneration paid to each Director and Chief Executive, are set out in the attached table below.

ALB	Web Links to DoH Arm's Length Bodies Annual Reports & Accounts - 2015/16 to 2019/20
HSCB	"Senior Employee's Remuneration" - http://www.hscboard.hscni.net/publications/annual-reports/
BSO	"Senior Management Remuneration (Audited)" – http://www.hscbusiness.hscni.net/about/CorporateInformation.htm

ALB	Web Links to DoH Arm's Length Bodies Annual Reports & Accounts - 2015/16 to 2019/20		
PHA	Page 77: -2015/16 & 2016/17 https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/sites/default/files/2018-07/PHA%20ACCOUNTS%202016-2017%20V3%20-%20Final%20to%20Publishers_0.pdf	Page 68: -2017/18 & 2018/19 https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/sites/default/files/2019-07/PHA%20ACCOUNTS%202018-2019.pdf	Page 54: -2018/19 & 2019/20 https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/sites/default/files/2020-08/PHA%20ACCOUNTS%202019-2020%20%28Complete%20for%20Laying%29.pdf
NIAS	Page 90 - 2015/16 & 2016/17 http://www.nias.hscni.net/wpfb-file/nias-annual-report-and-accounts-2016-17-pdf/	Page 66 – 16/17 & 2017/18 - http://www.nias.hscni.net/download/public/Corporate/Reports/Annual%20Reports/NIAS-Annual-Report-and-Accounts-2017-18-low.pdf	Page 85: http://www.nias.hscni.net/download/public/Corporate/Reports/Annual%20Reports/NIAS-Annual-Report-and-Accounts-for-year-ended-31-March-2020.pdf
NIFRS	"Senior Management Remuneration (Audited)" - https://www.nifrs.org/publications-subpage/publications/annual-reports/		
BHSCT	"Senior Employees' Remuneration (Audited)" - https://belfasttrust.hscni.net/about/publications/#27-annual-reports		
NHSCT	"Senior Employees' Remuneration (Audited)" - https://www.northerntrust.hscni.net/about-the-trust/corporate-information/our-finances/		
SHSCT	"Senior Employees' Remuneration (Audited)" - https://southerntrust.hscni.net/about-us/annual-reports/		
SEHSCT	"Senior Employees' Remuneration (Audited)" - https://setrust.hscni.net/?s=ANNUAL+REPORT		
WHSCT	"Senior Employees' Remuneration (Audited)" - https://westerntrust.hscni.net/?page_id=207&q=ANNUAL+REPORT+AND+ACCOUNTS		
NISCC	"Senior Employees' Remuneration (Audited)" - https://niscc.info/annual-reports/		
NIGALA	"Senior Employees' Remuneration (Audited)" - https://nigala.hscni.net/publications/annual-reports/		
PCC	At this time - Information only available from 2017/18: - https://patientclientcouncil.hscni.net/our-work/corporate-documentation/		
RQIA	"Senior Employees' Remuneration (Audited)" - https://www.rqia.org.uk/who-we-are/corporate-documents-(1)/corporate-documents/		
NIBTS	"Senior Management Remuneration (Audited)" - https://nibts.hscni.net/annual-reports/		
NIPEC	"Senior Management Remuneration (Audited)" - http://nipec.hscni.net/previousworkandpublications/corporate-publications/annualreports-2/		
NIMDTA	"Senior Management Remuneration (Audited)" - https://www.nimdtg.gov.uk/about/corporate-services/annual-reports/		

HSCB - Health & Social Care Board
BSO – Business Services Organisation
PHA – Public Health Agency
NIAS – NI Ambulance Service
NIFRS –NI Fire & Rescue Service
BHSCT – Belfast Health & Social Care Trust
NHSCT – Northern Health & Social Care Trust
SHSCT- Southern Health & Social Care Trust

SEHSCT – South Eastern Health & Social Care Trust
WHSCT – Western Health & Social Care Trust
NISCC – NI Social Care Council
NIGALA – NI Guardian Ad Litem Agency
PCC – Patient Client Council
RQIA – Regulation & Quality Improvement Authority
NIBTS – NI Blood Transfusion Service
NIPEC – NI Practice & Education Council for Nursing & Midwifery
NIMDTA – NI Medical & Dental Training Agency

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Health to detail the waiting time for a neurology consultation.
(AQW 12018/17-22)

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.

My Department publishes National Statistics on Hospital Waiting Times on a quarterly basis. The latest published position is September 2020, with the December 2020 publication due for release on 25th February 2021. These publications can be found at: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/topics/dhssps-statistics-and-research/hospital-waiting-times-statistics>

Waiting times information is available as downloadable csv files which includes data for the previous four quarters. In addition to the publication mentioned above, provisional monthly waiting times information for Outpatients, Inpatient & Day Case and Cancer are published at the following link:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/interim-waiting-times-reports>

At 30th November 2020, provisional figures indicate that 19,809 patients were waiting for a first consultant led outpatient appointment with a Neurology consultant. Table 1 to follow shows a breakdown of how long patients currently on the waiting list have been waiting to date.

These data do not indicate how long patients waited for a Neurology appointment as they are still on the waiting list, but rather presents how long they have waited to date.

Table 1: Neurology waiting times for a first consultant led outpatient appointment at 30th November 2020

Specialty	Number of weeks waiting at 30th November 2020							Total number waiting
	0-6	>6-9	>9-12	>12-15	>15-18	>18-52	>52	
Neurology	1,083	386	323	260	343	3,580	13,834	19,809

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health what research his Department has undertaken into Long Covid; and what symptoms are emerging in that research.
(AQW 12034/17-22)

Mr Swann: Research to evaluate the long-term health and psychosocial effects of Covid-19 in affected persons is ongoing. Major studies include the Post-Hospitalisation Covid-19 study which is a consortium of researchers and clinicians from across the UK working together to understand and improve long term health outcomes for patients who have been in hospital with Covid-19. Northern Ireland clinicians are actively engaged in this study.

The National Institute for Care and Health Excellence (NICE) published a rapid guideline on the management of the long-term effects of Covid-19 on 18 December 2020. The guideline defines “post-Covid-19 syndrome” for those people with Covid-19 whose symptoms have not resolved by 12 weeks. The guideline details an extensive list of commonly reported symptoms including breathlessness, coughing, chest tightness or pain, fatigue, cognitive impairment, abdominal pain and nausea.

The findings of this work will be fully considered alongside the wider body of emerging evidence and research, to inform future policy and service decisions in Northern Ireland.

This will include consideration of the nature and form of multidisciplinary assessment services that should be available for those with “post-COVID-19 syndrome” locally, acknowledging the clinic based approach recently announced for England.

Any funding allocation will depend on the overall level of resources available to the Department of Health and the needs of competing priorities.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health whether he intends to allocate resources to address the medium and longer term health implications of COVID-19 for previously infected patients.

(AQW 12035/17-22)

Mr Swann: Research to evaluate the long-term health and psychosocial effects of Covid-19 in affected persons is ongoing. Major studies include the Post-Hospitalisation Covid-19 study which is a consortium of researchers and clinicians from across the UK working together to understand and improve long term health outcomes for patients who have been in hospital with Covid-19. Northern Ireland clinicians are actively engaged in this study.

The National Institute for Care and Health Excellence (NICE) published a rapid guideline on the management of the long-term effects of Covid-19 on 18 December 2020. The guideline defines “post-Covid-19 syndrome” for those people with Covid-19 whose symptoms have not resolved by 12 weeks. The guideline details an extensive list of commonly reported symptoms including breathlessness, coughing, chest tightness or pain, fatigue, cognitive impairment, abdominal pain and nausea.

The findings of this work will be fully considered alongside the wider body of emerging evidence and research, to inform future policy and service decisions in Northern Ireland.

This will include consideration of the nature and form of multidisciplinary assessment services that should be available for those with “post-COVID-19 syndrome” locally, acknowledging the clinic based approach recently announced for England.

Any funding allocation will depend on the overall level of resources available to the Department of Health and the needs of competing priorities.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health what plans are being considered by his Department to ensure patients experiencing ongoing medium and longer term health effects of COVID-19 get the care they need.

(AQW 12036/17-22)

Mr Swann: Research to evaluate the long-term health and psychosocial effects of Covid-19 in affected persons is ongoing. Major studies include the Post-Hospitalisation Covid-19 study which is a consortium of researchers and clinicians from across the UK working together to understand and improve long term health outcomes for patients who have been in hospital with Covid-19. Northern Ireland clinicians are actively engaged in this study.

The National Institute for Care and Health Excellence (NICE) published a rapid guideline on the management of the long-term effects of Covid-19 on 18 December 2020. The guideline defines “post-Covid-19 syndrome” for those people with Covid-19 whose symptoms have not resolved by 12 weeks. The guideline details an extensive list of commonly reported symptoms including breathlessness, coughing, chest tightness or pain, fatigue, cognitive impairment, abdominal pain and nausea.

The findings of this work will be fully considered alongside the wider body of emerging evidence and research, to inform future policy and service decisions in Northern Ireland.

This will include consideration of the nature and form of multidisciplinary assessment services that should be available for those with “post-COVID-19 syndrome” locally, acknowledging the clinic based approach recently announced for England.

Any funding allocation will depend on the overall level of resources available to the Department of Health and the needs of competing priorities.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister of Health what (i) medical; and (ii) scientific evidence is available to indicate that the socially distanced sport of golf is a significant element for the spread of COVID-19 in the community.

(AQW 12049/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Executive, when making decisions on restrictions, takes into account the scientific and medical evidence and also the impacts of the restrictions on the economy and society, including education. The Executive weighs up the totality of the effect each restriction can have in combination with other restrictions in reducing the rate of infections of COVID-19. It is not always possible to disaggregate the precise impact on the rate of transmission of the virus in the community for each of the individual restrictions on their own.

In light of the high rate of spread of the virus which causes COVID-19, and the pressure this is placing on vital health and social care services, the Executive has been considering a wide range of activities which could impact on the rate of transmission of the virus. During the course of the pandemic the Executive has made decisions that certain businesses and activities would have restrictions placed on them to help to suppress the transmission of the virus within the population. These combinations of restrictions reduce the pressure on our health services, protect the elderly and the vulnerable and allow other essential services to be maintained during the current pandemic.

The Executive maintains an ongoing process of review of the coronavirus restrictions regulations, which considers both the current level of the pandemic and the impact the restrictions have on the economy and society, and it is the Executive’s clear intention not to retain restrictions for any longer than is absolutely necessary.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health whether he is aware of any staff employed by (i) his Department; or (ii) the Southern Health and Social Care Trust who are currently members of the Armagh county camogie team.

(AQW 12064/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am not aware whether any staff employed by the Department, nor the Southern Health and Social Care Trust, are current members of the Armagh county camogie team.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health what plans he has to reduce waiting lists of up to 248 weeks for some elderly patients awaiting orthopaedic surgery in Derry.

(AQW 12114/17-22)

Mr Swann: The pandemic has had a severe impact on waiting times which were already unacceptable at the time that I was appointed Health Minister. The redeployment of staff to increase capacity to respond to unscheduled care pressures has meant that available elective care capacity has had to be prioritised according to the clinical needs of patients.

I have established an Elective Care Cell with the twin aim to consider continuation of elective care through the surge period as far as possible given the prevailing COVID-19 conditions; and to develop a plan coming out of the surge period to stand up elective care as quickly as possible.

This work will encompass all surgical specialities. However, in view of the significant impact on orthopaedic services, I have specifically approved the creation of a clinically led Regional Orthopaedic Network which is working to rebuild and transform elective orthopaedic services across Health and Social Care Trusts, and to explore options to sustain elective activity where possible during this surge period. As one of its key underpinning principles, the Network will focus on the creation of a regional orthopaedic service with equity of access for all patients in Northern Ireland.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of nurses currently in training; and whether this number meets the identified needs of the health service.

(AQW 12169/17-22)

Mr Swann: There are currently 3,322 commissioned pre-registration nursing and midwifery students in training in Northern Ireland as of December 2020. The training places commissioned by my department reflect identified long term workforce needs across the HSC and the available financial resources.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health how the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, Quality Standard 189 on suicide prevention is achieved within Health and Social Care.

(AQW 12192/17-22)

Mr Swann: The quality statements in NICE quality standard 189 on suicide prevention have been addressed in Northern Ireland by way of specific actions in the Protect Life 2 Strategy for Preventing Suicide and Self harm in Northern Ireland 2019-2024.

Protect Life 2 is the overarching strategy to prevent suicide and Self harm in Northern Ireland from 2019 to 2024. It sets out the priorities and defines the key actions for reducing the prevalence of suicide and self-harm over the next 5 years. The strategy's twin aims are to reduce the suicide rates in Northern Ireland by 10% by 2024 and to ensure suicide prevention services and support are delivered appropriately in deprived areas where suicide and self-harm rates are highest.

There are 10 key actions included in the action plan aimed at reducing incidences of suicide and self-harm. These include cross government collaboration, improving awareness of suicide, enhancing responsible media reporting, enhancing community capacity, safer mental health services, restricting access to means, enhancing initial response, care and recovery of people who are suicidal, enhancing services for people who self-harm, support for those bereaved or exposed to suicidal behaviour and strengthening local evidence on suicide and effective interventions.

The Regional Protect Life 2 Steering Group has a strategic overview of the implementation of the Protect Life 2 Strategy in Northern Ireland. It oversees needs, priorities and actions within the Strategy and includes over 40 members from key agencies and sectors with responsibility for, and experience of, addressing suicide prevention issues and mental health/emotional wellbeing in Northern Ireland. The Steering group is chaired by the Chief Medical Officer.

The Executive Working Group on Emotional Wellbeing, Resilience and Suicide Prevention was established in January 2020 to coordinate and strengthen the approach to dealing with mental health issues and suicide prevention and affords all Ministers the opportunity to provide updates on their progress against the Protect Life 2 action plan.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health when the review into crisis services will be published.

(AQW 12193/17-22)

Mr Swann: As stated in AQW 9974/17-22 I expect this review to be published in April 2021.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health what monitoring is conducted for any side effects from the Pfizer BioNTech Coronavirus Vaccine in residents of care and nursing homes.

(AQW 12231/17-22)

Mr Swann: Health professionals are asked to report any suspected adverse reactions directly to the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) via the Yellow Card scheme. MHRA will consider all the information received and decide if the vaccine requires further investigation.

In addition to this health professional will also report any suspected adverse reactions via the Trusts' clinical incident reporting system. These reports are shared with Departmental officials who will continue to monitor the situation.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Health to detail the recorded prevalence of severe mental illness in each of the last five years, including 2020 to date, broken down by (i) age; (ii) sex; and (iii) deprivation.

(AQW 12241/17-22)

Mr Swann: This information is not available as requested. However, mental health is one of the disease registers in the Quality and Outcomes Framework (QOF), the purpose of which is to reward General Medical Services contractors for the provision of quality care. The register contains the number of people diagnosed with schizophrenia, bipolar affective disorder, and other psychoses, and other patients on lithium therapy.

QOF data is not available broken down by age, sex or deprivation.

The prevalence of mental health per 1,000 patients, in each of the last 5 years, is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Prevalence of mental health per 1,000 patients, in each of the last 5 years

Year	Prevalence of Mental Health per 1,000 Patients
2015/16	8.77
2016/17	8.91
2017/18	9.06
2018/19	9.16
2019/20	9.25

Source: Payment Calculation and Analysis System

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Health to detail the overall average bed capacity for each hospital in each of the last five years, including 2020 to date.

(AQW 12245/17-22)

Mr Swann: The average bed capacity in each hospital for the past five years is tabulated overleaf.

Hospital bed occupancy data can also be found on the COVID-19 Daily Dashboard at the following link: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/covid-19-daily-dashboard-updates> .

However the Daily Dashboard figures are produced using different methodology and are not comparable to the figure provided in this response.

Average bed availability in HSC Hospitals in Northern Ireland, 2016-2020¹

Year	Hospital	Average Occupied Beds	Average Available Beds	Occupancy
2016	Royal Victoria	597.9	686.6	87.1%
	Royal Maternity	98.0	110.0	89.1%
	RBHSC	74.6	94.1	79.2%
	Mater Infirmorum	213.1	230.4	92.5%
	Muckamore Abbey	110.6	117.4	94.2%
	Lagan Valley	81.8	93.1	87.9%
	Lagan Valley PNU	33.7	36.0	93.6%
	Thompson House	27.7	36.0	77.0%
	Downshire	63.5	71.2	89.3%
	Downe	39.9	42.4	94.2%
	Belfast City	299.9	422.3	71.0%
	Robinson Memorial	19.8	21.0	94.2%
	Dalriada	21.9	32.0	68.5%
	Causeway Hospital	183.5	238.1	77.1%

Year	Hospital	Average Occupied Beds	Average Available Beds	Occupancy
	Holywell	121.3	120.7	100.5%
	Moyle	14.2	16.4	86.6%
	Whiteabbey	41.6	42.8	97.4%
	Mid Ulster	20.0	22.0	91.0%
	Antrim	424.3	516.9	82.1%
	Musgrave Park	189.4	256.3	73.9%
	Cancer Centre	61.6	67.4	91.3%
	St Lukes	19.4	24.0	81.0%
	South Tyrone	31.5	36.0	87.6%
	Lurgan	46.5	51.0	91.1%
	Craigavon Area	407.6	484.9	84.1%
	Daisy Hill	174.9	215.0	81.4%
	Craigavon Area PNU	87.6	94.0	93.2%
	Altnagelvin Area	391.8	480.8	81.5%
	Waterside (Ward 1-4)	62.3	62.6	99.4%
	Gransha	23.9	39.0	61.2%
	Lakeview	8.1	8.7	92.8%
	Tyrone County	29.9	35.9	83.3%
	South West Acute	199.7	225.6	88.5%
	Tyrone & Fermanagh	48.6	61.5	79.0%
	Knockbracken Healthcare Park	105.8	118.0	89.6%
	Young Peoples Centre	24.3	31.0	78.3%
	Ards	18.3	20.0	91.3%
	Ulster	531.2	619.9	85.7%
	Ulster MHU	24.9	24.0	103.9%
2017	Royal Victoria	579.2	677.1	85.5%
	Royal Maternity	85.4	106.8	80.0%
	RBHSC	76.8	94.3	81.5%
	Mater Infirmorum	206.4	237.1	87.0%
	Muckamore Abbey	103.3	105.8	97.6%
	Lagan Valley	81.8	93.1	87.9%
	Lagan Valley PNU	30.9	36.0	85.7%
	Thompson House	25.3	36.0	70.3%
	Downshire	62.1	72.0	86.3%
	Downe	41.1	43.4	94.7%
	Belfast City	305.3	411.9	74.1%
	Robinson Memorial	20.3	21.4	94.9%
	Dalriada	22.5	32.0	70.2%
	Causeway Hospital	184.8	240.6	76.8%
	Holywell	111.6	115.8	96.4%

Year	Hospital	Average Occupied Beds	Average Available Beds	Occupancy
	Moyle	15.5	16.7	92.7%
	Whiteabbey	42.0	44.2	94.9%
	Mid Ulster	20.4	22.1	92.6%
	Antrim	434.9	524.5	82.9%
	Musgrave Park	169.7	239.2	71.0%
	Cancer Centre	57.8	66.6	86.7%
	St Lukes	19.0	24.0	79.3%
	South Tyrone	32.2	36.0	89.3%
	Lurgan	48.3	51.0	94.6%
	Craigavon Area	408.2	492.1	82.9%
	Daisy Hill	176.0	215.3	81.7%
	Craigavon Area PNU	89.5	94.0	95.2%
	Altnagelvin Area	380.4	476.8	79.8%
	Waterside (Ward 1-4)	64.4	64.9	99.2%
	Gransha	20.6	30.0	68.7%
	Lakeview	7.5	10.0	75.2%
	Tyrone County	15.4	20.0	77.3%
	South West Acute	193.9	223.5	86.7%
	Omagh Hospital & Primary Care Complex	14.9	20.3	73.7%
	Tyrone & Fermanagh	52.9	66.0	80.1%
	Knockbracken Healthcare Park	103.3	118.0	87.5%
	Young Peoples Centre	26.5	31.0	85.5%
Ards	18.8	20.0	94.0%	
Ulster	532.2	639.0	83.3%	
Ulster MHU	24.4	24.0	101.6%	
2018	Royal Victoria	588.5	669.6	87.9%
	Royal Maternity	85.8	109.5	78.4%
	RBHSC	76.8	96.5	79.7%
	Mater Infirmorum	202.0	250.1	80.8%
	Muckamore Abbey	90.6	93.6	96.8%
	Lagan Valley	76.7	90.2	85.0%
	Lagan Valley PNU	32.3	36.0	89.7%
	Thompson House	24.9	36.0	69.2%
	Downshire	65.0	72.0	90.3%
	Downe	40.7	43.2	94.2%
	Belfast City	295.8	384.4	77.0%
	Robinson Memorial	19.0	21.0	90.5%
	Dalriada	22.6	32.0	70.5%
	Causeway Hospital	187.3	240.3	78.0%

Year	Hospital	Average Occupied Beds	Average Available Beds	Occupancy
	Holywell	114.9	116.8	98.4%
	Moyle	16.0	17.9	89.3%
	Whiteabbey	41.6	44.0	94.5%
	Mid Ulster	20.0	22.4	89.3%
	Antrim	429.6	528.5	81.3%
	Musgrave Park	171.1	263.7	64.9%
	Cancer Centre	58.1	61.6	94.3%
	St Lukes	18.8	24.0	78.2%
	South Tyrone	34.3	36.0	95.1%
	Lurgan	48.4	53.0	91.3%
	Craigavon Area	410.7	478.0	85.9%
	Daisy Hill	173.7	216.9	80.1%
	Craigavon Area PNU	91.8	94.0	97.7%
	Altnagelvin Area	374.7	464.8	80.6%
	Waterside (Ward 1-4)	63.7	65.4	97.4%
	Gransha	23.5	30.0	78.5%
	Lakeview	6.6	10.0	66.3%
	South West Acute	198.4	226.2	87.7%
	Omagh Hospital & Primary Care Complex	33.9	40.8	83.0%
	Tyrone & Fermanagh	51.1	65.0	78.6%
	Knockbracken Healthcare Park	99.7	118.0	84.5%
	Young Peoples Centre	24.4	31.0	78.6%
	Ards	18.8	20.0	93.9%
	Ulster	546.4	627.9	87.0%
	Ulster MHU	25.5	24.0	106.1%
2019	Royal Victoria	593.8	673.7	88.1%
	Royal Maternity	80.9	107.4	75.3%
	RBHSC	75.6	96.0	78.8%
	Mater Infirmorum	175.1	206.8	84.7%
	Muckamore Abbey	69.6	72.4	96.2%
	Lagan Valley	77.6	90.0	86.2%
	Lagan Valley PNU	33.0	36.0	91.6%
	Thompson House	23.8	36.0	66.2%
	Downshire	65.5	72.0	91.0%
	Downe	40.0	43.3	92.5%
	Belfast City	285.8	365.0	78.3%
	Acute Mental Health Inpatient Centre	43.0	41.7	103.0%
	Robinson Memorial	18.7	21.0	89.3%

Year	Hospital	Average Occupied Beds	Average Available Beds	Occupancy
	Dalriada	21.9	32.0	68.4%
	Causeway Hospital	186.4	229.9	81.1%
	Holywell	114.4	117.0	97.7%
	Moyle	13.6	16.7	81.9%
	Whiteabbey	40.3	44.0	91.6%
	Mid Ulster	18.4	22.0	83.8%
	Antrim	434.2	543.8	79.9%
	Musgrave Park	166.6	250.0	66.6%
	Cancer Centre	58.3	60.6	96.2%
	St Lukes	16.4	19.1	86.1%
	South Tyrone	33.6	36.0	93.3%
	Lurgan	48.2	53.0	90.9%
	Craigavon Area	424.7	493.7	86.0%
	Daisy Hill	183.5	220.4	83.3%
	Craigavon Area PNU	91.5	94.0	97.3%
	Altnagelvin Area	386.3	472.1	81.8%
	Waterside (Ward 1-4)	62.4	65.0	96.0%
	Gransha	24.1	29.9	80.7%
	Lakeview	8.5	10.0	85.3%
	South West Acute	198.1	225.7	87.8%
	Omagh Hospital & Primary Care Complex	35.2	41.2	85.5%
	Tyrone & Fermanagh	41.7	61.3	68.0%
	Knockbracken Healthcare Park	81.0	100.8	80.4%
	Young Peoples Centre	20.0	31.0	64.5%
	Ards	16.4	19.0	86.4%
	Ulster	549.8	626.5	87.8%
	Ulster MHU	25.3	24.0	105.5%
2020 ^P	Royal Victoria	527.2	664.4	79.4%
	Royal Maternity	72.0	108.7	66.3%
	RBHSC	65.8	97.1	67.8%
	Mater Infirmorum	109.0	209.7	52.0%
	Muckamore Abbey	57.7	58.3	98.8%
	Lagan Valley	64.6	83.3	77.5%
	Lagan Valley PNU	34.2	37.0	92.4%
	Thompson House	19.7	36.0	54.6%
	Downshire	60.7	70.9	85.6%
	Downe	33.6	42.6	79.0%
	Belfast City	146.4	329.1	44.5%

Year	Hospital	Average Occupied Beds	Average Available Beds	Occupancy
	Acute Mental Health Inpatient Centre	86.4	80.0	108.0%
	Robinson Memorial	9.4	16.2	58.1%
	Dalriada	16.5	25.0	66.0%
	Causeway Hospital	164.8	205.8	80.1%
	Holywell	101.0	109.3	92.4%
	Moyle	12.0	16.8	71.3%
	Whiteabbey	27.9	38.5	72.4%
	Mid Ulster	13.3	42.3	31.5%
	Antrim	390.4	534.0	73.1%
	Musgrave Park	118.8	250.7	47.4%
	Cancer Centre	44.8	52.4	85.4%
	St Lukes	17.1	18.1	94.1%
	South Tyrone	22.6	28.8	78.5%
	Lurgan	37.9	50.7	74.6%
	Craigavon Area	358.0	506.3	70.7%
	Daisy Hill	144.1	212.3	67.9%
	Craigavon Area PNU	86.3	93.7	92.1%
	Altnagelvin Area	322.4	452.5	71.2%
	Waterside (Ward 5)	17.0	24.2	70.3%
	Waterside (Ward 1-4)	55.9	67.5	82.8%
	Gransha	25.0	28.7	87.4%
	Lakeview	8.6	10.0	85.7%
	South West Acute	168.9	214.2	78.9%
	Omagh Hospital & Primary Care Complex	27.4	40.9	67.1%
	Tyrone & Fermanagh	40.7	55.3	73.5%
	Knockbracken Healthcare Park	62.2	78.6	79.1%
	Young Peoples Centre	18.9	29.0	65.2%
	Ards	15.8	17.9	88.1%
	Ulster	469.6	577.0	81.4%
	Ulster MHU	25.0	24.0	104.3%

Source: KH03A return

1 Data for 2020 covers the time period 1 January 2020 - 30 September 2020

P Data is provisional and is subject to change.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, in relation to COVID-19 Regional Principles for Visiting in Care, (i) whether there is flexibility for an elderly resident to have their son and daughter visit separately on different weeks; and (ii) can the nomination be rotated between people on a monthly basis.

(AQW 12272/17-22)

Mr Swann: The regional principles are 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” which states, in respect of indoor visitation to residents, that:

“One person for one hour once weekly will be permitted where this can be accommodated within social distancing.”

The guidance does not specify that only one visitor should be nominated per resident. There is therefore flexibility for a resident to be visited by different visitors on different weeks. Where residents have agreed a nominated visitor, this can be discussed with the care home manager in terms of rotation between loved ones.

It is important to note that for the safety of visitors, residents and staff, the Care Home Manager is still responsible for making decisions regarding permitting visitors into their specific home on a day to day basis. This decision will be based on a risk assessment of the environment and rely on the ability to ensure social distancing and safety of residents, staff and the visitor.

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister of Health when AQW 11134/17-22 will be answered.
(AQW 12300/17-22)

Mr Swann: During the period 27 November to 10 December 2020 the Covid-19 regulations determined that non-essential business and services must close, however they were permitted to operate a ‘click and collect’ service without customers having to enter a closed premises.

As dog groomers were included in the non-essential category at that time their premises were to remain closed to the public. However they were permitted to operate a ‘click and collect’ service on an appointment basis to ensure that social distancing could be maintained.

The Executive have announced that dog groomers have now been added to the essential retailers list and can continue to operate during the next period of restrictions from 26 December 2020.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail the staff complement for the Health and Social Care Board, since 2015, broken down by (i) pay band; and (ii) full-time working equivalent.

(AQW 12311/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the whole-time equivalent (WTE) of staff employed in the Health and Social Care (HSC) Board at 30 September each year since 2015, broken down by Agenda for Change (AfC) pay band, is detailed in the table below.

Staff Employed (WTE) in HSC Board, by AfC Pay Band

AfC Pay Band	Staff Employed at 30 September					
	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Pay band 2	6.2	5.2	4.6	3.6	3.6	3.6
Pay band 3	39.6	33.7	31.1	31.8	28.2	25.9
Pay band 4	71.3	57.8	46.0	41.2	49.0	52.8
Pay band 5	41.4	36.4	39.5	35.5	29.5	32.6
Pay band 6	78.2	68.9	71.7	69.8	69.9	68.8
Pay band 7	72.9	73.1	63.2	59.1	59.1	66.0
Pay band 8A	88.8	72.3	66.1	63.9	66.1	71.5
Pay band 8B	69.8	61.9	60.9	59.9	66.6	66.7
Pay band 8C	19.1	20.0	19.0	19.3	23.4	21.2
Pay band 8D	19.0	16.0	15.0	17.0	17.0	14.0
Non-AfC Grades	32.5	34.3	32.1	32.2	34.5	28.8
Total	538.9	479.5	449.3	433.3	447.0	451.9

Source: Human Resources, Payroll, Travel & Subsistence (HRPTS) system

Department for Infrastructure

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure, as transport is a devolved power, what vires she possesses to facilitate all-island mutual recognition of driver licenses and qualifications.

(AQW 11537/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): Whilst Transport is operationally devolved to my Department, legislation on driving licences and qualifications is based on European Directives with transposition done at the Member State level, and if operational differences are required, minor accommodations subsequently made in NI legislation. The current EU exit legislation will continue to recognise licences and qualifications issued in the South after the transition period, however, the

EU position is that NI specialist licences, i.e. Passenger and Goods Vehicle licences will not be recognised for employment purposes in the South. EU arrangements form part of the wider market access negotiations and whilst my officials at every available opportunity continue to stress the unique circumstances on the island of Ireland, these negotiations are being conducted by the British Government. Future recognition of licences and qualifications is likely to be based on the principle of reciprocity and is in the hands of the Irish Government and the EU.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given the North West is the only region of Ireland without a rail network, whether she has given any consideration to the re-establishment of the North West rail link.

(AQW 11595/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Improving rail services to the North West is a key priority for my Department, and I have already taken a number of important steps to achieve this. Last month, I was delighted to be in Derry to open the new £27m North West Transport Hub. I have also committed to carrying out 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 commissioned a separate study to explore the options of new halts and associated park-and-ride facilities at Strathfoyle, Eglinton/City of Derry Airport and Ballykelly. This new study will also examine the possibility of introducing half-hourly services on the Derry to Belfast line.

In addition, Minister for Transport, Eamon Ryan T.D and I agreed at the North South Ministerial Council (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. I also continue to raise the importance of, and the many opportunities and benefits to be derived from improved rail connectivity across the island, including at North South Ministerial Council meetings.

My Department is also currently developing proposals for a new Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTNTP) which will set out the priorities for future development of the main road and rail networks up to 2035. The draft RSTNTP will be published for public consultation, providing the opportunity for representations to be made for projects, including re-establishing rail connections across the North West.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the funding that is required for the complete replacement of the Translink bus fleet with zero-emission vehicles.[R]

(AQW 11669/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The capital cost to replace Translink's existing bus fleet with zero emission vehicles is estimated to be in the region of £800m based on current market vehicle costs, likely technology developments and the costs associated with required depot infrastructure.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the number of and (ii) proportion of registered taxi drivers who have (a) applied for and (b) been approved to date for payment from the Taxi Drivers Financial Assistance Scheme 2020.

(AQW 11778/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Taxi Driver Financial Assistance Scheme closed on 27 November and as of today, 3,500 payments, that is some 76% of valid applications received, have been issued to eligible taxi drivers.

Approximately 4,500 valid applications have been received from NI taxi-drivers and staff in my Department are continuing to work at pace to process all applications to enable payments to be made to those who are eligible. There are however some applications where the Department has had to request further information from applicants and these applications have therefore not been processed for payment yet. Work is ongoing to resolve these cases. All applications which have met the eligibility criteria and have the correct documentation attached will be processed as quickly as possible.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure what is the potential cost of the proposed Craigantlet junction scheme.

(AQW 11836/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The approximate cost of the preferred scheme at Craigantlet junction is estimated to be in the region of £2.5m to £3.5m. As previously advised there are no plans to develop the project further at this time and any estimate would be refined when proposals eventually progress through the detailed design stage.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) whether her Department still owns land in areas where railway lines used to run; and (ii) to specify those lands.

(AQW 11842/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department holds the title to numerous portions of land in areas where railway lines used to run. As the information about this is not held in a database I am unable to specify these as requested, however, if the Member could identify a particular area of interest I could arrange for a search of the title documentation to be carried out by the Department.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether the Comber Greenway can be added to the winter gritting schedule.

(AQW 11870/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As previously advised the Comber Greenway currently does not meet the criteria for inclusion in the salted network. Whilst I would like to be able to expand our gritting service to the Greenway and many other routes, unfortunately it is simply not practicable to do so at present, due to the severe budget constraints and many other pressures faced by my Department.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 7552/17-22, whether a link between Connswater Greenway and Comber Greenway will be included in the A55 Knock Road widening scheme.
(AQW 11883/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Further to my response to AQW 7552/17-22 on 5 October 2020 regarding the A55 Knock Road widening scheme, I can confirm that the scheme proposal includes provision of cycling facilities along both sides of the carriageway. At present only pedestrian footways exist along both sides. The scheme would therefore provide a cycle link between the Connswater and Comber Greenways, which are used by both pedestrians and cyclists.

As I advised in my previous reply, I am committed to developing new integrated plans which deliver support for public transport, encourage more walking and cycling, better manage car commuting and promote sustainable development - all in an effort to improve the environment and people's lives. The A55 Knock Road scheme will therefore be considered in the new Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMTP), which will be subject to full public consultation.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given the concerns NI Water have raised in relation to capacity in the area, for her assessment of the investment needed in waste water in the Carryduff area.
(AQW 11896/17-22)

Ms Mallon: An £11.8 million upgrade is proposed for the Newtownbreda sewer network, which includes the Carryduff area, in NI Water's next price control period PC21 (2021 to 2027). This proposed investment will help to address the environmental impact of sewer spills and improve the overall performance of the sewerage network, in the Newtownbreda sewer catchment.

In terms of progress on this, NI Water has identified high level solutions for the sewer network with more detailed design work required in PC21. The impact of these works on the Newtownbreda wastewater treatment works will need to be assessed by NI Water during PC21. Once this work has been completed and the improvements delivered, NI Water can then plan to facilitate future growth in the Carryduff area, knowing the sewerage network is more likely to be capable of supporting new connections and performing to the required standards.

However, this proposed investment is subject to the adequate funding of NI Water and its PC21 investment programme, by the NI Executive.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the efforts her Department is making to increase the safety of storm drains.
(AQW 11918/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department maintains an extensive network of storm drains and culverted designated watercourses to ensure the effective management of flood risk.

While it is not possible to eliminate risk completely, new designated culverts, for which the Department is responsible, are constructed using national guidelines, which have recently been updated. My Department is also commissioning a study of key elements of the Department's existing designated culvert network to determine if additional works are needed to comply with the most recent guidance.

NI Water's infrastructure is also designed in line with the appropriate guidelines. If it considers that there is significant risk at any location it will install the necessary security infrastructure to prevent unintended access into its systems.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the support her Department has received due to COVID-19 pressures.
(AQW 11919/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The table below details the financial support received in my Department due to Covid 19 in 2020-21.

Description	Resource Funding Received £m
Lost Revenue:	
Translink	90.0
DVA	19.5
Rathlin Ferry	0.6
Strangford Ferry	0.4
Roads – Parking charges and Penalty Charge Notices	5.7

Description	Resource Funding Received £m
Crumlin Road Gaol	0.1
Planning Applications	0.1
Other:	
NI Water lost income and increased costs	32.5
Bus/ Taxi Support	19.0
City of Derry & Belfast City Airports	4.4
Lost fees/ costs taxi regulation	1.4
Total	173.7

Mr Buckley asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the locations of all salt bins across Upper Bann.
(AQW 11934/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Details of street names where salt bins are located across are listed on the attached tables:

Banbridge

Arderys Lane	Areema Heights	Ashley Gardens	Ballvally Heights
Ballydown Meadows	Ballygowan Park	Bannview Heights	Bishops Green
Bodell Place	Bramblewood Drive	Bramblewood Manor	Breezeways
Bridgeways	Bridgeways/Ballyvally Heights	Brookdale	Brookfield Avenue
Brookfield Meadow	Brookfield Park	Burn Brae	Castle Lodge
Cherrywood Court	Chinauley Park	Churchview Drive	Cline Road
Daisy Hill Court	Downshire Gardens	Dunbar Road	Edenderry Park
Forthill Avenue	Forthill Green	Foxleigh Fields	Gowan Meadows
Gowanvale Drive	Granville Gardens	Grovehill	Hawthorn Hill
Highfield Gardens	Hillhead Park	Hillhead Drive	Hillside Park
Huntly Bungalows	Iveagh Close	Iveagh Drive	Iveagh Park
Kenlis Place	Kensington Avenue	Kiln Lane	Kiloanin Crescent
Knollwood	Konver Heights	Larchwood Avenue	Larchwood Crescent
Larchwood Mews	Laurel Heights	Legion Court	Lisnaree Road
Maryville Park	Meadowbank, Seapatrick	Milfort Green	Moorfield
Mornington	Mount Charles	Mountview Drive	Mountview Park
Oakdale	Oakridge	Old Forge	Old Manse Green
Pinley Green	Pinley Meadow	Pinley Park	Rathfriland Road Park & Share
Primrose Gardens	Rathview	Reilly Park	Richmond Heights
Rockmore	Rockview Close	Seapatrick Road	Springfields
Summerhill	Summerhill Brae	The Rowans	Thorn Heights
Thorndale	Thornhill	Thornwood	Tudor Oaks
Victoria Gardens	Weavers Green	Weavers Meadow	Whyte Acres
Willow Drive	Willow Grove	Windyridge	Wyncroft Heights
Wyncroft Way			

Dromore

Meganlis Park	Millturn View	Mountview Drive	Mourne Grange
Mourne View (as Gallows Place)	Off Mount Street	Otterwood (off Circular Rd)	Parkhill
Parkside	Primrose Hill	Primrose Way	Quillyburn Manor
Rowantree Glen	Spout Lane	Sunmount Park	The Priory Dromore
The Spires Dromore	Thornhill Drive	Wallace Park	Weirs Row

Rathfriland

Back Road	Bernagh View	Castle Court	Castle Street
Cross Heights	Fox Ridge	Frazer Park Annaclone	Iveagh Crescent
Lissize Avenue	Lissize Park	Manor Heights	Mourne View
School Road	Sleepy Valley	Spelga Drive	Stewarts Crescent
The Villas Corbet			

Lurgan

Parknasilla Way	St Patricks Avenue	Belvedere Manor	Ballymacbredan Road
Springhill Manor	Bowens Lane	Bowens Manor	Windsor Hill
Millfort Park	Cambrai Drive	Oak Grange	Banbridge Road, Waringstown
Murrywood	Mossview	Primary Walk	Cambrai Drive
Galbraith Gardens	Silverwood leaves	Chestnut Grove	The Grange
Annsborough Pk	Bullays Hill (Annsborough rd)	Hoophill Park	Ashgrove Drive
Ashford Grange	Soye Crescent	Portland Manor	Forest Glade
Albert Avenue	Garland Avenue	Garland Heights	Derry Park Lane
Woodville Avenue	Villiers Avenue	River Glade Manor	Gilpenstown Road
Hillcrest (Gilpenstown road)	Taghnevan Close	Ailsbury Park	Downshire Avenue
Wood Lane	Glenwood Close	The Willows	Mourne Road
Pollock Mews	Glenwood Park	Watsons Lane	Robert Street
Birchdale	Monroe Avenue	Oakleigh heights (North Street)	Thornleigh (Thomas Street)
Sandhill Park	Connaght Park (Upper Toberhewny Lane)	Shane Park	Clanconnel Gds.
Lisnasure Road	William Street, Donaghcloney	Donaghcloney Rd	The Poplars
Lagan View Manor	Lagan Lodge	Winona Crest	Monree Road
Baird Avenue	Gamblestown Park	Elmhurst	Newforge Road
Glencroft, Magheralin	Taughrane Lodge	Springfort Lodge	Kensington Manor
Broomhill Heights	Monree Road		

Portadown

Mullenakill Park	Ashbrook	Timakeel Close	Kernan Hill Manor
Marlborough House	Carnreagh	Lakelands	Canvy Manor
Kensington Park	Beaufort Manor	Bocombra Ave	Bocombra Hill
Calvertstown Manor	Markville	Mahon Ind Est	Brook Street

Bramblewood Dr	Swallowfield	Parkmore	Bluestone Hall
Grantham Park	West Street	Ashfield Manor	Corcraín Drive
Hartfield Ave	Drumilly Green	Baltylum Meadow	Ashley Heights
Ballyoran Manor	Ballyoran Park	Ballyhannon Road	Lynden Gate
Ballyhannon Grove	Ballyhannon Lane	Larchwood	Killycomaine Drive
Ulsterville Park	Levaghery Gardens	Brownstown Park	Drumard Avenue Rbt
Tullyroan Drive	Moeran Park	Hobson Park	Deramore Drive
Glanroy Avenue	Brownstown Road	The Willows	Kernan Gds
Seagoe Drive	Upper Ramone PK	Ramone PK	Meadowbrook
Drumbeg	Pinebank		

Lawrencetown

Drumnascamph Road	Hillside Crescent	Locard Park	Rosehill
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Gilford

Hunters Hill	Hill Street	Copperfields	Stramore Park
Pineview Court	Castle Meadows	Woodlands	Brookfield Manor / Close
Hunters Hill Park	Chestnutt Brae		

Scarva/Loughbrickland

Glenloughan Park	Donard View Road	Greenan Court	Greenan Drive
Maple Drive	Rathfriland Street	Canal Court	Oaklands
Woodside Park	Scarva Locks	Bovenett Heights	Scarvagh Heights, Scarva

Blackscull

Ballygunaghan Place	Cloverdale		
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Kinallen

Skeagh Road Kinallen	Tullynisky Road Kinallen	Hawthorn Hill Kinallen	Whitethorn Lane
Whitethorn Brae	Warringsford Loop Road, Warringsford		

Armagh

George's Street	Gough Avenue	Ballynahone Crescent	Ballynahone
Ballynahone Avenue	Woodford Drive	Orangefield Cres.	Orangefield Park
Ballinahone Avenue	Woodford Park	Ardmore Drive	Edenvale
Ardmore Close	Mall West Car Park	Charlemont Gardens	Victoria Park
Rosemount Park	Folly Park	Ashley Heights	Ashley Gardens
Ashley Avenue	Dillon Heights	Kiluney Road	Linseys Hill
Kiluney Manor	Kiluney Crescent	Mullyloughran Lane	Mullyloughran Heights
Mullinure Lane	Alexander Gnds	Lisannally Gardens	Lisannally Villas
Knockamell Park	Slip Road from Station Road to Alexander Park	Drumsill Park	Mullinure Park
Sperrin Park	Drumman Hill	Mellifont Close	Drummanamore Grange
Drumman Heights	Drumbreda Walk	St. Brigid's Hill	Drumbreda Avenue
Abbey Park	Banbrook Hill	Dukes Grove	The Hermitage

Chapel Lane	Culdee Street	Windmill Avenue	Desart Lane
Mullacreevie	Callan Bridge Park	Old Navan Fort Road	St. Patrick's Park
Ard R1 Park	Ard R1 Gardens	Umgola Heights	Umgola Mews
Greenpark Manor	Tullymore Downs	Cathedral Close	Montague Street, T'gee
Umgola Manor	Avonmore	Church View	Milltown Road, Tandragee
Shanmulla, Blackwatertown	Avonmore, Blactwatertwon	Eglsh Road, Annaghmore	Rectory Close, Loughgall
Annahugh Road	Orchard Road, Loughgall	Annahugh Park	Kilmore Park, Kilmore
Legacorry Park, Richhill	Deans Walk, Richhill	Angela Crescent, Richhill	Bannmore, Richhill
Castle Gardens, Richhill	Orchard Hill, Richhill	Blenheim Court, Richhill	Brentwood Park, Richhill
Sleepy Valley Court, Richhill	Blenheim Drive, Richhill	Pinewood Drive, Richhill	Maynooth Manor, R'hill
Brompton Park, Richhill	Broomhill, Richhill	At nursing home Hamiltonsbawn	Hamiltonsbawn 40m from A51
Breezemount, H'bawn	Hillside Avenue, H'bawn	Johnstown Mews, H'bawn	Laurel Park, Laurelvale
Laurel Drive, Laurelvale	Mullavilly Green	Rose Garden, Mullavilly	Laurel Heights, L'vale
Mourneview Park, T'gee	Willowfield Heights, T'gee	Knockview Drive, T'gee	Castle Mews, Tandragee
Sinton Park, Tandragee	Old Mill Manor, L'vale	Laurel Heights, L'vale	Knightsbridge, T,gee
Linvara, T'gee	Austin Drive, Tandragee	The Mount, Tandragee	Coburn Drive, Tandragee
Richmond Court, T'gee	Richmond Drive, Tandragee	Woodview Park, Tandragee	Thornhill Avenue, Tandragee
Thornhill Crescent, Tandragee	Haddens Terrace, Mountnorris	Pinley Green, Markehill	Bunker Hill, Markethill
Cusher Green, Markethill	Coolmillish Way, Markethill	Neills Villas, Loughgilly	Redrock Road, Markethill
Dernasigh Road, Tullysarran	Acton Road	Hillside Crescent, P'pass	Aughan Park, P'pass
Old Road, Poyntzpass	Acton Village, Poyntapass	Drumantine Road, Poyntzpass	Annvale Hts Keady
Annvale Gdns, Keady	Ard na greine Keady	Granemore Park, Keady	Annvale Green, Keady
Esker Park, Killylea	Annaghananny Cottages killylea	Darkley Village	Mullaghmore Park, Keady
Madden Row, Keady	St Matthews Estate, Keady	Lir Gardens, Keady	Mulcreevy Park Keady
Carbrey Heights, Keady	Railway Crescent Keady	Dalton Park, Keady	Mountview, Keady
Manor Hill, Milford			

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will consider adding capacity to the gritting schedule in the Magherafelt section of the Western Division.

(AQW 11966/17-22)

Ms Mallon: For an additional section of road to be added to the scheduled gritting network it must first meet the criteria set down within the Department's Winter Service Policy. Whilst gritter capacity is of course a consideration in terms of delivery, it is the policy which determines whether or not a road is added to the schedule in the first instance and ultimately what the costs of the gritting operation are.

Should additional capacity within the fleet be created it does not automatically follow that this would result in additional roads being added to the schedule.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail plans in place to make railway stations and halts accessible to people with a disability.[R]

(AQW 11972/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In recent years, my Department has made significant strides in improving the accessibility of our public transport network and it is my ambition as Minister to ensure those improvements are delivered working closely with our stakeholders. There is active engagement, for example, with the Inclusive Mobility Transport Advisory Committee (IMTAC), who have provided essential advice to my Department for many years.

Whilst there is more work to do to improve the inclusivity of our public transport network, I can confirm that my Department and Translink fully consider the needs of people with a disability when designing projects. To that end, I can confirm that a number of development proposals are in place to improve our railway stations and halts including the development of the Belfast Transport Hub and the refurbishment of Yorkgate Station. Whilst plans to build or refurbish rail station and halts are dependent upon available capital budget and competing priorities within the Department, I can assure you that these projects, when taken forward, will be designed in consultation with IMTAC as we strive to improve the accessibility of our public transport network.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 10820/17-22, for a breakdown of the £1.8 million estimated cost associated with the scheme.

(AQW 11990/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I recognise the importance of road safety and in particular the ongoing safety concerns of citizens using the junction at McKinstry Road / The Cutts, Derriaghy. I am aware of the continued public concern and support for an improvement scheme and that a number of meetings with a number of elected representatives highlighting this concern have taken place over the years.

The identified solution is to fully control the right turn movements within the signal phasing and this will require extensive carriageway widening and realignment in order to accommodate the provision of traffic islands to house the required signal equipment.

I am advised that the preliminary estimate for the construction element of this scheme is around £1.8m, a breakdown of which is detailed below. This will be updated upon completion of the detailed design.

Preliminaries, Traffic Management

Site Clearance, Fencing, Road Restraint	£215K
Drainage including Culvert Extension	£65K
Earthworks	£100K
Pavements	£380K
High Friction Surfacing	£30K
Kerbing, Footways and paved areas	£50K
Traffic Signs and Road Markings	£15K
Road Lighting	£55K
Walls	£10K
Services for statutory Undertakers	£400K
Landscaping	£25K
Traffic signals and CCTV	£200K
Optimism bias	£300K

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure what action her Department can take against a developer regarding unadopted roads which are not finished to standard.

(AQW 12014/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The adoption of private streets in developments is a developer led process and officials work closely with them to progress adoption in a timely manner.

Where developers are seen to be progressing the completion of road infrastructure, my officials will afford them every opportunity to do so. Where it is evident that a developer is unwilling or unable to complete infrastructure to the required standard, my Department will consider enforcement action.

Under the Private Streets (NI) Order, my Department has powers to serve an Article 11 Notice to a developer requiring them to complete the road infrastructure that is proposed for adoption within 28 days. Where this notice is not complied with, my Department has further power to enter the site and complete the street works that are covered by the bond.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many people are currently waiting to do their driving test.
(AQW 12041/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The DVA normally conducts around 47,000 Category B (private car) driving tests per year. However, this is not a normal year and therefore assessing the current demand for driving tests is very difficult. In order to book a practical driving test a learner driver must first pass their theory test. As of 13 December, approximately 23,500 people held a valid theory test pass certificate and therefore this was the maximum number of people that could have applied for a driving test at that time. However, some of these learners will already have booked a test between now and the end of March and, as would normally be the case, not all learners who complete the theory test will apply to take a practical driving test.

The latest six-week lockdown restrictions announced by the Executive on 17 December have resulted in practical driving tests being cancelled from 28 December to 6 February 2021, to help stop the spread of Covid-19. The DVA will directly contact all those customers who had their tests cancelled to advise them how they can reschedule their appointments. Driver theory tests have also been cancelled during the six-week period of lockdown restrictions and similarly Pearson VUE, the theory test provider, will contact customers directly to facilitate the rescheduling of their theory tests.

When practical driving tests resume again the DVA will continue to offer driving tests on a Saturday and will 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 is also recruiting additional examiners and will 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.

To help further mitigate the impact on customers due to the cessation of practical driving as a result of the latest Covid restrictions, I have brought forward further legislation to extend the validity of theory test pass certificates. Theory test pass certificates which have already been extended by eight months and will expire from 1 November 2020 onwards, have had their validity period extended by a further four months. In addition, theory test pass certificates which expire between 1 November 2020 and 30 June 2021, and which have not already benefited from an extension, have had their validity period extended by eight months.

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 to detail the law in relation to delivery cages blocking public footpaths.
(AQW 12042/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The legislation covering this issue is Article 88 of the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993 which states that "any person who, without lawful authority or reasonable excuse, in any way intentionally or negligently obstructs the free passage along a road shall be guilty of an offence".

For clarity, the footway is deemed part of the road by definition under the Order.

The PSNI is responsible for enforcement of this Article.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) what discussions she has had with Executive colleagues and Waterways Ireland relating to capital expenditure projects along the Lower Bann in the East Londonderry constituency; and (ii) the nature and cost of these projects.
(AQW 12070/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Waterways Ireland receives a capital budget allocation each year from the Department for Infrastructure. The allocation is dependent on the amount of capital available to the Department and the priority of all of the bids to be considered. Capital allocated to Waterways Ireland is spent on projects in the North.

When Waterways Ireland identifies potential projects, a Business Case is prepared and submitted to the Department for clearance.

Waterways Ireland gives details of proposed Capital projects, which have approved Business Cases and which it can deliver in year, in the Annual Business Plan. Projects are prioritised and those involving a risk of infrastructure failure or Health and Safety issues are considered high priority when the Department is allocating its annual Capital Budget.

The annual Business Plan is circulated to Executive Colleagues before it is submitted for NSMC approval.

The table below shows Waterways Ireland's planned capital projects on the Lower Bann for 2021, including the nature and cost of each.

LOCATION	Description	Planned to Start	Estimated Cost £000
Carnroe Weir	Rehabilitation of the weir	Early 2021	Total - 2,500
	Preparatory Works	Spring 2021	
	Instream Works – Phase 1	Spring 2022	
	Instream Works – Phase 2		
The Cutts	Replacement of Lock Gates	2021	27
Replacement of Fleet and Plant	Lower Bann	2021	20
Total			2,547

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) why some taxi drivers have not received replies from her Department after applying for support to confirm their eligibility to the scheme; and (ii) what action her Department is taking to address this. (AQW 12125/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Taxi Driver Financial Assistance Scheme closed on 27th November and over 5000 applications have been received from taxi drivers. Applicants receive an initial acknowledgement upon contacting the department via email and will be notified in due course as to whether they have been successful. Further information is being requested from those applicants who have not provided sufficient evidence to demonstrate that they meet the eligibility criteria. To date almost 3000 payments have been made. Officials continue to work at pace to ensure as many payments are made as possible to eligible applicants before Christmas.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the process for the adaptation and bringing up to standard of a long-standing section of road or parking area in daily use by the public. (AQW 12170/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Private Streets (Northern Ireland) Order 1980 [PSO] enables my Department to adopt streets (including footways and parking areas) into the public road network. There are a number of different ways a street can be adopted depending on its individual circumstances.

Where a development is covered by an Agreement under Article 32 of the PSO and the developer fails to complete a new street, my Department can issue a Notice under Article 11 requiring the execution of all works necessary to bring the street up to an adoptable standard. Should the developer fail to comply with this Notice, my Department can use the bond to execute these works and then adopt the street.

My Department can also adopt existing streets, not previously determined for adoption, under Article 9 of the PSO, provided they meet the following criteria:

- My Department is of the opinion that the street should become a public road and a majority of the owners or occupiers of the land in or adjoining the street consent thereto in writing; or
- A majority of such owners or occupiers request in writing that the street should become a public road and my Department is of the opinion that the request be granted; and (in either case)
- My Department is satisfied that the street is in all respects fit and proper to become a public road.

Should the majority of owners/occupiers wish to have their street adopted, they should first write to my Department. My Department will then decide whether the street should become a public road or not. If it does, the onus will then lie with the applicants to fund and complete all works necessary to bring the street up to the appropriate standard in order to allow adoption to proceed. Consent of the landowner would also be required prior to any formal adoption.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department has given consideration to offering resource grant funding to local councils for active travel initiatives in addition to the capital funding available.[R] (AQW 12184/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is operating with a very limited resource funding budget and so my officials are working to explore options to assist Councils in progressing active travel initiatives through capital funding, particularly through the £20 million allocated for Blue Green infrastructure.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) for an update on the submission of Waterways Ireland's 2020-22 Corporate Plan and 2020 and 2021 Business Plans to NSMC; and (ii) whether she expects this to be approved before the proposed deadline of the end of 2020.

(AQW 12217/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Waterways Ireland is in the final stages of developing a 10 year strategy. When complete and agreed, this strategy will be delivered through the Annual Business Plans and three year Corporate Plans. The Corporate Plan 2020-2022 will be developed from the long term strategy and will be submitted to NSMC for approval in due course.

The Waterways Ireland Business Plans and Budgets for 2020 and 2021 have been approved by Sponsor Ministers, Finance Ministers and subsequently by NSMC at the Institutional Meeting on 16 December 2020.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure, further to the Chief Planner's update on 16 December 2020 relating to future treatment of Battery Energy Storage Systems applications, to detail the repercussions and advice relating to revocation of permissions already granted.

(AQW 12306/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The recent Chief Planner's Update provided clarification on how battery energy storage systems (BESS) should be considered in the planning system. In terms of applications already granted by district councils for BESS development, any consideration of revocation will be for the relevant council.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 9110/17-22, and given public concern over how the provisions of the Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations are being applied to the screening of planning projects, to detail (i) her Department's assessment of the appropriateness of the use of the terms Yes, No and N/A as a method of assessing the criteria contained in Schedule 3 of the said regulations; and (ii) what communication her Department has had with local councils about the use of this specific method of environmental assessment.

(AQW 12314/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The statutory obligations placed on planning authorities to assess the potential environmental impact of proposed development are set out in planning legislation, primarily the Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2017 ("the 2017 Regulations").

The onus is on a planning authority which is determining an application for planning permission to meet these obligations including, where appropriate, recording their decisions and making them available in line with the requirement for public access.

The 2017 Regulations do not specify the use of any particular terminology. I am aware that planning staff have traditionally used a common template to assist in their environmental assessments but it is up to each authority to satisfy itself that it meets its statutory obligations.

In terms of communication on this issue, discussions are ongoing between the Department and councils to identify what is considered to be good practice in conducting such assessments with a view to sharing this across the two-tier planning system.

Department of Justice

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of people who have received legal aid for cases related to domestic abuse, each year from 2015.

(AQW 11696/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): The Legal Services Agency holds information against specified legal proceedings. Domestic abuse is not a specified proceedings as claims of domestic abuse can form part of applications in a range of proceedings. The table below sets out the number of certificates which were granted for Non-Molestation and Occupation Orders under The Family Homes & Domestic Violence (NI) Order 1998. This includes both grants of legal aid, both for first time applications and subsequent applications to vary these orders.

Year	Non-Molestation Order	Occupation Order	Total
2015/16	2,380	23	2,403
2016/17	1,383	26	1,409
2017/18	1,990	17	2,007
2018/19	1,690	15	1,705
2019/20	1,735	27	1,762

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Justice to detail the breakdown of applications that have been denied for legal aid, including the reasons for doing so, each year since 2015.

(AQW 11773/17-22)

Mrs Long: Save for specific exemptions, applications for representation before the lower and higher courts are subject to financial eligibility and legal merits tests.

If an application fails the financial eligibility test, the applicant can seek a review. If the applicant still fails to satisfy the financial eligibility test the applicant can reapply if their financial circumstances change.

If an application is refused on the legal merits the Legal Services Agency will notify the applicant and their solicitor of the decision to refuse and the reasons for the refusal. One or more of the statutory grounds will be provided together with specific reasons based on the content of the application.

The statutory grounds for refusing representation lower courts are that it appears:

- (a) to be unreasonable that a certificate should be granted; or
- (b) that only a trivial advantage would be gained by the applicant in taking, defending or being a party to the proceedings to which the application relates, or, owing to the simple nature of the proceedings, a supplier would not ordinarily be employed.

The statutory grounds for refusing representation higher courts are that it appears:

- (a) to be unreasonable that a certificate should be granted;
- (b) to be more appropriate that an application for a certificate should be made under representation lower courts; or
- (c) that only a trivial advantage would be gained by the applicant in taking, defending or being a party to the proceedings to which the application relates, or, owing to the simple nature of the proceedings, a supplier would not ordinarily be employed.

If an application fails to satisfy the legal merits test the applicant can seek a review or in certain circumstances an appeal to an independent appeals panel. If the review or appeal does not result in a grant, the applicant can submit a fresh application if there are further developments in the case.

The tables below indicate the number of applications which did not satisfy the financial eligibility tests and the legal merits tests.

Representation Lower

	Refused on Financial Eligibility	Refused on Legal Merits	Overall Total of Refusals
2015/16	250	346	596
2016/17	347	314	661
2017/18	351	242	593
2018/19	234	211	445
2019/20	152	361	513

Representation Higher

	Refused on Financial Eligibility	Refused on Legal Merits	Overall Total of Refusals
2015/16	32	1,088	1,120
2016/17	32	945	977
2017/18	24	904	928
2018/19	15	914	929
2019/20	183	1,065	1,248

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Justice in relation to domestic abuse, to detail the number of cases waiting to proceed but delayed due to accessing legal aid.

(AQW 11776/17-22)

Mrs Long: Applications for emergency legal aid, which would include cases involving allegations of domestic abuse, are processed on the day of application or the next working day unless all relevant information was not included in the original application. As such there is no delay in the provision of legal aid for properly submitted emergency applications.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Justice what steps her Department has taken to address rural crime, in conjunction with the PSNI and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

(AQW 11847/17-22)

Mrs Long: You will be aware from a previous answer that the PSNI and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) are key partners in the Rural Crime Partnership (RCP). The Partnership, chaired by my Department, aims 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.

The RCP has continued to meet virtually throughout lockdown and, due to the cancellation of the Balmoral Show and other key agricultural events, a key focus of its work is looking for alternative ways to promote crime prevention messages aimed at reducing crime and the fear of crime in the rural community. For example, crime prevention messages delivered via an article in the Northern Ireland Housing Executive Rural Housing Week e-zine; PSNI partners represented the RCP at the Bank of Ireland Virtual Open Farm Event in August; a social media campaign was developed which ran from 15 September until 14 October, to raise awareness of rural crime, promote crime prevention measures and encourage reporting of incidents to the PSNI or Crimestoppers. This crime prevention work sits alongside the wider operational work taken forward by the PSNI and DAERA to address rural crime.

The DoJ also provides funding to PCSPs who, at a local level, support a number of rural crime initiatives in collaboration with their partners, including PSNI. For example, Ards and North Down PCSP provide ongoing support for the Neighbourhood Watch and Text Alert schemes and have enhanced the scale of their 4 tier anti burglary security scheme that assists vulnerable people and victims of crime. They have also commenced the development of the Farm Watch Scheme and are also supporting a PR campaign to raise awareness of rural crime.

PSNI partners continue to give practical advice to farmers on how to tackle rural crime through reporting all suspicious activity, making use of tracking devices on equipment and machinery, fitting locks to gates and doors and engaging with their local Farm Watch group.

The RCP will continue to meet to ensure the key concerns of the rural community are being addressed and to ensure any emerging agri-crime issues are identified for specific action.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice what work her Department has undertaken to determine the extent to which offending or reoffending is inter-generational amongst families.

(AQW 11884/17-22)

Mrs Long: The extent of research undertaken to date on inter-generational offending recognises that maintaining relationships between those imprisoned and their families as being critical for encouraging desistance, reducing crime and facilitating reintegration.

The most recent review, undertaken by Lord Farmer, in August 2017, entitled "The Importance of Strengthening Prisoners' Family Ties to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime" emphasised that family work should always be seen and referred to alongside employment and education as the third leg of the stool that brings stability and structure to an individual's life, particularly when they leave prison. Lord Farmer's Review has influenced the Northern Ireland Prison Service's (NIPS) Strengthening Family Relations Strategy, which was introduced in 2019.

In order to provide robust longitudinal evidence on whether prison-based parenting programmes and enhanced parent-child visiting schemes actually work, Queen's University Belfast, supported by the NIPS, has been successful in securing funding from the Nuffield Foundation to undertake a 2 year study to test the effectiveness of the Families Matter prison-based parenting programme.

In terms of work undertaken by wider justice agencies, both the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNi) and Youth Justice Agency (YJA) recognise the impact of inter-generational offending and work with service users to address their offending and the root causes of such behaviour.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Justice, as figures for reoffending have increased year-on-year since 2010-2011, to detail her Department's strategy to address reoffending.

(AQW 11899/17-22)

Mrs Long: Before I set out my Department's approach to addressing reoffending I believe it is important to set the increase in the reoffending rate into context.

The number of people who received a non-custodial disposal at court, a diversionary disposal or who were released from custody within Northern Ireland during the given financial year has decreased from 33,815 in 2010/11 to 20,407 in 2017/18, a reduction of approximately 39.7% (13,408 individuals). Furthermore, the number of people who reoffended within each cohort has decreased from 5,646 in 2010/11 to 3,884 in 2017/18, a reduction of approximately 31.2% (1,762 individuals) (Table1).

Table 1: One-Year Proven Reoffending within Northern Ireland from 2010/11 to 2017/18

	Number of People in Cohort	Number who Reoffended within One Year	Reoffending Rate (%)
2010/11	33,815	5,646	16.70%
2011/12	31,343	5,869	18.73%
2012/13	29,427	5,452	18.53%
2013/14	27,069	4,890	18.06%
2014/15	23,627	4,221	17.87%
2015/16	21,982	4,059	18.47%
2016/17	21,493	3,862	17.97%
2017/18	20,407	3,884	19.03%

The slightly slower rate of decrease in the actual number of individuals reoffending, in comparison with the overall cohort, has contributed to the increase in proportion of individuals reoffending. Furthermore, the slowing rate of decrease in actual numbers within the reoffending cohort in recent years may indicate a situation whereby specific cohorts of prolific offenders may come to disproportionately affect the reoffending rates.

Our strategic approach for the Department, our agencies, NDPBs and other partners, particularly those in the voluntary and community sector, is to align activities, support rehabilitation, improve outcomes for offenders and ultimately build a safer NI through a long term reduction in offending behaviour. However, the criminal justice system on its own cannot provide the knowledge, expertise or access to the services needed to truly reduce reoffending.

There are a range of socio-economic factors which have been shown to have an impact on reoffending, including poverty and social deprivation, mental health issues, substance misuse, homelessness, and a lack of educational attainment and employment opportunities. Addressing reoffending not only means tackling these issues, but also creating positive connections back into supportive families and communities so that they become enablers of change.

Our approach has been based on:

Adopting a welfare based rather than punitive approach to children engaged in offending behaviour: Working together with the Department of Health, the Youth Justice Agency (YJA) are developing a joint multi-purpose Care and Justice Campus to provide a short term safe space at one end of the spectrum through to longer term, high intensity, therapeutic support for children with serious issues relating to mental health, substance misuse and childhood trauma. The YJA have also developed a new model of practice based on the Child First Offender Second approach including a focus on Adverse Childhood Experiences, Trauma Informed Practice and Signs of Safety.

Problem-solving approaches: The Department and its agencies are developing and delivering problem solving approaches as a means of dealing more effectively with the root causes of offending behaviour, in a range of areas including both domestic abuse and substance misuse and an Enhanced Combination Order. Early scoping work is also being undertaken around the development of a Mental Health Court.

My officials, PBNI, Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS), Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and YJA are also working in a Reducing Offending Partnership (ROP) aimed at managing offenders who are at high risk of offending/reoffending. The PSNI are currently reviewing ROP, which is particularly important given that a small number of prolific offenders can disproportionately affect the reoffending rates.

Restorative Justice: Reducing Offending Directorate is leading on efforts to extend restorative principles to the adult justice system through the development of an Adult Restorative Justice Strategy.

Addressing the complexities of accommodation needs of offenders: Having a safe place to live is one of the most important factors contributing towards someone moving away from offending behaviour. Working together with the Department for Communities and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, we are working to improve the support offered to these offenders upon their return to the community.

Improving access to and opportunities for education and employment: Increasing access to and readiness for employment amongst those who offend, and ensuring that they are able to apply for jobs once they leave the justice system, makes it much more likely that they will have the needed stability in their lives to refrain from further offending. We are working with the Departments for Communities, Education and Economy to address economic inactivity amongst those in the justice system.

Improving health outcomes for people in the criminal justice system: The Departments of Health and Justice are working jointly, with the support of the Interim Mental Health Champion, to improve health outcomes for people in the criminal justice system. Through collaboration with a range of partners, including the PSNI, Health and Social Care Trusts and Public Health Agency, a person centred approach is being taken to support those who are most vulnerable in our society. The interventions range from those targeted towards those on the cusp of the justice system to divert them away from offending, and to supporting the rehabilitation of those who are within the care of the Northern Ireland Prison Service – including those who may be at risk of suicide and/or self-harm.

Early Intervention - We are currently working across the justice system to deliver a coherent approach to early intervention with the aim of creating a long-term whole systems approach in collaboration with wider Government Departments, criminal justice agencies and the VCS.

Prisons 2020 and Beyond - The focus of the NIPS is on ensuring rehabilitation is at the core of all that it does. In terms of reducing reoffending, this has included, amongst other matters, the recent development of a Strengthening Family Relations Strategy, the reintegration of Probation staff within Prisoner Development Units, and the forthcoming consultation in respect of a new justice-wide gender-informed strategy to support and challenge women, including girls, in contact with the criminal justice system.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice what plans her Department has to speed up the court process from first hearing to sentencing.

(AQW 11911/17-22)

Mrs Long: My Department oversees a programme of work aimed at speeding up the criminal justice system. This involves criminal justice organisations across the system and has four strands:

- (1) Performance reporting - including the use of data to monitor the end to end time taken to complete criminal cases and identify areas for improvement;
- (2) Working in partnership - including a number of multi-agency initiatives such as the Indictable Cases Process (ICP) and Crown Court Cases Performance Groups aimed at tackling avoidable delay through collaboration;
- (3) Legislation - including the Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill which was introduced to the Assembly in November and aims to allow certain serious cases to be directly transferred to the Crown Court, bypassing the traditional committal process; and
- (4) Research and analysis to help inform and identify areas for reform.

Speeding up justice is one of the biggest challenges facing the justice system and is a priority for the Department, its criminal justice partners and the Criminal Justice Board. Statistics for 2019-20 show that the average time taken to complete all criminal cases fell to 149 days from 167 days in 2018-19. That represents an 11% reduction and 149 is the lowest figure in four years. However, the average time taken for some cases, including in the Crown Court, remains high and continues to be an area of focus.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice what plans her Department has to ensure that those facing trial do not abuse and delay the trial process by repeatedly replacing their legal counsel.

(AQW 11912/17-22)

Mrs Long: As Justice Minister, I have no role in how cases are managed in court. That is, quite rightly, a matter for the independent judiciary following consideration of the circumstances put before them.

Adjournments and case progression may be hindered for a variety of reasons. The Department of Justice has not been made aware of any systemic issues in relation to the repeated replacing of legal counsel. I have, therefore, no plans at present to make any policy changes in this area.

However, in my role as Justice Minister, I am working to ensure that the justice system operates as effectively as possible. This includes reforms to speed up justice and reduce unnecessary delay within the system.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Justice how many applications are currently under consideration by the Planning Appeals Commission.

(AQW 11933/17-22)

Mrs Long: There were 140 applications under consideration by the Planning Appeals Commission as of 30 November 2020.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Justice for an update on her focused review of the support mechanisms and procedures the Prison Service has in place to ascertain if more could be done to help the wellbeing of frontline staff, due to report on October 31.

(AQW 11941/17-22)

Mrs Long: I commissioned the review of support services for frontline prison staff and the report was due at the end of October.

Following a request from the Review Team, I granted an extension to mid-December. I have now received a copy of the report and am considering the recommendations.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Justice, in light of the Gillen Review Report which stated that, in 2017/18, serious sexual offence cases involving a child in the Crown Court took an average of 986 days to complete from offence reported to case dealt with at court, to detail comparable figures for the total number of these cases for (i) 2018/19; and (ii) 2019/20.

(AQW 11981/17-22)

Mrs Long: The average (median) time taken from the date an offence was reported to the police until the time a subsequent case was dealt with at Crown Court, where the principal offence was a sexual offence that specified the involvement of a child, for cases dealt with in 2018/19, was 845 days, and, in 2019/20, 746 days.

A judge-led pilot involving a voluntary protocol to fast track serious sexual offence cases involving children under 13 years old to the Crown Court was initiated in September 2019. The purpose was to expedite cases involving very young children in order to maximise the opportunity for them to provide their best evidence and minimise the stress and emotional impact of the criminal justice process. The protocol has been successful in making a difference to the children and their families involved in these cases and in reducing the average time for such cases to complete. Participating organisations have agreed to extend the pilot for a further year and acknowledged that lessons learned could potentially be used as a basis to achieve improvements on a wider scale.

The Department of Justice is coordinating the further development of the protocol, in line with recommendations in the Gillen Review into the law and procedures in serious sexual offences in relation to child victims, to ensure that the benefits gained to date can be extended and formalised in practice, in tandem with the ongoing operation of the existing judge-led pilot.

Note:

- 1 Figures relate to the number of calendar days between the listed date points. Court recess dates are not taken into account.
- 2 Figures relate to cases disposed at court during the time period specified. Each period is a financial year, running from 1st April to the following 31st March.
- 3 Figures relate to cases brought on behalf of the PSNI, Harbour and Airport police in Northern Ireland that resulted in a court disposal. Appeals are not included.
- 4 Figures do not include cases where the case was dismissed but a caution was administered, fixed penalty registrations, penalty notices for disorder or cases resulting from a breach of a court order.
- 5 The figures reported relate to cases dealt with at Crown Court and where the principal offence specified the involvement of a child.
- 6 Case processing time datasets do not contain specific information in relation to age of victims, other than where specified in the offence description. Therefore, some cases where it was not possible to identify that the victim was a child may not have been included in figures quoted.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice what plans her Department has to eliminate abuses of the legal aid system.
(AQW 11983/17-22)

Mrs Long: My plans for reform of legal aid are outlined in my answer to AQW 11611. Legal aid is a key way of enabling access to justice and protecting human rights. It is governed by a statutory framework which include detailed criteria around access to legal aid and eligibility. That statutory framework is applied by the Judiciary in making decisions on applications for criminal legal aid and by the Legal Services Agency in making decisions on applications for civil legal aid. Those decisions are made independently within the statutory framework.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice what plans her Department has to ensure judges undertake more than one session of court cases per week.
(AQW 11984/17-22)

Mrs Long: The listing of court business and allocation of judiciary to court sittings is a matter for the Lord Chief Justice. The current allocated courts and schedules can be found at; <https://www.judiciaryni.uk/coronavirus-covid-19>

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice what plans her Department has to address the backlog of court cases.
(AQW 11985/17-22)

Mrs Long: A huge amount of work has been ongoing across the justice system to respond to, and recover from, the impact of COVID-19. Virtual courtroom capacity has been significantly increased, with video conferencing technology being deployed to facilitate remote and hybrid hearings during this challenging time.

Every justice organisation has a recovery plan in place and justice organisations have worked in partnership to develop and deliver a coordinated approach to recovering the system. The Criminal Justice Board meets regularly to consider its response to the impact of COVID-19 on the justice system and to monitor the performance of the justice system generally.

Following a series of Covid-19 Risk Assessments, with effect from 24 August, the number of operational courthouses has increased from 5 to 15; only three of the smallest hearing centre venues are not currently operational. Up to 57 courtrooms are now available for courts and tribunals business. With the re-opening of almost all courts from August onwards, cases disposed by the courts have exceeded those received and consequently the outstanding caseload has reduced.

NICTS has consulted with the Public Health Agency (PHA) on the approach to physical hearings, including jury trials, so that business recovery can take place while maintaining a secure environment where court users can feel safe and confident.

I have also instructed my officials to explore the potential for additional external venues, sometimes referred to as Nightingale courts, to increase capacity.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice whether legal aid bills automatically go before (i) the Taxing Masters Office to receive an order for taxation; and (ii) the Law Society for a remuneration certificate.

(AQW 12005/17-22)

Mrs Long:

- (i) If an individual who has the benefit of a representation higher courts certificate is involved in proceedings in the High Court, the court will direct taxation of the assisted party's costs unless their costs fall to be paid by their opponent. The Taxing Master will tax the assisted party's costs and the Master's Taxation Certificate will be presented to the Legal Services Agency for payment.
- (ii) The Law Society plays no role in the administration of legal aid, including payment of any case.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister of Justice how many Assembly Written Questions her Department received during the period 2 March 2020 to 30 November 2020; and to detail the total cost of responding to these questions.

(AQW 12048/17-22)

Mrs Long: I received 504 Assembly Written Questions during the period 2 March 2020 to 30 November 2020.

My Department does not routinely estimate the cost of responding to Assembly Questions and so the information requested is not available.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 11334/17-22, (i) whether the immediate steps included follow up phone calls; and (ii) when they were made, given that the email sent to the solicitors of the impacted individuals was sent out of hours.

(AQW 12094/17-22)

Mrs Long: The immediate steps taken to contact the solicitors for the Properly Interested Persons were by email. The solicitors involved responded promptly and no follow-up telephone calls were required.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Justice what collaborative work she has undertaken with her ministerial counterparts in the Republic of Ireland to mitigate any potential negative effects of losing access to the Lugano Convention due to Brexit.

(AQW 12115/17-22)

Mrs Long: The UK has applied to accede to the Lugano Convention on jurisdiction and the recognition and enforcement of judgments in civil and commercial matters in its own right and a decision on this by the EU is awaited. There are other Hague Conventions which will offer some co-operation arrangements in cross-border civil litigation to which the UK is already party.

I have not had any discussions with my Irish counterparts in this area as the reciprocal recognition and enforcement of civil court orders requires a legal framework which, in respect of EU Member States, can only be agreed by the EU.

The impact of Brexit on North/South litigation is likely to be somewhat cushioned by dual-qualified lawyers either side of the border; the relative ease with which a litigant in Ireland can bring proceedings in Northern Ireland and vice versa; and by the fact that we are both English-speaking, common law jurisdictions.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 11334/17-22, (i) whether a dossier compiled by a statutory agency found its way to Phoenix Law; and (ii) if this was the case, was the Information Commissioner's Office informed.

(AQW 12162/17-22)

Mrs Long: Further to AQW 11334/17-22, no dossier was sent by the Legacy Inquest Unit to Phoenix Law in relation to the Neil McConville Inquest.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice, in respect of the Coroner's office breaches of data protection in the McConville Inquest, what regard there has been to the seventh data protection principle in failing to refer this latest breach to the Information Commissioner's Office.

(AQW 12163/17-22)

Mrs Long: The LIU reported the data incident in the McConville inquest to the DOJ's Records and Information Management Team (RIMT) in line with data incident policy. Having assessed the incident and LIU actions taken to limit further dissemination of the data and to ensure its permanent deletion, the DOJ's RIMT were satisfied that the threshold for reporting to the ICO had not been met and that the DOJ had complied with its duty under Article 5 (2) of GDPR in that appropriate records are held and can be made available to ICO as necessary.

Department for the Economy

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for the Economy, given the increasing reliance on mobile phones to access details of medical appointments and reminders, and, in the absence of internet access, what steps have been taken to improve mobile phone signal in Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

(AQW 6481/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): I fully appreciate the importance of access to good mobile and broadband services, particularly in the current circumstances. To promote improved mobile coverage, the UK Government recently announced the 'Shared Rural Network' (SRN) scheme which will improve 4G access in rural areas throughout the UK. Under the scheme, Mobile Network Operators (MNOs) will share existing infrastructure to eliminate almost all partial not-spots across Northern Ireland (areas where one or more operators are present but all four are not). New infrastructure will be built, shared by all four MNOs, in areas where no operators are currently present.

Across the UK, the MNOs have committed to investing £532m to eliminate partial not-spots, with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) investing a further £500m towards total not-spots in rural areas. Design work has already started on the scheme, with improvements in coverage to increase between now and 2026. My officials are working with DCMS, other NI Departments, Councils and MNOs to support the successful implementation of the SRN in Northern Ireland.

In addition, my Department will lead in developing a Mobile Action Plan (MAP) for Northern Ireland, as reflected in DfE's 2020/21 COVID-19 Recovery Business Plan. This is at the initial stage, and my officials are currently in the process of setting up a cross sector working group to ensure appropriate stakeholder contribution to the Plan. A draft MAP will be referred to the Executive for endorsement in due course.

With regard to internet access, I expect the contract for Project Stratum to be awarded in October. This will utilise funding of £165m to increase access to 30Mbps broadband services for those premises currently unable to access such services. The project's target intervention area consists of just under 79,000 premises across Northern Ireland. Of these, 12,841 premises are located in the Fermanagh and South Tyrone constituency area.

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister for the Economy to detail her Department's plans to support self-employed workers throughout this latest phase of restrictions.

(AQW 9097/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Self-employed individuals are eligible to apply for both Part A and Part B of the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme provided eligibility criteria are met.

Details of Part A are available at <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/covid-restrictions-business-support-scheme-part>.

Details of Part B are available at <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/covid-restrictions-business-support-scheme-part-b>

My Department has also introduced the Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme (NSESS) which opened for applications on 3 December 2020 and will provide financial support to newly self-employed individuals (sole traders and those in partnerships) whose business is adversely impacted by Covid and who have not been able to access support from the UK government's Self-Employed Income Support Scheme. Further details and an eligibility tracker are available at <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/newly-self-employed-support-scheme>.

Additionally, the Executive has agreed a funding allocation of £20million to support sole limited company directors who have been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic but were not eligible for the UK Government's Self Employed Income Support Scheme. My Department continues to work on bringing forward further details of this scheme as a matter of a priority and these will be made available on the NI Business Info website in due course.

The UK Government has also announced an extension to the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme to April 2021. Full details are available at <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/claim-a-grant-through-the-coronavirus-covid-19-self-employment-income-support-scheme>.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for the Economy for the legal basis to recoup ineligible payments made under the Coronavirus: £10,000 Small Business Support Grant Scheme with respect to (i) wind turbines; (ii) MP/MLA offices; and (iii) any other categories.

(AQW 9645/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I would refer the Member to the reply I gave to AQW 9546/17-22.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the number of grants paid out under the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme thus far.

(AQW 9762/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Information in relation to the number of businesses that that have applied to the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme and received payment can be accessed online via the following webpages

Part A: <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/covid-restrictions-businesssupport-scheme-part>

Part B: <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/covid-restrictions-businesssupport-scheme-part-b>

Here you can find information about the operation of the scheme to date. Based upon applications received this details applications by status (draft/submitted/processed/rejected/paid), and provides a facility to interrogate by District Council area and Parliamentary Constituency.

This data will be updated on a weekly basis.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for the Economy what urgent measures are being taken to make payments under the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme
(AQW 9788/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Invest NI aim to make payments as quickly as possible to successful applicants that have met the eligibility criteria. I have asked officials in Invest NI and my Department to be as flexible and inclusive as possible in the administration of the scheme, to accelerate the processing of applications. I have been encouraged by the progress made to deliver support to eligible businesses to date. Whilst I appreciate the need to ensure funding is allocated in a timely manner, it is imperative that as custodians of public money, reasonable requirements are in place to ensure that funding is directed to those that need it most and to safeguard against fraud.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for the Economy (i) to detail the number of applications the COVID-19 Restrictions Business Support Scheme has received to date; and (ii) to confirm the number of payments issued by her Department to date.
(AQW 9914/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Information in relation to the number of businesses that that have applied to the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme and received payment can be accessed online via the following webpages

Part A: <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/covid-restrictions-business-support-scheme-part>

Part B: <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/covid-restrictions-business-support-scheme-part-b>

Here you can find information about the operation of the scheme to date. Based upon applications received this details applications by status (draft/submitted/processed/rejected/paid), and provides a facility to interrogate by District Council area and Parliamentary Constituency. This data will be updated on a weekly basis.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the number of businesses which have not received their COVID-19 business support scheme grant.
(AQW 10004/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Information in relation to the number of businesses that that have applied to the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme and received payment can be accessed online via the following webpages

Part A: <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/covid-restrictions-businesssupport-scheme-part>

Part B: <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/covid-restrictions-businesssupport-scheme-part-b>

Here you can find information about the operation of the scheme to date. Based upon applications received this details applications by status (draft/submitted/processed/rejected/paid), and provides a facility to interrogate by District Council area and Parliamentary Constituency.

This data will be updated on a weekly basis.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for the Economy when payments will be issued to businesses in North Down who applied under Part A of the COVID Restrictions Business Support Scheme.
(AQW 10190/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Payments to successful applicants to Part A of the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme commenced on 6 November 2020. The remaining application will be assessed and verified as soon as possible.

Details on payments made by parliamentary constituency can be accessed at ng link:

<https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/covid-restrictions-business-support-scheme-part>

Mr Allen asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the (i) number of Coronavirus Restrictions Business Support Scheme applications received to date; (ii) the total number of applications processed and paid to date; and (iii) the average time taken for applications and payments to be processed.
(AQW 10232/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Information in relation to the number of businesses that that have applied to the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme and received payment can be accessed online via the following webpages

Part A: <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/covid-restrictions-business-support-scheme-part>

Part B: <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/covid-restrictions-business-support-scheme-part-b>

Here you can find information about the operation of the scheme to date. Based upon applications received this details applications by status (draft/submitted/processed/rejected/paid), and provides a facility to interrogate by District Council area and Parliamentary Constituency. This data will be updated on a weekly basis.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has considered implementing legislation to stop the abuse of retail staff at work.

(AQW 10381/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Public Order legislation is a matter for the Department of Justice (DOJ). DOJ advises that the existing framework offers robust protection for retail workers as it is an offence to carry out threats or abuse in a public place.

Any retail staff member who receives abuse while at work should contact the PSNI. The penalty on summary conviction is up to six months imprisonment, or a fine of up to £5,000, or both.

You may wish to note that, in April 2019, the Home Office ran a call for evidence on violence and abuse toward shop staff in Great Britain. A copy of the call for evidence and the Government response is available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/violence-and-abuse-toward-shop-staff-call-for-evidence>.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of the impact a lack of rural banking facilities is having on the wider Castledearg area.

(AQW 10764/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I appreciate the impact a lack of rural banking facilities can have on our communities and businesses within local rural areas, such as the wider Castledearg area.

My Department does not have direct responsibility for banks in Northern Ireland as the regulation of financial services is a reserved matter. However, the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland (CCNI), one of my Department's Non- Departmental Public Bodies, provides advice on consumer matters, including banking services.

The CCNI website contains useful information for consumers on bank closures, including comparison guidance for those who may wish to consider switching bank accounts and a current account comparison tool.

In 2018, following the announcement of the closure of the Ulster Bank branch in Castledearg, CCNI developed a Financial Map to indicate where alternative financial services were located within the immediate area¹. More recently, CCNI has developed Financial Maps to highlight alternative financial services available in the Ballycastle, Comber, Kilrea and Strabane areas, which will be affected by the imminent Danske Bank branch closures. Further information is available at: <https://www.consumercouncil.org.uk/consumers/rights-and-advice/financial-services/bank-branch-closures>.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the criteria by which the Company Directors Fund Scheme will be applied.

(AQW 10933/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Executive has agreed a funding allocation of £20million to support sole limited company directors who have been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic but were not eligible for the UK Government's Self Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS).

However, new schemes such as this one take time to develop and they need to undergo the necessary preparation and scrutiny to ensure that the process will run as smoothly as possible when it does go live, and also that the support is appropriately targeted to those for whom it is intended.

My Department continues to work on bringing forward further details of the scheme as a matter of a priority and these will be made available on the NI Business Info website in due course.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will provide a dedicated helpline and email contact for Assembly Members for each of the Coronavirus schemes being led by her Department.

(AQW 11036/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: A helpline is available for applicants to the two support schemes currently operational.

The helpline number for both the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme and the Newly Self-Employed Support scheme is 0800 952 4422 and is open from Monday to Friday, 9am – 4:30pm.

Details on how to access advice for schemes currently under development will be announced when each scheme is launched.

1 https://www.consumercouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/2018-04/Castledearg_FinancialServices_0_5_Mile_A4.pdf

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy whether there is a dedicated telephone number or email address for elected representatives to assist constituents with Covid Business Support Scheme problems.

(AQW 11291/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: A dedicated helpline for elected representatives is not available. However, a helpline is available for applicants to the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme. The helpline number is 0800 952 4422 and is open from Monday to Friday, 9am – 4:30pm.

Applicants can also access an online enquiry form at the following link:

<https://www.investni.com/covid-restrictions-business-support-scheme-enquiry-form>.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister for the Economy what steps her Department is taking to support the economy of small town centres.

(AQW 11365/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: It is the collective responsibility of the Executive to do all that we can to improve the economic performance of Northern Ireland and, in the shorter term, support economic recovery post COVID-19.

With regard to the economy of small town centres, there are many aspects to this specific issue and much of it will be driven by our local councils, for whom the Department for Communities (DfC) have policy and operational lead responsibility.

In July 2020, DfC, along with the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA), announced the launch of the COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation Programme. This programme has been designed to enable councils to invest in their town and city centres to create spaces that were safer and more inviting to shoppers, visitors and workers.

On Monday 23rd November, and in light of the decision to introduce new and extended restrictions from Friday 27th November 2020 for a two week period, the Executive announced a number of new and significant financial support packages, totalling £213 million.

As part of this new package of support, I am introducing a £95 million High Street Stimulus scheme to encourage people to shop and spend local across Northern Ireland, putting much needed revenue straight into businesses in our villages, towns and cities.

The scheme will provide individuals with a prepaid card to be spent at 'bricks and mortar' businesses including retail and hospitality. It will not be available for online sales.

It is anticipated that the scheme will to 'go live' in early 2021, during the months when our towns and cities would be quieter than usual.

Looking ahead, the Department for the Economy has set out a vision for economic recovery in "Rebuilding a Stronger Economy" which was published in June 2020. Work is ongoing to finalise the detail of this Economic Recovery Plan for the next 12-18 months, and one of the key aspects of this work is to address the regional imbalance across our local economy.

Finally, a High Street Taskforce has been established by The Executive Office, with representation from many external stakeholders, including Retail NI, Hospitality Ulster, Federation of Small Businesses, working alongside officials from relevant government departments and other public bodies.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister for the Economy whether business owners who have accessed the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme will be excluded from support under the proposed grant scheme for company directors.

(AQW 11442/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Executive has agreed a funding allocation of £20million to support sole limited company directors who have been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic but were not eligible for the UK Government's Self Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS).

My Department continues to work on bringing forward further details of this scheme as a matter of a priority and these will be made available on the NI Business Info website in due course.

I understand this is a difficult time for many businesses, and my Executive Colleagues and I remain committed to ensure the maximum number of businesses are eligible for support within the funding envelope available.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) the cost of Project Kelvin; (ii) the outcomes it has delivered; and (iii) her assessment of its value for money.

(AQW 11456/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) The total public subsidy for Project Kelvin was £25.7m (€29.5m).
- (ii) An independent evaluation of Project Kelvin highlighted the following key outcomes:
 - Increased competition in the telecoms market in the Interreg area;

- Reduced communications latency between North America and the North West by 53%; and between mainland Europe and the North West by 78%;
- Similar costs of telecoms services between North American and European telecoms hubs and the North West when compared to those in major UK cities and Dublin;
- Increased resilience and security of the telecoms networks in the region; · Benefitted businesses and consumers both in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland;
- Provided the digital infrastructure to ensure the region is not disadvantaged compared to other regions as a place in which to invest, do business and live; and
- Provided the platform to achieve economic and social benefits through the optimal use of digital technology.

Invest NI has, and continues, to highlight the benefits of the region's world class telecoms infrastructure, including the transatlantic link provided by Project Kelvin, to promote Northern Ireland as an attractive and viable location for new inward investment opportunities, and to secure additional projects from existing international investors. The agency conducted an informal survey some years ago to assess the extent to which Project Kelvin was important to investment decisions. The survey found that, between going fully operational in Spring 2010 until the end of Financial year 2011-12, approximately 25% of first time investors (14 companies) rated the transatlantic link as either crucial to their investment decision or a contributing factor. Two of the companies in question invested in the Foyle Constituency area. It would not be unreasonable to assume that Project Kelvin continues to be an influencing factor in a similar proportion of more recent investors, especially those in the ICT and financial services for whom high-speed internet connectivity is crucial. Telecoms infrastructure is just one of the factors that influence an investment decision. An investor will make this decision based on a combination of factors, including the availability of a skilled workforce, availability of suitable office accommodation and other infrastructure issues.

(iii) The independent evaluation concluded that the project offered value for money as follows:

- In addition to the mandatory locations required, the contractor successfully utilised the pre-existing Saturn ring network in Northern Ireland to achieve an additional 10 access points to the terrestrial network, in order to further enhance the international and regional connectivity of those towns and cities;
- The contractor offered costs for international connectivity to businesses comparable to those available in cities such as Glasgow, Manchester and Dublin;
- Project Kelvin ensured greater competition in the telecoms market; · Levels of latency achieved between the North West region and New York and Amsterdam were substantially below the mandatory levels;
- The total investment required from the Interreg IVA Programme was €29.5m, however, the total cost of Kelvin was €75.9m. Therefore, €46.4m of private sector investment was leveraged;
- Customers utilising the Kelvin infrastructure indicated that it provided large data users with reassurance of resilience and security of supply, due to the direct international telecoms link; and
- The project has had a positive impact on costs for customers due to the greater competition. AQW 11457/17-22 As the Project Kelvin contract concluded in 2018, my Department does not hold details of the number of businesses and other organisations currently connected to the Project Kelvin network.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the number of businesses and other organisations connected to Project Kelvin, broken down by (i) district council area; and (ii) parliamentary constituency.
(AQW 11457/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) The total public subsidy for Project Kelvin was £25.7m (€29.5m).
- (ii) An independent evaluation of Project Kelvin highlighted the following key outcomes:
- Increased competition in the telecoms market in the Interreg area;
 - Reduced communications latency between North America and the North West by 53%; and between mainland Europe and the North West by 78%;
 - Similar costs of telecoms services between North American and European telecoms hubs and the North West when compared to those in major UK cities and Dublin;
 - Increased resilience and security of the telecoms networks in the region;
 - Benefitted businesses and consumers both in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland;
 - Provided the digital infrastructure to ensure the region is not disadvantaged compared to other regions as a place in which to invest, do business and live; and
 - Provided the platform to achieve economic and social benefits through the optimal use of digital technology.

Invest NI has, and continues, to highlight the benefits of the region's world class telecoms infrastructure, including the transatlantic link provided by Project Kelvin, to promote Northern Ireland as an attractive and viable location for new inward investment opportunities, and to secure additional projects from existing international investors. The agency conducted an informal survey some years ago to assess the extent to which Project Kelvin was important to investment decisions. The survey found that, between going fully operational in Spring 2010 until the end of Financial year 2011-12,

approximately 25% of first time investors (14 companies) rated the transatlantic link as either crucial to their investment decision or a contributing factor. Two of the companies in question invested in the Foyle Constituency area. It would not be unreasonable to assume that Project Kelvin continues to be an influencing factor in a similar proportion of more recent investors, especially those in the ICT and financial services for whom high-speed internet connectivity is crucial. Telecoms infrastructure is just one of the factors that influence an investment decision. An investor will make this decision based on a combination of factors, including the availability of a skilled workforce, availability of suitable office accommodation and other infrastructure issues.

(iii) The independent evaluation concluded that the project offered value for money as follows:

- In addition to the mandatory locations required, the contractor successfully utilised the pre-existing Saturn ring network in Northern Ireland to achieve an additional 10 access points to the terrestrial network, in order to further enhance the international and regional connectivity of those towns and cities;
- The contractor offered costs for international connectivity to businesses comparable to those available in cities such as Glasgow, Manchester and Dublin;
- Project Kelvin ensured greater competition in the telecoms market;
- Levels of latency achieved between the North West region and New York and Amsterdam were substantially below the mandatory levels;
- The total investment required from the Interreg IVA Programme was €29.5m, however, the total cost of Kelvin was €75.9m. Therefore, €46.4m of private sector investment was leveraged;
- Customers utilising the Kelvin infrastructure indicated that it provided large data users with reassurance of resilience and security of supply, due to the direct international telecoms link; and
- The project has had a positive impact on costs for customers due to the greater competition. AQW 11457/17-22 As the Project Kelvin contract concluded in 2018, my Department does not hold details of the number of businesses and other organisations currently connected to the Project Kelvin network.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will amend the criteria for the Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme to ensure that those that became self-employed from September 2019 to March 2020 are included in the scheme. (AQW 11476/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The UK Government's Self-Employed Income Support Scheme excluded those who started trading in 2019/20 as these individuals would not have been able to provide HMRC with the data needed to properly guard against the risk of fraud. The Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme (NSESS) is targeted at this population and applies broadly the same methodology as the SEISS.

I appreciate there remains self-employed individuals impacted by the limits on the NSESS and SEISS. In particular, I am aware of these impacts on those who became self-employed in 2018/19 that were excluded from the SEISS or received limited support due to the policy design of the scheme.

I fully appreciate that this is frustrating for those individuals. However, the scheme was designed to fit within the £10 million funding envelope approved by the Executive. The criteria for the scheme was approved by the Executive. Extending eligibility criteria to try and redress issues around existing national policy decisions has wide ranging implications - not least on affordability - and, therefore, changing the criteria for the scheme is a decision for the Executive.

Mr Frew asked the Minister for the Economy why applicants need to earn 50 per cent of their earnings from self-employment to be eligible for the Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme, given that, if they went self-employed from September 2019 onwards, it would be difficult to earn more in self-employment compared to 6 months of PAYE; and whether she will change criteria to allow the applicants to provide their P45 from their last PAYE job to show they left PAYE work. (AQW 11504/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department has already delivered £350m of lifeline support to the Northern Ireland economy, and is in the process of delivering another £200m of essential support to our businesses. Within this package of new schemes agreed by the Executive, I launched the Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme (NSESS) on 3 December 2020.

The UK Government's Self-Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS) excluded those who started trading in 2019/20 as these individuals would not have been able to provide HMRC with the data needed to properly guard against the risk of fraud. The Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme (NSESS) is targeted at this population and applies broadly the same methodology as the SEISS. The NSESS does not seek to redress any inequities as a result of policy decisions made in the SEISS.

I appreciate there remains self-employed individuals impacted by the limits on the NSESS and SEISS. In particular, I am aware of these impacts on those who received less than 50% of their income from Self-Employment in 2019/20, and those who became self-employed in 2018/19 that were excluded from the SEISS or received limited support due to the policy design of the scheme.

I fully appreciate that this is frustrating for those individuals. However, the scheme was designed to fit within the £10 million funding envelope approved by the Executive. The criteria for the scheme was approved by the Executive. Extending eligibility criteria to try and redress issues around existing national policy decisions has wide ranging implications - not least on affordability - and, therefore, changing the criteria for the scheme is a decision for the Executive.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) what steps she has taken to encourage more students from Northern Ireland to pursue courses or careers in the medical professions; and (ii) what conversations she has had with the Minister of Health in relation to the above issue.

(AQW 11571/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department's Careers Service provides an independent advice service to all people, including students, when they are considering their career choices. This would include advice on opportunities across the broad range of health and medical careers.

However, my Department does not have specific responsibility for encouraging people to pursue courses or careers in the medical professions. At the higher education level, the Minister for Health has sole responsibility for quota-controlled courses in subjects allied to Medicine. For this reason, I have not had any conversations with him on this matter.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy to detail her Department's advice for workers who are entitled to furlough but their employer is not making a payment.

(AQW 11623/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) is a UK wide Government initiative. Responsibility for the policy and administration of the CJRS falls to Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC). Full details on employee eligibility and HMRC advice can be found using the link below:

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/check-if-you-could-be-covered-by-the-coronavirus-job-retention-scheme>

As such, individuals may wish to contact HMRC directly to discuss their employer's participation in the Scheme. From February, however, as part of HMRC's commitment to transparency and to deter fraudulent claims, HMRC has stated that it will publish information about employers who claim for periods starting on or after 1 December on GOV.UK.

An employee who believes their employment rights 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 on employment rights. The Law Centre can be contacted on its advice line on 028 9024 4401 or by email: employmentadvice@lawcentreni.org.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of the implications for Northern Ireland's energy strategy of the UK Prime Minister's Ten Point Plan for a green industrial revolution.

(AQW 11672/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Prime Minister's Ten Point Plan is welcomed as many of the aspirations within the Plan are well aligned with key areas being considered as part of a future NI Energy Strategy.

The Plan demonstrates the UK Government's commitment to hydrogen, and I have previously outlined my vision for a local hydrogen economy. I was delighted to recently provide funding to NI Water for an innovative new commercial-size electrolyser, and am aware of a range of exciting proposals that could showcase our potential to develop cutting-edge hydrogen technology here. I have met with BEIS Minister Kwarteng to ensure that hydrogen funding opportunities are available for Northern Ireland. I was glad to see the focus on energy efficiency, which is a key driver to reduce energy consumption and lower carbon emissions, as well as helping to eradicate fuel poverty and promote positive health outcomes. The commitments set out in relation to Greener Buildings in the Ten Point Plan largely relate to policy proposals for England, reflecting the devolved nature of energy policy across the Devolved Administrations. Through the Energy Strategy, I will consider policy options to drive forward energy efficiency in both the domestic and non-domestic sectors in Northern Ireland.

I noted that the plan commits to reducing emissions in schools, hospitals and public buildings. Through my funding for the Energy Management Unit in the Strategic Investment Board, work is well underway to achieve the milestone that by 2030 there will be a 30% reduction in carbon emissions across NI Central Government compared to a 2016-17 baseline.

Finally, I have previously stated that I would like the level of electricity that is generated from renewable sources to be at least 70% by 2030. In order to achieve such an ambition, we will need to look at technologies including offshore wind, which was included in the Plan. The development of the Energy Strategy is considering how such diversification could be best facilitated, as well as ensuring our companies can benefit from the supply chain opportunities that will arise from UK offshore developments announced in the Plan.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy to detail her Department's assessment to any possible future enterprise zones.

(AQW 11676/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: HM Treasury has responsibility for designating Enterprise Zones (EZs) and laid the Statutory Instrument designating a pilot Enterprise Zone in Coleraine in July 2016. It came into force on 5 August 2016.

In Northern Ireland, the EZ offers Enhanced Capital Allowances (ECAs) which permit 100 per cent first year allowances for qualifying plant and machinery expenditure. The designation of any future EZ in Northern Ireland would require consultation with the Department of Finance, who are responsible for tax policy in NI, and HMT, as ECAs are tax benefits.

The Atlantic Link Enterprise Campus in Coleraine is the only designated EZ in NI. My Department's role is to ensure that the designated area is developed by Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council (CC&GC) in a way which is consistent with the application for designation and criteria, namely, that the EZ has a clear aim of attracting capital intensive companies. CC&GC has been marketing the site and DfE is working with the Council to ensure that appropriate monitoring data is collected to enable an evaluation of the pilot to inform any future recommendations on EZs. HMT has confirmed that ECAs are not due to expire in Coleraine until 2024. A full evaluation of the pilot will take place then.

Freeports is a UK Government policy, which is being led locally by the Minister for Finance. However, as an Executive, we are considering it carefully with a view to understanding how it could work best in the Northern Ireland context. It is important that we get the policy right and I am exploring how a Freeport can complement and magnify our economic ambitions in a way that supports a regionally balanced economy. Working alongside their DoF colleagues, my officials are engaging with UK Government, Port operators, Councils, Business Representative Bodies and others in that regard.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy (i) whether she has plans to remove the 11:00pm curfew on hot food delivery, bringing Northern Ireland in line with the rest of the UK and enabling shift workers, including those in many front-line services such as medical staff, to get hot food delivered after 11:00pm; and (ii) whether she sees this as a fairer way to treat businesses who primarily operate at night.

(AQW 11702/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: These matters are not within the remit of my department.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department intends to extend criteria for the Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme so that individuals who went self-employed before the 2019/20 tax year, and are ineligible for the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme, can access this support.

(AQW 11713/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department has already delivered £350m of lifeline support to the Northern Ireland economy, and is in the process of delivering another £200m of essential support to our businesses. Within this package of new schemes agreed by the Executive, I launched the Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme (NSESS) on 3 December 2020.

The UK Government's Self-Employed Income Support Scheme excluded those who started trading in 2019/20 as these individuals would not have been able to provide HMRC with the data needed to properly guard against the risk of fraud. The Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme (NSESS) is targeted at this population and applies broadly the same methodology as the SEISS.

I appreciate there remains self-employed individuals impacted by the limits on the NSESS and SEISS. In particular those who became self-employed in 2018/19 that were excluded from the SEISS or received limited support due to the policy design of the scheme.

I fully appreciate that this is frustrating for those individuals. However, the scheme was designed to fit within the £10 million funding envelope approved by the Executive. The criteria for the scheme was approved by the Executive. Extending eligibility criteria to try and redress issues around existing national policy decisions has wide ranging implications - not least on affordability - and, therefore, changing the criteria for the scheme is a decision for the Executive.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy how Maternity Pay and Maternity Allowance is interpreted in the Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme in terms of the 50 per cent income threshold.

(AQW 11734/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Self-employed individuals claiming maternity allowance are entitled to apply for the NSESS as long as they meet the eligibility criteria and can demonstrate their trading has been impacted as a result of COVID-19.

Maternity allowance is not taxable income and is not taken into account in determining eligibility for NSESS.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the number of newly self-employed people which have been excluded under the Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme.

(AQW 11735/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I launched the Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme (NSESS) on 3 December 2020. It will provide financial support to approximately 2,900 newly self-employed individuals (sole traders and those in partnerships) whose business is adversely impacted by Covid and who have not able to access support from the UK government's Self-Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS).

The UK Government's Self-Employed Income Support Scheme excluded those who started trading in 2019/20 as these individuals would not have been able to provide HMRC with the data needed to properly guard against the risk of fraud. The NSESS is targeted at this population and applies broadly the same methodology as the SEISS. The NSESS does not seek to redress any inequities as a result of policy decisions made in the SEISS. The criteria for the scheme was approved by the Executive.

As a result of employing similar criteria as the SEISS, I appreciate that not all of those who commenced self-employment in 2019/20 will be eligible for the NSESS, for example those whose income from self-employment was less than 50% of total income or those whose trading profits exceeded £50k. I fully appreciate that this is frustrating for those individuals. Due to lack of data, it is not possible to estimate how many self-employed will not qualify for the scheme. However to date, over 2,000 self-employed have started their applications to the scheme and over 750 applications have been submitted.

There is a £10 million funding envelope for the scheme and the eligibility criteria was designed within this funding envelope. The utilisation of any underspend from this scheme as well as any wider funding support will be a decision for the Executive to make collectively.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy, given that HMRC has confirmed that they cannot resend the SA250 form and many will not have saved a copy, whether she intends to accept alternative documentation to prove eligibility for the Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme.

(AQW 11753/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: If applicants no longer have a copy of the SA250 letter sent to them by HMRC when they registered for Self-employment they should contact HMRC requesting a letter to confirm the date they started self-employment. The letter must be on HMRC headed paper, and should also clearly show their name, address and UTR. Applicants should submit a clear and legible scanned, photograph or screenshot copy of this letter with their application.

Further information regarding eligibility documentation can be found in the FAQs on the NI Business Info website here:

Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme (<https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/sites/default/files/2020-12/Newly-Self-Employed-Support-Scheme-FAQs-14-December-2020.pdf>)

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for the Economy what plans she has to prevent excessive payment to wind turbine owners that install derated wind turbines which increase the income that they will receive from Renewable Obligation Certificate's to a higher level than was originally estimated by the scheme and which, in turn, increases the cost of electricity to consumers.

(AQW 11782/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Please note that no direct payments are made to NIRO accredited wind turbine owners from Government. Renewable electricity generators receive income by selling Renewable Obligation Certificates (ROCs) in a UK-wide market to electricity suppliers to meet the obligation placed on them by UK Government. The price they receive for these ROCs is determined by demand and supply.

The practice of installing de-rated turbines is permitted throughout the UK across all of the different renewable electricity support mechanisms. Generators wishing to install such equipment must satisfy Ofgem, as administrator of the NIRO, that the capacity of the generating stations is in accordance with the requirements of the associated legislation. Work is ongoing to establish whether load factors, which refers to the level of electricity output compared to the capacity of the station, are consistently higher for de-rated turbines.

The number of ROCs issued to all generators is directly dependent on the amount of renewable electricity they can generate. The renewable electricity they generate is used by consumers and contributes to Northern Ireland's renewables targets, therefore helping to displace imported fossil fuels which would otherwise be supplied instead.

The NI Audit Office report includes a recommendation to carry out a review of all types of renewable generators to ensure that the levels of support available and rates of return for renewable electricity generators are compatible with projections. The Department has accepted this recommendation and will ensure that de-rated onshore wind turbines will be considered in that context.

Dr Aiken asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on her Department's preparations for a no-deal Brexit; and the measures which will be in place to support businesses.

(AQW 11787/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Despite the lack of clarity in some areas my Department continues to prepare for the end of the transition period, including ensuring policy and legislation are adapted as necessary. The focus is on the implementation of the NI Protocol and the possibility of a non-negotiated outcome. My officials will act swiftly to translate this clarity into guidance and support for those who need it.

My Department has also been engaged in the development of support measures to prepare businesses, whether we reach a deal or no-deal outcome. InvestNI offers a range of support services to companies and InterTradeIreland's Brexit Advisory Service provides financial and professional support. We also support businesses through providing information to assist in preparations on NI Business Info. This draws together material from a wide range of sources to provide a 'one stop shop' for guidance.

My Department will continue to provide advice, guidance and support to businesses in the months ahead to support our businesses to adjust to the new trading environment.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy to detail what communications she has already had with (i) student bodies/organisations; (ii) universities; and (iii) individual students about students' return for semester two.

(AQW 11794/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department for Health has lead responsibility for guidance in relation to the safety of students and the wider public. There are a number of cross-cutting issues related to student travel and welfare and the Executive Office has been asked to co-ordinate these plans, with a Task and Finish Group established to do so, which my officials have been involved in, alongside a variety of other Departments.

There is guidance, approved by my Health and Executive Office colleagues, for students travelling at Christmas time and the NUS-SUI were given sight of this draft guidance for comment. The feedback provided included a call for clarity in relation to the return which has been fed back into the TEO led task group. It is intended they will be consulted, in regards to any further guidance, to provide messaging to students to best ensure compliance.

There has been engagement with the local HE providers around their plans for semester 2 in relation to term start dates and percentage of face to face delivery planned to feed into any wider guidance produced by the Task Group.

My Department has had no discussions with individual students and there are no plans to do so.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy (i) when will she release guidance on the return to campus for semester two for students in higher education; (ii) how does she plan to engage with student representatives over the development of these plans; and (iii) what communication has her Department had with other jurisdictions in the UK around the return to campus for semester two.

(AQW 11795/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department for Health has lead responsibility for guidance in relation to the safety of students and the wider public.

There are a number of cross-cutting issues related to student travel and welfare and the Executive Office has been asked to co-ordinate these plans, with a Task and Finish Group established to do so, which my officials have been involved in, alongside a variety of other Departments.

There is guidance, approved by my Health and Executive Office colleagues, for students travelling at Christmas time and the NUS-SUI were given sight of this draft guidance for comment. The feedback provided included a call for clarity in relation to the return which has been fed back into the TEO led task group.

It is intended they will be consulted, in regards to any further guidance, to provide messaging to students to best ensure compliance.

Departmental officials have been meeting with the other devolved administrations twice weekly to discuss plans and to ensure consistency of message (where possible).

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 10160/17-22, where the £397,401 returned to her Department was reallocated.

(AQW 11876/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The £397,401 unspent Further Education (FE) Hardship Funding, from 2019/20 academic year, returned to the Department was reallocated as detailed below.

As part of January 2020 Monitoring Round, £220,000 was reallocated from Hardship Fund to the FE colleges to partially meet sector staff cost pressures. A breakdown per individual college cannot be provided as FE college staff cost pressures were also partially met by other reallocations.

In addition, at 2019/20 financial year end £94,000 Hardship Fund easement was used to part off-set general FE college pressures across the sector. As the colleges' overall pressures were off-set by easements in addition to the £94,000 from Hardship Fund, a split per individual college cannot be provided for the £94,000.

Due to timing differences between the Department's 31st March financial year end and the colleges' 31st July academic year end, the balance of £83,401 has not yet been reallocated. The Department is currently retaining this as a reserve to meet any potential surge in demand for Hardship Fund due to COVID-19.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the rationale for not aligning the dates relating to eligibility for the Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme with the cut-off dates for eligibility in the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme.

(AQW 11897/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The dates related to eligibility for the NSESS and SEISS are aligned as those who started self-employment prior to 6 April 2019 could apply for SEISS as long as they had submitted their 2018/19 tax return. Although the 2018/19 tax return was due by 31st January 2020, HMRC extended the date for submission to 23 April 2020.

The intention of the Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme is to allow those who were outside the scope of the Self-employment Income Support Scheme (i.e. those who only commenced self-employment during the 2019/20 financial year and did not submit a tax return for 2018/19) an opportunity to apply for the grant.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on work undertaken by her Department to widen the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme to include all newly self-employed that have been continually self-employed between April 2019 and April 2020.

(AQW 11900/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department has already delivered £350m of lifeline support to the Northern Ireland economy, and is in the process of delivering another £200m of essential support to our businesses. Within this package of new schemes agreed by the Executive, I launched the Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme (NSESS) on 3 December 2020.

The UK Government's Self-Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS) excluded those who started trading in 2019/20 as these individuals would not have been able to provide HMRC with the data needed to properly guard against the risk of fraud. The Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme (NSESS) is targeted at this population and applies broadly the same methodology as the SEISS.

The NSESS does not seek to redress any inequities as a result of policy decisions made in the SEISS. However, I acknowledge there remains self-employed individuals impacted by the limits on the NSESS and SEISS. I fully appreciate that this is frustrating for those individuals. However, as you know, the scheme was designed to fit within the £10 million funding envelope approved by the Executive. The criteria for the scheme was approved by the Executive. Extending eligibility criteria to try and redress issues around existing national policy decisions has wide ranging implications - not least on affordability - and, therefore, changing the criteria for the scheme is a decision for the Executive.

I remain committed to working with my Executive Colleagues to support as many businesses as possible facing challenges as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 11625/17-22, whether she will release the legal advice she received on the matter.

(AQW 11924/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: In response to AQW 11625, I indicated that I have taken legal advice in relation to a moratorium on petroleum licensing for all exploration for, drilling for and extraction of hydrocarbon and that I had been advised that such a course of action would most likely be subject to challenge.

Such legal advice is protected by legal professional privilege and I do not intend to publish it.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy whether businesses that are permitted to reopen and resume trading following the lifting of some COVID-19 restrictions but choose to remain closed, will automatically receive support from the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme.

(AQW 11926/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme has been introduced to provide financial support to businesses affected by the Health Protection Regulations. The support is available to affected businesses for the duration of the restrictions. As such, the scheme does not apply to periods outside of the restrictions.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy, in relation to the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme, to detail the number of applications submitted from each local council area, to (i) Part A; and (ii) Part B of the Scheme.

(AQW 11927/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Information in relation to the number of businesses that that have applied to the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme and received payment can be accessed online via the following webpages

Part A: <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/covid-restrictions-business-support-scheme-part>

Part B: <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/covid-restrictions-business-support-scheme-part-b>

Here you can find information about the operation of the scheme to date. Based upon applications received this details applications by status (draft/submitted/processed/rejected/paid), and provides a facility to interrogate by District Council area and Parliamentary Constituency. This data will be updated on a weekly basis.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for the Economy whether residents of this jurisdiction will be eligible for European Union fee rates at universities in the Republic of Ireland following the end of the EU exit implementation period.

(AQW 11938/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Fees for University courses in the Republic of Ireland is a matter for their Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. In January 2020 Republic of Ireland Ministers announced that UK students starting courses in academic year 2020/21 would continue to be charged the same €3,000 as their 'home' students for the duration of their courses. In recent years they have announced their fee policy in the January before the academic year starts.

I can confirm that in signing the Common Travel Area Memorandum of Understanding on 8 May 2019 the UK and Republic of Ireland Governments state their high level commitment that British and Irish citizens will continue to have access to all levels

of education and associated student support in each other's state on terms no less favourable than those for the citizens of that state.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 10294/17-22, to detail (i) her options; and (ii) her plans to utilise the remaining £22.2 million underspend in the Annually Managed Expenditure for the Renewable Heat Incentive. (AQW 11939/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As I advised in my responses to AQW 11484/17-22 and AQW 10294/17-22, the AME budget available for the Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme has not all been drawn down from HM Treasury. This budget can only be used to incentivise the use of renewable heat and again we cannot simply adopt a tariff that maximises use of available budget.

On the basis that the Non-domestic RHI Scheme will be closed in line with the commitment made in the New Decade, New Approach deal, proposals for a replacement scheme to incentivise generation of heat from renewable sources will be brought forward at a later date.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for the Economy how many instances of petroleum exploration there have been in Northern Ireland, in each of the last five financial years.

(AQW 11973/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: All petroleum exploration activities that take place in the Northern Ireland are carried out under licence from the Department for the Economy.

During the past five financial years, two Petroleum Licences were active in Northern Ireland: PL1/10, awarded to InfraStrata Plc and eCorp Oil & Gas UK Limited on 4 March 2011 and PL3/10, awarded to Rathlin Energy Limited on 15 February 2011. These licences were relinquished in April 2020 and October 2015 respectively.

Petroleum exploration activities include desk-based studies, laboratory-based analyses or ground-based activities such as exploratory drilling or seismic surveying.

The exploration activities carried out in Northern Ireland in each of the last five financial years is as follows:

2019/20 None

2018/19 None

2017/18 Desk-based studies on the Identification and Characterisation of Source Rock potential in the Larne Basin and an Air-FTG® Feasibility Modelling Report (PL1/10).

2016/17 Drilling of the Woodburn Forest No. 1 Well and associated subsequent studies: Downhole Geophysical Logging, Isotopic Analysis of Gas Samples, Petrophysical Analysis, Biostratigraphical Analysis (PL1/10).

2015/16 Plugging and Abandonment of Ballinlea No. 1 Well (PL3/10).

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 10129/17-22, by which date her Department intends to have processed the remaining applications for Part A of the COVID-19 Restrictions Business Support Scheme.

(AQW 11978/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As at midnight on Wednesday 16th December, following closure of the scheme at 6pm that day, Invest NI had completed initial processing of circa 94% of submitted applications and has made payments to circa 73%. Invest NI will continue to work across the forthcoming week, and weekend, to facilitate further payments with the aim of completing the processing and payment, or rejection as appropriate, of the vast majority of CRBSS Part A applications in advance of the Christmas Holidays.

Unfortunately, Invest NI do not anticipate that they will be able to close out all applications before Christmas.

In line with other schemes, there was an uplift in the number of submitted applications in advance of the closure of the scheme. This will result in the processing of these late applications, as well as the more complex applications, stretching to beyond Christmas.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister for the Economy what guidance her Department has issued to higher education institutions in relation to (i) the COVID-19 pandemic; and (ii) how to operate in the next semester.

(AQW 11980/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Your question has been passed to me, as Minister for the Economy, for answer.

There has been a wide range of advice and support provided to our higher education institutions throughout the pandemic by my Department, and others, such as the Department for Health who have lead responsibility for student safety. Much of this information can be found on the NI Direct website and is reflected on the pages of the individual institutions.

There are a number of cross-cutting issues related to student travel and welfare and the Executive Office has been asked to co-ordinate these plans, with a Task and Finish Group established to do so, which my officials have been involved in, alongside a variety of other Departments. There is guidance, approved by my Health and Executive Office colleagues, for

students travelling at Christmas time and considerations are ongoing as to the requirements of further guidance for semester two.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister for the Economy (i) what date the Covid Restrictions Business Support Part A and Part B schemes opened for applications; (ii) what date the first payment under each part of the scheme was made; (iii) how many applications were received for each part of the scheme from the East Derry constituency up to Friday 27 November; (iv) how many payments were made by this date; and (v) what is the total amount paid.

(AQW 11982/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Information in relation to the number of businesses that that have applied to the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme and received payment can be accessed online via the following webpages

Part A: <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/covid-restrictions-business-support-scheme-part>

Part B: <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/covid-restrictions-business-support-scheme-part-b>

Here you can find information about the operation of the scheme to date. Based upon applications received this details applications by status (draft/submitted/processed/rejected/paid), and provides a facility to interrogate by District Council area and Parliamentary Constituency. This data will be updated on a weekly basis.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 10972/17-22, to detail the criteria for receiving the £200 High Street Stimulus Scheme voucher.

(AQW 12011/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Pursuant to AQW 10972/17-22, the specifics of the Northern Ireland High Street Stimulus scheme are still being finalised and eligibility criteria has not yet been confirmed.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will engage with disability groups on Brexit affecting their access to motability vehicles.

(AQW 12033/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: This is not an issue within my remit. To date I have not been approached by any groups with this particular concern.

If the issues relate to tariffs, this is a reserved matter but I will continue to press the UK government for the best outcome for the businesses and people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will consider legislating to provide greater consumer protections to static caravan owners who do not have a caravan as a primary residence.

(AQW 12057/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Caravans Act (NI) 2011 Part 2 provides legislative cover in respect of the seasonal caravan sector in Northern Ireland. Responsibility for the Act is shared between the Department for Communities (DfC) and my Department.

However, it is DfC which is obliged to review Parts 1 and 2 of the Schedule every 5 years. The last review took place in 2016 and there were no recommendations arising from it. The next review is scheduled for 2021 and stakeholders including DfE will have an opportunity to contribute input.

I can assure you that I fully recognise the vital contribution consumers provide to the Northern Ireland economy and I support the need to ensure that consumer protection rights are adequate and proportionate. My Department's Trading Standards Service continuously engages with, and monitors feedback from, consumers and traders, to ensure consumer rights and responsibilities are upheld and appropriate enforcement action taken as necessary.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy why wind farms that were not connected to the electricity grid were deemed eligible for inclusion for payments under the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation.

(AQW 12186/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: It is important to note that the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation (NIRO) is a market based scheme which operates on the basis of trading Renewable Obligation Certificates across the UK. It is not a grant scheme and payments are not made to generators directly from government.

The NIRO operates in parallel with the Renewables Obligations (ROs) in Great Britain and legislation regarding the eligibility of generating stations operating off-grid, relating to all three ROs as well as the small scale Feed-in Tariff in GB, is consistent in this regard. Off-grid stations, therefore, are evident throughout the UK and contribute towards the overall objectives of the ROs to encourage increased levels of renewable electricity and to displace electricity generated from fossil fuels. All off-grid stations in Northern Ireland are small scale and whilst a small number of stand-alone onshore wind turbines are operating off-grid, no wind farms are operating in this manner.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy why wind farms that had not been given planning permission were deemed eligible for inclusion for payments under the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation.

(AQW 12187/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: It is important to note that the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation (NIRO) is a market based scheme which operates on the basis of trading Renewable Obligation Certificates across the UK. It is not a grant scheme and payments are not made to generators directly from government.

I am not aware of any wind farms that have been accredited to the NIRO without planning permission

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for the Economy (i) what engagement has she had with student leaders and representatives of students about the issues facing them in relation to accommodation costs for 2020/21; (ii) whether she has considered any packages of support to help students who are tied into accommodation contracts; and (iii) to detail any financial support she plans to bring forward for student renters who cannot avail of their properties from January 2021 to June 2021.

(AQW 12212/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: On 14 October 2020, I had a 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 agreed with NUS-USI that my officials would seek their views and ensure that they are taken into consideration as we move forward. NUS-USI remain in regular correspondence with the Department. While my Department provides funding to, and sets the strategic direction for the Higher Education sector in Northern Ireland, student accommodation, whether University halls of residence or private rental housing, is a matter between the individual student and their landlord. My Department has no remit in determining whether students should receive a refund of or reduction to their accommodation fees as a result of the disruption caused by the Covid pandemic.

However, any students experiencing financial hardship should first of all ensure that they have applied online at www.studentfinancenl.co.uk for all the financial assistance to which they may be entitled. My Department delivers financial support to eligible Northern Ireland students through Student Finance NI, and by the end of November 2020 had provided £84m in maintenance loans and a further £37m in maintenance grants as a contribution towards students' living costs during the academic year, including the cost of accommodation.

Students who continue to find themselves in genuine financial hardship should contact their University to see if they are eligible for a hardship payment. These payments are funded through my Department, and in the 2020/21 financial year, I have doubled the total amount of funding available for them from £2.8m to £5.6m in recognition of the economic conditions caused by the pandemic.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister for the Economy (i) what date the New Apprenticeships Incentive Scheme opened for applications; (ii) what date the first payment was made; (iii) how many applications were received from the East Derry constituency up to and including Wednesday 16 December; (iv) how many payments were made by this date; and (v) to detail the total amount paid to this constituency under this scheme.

(AQW 12262/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- i There are three separate elements to the Apprenticeships Recovery Package:
- New Apprenticeship Recruitment Incentive – A new incentive programme providing up to £3,000 for each new apprenticeship opportunity created between 1st April 2020 and 31st March 2021. This scheme opened for applications on the 16th October 2020.
 - Return Retain Result (RRR) – An Incentive scheme providing up to £3,700 to support employers to return apprentices from furlough and retain their employment through to the 31st March 2021 and on to successful completion of their apprenticeship. This scheme opened for applications on the 1st December 2020, the earliest date a successful application could be made; and
 - Challenge Fund – A one off grant scheme to promote the development and testing of new and innovative models of apprenticeship recruitment and delivery. The Challenge Fund opened for applications on 28th September 2020 and closed on 23rd October 2020.
- ii. Since the launch of the schemes the Department has been working at pace to put in place the people, processes and systems required to administer the schemes and process payments. The first round of payments, for the New Apprenticeship Recruitment Incentive, were processed on Friday 27th November 2020 with payments expected to reach bank accounts no later than Thursday 3rd December 2020. The first payment for the RRR scheme was processed on Monday 7th December 2020 with payment expected to reach the bank account no later than Friday 11th December 2020.
- iii. As of 16th December 2020 a total of 197 applications had been received for the Recruitment of New Apprenticeships Incentive Scheme of which two were from an employer based in the East Derry constituency.

As of 16th December 2020 a total of 44 applications had been received for the Return, Retain and Result Scheme of which none were from an employer based in the East Derry constituency.

The Challenge Fund received 46 applications with 13 projects chosen to receive funding. Successful applicants have been notified and officials are working closely to agree costs and activities ahead of Letter of Offer issue. A number of projects are NI wide and therefore cannot be broken down into constituencies.

- iv. As of 16th December 2020 32 payments have been processed for the New Apprenticeship Recruitment Incentive scheme and 32 payments have been processed for RRR. No payments have been made from the Challenge Fund, as final activities and costs are in the process of being agreed.
- v. To date no payments have been made to employers from the East Derry constituency for the New Apprenticeships Recruitment scheme or RRR scheme. A key aspect of the New Apprenticeships Recruitment scheme is to promote longer term outcomes with employers becoming eligible for a payment of £2,000 90 days after the beginning of the new apprenticeship followed by a payment of £1,000 200 days from the beginning of the apprenticeship. The Department is working with all those who have submitted applications deemed ineligible to ensure applications are re-submitted with required evidence once the 90 day milestone has been reached at which point payment will be made. The launch of these schemes has been supported by an advertising campaign across TV, radio and social media, my Department has also been working with training providers to ensure that employers are made aware of the support available. I would encourage you to utilise your networks to help ensure that employers within your constituency, and across Northern Ireland, are aware of the support that is available for apprenticeships via the new Apprentice Recruitment Incentive and the Return Retain Result scheme. Further information on both schemes can be found at the following address: <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/coronavirus-apprenticeship-recovery-package>

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Mr Carroll asked the Assembly Commission to detail the (i) individuals; and (ii) groups on the advisory group in relation to establishing the Youth Assembly.

(AQW 11775/17-22)

Mr Butler (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The Speaker has met with a range of organisations and individuals to invite them to join the Advisory Group over recent weeks and is now awaiting the confirmation of nominations.

Once the membership is finalised, I understand that the Speaker, as Chairperson of the Advisory Group, will write to all Members to provide the details.

Mr Carroll asked the Assembly Commission to detail any consideration it has given introducing, or supporting, legislation to ensure that the Youth Assembly will be a permanent feature and not subject to budgetary or operational constraints.

(AQW 11777/17-22)

Mr K Buchanan (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): To ask the Assembly Commission to detail any consideration it has given [sic] introducing, or supporting, legislation to ensure that the Youth Assembly will be a permanent feature and not subject to budgetary or operational constraints.

(AQW 11777/17-22)

As you will be aware, the Assembly Commission agreed proposals, including resourcing, for the Youth Assembly at its meeting on 11 May 2020 and those proposals were announced on 22 July 2020. Since then, two Education Officers from the Education Service have and will continue to work on establishing the Youth Assembly and two Youth Assembly Participation Officers were appointed at the end of November. Therefore, it is considered that budgetary and operational constraints should not arise during the 'pioneer' phase of the Youth Assembly.

Let me assure you that the Assembly Commission has been, and continues to be, keen to progress the establishment of the Youth Assembly as a matter of priority.

Mr Carroll asked the Assembly Commission who sits on the co-design panel to establish the Youth Assembly.

(AQW 11850/17-22)

Mr Butler (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): To ask the Assembly Commission who sits on the co-design panel to establish the Youth Assembly.

(AQW 11850/17-22)

A young person's Youth Assembly Co-design Panel has been established to help co-design some of the practicalities relating to the Youth Assembly, notably around recruitment and selection, induction and communication. To date, the following organisations have been invited to nominate a representative to the panel:

- Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People
- Children's Law Centre
- National Children's Bureau
- VOYPIC (Voice of Young People in Care)
- Boys' and Girls' Clubs

- Northern Ireland Youth Forum
- Uniformed Organisations Youth Work Hub (Girl Guiding Ulster, Scouts NI, Girls' Brigade, Boys' Brigade Northern Ireland District, Catholic Guides of Ireland, Scout Foundation NI, Scouting Ireland)
- Disability Sport NI
- Bryson Future Skills
- Angel Eyes NI
- UK Youth Parliament
- YouthAction
- Irish Football Association
- Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster
- Cara Friend
- Disability Action
- Derry and Strabane City Council - North West Ministry of Youth
- Rainbow Project
- Fóram na Nog
- Mencap
- Sported
- GAA
- Ulster Rugby

For your information, the Co-design Panel has already held several sessions during this month and, indeed, it is hoped that it will complete its work by the end of January 2021.

Mr McGlone asked the Assembly Commission what measures are being taken to improve wi-fi in Parliament Buildings.
(AQW 12021/17-22)

Mr Butler (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): To ask the Assembly Commission what measures are being taken to improve wi-fi in Parliament Buildings.

(AQW 12021/17-22)

The current Wi-Fi network was installed in Parliament Buildings in 2013 and originally consisted of 84 wireless access points located throughout the building. An additional 16 access points were purchased and installed in 2015 in order to improve the overall Wi-Fi signal coverage for building users.

The current Wi-Fi network shares the Assembly's main internet connection, which was upgraded from 80 to 500 Megabits in 2017. The speed of this connection is monitored on a daily basis and is currently operating well within the capacity of the connection.

Since the return of Assembly business in 2020 and the greater demand for video conferencing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, IS Office is aware that Wi-Fi connectivity and signal quality has been an issue for some Members.

In response IS Office has recently purchased web cams for use by Members and party support staff and these are currently being rolled out. The web cams will be installed on desktop PCs in Parliament Buildings and as they will use the Assembly wired network, they should provide a much more reliable service.

IS Office has also recently issued written advice to Members on how best to manage Wi-Fi connections on mobile devices.

As the current system is approaching end of life, IS Office intends to undertake a review of the system and to set up a project to replace the Wi-Fi network infrastructure before the end of the current Assembly mandate.

Should Members experience any difficulty with Wi-Fi access or performance in Parliament Buildings they should contact the IS Office Service Desk. IS Office will continue to monitor the current Wi-Fi service in Parliament Buildings and will respond appropriately to any specific issues as they arise.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 1 January 2021

Written Answers to Questions

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in the interest of public awareness, whether he will ensure that (i) the critical levels for ammonia emissions; (ii) the critical loads of nitrogen deposition; and (iii) where these are both being exceeded, are displayed on the outdoor information panels and visitor centre notice boards of all nature conservation sites owned and managed by his Department.

(AQW 10431/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): There are no plans to update all information panels on our protected sites and country parks and no specific policy for what information is displayed. Information panels are updated as and when needed. Information on the specific pressures or threats facing a protected habitat are not routinely included. However, given the growing public awareness and interest in environmental issues, inclusion of more detailed environmental information and educational material may be considered in the future.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for a breakdown of funding to the contracted organisations throughout the term of the Rural Community Development Support Scheme by (i) all allocated; and (ii) any planned additional monies, for each year from 2018 to 2021 inclusive.

(AQW 10961/17-22)

Mr Poots: The information requested is set out in the table below:

Contracted Organisation	(i)Funding Allocated			(ii)Planned additional monies 2020/21
	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	
Northern Area Community Network	£161,161	£160,295	£146,820	£13,557
Rural Area Partnership in Derry Ltd	£68,838	£69,647	£60,602	£26,440
County Down Rural Community Network	£195,027	£193,058	£182,727	£27,914
Omagh Forum for Rural Associations	£98,168	£102,805	£88,409	£30,025
The Antrim, Down and Armagh Rural Support Network	£103,368	£99,854	£91,368	£27,914
Cookstown & Western Shores Area Network				
Partner – Community Organisations of South Tyrone Area	£135,040	£135,940	£121,824	£13,950

The Planned Additional Monies are for administration fees for the delivery of the Rural Micro Capital Grant Scheme in the current financial year and additional funding provided for the pilot 'Marginalised Minority Communities in Rural Border Areas' Programme.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to AQW 9851/17-22, for his assessment of how continued restrictions at household recycling centres are affecting (i) recycling; (ii) illegal waste disposal; (iii) fly-tipping levels; and (iv) the environment in general.

(AQW 11058/17-22)

Mr Poots: The majority of Household Waste Recycling Centres (HWRCs) have now re-opened across Northern Ireland, with 94 out of 96 sites now operational. While most HWRCs are now accepting all previous waste streams, local Councils have had to implement a number of measures across sites to ensure the health and safety of staff and the public. Despite this, the

impact on recycling overall appears to be limited, with recycling statistics dropping only 0.1% over a rolling 12 month period. Likewise, the current level and types of illegal waste disposal incidents being reported appear to be on a par with pre-COVID levels.

There has been no lasting impact on the environment in general. Dumping of small-scale waste that should otherwise be disposed of at HWRCs is cleared when DCs are made aware of it.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the impact incorrect disposal of feminine hygiene products has on (i) water pollution levels; and (ii) our marine environment.

(AQW 11160/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department does not hold specific water pollution statistics relating to the incorrect disposal of feminine hygiene products however these products would be captured in the general issue of Sewage Related Debris (SRD). SRD is reported to impact our rivers and our beaches due to both the operation of the sewerage system and the way that the public misuse the system.

By necessity, sewerage systems will have a number of storm water overflows present and these are designed to operate in wet weather only. These overflows are a necessary component in all sewerage networks that can carry storm water, as they ensure that flows cannot back up in the system and flood domestic or other properties. The discharges that will intermittently occur from these overflows, during storm events, are regulated by NIEA under Water (NI) Order 1999 Discharge Consents. It is impracticable to construct sewerage systems that would be capable of carrying the maximum possible storm flows, due to the size of the pipes and infrastructure that would be required to allow this. Also, during dry weather periods, the flows would be very low and, in such large diameter pipes, this would lead to septicity, odour, blockage and infestation issues.

Feminine hygiene products entering the environment in the first place is a direct result of the misuse of the sewerage system, either intentionally or inadvertently. As you will have seen from NI Water's recent television adverts, the sewerage systems in NI, similarly to the rest of the UK, suffer greatly from misuse by the public through the flushing of sanitary items, wipes, disposable nappies, cotton buds etc. Large volumes of these items block screens on sewerage systems and in addition block the sewers themselves causing polluting discharges.

The problems of flushing wipes has been exacerbated over the last months with people working from home during the COVID19 Crisis and an increase in the use of antibacterial and antiviral wipes. NI Water's cannot control directly what is flushed into the sewers and rely on educational measures such as their recent TV adverts and 'Bag it and Bin It' campaigns to alter behaviours. Such SRD will not enter the environment if it is not flushed into the sewerage system.

The presence of sewage related debris (SRD) on our coastal shores is indicative of the impact of the incorrect disposal of sanitary items and can be associated with an increase of faecal indicator bacteria in waters. Research has shown that up to 90% of sanitary products are comprised of plastics of various types. In the environment the fibres in these products become disassociated and breakdown into smaller fragments through UV degradation and physical abrasion, generating microplastic particles.

My Department is aware of the presence of sanitary products at bathing water sites and has initiated a monitoring programme to assess the overall level of microplastics in our marine water and sediments. It is too early at this stage to report on any findings from this monitoring programme.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs why cosmetics containing plastic micro beads are still on sale in Northern Ireland, despite having been banned by the UK Government.

(AQW 11201/17-22)

Mr Poots: The manufacture and sale of rinse-off cosmetic products containing plastic microbeads was banned in Northern Ireland by The Environmental Protection (Microbeads) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019. The ban is enforced by local councils. It does not apply to products which wear off.

It would be helpful if you could provide to joe.breen@daera-ni.gov.uk details of the product you are referring to and where it was purchased/displayed. It would also be helpful if you could supply an image of the ingredients so officials can refer the matter to the relevant local authority, if appropriate.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) whether he has stipulated options for the future of the Mobuoy waste site; and (ii) what options are to be considered.

(AQW 11261/17-22)

Mr Poots: I met with members of the Derry City and Strabane District Council (DCSDC) Environment and Regeneration Committee (ERC) on 28 October 2020. At that meeting I advised that DAERA has a responsibility to remediate the site and make it safe as an absolute minimum, but that could be elaborated on, and developed into something very attractive on the River Faughan.

I asked members to consider what their and DCSDC's vision is for that area and if they would support something more significant. I have not specifically stipulated options for the future of the site. I emphasised that through DAERA/DCSDC collaboration an enhanced environment could be created which would be an asset to the city for future generations and potentially a tourist attraction.

It remains a reality that much of the site information cannot be released and matters relating to the trial cannot be discussed. However, a draft Mobuoy Stakeholder Engagement and Governance paper outlining proposals to take forward the site vision, with stakeholder and local community engagement, while protecting the integrity of the criminal trial, was presented to and approved by my Department's Mobuoy Remediation Project Board on 21 October 2020. This paper was subsequently presented to and approved by the Council's ERC on 11 November 2020 and is now awaiting full Council approval.

The proposals comprise a working group of officials to service two forward-looking stakeholder steering groups. One will concentrate on finalising the remediation strategy and the other will focus on the site vision; how the site can best be used to benefit the community once the remediation works are completed. The site vision must though be realistic and deliverable within the constraints of the resources available; and there must be evidence of need as well as technical feasibility and achievability.

I strongly support and promote the opportunity to leave a positive legacy, something of real significance at the Mobuoy site for the local community and future generations, through collaboration and joint funding between my Department, the Department of Finance and the Council.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the due diligence to be undertaken by his Department in relation to the (i) technical expertise; (ii) relevant experience; (iii) trading history; (iv) financial resilience; and (v) character of bidders seeking to win the tender for the Integrated Consultant Team to examine the options for the future of the Mobuoy waste site.

(AQW 11262/17-22)

Mr Poots: The competition for the Integrated Consultant Team is being procured using a restricted (two-stage) procedure in accordance with the Public Contracts Regulations. During the first stage, consultants will be required to submit details of their financial standing and professional ability. Only those firms that are assessed as having appropriate financial standing and professional ability will be considered for invitation to tender in the second stage.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in relation to disclosures made in the tender documentation for the appointment of an Integrated Consultant Team in relation to Mobuoy, for his assessment of the risk to (i) drinking water; (ii) river quality; and (iii) wildlife from the lack of engineering controls at the Mobuoy waste dump.

(AQW 11263/17-22)

Mr Poots: My priority at the Mobuoy waste site is to protect the drinking water supply and the environment. It is also of utmost importance to respect the court process regarding the ongoing prosecution of the alleged operators of the site and to take note that these criminal proceedings are active within the meaning of the Contempt of Court Act 1981.

In this context I want to be absolutely clear that no information that must remain confidential until after the criminal trial has been disclosed within the procurement documentation for the appointment of the Mobuoy Integrated Consultant Team. The first stage procurement documents are currently publicly available on the eTenders NI website. These documents necessarily contain background information about the site that is already publicly available on the NIEA website <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/mobuoy-remediation-project>, together with the details of my Department's future requirements for the services being procured. As set out in the documents, the second stage of the procurement that is scheduled for the New Year will in due course have special controls and document security measures in place to comply with our legal obligations.

Illegal waste sites by definition do not have liners and other engineered controls in place and therefore have the potential to pollute the underlying groundwater bodies. If polluted groundwater makes its way to surface watercourses and rivers, there is a risk that this may affect water quality and/or local wildlife.

Therefore as regards the Mobuoy waste site, I have instructed my officials to procure an Integrated Consultancy Team to progress with the remediation of this site and implement measures that will effectively deal with the specific risks the site may pose to the environment.

To ensure the risks are managed in the meantime and that the water quality of the River Faughan remains safe, a comprehensive Environmental Monitoring Programme (EMP) continues to operate with site and river water quality tested weekly, together with daily laboratory testing of water from NI Water's raw water abstraction. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, this has been supplemented with weekly site inspections and field chemistry testing to mitigate the risk of laboratory restrictions. No pollution incidents in the River Faughan have been reported by members of the public or identified through the extensive monitoring carried out under the EMP during this period.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail all applications for tree felling licenses received, broken down by (i) the location of each area of woodland; (ii) its size; and (iii) the reasons why felling was permitted, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 11299/17-22)

Mr Poots: The location of felling licence applications granted in each of the last five years by council area and size are detailed below for clear felling (table 1) and thinning (table 2).

Tree felling in woodlands enables owners to manage and regenerate their woodland and provides a timber income to reinvest in forests. It is regulated under the Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 2010 and requires forest owners to consider the timing and extent of felling and the composition of regenerated woodlands.

Table 1 – Felling licences issued for clear felling

Local Government District	Year	Licences less than 5 ha	Licences between 5 and 10 ha	Licences larger than 10 ha	Total
		Total area and (Number of licences)	Total area and (Number of licences)	Total area and (Number of licences)	Total area and (Number of licences)
Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council	2015/16	0.68 ha (1)	-	-	0.68 ha
	2016/17	-	-	-	(1)
	2017/18	-	-	-	
	2018/19				
	2019/20				
Ards and North Down Borough Council	2015/16	0.80 ha (1)	-	-	1.5 ha
	2016/17	-	-	-	(2)
	2017/18	0.70 ha (1)			
	2018/19				
	2019/20				
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council	2015/16	-	-	-	13.12 ha (3)
	2016/17	1.24 ha (1)	5.87 ha (1)	-	
	2017/18		6.01ha (1)		
	2018/19				
	2019/20				
Belfast City Council	2015/16				0ha
	2016/17				(0)
	2017/18				
	2018/19				
	2019/20				
Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council	2015/16	9.33 ha (4)	8.60 ha (1)	-	343.00 ha
	2016/17	5.90 ha (4)	5.28 ha (1)	53.79 (1)	(23)
	2017/18	5.46 ha (3)	-	25.53 ha (1)	
	2018/19	11.44 ha (4)		217.13ha* (3)	
	2019/20	0.54 ha (1)			
Derry City & Strabane District Council	2015/16	1.60 ha (2)	7.37ha (1)	-	52.15 ha
	2016/17	1.77 ha (3)	8.72ha (1)	-	(16)
	2017/18	15.11 ha (4)	7.33 ha (1)		
	2018/19	2.56 ha (3)	7.69 ha (1)		
	2019/20				

Local Government District	Year	Licences less than 5 ha	Licences between 5 and 10 ha	Licences larger than 10 ha	Total
		Total area and (Number of licences)	Total area and (Number of licences)	Total area and (Number of licences)	Total area and (Number of licences)
Fermanagh & Omagh District Council	2015/16	13.37 ha (8)	17.07 ha (3)	10.13 ha (1)	439.82 ha (75)
	2016/17	23.22 ha (12)	16.57 ha (2)	13.71 ha (1)	
	2017/18	18.02 ha (12)	9.33 ha (1)	96.41 ha (4)	
	2018/19	16.88 ha (12)	25.35 ha (3)	77.45 ha (2)	
	2019/20	18.05 ha (10)	-	84.26 ha (4)	
Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council	2015/16	0.41 ha (1)	13.48ha (2)	-	20.93 ha (5)
	2016/17	1.81 ha (1)	-	-	
	2017/18	-	5.23 ha (1)		
	2018/19	-			
	2019/20				
Mid and east Antrim Borough Council	2015/16	-	-	-	11.11 ha (3)
	2016/17	1.94 ha (1)	5.15ha (1)	-	
	2017/18	4.02 ha (1)			
	2018/19				
	2019/20				
Mid Ulster District Council	2015/16	2.71 ha (2)	11.94 ha (2)	32.47 ha (2)	102.02 ha (23)
	2016/17	10.00 ha (5)	-	11.66 ha (1)	
	2017/18	1.67 ha (2)	9.37 ha (1)	11.50 ha (1)	
	2018/19	1.15 ha (1)		-	
	2019/20	9.55 ha (6)			
Newry, Mourne & Down District Council	2015/16	3.01 ha (1)	-	-	13.54 ha (9)
	2016/17	3.97 ha (2)	-	-	
	2017/18	-			
	2018/19	6.56 ha (6)			
	2019/20				
Grand Total		193.47ha (115)	170.36 ha (24)	634.04 ha (21)	997.87 ha (160)

* Includes a 175 hectare licence for the clearfelling required as part of a planned development.

Table 2 – Felling licences issued for thinning operations

		Licences less than 5 ha	Licences between 5 and 10 ha	Licences larger than 10 ha	Total
Local Government District	Year	Total area and (Number of licences)	Total area and (Number of licences)	Total area and (Number of licences)	Total area and (Number of licences)
Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council	2015/16	1.88 ha (1)	20.89 ha (2)	55.58 ha (1)	180.39 ha (9)
	2016/17	-	5.93 ha (1)	28.16 ha (1)	
	2017/18	-	-	43.30 ha (2)	
	2018/19			24.65 ha (1)	
	2019/20			-	
Ards and North Down Borough Council	2015/16	1.52 ha (2)	-	35.79 ha (2)	77.33 ha (11)
	2016/17	2.17 ha (2)	-	30.10 ha (1)	
	2017/18	4.99 ha (3)		-	
	2018/19	2.76 ha (1)			
	2019/20				
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council	2015/16	-	-	-	46.51 ha (2)
	2016/17	-	-	22.75 ha (1)	
	2017/18			23.76 ha (1)	
	2018/19				
	2019/20				
Belfast City Council	2015/16	-	-	-	0 ha (0)
	2016/17	-	-	-	
	2017/18				
	2018/19				
	2019/20				
Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council	2015/16	5.69 ha (2)	5.11 ha (1)	82.10 ha (3)	307.45 ha (19)
	2016/17	0.30 ha (1)	8.67 ha (1)	53.41 ha (1)	
	2017/18	1.53 ha (2)	6.70 ha (1)	45.13 ha (4)	
	2018/19	-	8.44 ha (1)	90.37 ha (2)	
	2019/20				
Derry City & Strabane District Council	2015/16	4.56 ha (1)	7.05 ha (1)	11.27 ha (1)	802.00 ha (9)
	2016/17	0.59 ha (1)	5.58 ha (1)	-	
	2017/18	-	-	717.02 ha (1)	
	2018/19	-	-		
	2019/20			55.93 ha (3)	
Fermanagh & Omagh District Council	2015/16	5.16 ha (2)	7.05 ha (1)	53.18 ha (2)	314.02 ha (27)
	2016/17	2.01 ha (1)	12.56 ha (2)	21.98 ha (1)	
	2017/18	1.59 ha (2)	12.06 ha (2)	47.61 ha (2)	
	2018/19	5.22 ha (2)		82.03 ha (3)	
	2019/20	12.33 ha (4)		51.24 ha (3)	

		Licences less than 5 ha	Licences between 5 and 10 ha	Licences larger than 10 ha	Total
Local Government District	Year	Total area and (Number of licences)	Total area and (Number of licences)	Total area and (Number of licences)	Total area and (Number of licences)
Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council	2015/16	12.42 ha (2)	13.49 ha (2)	31.34 ha (1)	57.25 ha
	2016/17	-	-	-	(5)
	2017/18	-	-	-	
	2018/19				
	2019/20				
Mid and east Antrim Borough Council	2015/16	4.91 ha (1)	7.14 ha (1)	21.41 (1)	69.18 ha
	2016/17	6.05 ha (2)	6.21 ha (1)	-	(9)
	2017/18	-	12.61 ha (2)	10.85 ha (1)	
	2018/19		-		
	2019/20				
Mid Ulster District Council	2015/16	2.27 ha (1)	-	13.97 ha (1)	190.55 ha
	2016/17	-	5.30 ha (1)	59.09 ha (3)	(19)
	2017/18	4.28 ha (1)	26.45 ha (4)	-	
	2018/19	17.56 ha (7)		61.63 ha (1)	
	2019/20				
Newry, Mourne & Down District Council	2015/16	5.44 ha (2)	7.87 ha (1)	20.71 ha (1)	150.32 ha
	2016/17	1.12 ha (2)	16.87 (2)	15.80 ha (1)	(18)
	2017/18	3.17 ha (2)	14.75 ha (2)	32.40 ha (1)	
	2018/19	1.80 ha (1)	14.93 ha (2)	15.46 ha (1)	
	2019/20			-	
Grand Total		111.32 ha (48)	225.66 ha (32)	1858.02 ha (48)	2195.00ha (128)

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs why his Department adds only 1 per cent interest on to Basic Payment Scheme payments which are initially refused but awarded after a judicial review.

(AQW 11300/17-22)

Mr Poots: There is no legal requirement for my Department to pay interest on Direct Payments.

In a small number of cases which have been subject to a Judicial Review, the Department has exercised its discretion to make an ex gratia payment. Any ex gratia payment must be consistent with Managing Public Money Northern Ireland is to ensure fairness, equal treatment and the protection of taxpayer's money.

The calculation used by my Department was based on an interest rate of the Bank of England base rate plus 1%.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) what financial support is available to assist Crawford Hide Company, Co. Down, who have been impacted by COVID-19; and (ii) what engagement he has had with this business to discuss their issues.

(AQW 11308/17-22)

Mr Poots: I have recently received correspondence directly from Mr Crawford and on two previous occasions from Sinead Bradley MLA, on his behalf. My officials have also engaged with Mr Crawford during several online meetings and through telephone calls.

In my previous reply to Mrs Bradley MLA, I indicated that DAERA did not have any powers to intervene in this sector and set out the range of COVID-19 support measures available from Government at that time. I also indicated that it was not possible for Government to provide funding for every scenario that presented itself during this pandemic.

In my recent reply to Mr Crawford, I indicated again that my Department remains unable to provide financial assistance to his business. I have encouraged him to monitor the NI Business Info website www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk for details of existing and new schemes and programmes that may be of help.

The current range of Government COVID-19 financial support measures that may be applicable to this business include:

- Self Employed Income Support Scheme
- Bounce Back Loan Scheme
- Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme
- Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme
- Business Rates Relief
- New scheme for Company Directors

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to AQW 10354/17-22, (i) why a background note was included in his answer; (ii) whether background notes are common practice for departmental officials in preparing answers to Assembly Questions; (iii) whether he, or his special advisor, specifically instruct officials to include background notes in answers to Assembly Questions; (iv) whether it is common practice for background notes to include a Member's voting position on prior Assembly debates; (v) whether he, or his special advisor, specifically instruct officials to include the Member's voting positions in background notes; and (vi) whether background notes are drafted before or after the answer to the question is drafted.

(AQW 11446/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- (i) A background note was included in my answer due to an administrative error.
- (ii) Background notes are common practice for departmental officials in preparing answers to Assembly Questions.
- (iii) Neither I, nor the special advisor, specifically instruct officials to include background notes in answers to Assembly Questions.
- (iv) It is not uncommon practice for background notes to include a Member's voting position on prior Assembly debates. Neither I nor the special advisor, specifically instruct officials to include the Member's voting positions in background notes.
- (v) Background notes are drafted at the same time that the answer to the question is drafted.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what incentives or schemes are available to help encourage landowners and farmers to plant native trees and hedgerows.

(AQW 11511/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department provides grant aid through the Forest Expansion Scheme which I have recently modified to further encourage land owners to plant more trees including native species. In particular, I have reduced the minimum threshold for eligibility which has seen a very positive response, approximately doubling the number of applications to the scheme this year. In addition the Environmental Farming Scheme supports planting native tree and shrubs. Under the current Rural Development Programme, to date these schemes have supported: 585 hectares of new native woodland; 490 km of new native hedgerows; 422 km of native tree enhanced boundaries and 23 km of riparian buffers with native trees.

I also plan to open an additional Small Woodland Grant Scheme later this month which is designed to complement existing holdings by planting native woodland. This new scheme will further contribute to the 'Forests for Our Future' programme which aims to plant 18 million trees over the next decade. Planting trees under the programme is one of the foundation initiatives of the Executive's Green Growth strategy which is being developed by my department.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs when AQW 10958/17-22 will be answered.

(AQW 11552/17-22)

Mr Poots: I can confirm AQW 10958 17-22 was answered on 04 December 2020.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how many cases of badger-baiting have been recorded in North Down, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 11610/17-22)

Mr Poots: The requested statistics for badger baiting are not held by my Department as the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) are the primary enforcement agency for these offences under the Wildlife (NI) Order 1985 (as amended). Statistics for prosecutions will be recorded by the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) and information about judicial outcomes are held by the Courts Service.

However, I am very happy to draw your attention to two published reports by the Partnership for Action Against Wildlife Crime Northern Ireland (PAW NI), a forum that is co-chaired by DAERA and the PSNI. The Badger Subgroup Persecution Report

2015 and the Persecution Report 2016-18 published earlier this month detail and map the incident reports recorded by the PSNI across Northern Ireland. The reports indicate that there is a higher incidence of reports from County Down compared to other counties.

The authors surmise that this higher figure may be a reflection of greater badger numbers and denser human population in the east of the province, but point out that these incidents are occurring across Northern Ireland. The number of reports may be an under-representation of crimes due to reluctance 'to waste police time' or a lack of knowledge of what constitutes a wildlife crime. Full copies of the Badger crime reports and advice on how to report a wildlife crime are available on the PAW NI website <https://www.wildlifecrimeni.org/copy-of-wildlife-crime-northern-ire-1>.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how many cases of illegal dumping were reported in North Down, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 11688/17-22)

Mr Poots: Incidents of alleged 'illegal waste disposal' reported to my Department are recorded as such, and not under the specific term 'illegal dumping'. Details of the number of reported incidents of illegal waste disposal within the Boundaries of the North Down constituency are set out below.

Year	Number of incidents
2018	78
2019	65
2020 (to 11 December)	64

My Department focuses its enforcement actions primarily on larger scale waste dumping activity rather than low level ad hoc dumping often referred to as 'fly-tipping', which is primarily addressed by District Councils (DCs).

Reports of smaller scale low level ad hoc dumping which are received are referred to and dealt with by DCs.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on a financial support fund for farmers impacted in the Glenelly Valley due to flooding in August 2017.

(AQW 11711/17-22)

Mr Poots: I have not yet come to a decision on the provision of direct financial assistance to those farmers affected by the flooding that took place in August 2017.

I have directed officials to consider delivery options for a scheme that could provide financial support to those farmers that were affected by the August 2017 flooding and subsequent landslides. I will continue to consider very carefully all the relevant issues surrounding the matter before reaching a balanced decision in due course.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what discussions he has had on establishing farmer-led groups to co-develop new ways of working that will help make farming and food production more sustainable.

(AQW 11716/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department delivers a number of Schemes which encourage a farmer-led group approach to knowledge transfer. These schemes integrate sustainability with technical efficiency, productivity, profitability and innovation. The Schemes are part funded by the EU and are delivered by the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE).

CAFRE works with 165 farmer-led groups through the Business Development Groups (BDGs) Scheme. Over 3200 farmers and growers participate in BDGs which allow sharing of knowledge with the aim of improving the sustainability, technical efficiency and profitability of farm businesses.

Innovative technologies and practices are key drivers of future productivity, sustainability and resilience of the Agri-food Industry. CAFRE delivers two Innovation Schemes. The Farm Innovation Visits Scheme has been designed to encourage farmers to adopt innovative technologies and practices within Europe. To date 284 farmers have visited a wide range of farms and agricultural businesses across Europe as part of 20 Farm Innovation Visits. CAFRE has also established 20 locally based Technology Demonstration Farms which give farmers the opportunity to demonstrate technologies and innovative approaches that they have already adopted, to their farming peers.

The European Innovation Partnerships Scheme uses a collaborative approach between farmers, researchers, businesses and advisory services to encourage innovation to address problems or opportunities identified by farmers. Seven Operational Groups have been established to deliver projects aimed at improving the sustainability and competitiveness of the agri-food sector.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline what steps his Department is taking to prevent offences of animal cruelty.

(AQW 11834/17-22)

Mr Poots: All animals in Northern Ireland are protected by the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 (the Act). It is an offence under the Act to cause unnecessary suffering to an animal; the maximum penalty available being up to five years imprisonment and/or an unlimited fine. Northern Ireland penalties are the toughest in the United Kingdom.

Individuals are encouraged to report any animal welfare concern to contact the appropriate body. When animal welfare issues are reported, enforcement activity is undertaken – (i) by my Department for offences involving farmed animals; (ii) by council animal welfare officers for companion animals; and (iii) by the Police Service of Northern Ireland, for suspected instances of animal fighting, wildlife crime, and crime involving animals.

In addition, my Department also publishes guidance leaflets, regularly issues social media messages, and works with the other statutory agencies and voluntary bodies / animal charities to promote good welfare practices. This material is continually reviewed and where appropriate, input is sought from stakeholders.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether his Department provides advice to local councils on the risk of bog slippage when they are considering planning applications for wind turbines.

(AQW 11931/17-22)

Mr Poots: The issue of peat stability is primarily a geotechnical issue. As such, the Planning Authority should consult the Geological Survey for Northern Ireland (GSNI) in these regards. GSNI in turn provides expert comment to my Department on this issue.

If my Department has been consulted on a wind turbine where the potential for peat slide has been identified my officials would assess this risk of impacts to environmental interests. My officials will also consider any peat stability assessment reports provided by the developer. The consultation response may include opinions on potential impacts on sediment displacement occurring from peat slippage and may suggest mitigation measures to prevent risk where appropriate.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs when the criteria for the package of support he has announced for the fishing community in Lough Neagh will be released.

(AQW 11967/17-22)

Mr Poots: My officials are currently working on the necessary eligibility criteria to enable applicants to apply for a Lough Neagh Financial Support Scheme.

At this time I cannot confirm when this work will be finalised. However I am hopeful an announcement regarding the launch of the Scheme can be made in the near future.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail any concern his Department has about the possibility of new zoonotic diseases or pathogens developing.

(AQW 11998/17-22)

Mr Poots: While the majority of new and emerging diseases and pathogens in recent years have originated from animals or wildlife (zoonotic), the UK has a strong research base in zoonotic disease surveillance, risk analysis and mitigation, comprising institutions from across industry and academia and the publicly funded laboratories. These facilities include those of the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) and the Queen's University, Belfast.

There are strong collaborative mechanisms between these various institutions, which monitor, research and assess current and emerging human and animal health risks, across the UK and internationally.

My officials are members of the Human Animal Infections and Risk Surveillance (HAIRS) group (<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/human-animal-infections-and-risk-surveillance-group-hairs>). This is a UK-based multi-agency cross government horizon scanning and risk assessment group. Established in early 2004, the group meet monthly, or more regularly when required, to identify and assess emerging infection risks to human health in the UK.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the reasons why Knockninny Hill was declared as an Area of Special Scientific Interest.

(AQW 12000/17-22)

Mr Poots: The extent and quality of the habitats, and priority species contained, was the reason for selecting Knockninny Hill as an ASSI.

Referring to my earlier response (AQW 6313/17-22), the selection features of the site are: Upland Calcareous Grassland; Upland Mixed Ashwood; Higher Plant Assemblage and Invertebrate Assemblage.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the number of (i) dog fouling incidents reported; and (ii) the number of dog fouling offenders who received a fine, in each month of the last three years broken down by local council area.

(AQW 12015/17-22)

Mr Poots: The current legislation (Clean Neighbourhoods & Environment Act (NI) 2011 & Environmental Offences (Fixed Penalties) (Miscellaneous Provisions) Regulations (NI) 2012) gives district councils powers to issue Fixed Penalty Notices (FPNs) of up to £80 for dog fouling offences. For cases dealt with by the courts, a fine of up to £1,000 can be imposed.

My Department does not collate data in respect of either dog fouling incidents reported or dog fouling FPNs issued by district councils. However Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful (KNIB) collects FPN data as part of its DAERA funding arrangements. The FPN data collated by KNIB is broken down by council area and is collected on an annual (rather than monthly) basis. This data is not verified by DAERA and these are not official statistics.

Annex A sets out the dog fouling FPN data collected by KNIB for the 3 most recent years for which data is available (up to 2018/19).

Annex A

Number of FPNs Issued By Councils for Dog Fouling Offences: 2016/7 – 2018/9

	2016/7	2017/8	2018/9
Antrim Newtownabbey	2	13	9
Ards North Down	105	200	170
Armagh Banbridge Craigavon	20	22	12
Belfast City	161	78	59
Causeway Coast Glens	7	10	1
Derry Strabane	1	0	5
Fermanagh Omagh	2	2	1
Lisburn Castlereagh	9	6	6
Mid East Antrim	22	7	3
Mid Ulster	5	1	4
Newry Mourne Down	13	8	8
Total	347	347	278

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) whether a licence is required in order to gather mussels and other shellfish from Belfast Lough; (ii) what powers of regulation does his Department have over the gathering of shellfish.

(AQW 12037/17-22)

Mr Poots: Various areas within Belfast Lough are privately leased from The Crown Estate for the purpose of cultivating mussels. My Department issues Fish Culture Licences under Section 11 of the Fisheries Act (NI) 1966 for this purpose. Applications are subject to public advertisement and consultation. In addition a shellfish Fishery Licence is also granted under Section 131 of the Act conferring on the holder exclusive rights of cultivation of mussels within the specified areas. These areas are all below the Low Water Mark.

Intertidal shellfish gathering is prohibited in Belfast Lough by the Belfast Corporation Act 1930 and the regulator is the Environmental Health Departments in the local councils.

Shellfish gathering in the intertidal area is not currently regulated by my Department under environmental or fisheries legislation. I recognise the potential risks of intertidal shellfish harvesting to vulnerable habitats and species in Marine Protected Areas such as Belfast Lough. My Department is developing potential management options and these will be subject to public consultation in 2021. Where it is determined that controls are necessary, my Department can exercise powers in the Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1966 and the Marine Act (Northern Ireland) 2013 to introduce regulations and byelaws.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs when his Department applied for planning permission for the lane constructed at Glenwherry Hill Farm in March 2020.

(AQW 12140/17-22)

Mr Poots: The project to construct a hard core lane at Glenwherry Hill Farm, which is part of my Department's College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE), satisfies the requirements of agricultural permitted development legislation and as such, a planning application was not required.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what considerations he has given to (i) the promotion of sustainable fishing tourism in Northern Ireland; and (ii) the support that could be provided to small-scale fisheries seeking to diversify their activities whilst continuing their traditional trade.

(AQW 12176/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- i) Marine tourism is one of the themes within the Sustainable Development Strategy for Northern Ireland's commercial fishing dependent communities. This strategy is being delivered by the South East Area Fisheries Local Action Group drawing on European Maritime and Fisheries Funding.

Inland Fisheries is presently developing Fisheries Management Plans for both Lough Neagh and Lough Erne which will benefit local anglers, angling tourists and commercial fishermen. The Department continues to provide angling at its Public Angling Estate waters and promotes angling in Northern Ireland by attending promotional shows both in the UK and in Europe. Regular fish surveys are carried out to ensure the future sustainability of key stocks.

- (ii) I am conscious of the potential that diversification offers for small-scale coastal fishermen. The European Maritime and Fisheries Fund, which remains open for applications, continues to provide financial support for the acquisition of new skills for commercial sea fishers and financial assistance to NI licensed vessel owners who wish to diversify from their tradition operations.

Department for Communities

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Communities, given the increase in domestic violence, what resources her Department is allocating to meet the increased demand for Women's Aid services and refuges.

(AQO 1018/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister for Communities): Although the Department of Justice have confirmed an increase in calls to the domestic violence helpline in recent times, the Housing Executive have advised they have not seen a similar increase in demand for Women's Aid services. During the period 1 April to 30 September 2020, there was a reduction in people presenting as homeless as a result of domestic violence during same period of the previous year from 905 to 666, with 548 acceptances, down from 792.

- The Housing Executive, through the Supporting People Programme, fund 134 units in 13 Women's Aid Refuges for women at risk of domestic violence at a cost of just under £2.6 million per year. Through the programme they also provide an additional 1173 units of floating support at a cost of just over £1.8 million.
- Belfast & Lisburn WA (BLWA) – Ulsterville Avenue operates as an 'emergency crash pad' which is utilised for 24 hours before women and their families are moved on to more suitable accommodation. During the COVID-19 lockdown period, the BLWA emergency crash pad remained open for referrals and its length of stay was increased to 48 hours.
- 'Crash Pads' are now in operation in Belfast, Ballymena and Foyle operated by each corresponding Women's Aid Organisation.
- In response to COVID-19 cost pressures faced by Supporting People service providers, additional funding of £10m was secured from the Executive. A total of £32k has been issued to date to providers funded to provide services to the women at risk of domestic violence client group and is based on estimated spend until May 2020. Actual expenditure (April to July 2020) will be paid following an agreed process.
- £400k has been allocated to Foyle Women's Aid as a contribution to the development of the Family Justice Centre – One Safe Place, to be located at Bishop Street, Derry, with the aim to provide a wraparound support service to victims of domestic violence.
- The Department of Health has provided Women's Aid with an additional £60,000 to provide an initial care package for families who have experienced, or been a victim of, domestic abuse. This package provided food parcels, home based resources and games for families, including laptops and mobile phones.
- A full range of work is ongoing, in partnership with our statutory and voluntary partners, to help raise awareness of the support services available and to ensure the provision of practical measures for victims during this challenging period. Areas of support include the 24 hour Domestic and Sexual Abuse Helpline, funded by Government and run by Nexus: 0808 802 1414, advice and practical help such as accommodation and free travel for those needing to leave their homes.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Communities when the measurable targets will be confirmed for her five-year strategy document, Building Inclusive Communities.

(AQW 11955/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Delivery of the 'Building Inclusive Communities 2020-2025' Strategy will be measured through the Department's Business Plans, which my Officials are currently engaged in developing.

My Officials will attend the Communities Committee on 25 February 2021 to provide an update on the DfC 2020 – 2022 Business Plan, which will set out the key activities, milestones and measures that align with the strategic objectives and

priorities set out the Strategy. It should be noted that the Business Plan is a living document and will be subject to change if operational priorities dictate.

Department of Finance

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance whether there is a strategy in place to reduce the carbon footprint of the public sector. (AQW 11974/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): The office buildings that my Department manages are responsible for around 4% of total Public Sector energy consumption. My Department has prepared an Energy with Carbon Reduction Plan for the NICS Office Estate, which builds on previous plans and aims for a further 4% energy saving over the period to 2023. Reductions in energy use have been achieved by reducing the size of the estate - or rightsizing; encouraging behavioural changes in staff to use energy more efficiently; and capital investment in areas such as boiler replacement and LED lighting.

My department is planning to establish a series of regional hubs to enable civil servants to work in offices near to where they live. This will contribute to the reduction of emissions by cutting down on the number of cars travelling long distances.

I tabled a paper on social value, with outcomes including effective stewardship of the environment, to the Procurement Board on 16 December 2020. It will require procurement strategies and specifications that:

- Deliver additional environmental benefits in the performance of the contract including working towards net zero greenhouse gas emissions.
- Contract specifications that support environmental protection and improvement.

I have invited comments from the Board and once agreed, I will seek endorsement from Executive colleagues.

My Department has policy and legislation responsibility for building regulations, which provide minimum energy efficiency standards of building work. I want to see ambitious measures to improve the energy efficiency and carbon performance of new buildings locally, in a way that helps industry transition to new standards in energy efficiency and low carbon heating safely.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Finance how many applications have been received to the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme; and how many have been paid to date. (AQW 12083/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS) provides support for business that have been directly affected by the Health Protection restrictions. It opened to businesses in Derry City and Strabane District Council Area on Wednesday 14th October and to other council areas on Monday 19th October. It has changed four times since it was first set up, extending its geographic range to all council areas and increased the amount of payments issued and the types of businesses that are eligible. This has added to the complexity of administering the scheme.

As of 22nd December, there have been 17,213 applications received. 9,579 businesses have received payments totalling £59m. 5,735 have been rejected.

Approximately a third of applications still to be processed include duplicate and / or incomplete applications. Land and Property Services is continuing to progress applications as quickly as possible.

Department for Infrastructure

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the procedure adopted in reducing a speed limit due to increased pedestrian footfall. (AQW 11988/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): The procedure for determining speed limits is detailed in RSPPG E051 'Setting Local Speed Limits in Northern Ireland'. This document is publically available on the Department's website via the following link:

<https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/setting-local-speed-limits-northern-ireland-rsppg-e051>

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans she has to develop a bypass at Ballykelly to alleviate traffic congestion in the village. (AQW 12029/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My officials are currently developing proposals for a new Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTNTP) which will set out future development proposals for the main road and rail networks to 2035. This plan will consider the Ballykelly Bypass. I intend to publish the Draft RSTNTP for consultation in late 2021. This will give you the opportunity to support or challenge the proposals being brought forward.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 11445/17-22, (i) whether Regulation 32 of the Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2017 permits her Department and local authorities to (a) use discretion not to enforce against unauthorised EIA development; and (b) allows unauthorised EIA Development to become immune from enforcement action; and (ii) to detail how her approach to dealing with the unauthorised EIA development at Lough Neagh Special Protection Area conforms with European Directive 2014/52/EU.

(AQW 12103/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Regulation 32 of the Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2017 ("the 2017 Regulations") requires that a planning authority "shall consider the exercise of their enforcement functions in such a way as to secure compliance with the objectives and requirements of the Directive". The regulation does not in itself set any particular course of action which a planning authority must follow in reaching a decision in relation to enforcement.

My Department's approach in dealing with the case of sand-dredging in Lough Neagh has been in line with the requirements of the 2017 Regulations, and preceding regulations, which have transposed the requirements of Directive 2011/92/EU (as amended by Directive 2014/52/EU) as they apply to the planning system. Actions and decisions that have been taken have been fully in line with the directions of the Northern Ireland Court of Appeal.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in light of their current financial situation, whether consideration has been given to reducing the contribution required by local councils for greenway capital schemes.[R]

(AQW 12105/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The development of Greenways has significant potential to deliver outcomes across a range of Government objectives which will have far reaching benefits for individuals and communities across the entire region. That is why I have been willing to make a substantial contribution to the capital costs of greenways as outlined in my announcement in September of support for six greenways.

In addition to support from my Department in respect of the active travel element of greenways, Councils are free to seek support from other Departments and organisations in respect of the wider benefits of greenways in terms of health, environment, social inclusion, rural development, tourism and recreation.

Having said that, I am willing to consider, with Councils, how best to take forward this important work.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure how her Department will resolve water main supply issues for up to 4000 affordable and social homes on the Skeoge lands in Derry.

(AQW 12117/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The importance of additional affordable and social homes cannot be overstated. NI Water has identified that a high priority £1.7m watermain upgrade project is required, to serve the proposed development on the Skeoge lands, before a connection can be made to the existing water supply network.

Delivery of the required upgrade is subject to the availability of adequate funding from the NI Executive for NI Water's PC21 Final Determination. The proposed project is associated with the DfI Roads A2 Buncrana dual carriageway upgrade project. By undertaking both projects simultaneously, costs, time, and traffic disruption can be minimised.

Delivery of the required upgrade is subject to the availability of adequate funding from the NI Executive for NI Water's PC21 Final Determination. The proposed project is associated with the DfI Roads A2 Buncrana dual carriageway upgrade project which is estimated to start in 2023 (subject to the successful completion of the statutory procedures). By undertaking both projects simultaneously, costs, time, and traffic disruption can be minimised.

Ensuring that NI Water is appropriately funded for PC21 is critical to facilitate the provision of these affordable and social homes.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department is planning to set up other active travel centres.

(AQW 12122/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am very keen to increase the proportion of everyday journeys made by walking, cycling and public transport right across the North.

My Department has been working in partnership with Derry City and Strabane District Council and Sustrans to draw up proposals for the operation of an Active and Sustainable Travel Centre at the North West Multi-modal Transport Hub. My Department has limited resource funding, and therefore an application has been made to SEUPB for funding to cover the operating expenses of this centre for a three year period.

Until there is additional resource funding allocated to my Department, it is not financially possible to set up other active travel centres at this time.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department will provide further support for local councils to assist them in greenway projects.

(AQW 12123/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The development of Greenways has significant potential to deliver outcomes across a range of Government objectives which will have far reaching benefits for individuals and communities across the entire region. That is why I have been willing to make a substantial contribution to the capital costs of greenways as outlined in my announcement in September of support for six greenways.

In addition to support from my Department in respect of the active travel element of greenways, Councils are free to seek support from other Departments and organisations in respect of the wider benefits of greenways in terms of health, environment, social inclusion, rural development, tourism and recreation.

Having said that, I am willing to consider, with Councils, how best to take forward this important work.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the patronage rates of Translink's fleet during March to September 2020.

(AQW 12124/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The following table provides Translink's patronage during March to September 2020 on a weekly basis and compared with the same period last year.

Date Range	Public Transport patronage in 2019	Public Transport patronage in 2020	Patronage % as compared to 2019
01/03/20 - 07/03/20	1,301,343	1,262,043	97%
08/03/20 - 14/03/20	1,205,542	1,112,888	92%
15/03/20 - 21/03/20	1,181,937	564,142	48%
22/03/20 - 28/03/20	1,293,885	158,977	12%
29/03/20 - 04/04/20	1,269,985	95,852	8%
05/04/20 - 11/04/20	1,277,919	101,254	8%
12/04/20 - 18/04/20	1,153,684	64,572	6%
19/04/20 - 25/04/20	903,748	89,406	10%
26/04/20 - 02/05/20	1,279,123	141,369	11%
03/05/20 - 09/05/20	1,149,854	125,051	11%
10/05/20 - 16/05/20	1,242,759	104,134	8%
17/05/20 - 24/05/20	1,303,752	125,166	10%
25/05/20 - 31/05/20	1,181,131	143,437	12%
01/06/20 - 07/06/20	1,258,868	169,943	13%
08/06/20 - 14/06/20	1,254,704	187,703	15%
15/06/20 - 21/06/20	1,247,966	233,150	19%
22/06/20 - 28/06/20	1,259,524	262,587	21%
29/06/20 - 05/07/20	1,200,814	298,100	25%
06/07/20 - 12/07/20	969,611	329,190	34%
13/07/20 - 19/07/20	1,098,858	306,706	28%
20/07/20 - 26/07/20	1,170,120	384,074	33%
27/07/20 - 02/08/20	1,216,445	408,150	34%
03/08/20 - 09/08/20	1,162,970	435,692	37%
10/08/20 - 16/08/20	1,147,590	474,434	41%
17/08/20 - 23/08/20	1,231,909	453,991	37%
24/08/20 - 30/08/20	1,193,278	483,415	41%
31/08/20 - 06/09/20	1,299,596	541,121	42%
07/09/20 - 13/09/20	1,284,877	600,290	47%
14/09/20 - 20/09/20	1,344,589	615,267	46%
21/09/20 - 27/09/20	1,382,368	617,672	45%

Date Range	Public Transport patronage in 2019	Public Transport patronage in 2020	Patronage % as compared to 2019
28/09/20 - 04/10/20	1,363,805	607,127	45%

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Translink has provided weekly passenger information on patronage for reporting into the NI Hub and Departmental Operations Centre.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department would consider further taxi driver support schemes due to reduced Christmas period trade.

(AQW 12158/17-22)

Ms Mallon: At present, the priority is to process the 4500 valid applications that have been received from taxi drivers for the current scheme, with 3500 payments issued before Christmas. Staff in my Department are working at pace to process all the remaining applications as quickly as possible, once outstanding information is received, to enable payments to be made to those who are eligible without delay.

I have asked my officials to explore further options for helping those taxi drivers who were not eligible for the current scheme. At the same time, I also continue to press for the inclusion of the taxi sector in the various other support schemes being taken forward across the Executive, particularly Part B of the CBRRS run by the Department for the Economy, given the impact on their income from the restrictions on hospitality and retail.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the number and location of unadapted roads in public use within the Belfast East constituency.

(AQW 12168/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department does not hold records of all un-adopted roads in public use.

Roads in public use can remain un-adopted for a number of reasons. For example, as part of the planning process, developers can request that a road in a housing development remains private. Also, many roads serving 5 or less dwellings are not constructed by developers to a standard suitable for adoption. Furthermore, all roads within Belfast Harbour in East Belfast are maintained by the Harbour Authority.

My Department does hold records of all streets that are under construction within developments that have been determined for adoption into the public road network. Although this information is not available by constituency, the locations of the 248 private streets currently under construction within the Belfast City Council area are listed below.

Abbeyfold, Abbey Park	Knockdene Park South, Belfast
Aghery Walk/Areema Drive, Belfast	Lacefield, Upper Newtownards Road, Belfast
Aghery Walk/Areema Drive, Belfast	Ladas Way, Belfast
Ainsworth Avenue, Belfast	Laganview Court
Airport Road, Belfast	Lagmore Avenue/Road, Belfast
Alexandra Park Avenue, Belfast	Lagmore Road, Lisburn
Alliance Avenue, Belfast	Lagmore Road, Lisburn
Alliance Avenue, Belfast	Lanyon Place
Alliance Drive/Gardens, Belfast	Lanyon Place
Alliance Road, Belfast	Lawnbrook Avenue, Belfast
Altnagarron Heights, Forthriver Road, Belfast	Lawnbrook Avenue, Belfast
Ambleside Street/Winchester Street, Belfast	Lawnbrook Avenue, Belfast
Annadale Embankment, Belfast	Lawnbrook Avenue, Belfast
Annadale Embankment, Belfast	Lepper Street, Belfast
Antrim Road, Belfast	Lepper Street, Belfast
Antrim Road, Belfast	Lepper Street, Belfast
Antrim Road, Belfast	Lepper Street, Belfast
Antrim Road, Belfast	Ligoniel Road, Belfast
Antrim Road, Newtownabbey	Ligoniel Road, Belfast

Ardglan Place, Jamaica Street, Belfast	Ligoniel Road, Belfast
Arran Mor, Belfast	Ligoniel Road, Belfast
Arundel Courts/Arundel Walk, Belfast	Ligoniel Road, Belfast
Avonorr Drive	Ligoniel Road, Belfast
Ballycarry Street, Belfast	Limestone Road, Belfast
Ballygomartin Road, Belfast	Linen Gardens/Court, Belfast
Ballygomartin Road, Belfast	Linfield Road, Belfast
Ballygomartin Road, Belfast	London Road/Lismore Street, Belfast
Ballygowan Road, Belfast	London Road/Lismore Street, Belfast
Ballygowan Road, Belfast	Loughside Chase, Belfast
Ballygowan Road, Belfast	Lower Lenadoon - Phase 1a
Ballygowan Road, Belfast	Mackies
Ballymagarry Lane	Mackies
Ballynafoy, Ravenhill Road, Belfast	Madrid St + Thistle Court
Balmoral Avenue, Belfast	Malcolmson Street, Belfast
Balmoral Avenue, Belfast	Malone Ridge, Fairway Gardens, Upper Malone Road, Belfast
Balmoral Avenue, Belfast	Malone Ridge, Fairway Gardens, Upper Malone Road, Belfast
Balmoral Avenue, Belfast	Medway Street/Island Street
Barnetts Road, Belfast	Mersey Street, Belfast
Beersbridge Road, Belfast	Mersey Street, Belfast
Beersbridge Road, Belfast	Mersey Street, Belfast
Beersbridge Road, Belfast	Mill Avenue, Ligoniel, Belfast
Beersbridge Road, Belfast	Mill Pond Glen, Poleglass
Beersbridge Road, Belfast	Mill Pond Glen, Poleglass
Belfast City Hospital, Donegall Road, Belfast	Mill Valley Road, Belfast
Bellevue Park, Antrim Road, Belfast	Mill Valley Road, Belfast
Belmont Road, Belfast	Mill Valley Road, Belfast
Benview Park, Belfast	Mill Valley Road, Belfast
Benview Park, Belfast	Mill Valley Way, Belfast
Blackdam Close, Ligoniel Road, Belfast	Millfield And Castle Street
Blackdam Close, Ligoniel Road, Belfast	Monagh By-Pass/Springfield Road, Belfast
Blackdam Close, Ligoniel Road, Belfast	Monagh Drive / Springfield Road
Blacks Road, Belfast	Monagh Drive, Belfast
Blacks Road, Belfast	Monarch Street/Monarch Parade, Belfast
Blacks Road, Belfast	Monarch Street/Monarch Parade, Belfast
Blacks Road, Belfast	Montpelier Court
Blacks Road, Belfast	Mornington, Belfast
Blacks Road, Belfast	Mount Gilbert, Belfast
Blacks Road, Belfast	Mountcollyer Phase 2
Blacks Road, Belfast	Moyard Parade/Crescent, Belfast
Boucher Plaza	Newforge Lane
Boucher Road, Belfast	Newtownards Road / Hollywood Road

Boucher Road, Belfast	Norglen Road/Monagh Crescent, Belfast
Broadway/Donegall Avenue, Belfast	Oak Villa, Springfield Road
Broadway/Donegall Avenue, Belfast	Oldpark Road, Belfast
Broadway/Donegall Avenue, Belfast	Oldpark Road, Belfast
Broadway/Donegall Avenue, Belfast	O'Neills Lane, Belfast
Brookmount Street, Belfast	O'Neills Lane, Belfast
Broomhill Lane, Hillside Crescent, Belfast	Orby Drive, Belfast
Brucevale Park, Belfast	Ormeau Road, Belfast
Bryson Street, Belfast	Ormeau Road, Belfast
Cairnmartin Crescent	Ormeau Road, Belfast
Cairnmartin, Ballygomartin Road, Belfast	Ormeau Road, Belfast
Cambrai Street	Ormiston House, Hawthornden Road, Belfast
Candahar Street, Belfast	Ormiston House, Hawthornden Way
Carolan Road, Belfast	Ormonde Gardens, Belfast
Carrick Hill, Belfast	Palmerston Road
Carrigart Avenue	Park Avenue, Belfast
Castlecourt Shopping Centre	Park Avenue, Belfast
Castlehill Manor, Castlehill Road, Belfast	Park Avenue, Belfast
Castlehill Wood, Belfast	Park Avenue, Belfast
Castlereagh Road	Parkgate Avenue, Belfast
Centurion Street	Parkgate Avenue, Belfast
Charleville Street, Sydney Street West	Parkside Gardens, Belfast
Cherryville Street, Belfast	Parkside Gardens/Limestone Road, Belfast
Circular Road, Belfast	Parkside Gardens/Limestone Road, Belfast
Circular Road, Belfast	Parkside Gardens/Limestone Road, Belfast
Clifton Street/Stanhope Street/Regent Street, Belfast	Peppermill Street
Cliftonpark Avenue, Belfast	Pirrie Park Manor, Broughton Gardens, Belfast
Cliftonville Road	Priory Park, Belfast
Cliftonville Road, Belfast	Quarry Hill
Clonallen Crt, Belmont Rd	Rath Mor
Colin Glen Park, Belfast	Ravenwood
Colin Glen Park, Belfast	Ringford Park
Colin Green, Belfast	Roden Street / Distillery Street
College Park, Belfast	Roden Street, Belfast
College Park, Belfast	Roden Street, Blackwater Way
Connsbrook Avenue, Belfast	Roosevelt Way / Iverna Street, Belfast
Conor Close, Conor Rise, Stewartstown Road	Roosevelt Way / Iverna Street, Belfast
Conswater Phase 2	Rosepark Gardens
Conway Street, Belfast	Rossmore Drive
Conway Street, Belfast	Roumania Rise, Belfast
Cregagh Park, Belfast	Saint Galls Avenue, Belfast

Cromwell Road	Sandown Park
Cromwell Road, Lower Malone	Sandown Road, Belfast
Crosscollyer Street	Severn Street, Belfast
Crumlin Road	Shankill Road/Lanark Way/Caledon Street, Belfast
Crumlin Road, Belfast	Shore Road, Belfast
Crumlin Road, Belfast	Shore Road, Belfast
Crumlin Road, Belfast	Shore Road, Belfast
Crumlin Road, Belfast	Shore Road, Belfast
Cupar Street Lower, Belfast	Shore Road, Belfast
Cupar Street Lower, Belfast	Short Strand, Belfast
Cupar Street/David Street, Belfast	
Danesfort Park, Stranmillis Road, Belfast	Somerdale Park, Belfast
Danesfort, Stranmillis Road, Belfast	Springfield Crescent, Belfast
Deerpark Grove	Springfield Drive, Belfast
Dermott Hill Parade	Springfield Drive, Belfast
Devonshire Street, Belfast	Springfield Road, Belfast
Diamond Gardens, Belfast	Springfield Road, Belfast
Diamond Gardens, Belfast	St Bernadettes Avenue, Glenalina Road, Belfast
Distillery Street, Belfast	St. Anne's Cathedral, Belfast
Donard Court, Crumlin Road /Mccandless Street, Belfast	St. Mary's Gardens/Mica Drive, Belfast
Donegall Park Gardens	Stanhope Drive, Belfast
Donegall Road, Belfast	Stanhope Drive, Belfast
Donovan Fold, Donovan Parade	Station Road/Victoria Avenue, Belfast
Dub Lane, Belfast	Stirling Way, Stirling Green, Tudor Drive, Belfast
Edward Street/Dunbar Link, Belfast	Stockmans Way, Belfast
Fane Street & Pigs Row	Summerhill Road/Gardenmore Road, Belfast
Felt, Blythe Street & Benthem Drive	Sunningdale Gardens, Belfast
Finaghy Park Central, Belfast	Sunningdale Gardens, Belfast
Flax Street/Herbert Street, Belfast	Sunnyside Street, Belfast
Ford Visteon Plant, Finaghy Road North, Belfast	Sunnyside Street, Belfast
Fortwilliam Park	Sydenham By-Pass
Galwally Avenue	Sydenham By-Pass
Gardenmore Road, Belfast	Taughmonagh Estate
Gardenmore Road, Belfast	Taughmonagh Estate
Gardiner Street, Belfast	Tesco Store, Belfast Road, Belfast
Gibson Street Adj Grovener Road	The Bell Towers
Gibson Street, Belfast	The Bell Towers
Girdwood Army Barracks, Clifton Park Avenue, Belfast	The Glen, Limestone Road, Belfast
Glen Road Heights, Glen Road, Belfast	The Manor, Blacks Road, Belfast
Glen Road Heights, Glen Road, Belfast	The Manor, Blacks Road, Belfast
Glen Road, Belfast	The Mount

Glen Road, Belfast	Thorburn Road/Portmore Hill, Belfast
Glen Road, Belfast	Thornberry Close, Belfast
Glen Road, Belfast	Thornberry Close, Belfast
Glen Road, Belfast	Thornberry Hill/Blackdam Court, Belfast
Glen Road, Belfast	Thornberry Hill/Blackdam Court, Belfast
Glen Road/Dungloe Crescent/Naroon Park, Belfast	Thornberry Road, Belfast
Glenhurst Drive, Belfast	Thornberry Road, Belfast
Glenmachan Street, Belfast	Torr Way, Finaghy, Belfast
Glenmachan Street, Belfast	Torrens Avenue, Belfast
Glenwood Court, Bell Steel Road, Belfast	Torrens Avenue, Belfast
Great Georges Street, Belfast	Torrens Road, Belfast
Grosvenor Road, Belfast	Twinbrook Road, Belfast
Grove Street East, Belfast	Tyndale Gardens, Belfast
Grove Street East/Fashoda Street, Belfast	Tyndale Gardens, Belfast
Grove Street East/Fashoda Street, Belfast	Tynedale Gardens, Avenue
Harberton Park, Belfast	Upper Courtyard
Harberton Park, Belfast	Upper Dunmurry Lane, Belfast
Harberton Park, Belfast	Upper Dunmurry Lane, Belfast
Harberton Park, Belfast	Upper Dunmurry Lane, Belfast
Harberton Park, Belfast	Upper Newtownards Road, Belfast
Harberton Park, Belfast	Upper Springfield Road, Belfast
Harberton Park, Belfast	Upper Suffolk Road, Belfast
Harberton Park, Belfast	Victoria Square, Belfast
Hawthornden Road, Belfast	Viewfort Park, Belfast
Hawthornden Road, Belfast	Wandsworth Court, Belfast
Henry Place, Belfast	Wandsworth Court, Belfast
Herbert Street & Flax Street	Wellington Square, Annadale Embankment
Highfield Drive, Belfast	Wellwood Street / Glenalpin Street
Hope Street And Wellwood Street	Welsh Street/Upper Stanfield Street, Belfast
Hopewell Crescent, Belfast	West Circular Road, Belfast
Hopewell Crescent, Belfast	Westway Hill
Hospital Road, Belfast	Westwood Shopping Centre, Kennedy Way, Belfast
Hyndford Street, Belfast	Whiterock Road/Whiterock Grove, Belfast
Inverary Avenue, Belfast	Whiterock Road/Whiterock Grove, Belfast
Island Street/Medway Street, Belfast	Whitewell Court
Jamaica Street, Belfast	Whitewell Grove, Belfast
Jamaica Street, Belfast	Windsor Avenue
Jamaica Street, Belfast	Wolfhill Avenue And Ligoniel Road, Belfast
Jamaica Way/Ardglan Place, Belfast	Wolfhill Avenue, Belfast
Kensington Road, Belfast	Wolfhill Link / Thornberry Road, Belfast
Kensington Road, Belfast	Wolfhill Link / Thornberry Road, Belfast
Kent Street, Belfast	Wolfhill Link / Thornberry Road, Belfast

Kings Road, Belfast	Woodstock Road, Belfast
Kinnaird Terrace/Kinnaird Street, Belfast	Woodstock Road/Cregagh Road, Belfast
Kitchener Drive, Belfast	Woodstock Road/Cregagh Road, Belfast
Kitchener Drive, Belfast	Woodvale Road, Belfast
	York Road, Belfast

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in light of the public concern expressed by Mr Justice Humphreys in the case of Donnelly versus Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, to detail what her Department is doing to ensure that local authorities approach to planning enforcement on unauthorised minerals extractions is compliant with Regulation 32 of the Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2017.

(AQW 12181/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am content that the requirements of the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Directive (as amended) as they apply to the land use planning system have been properly transposed into domestic legislation via the Planning (EIA) Regulations (NI) 2017 ("the 2017 EIA Regulations"). Regulation 32 of the 2017 EIA Regulations requires that a planning authority "shall consider the exercise of their enforcement functions in such a way as to secure compliance with the objectives and requirements of the Directive".

It is the responsibility of an individual council, in its role as a local planning authority, to ensure it is properly meeting its statutory obligations. It is best placed to make a decision on enforcement in light of the specific details of any alleged unauthorised development and is the authority with the responsibility to do so. This is in keeping with the spirit of the then NI Executive's decision to transfer local planning decisions to local councils and create the two-tier planning system.

However, my Department is taking forward work under the Environmental Governance Work Programme which aims to enhance competence and capacity across the two-tier planning system in order to support environmentally sound decision-making. This includes work on capacity building, engagement and support and the development of a number of pieces of guidance, the first element of which will deal with unauthorised EIA development.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will seek to bring forward further financial support for taxi drivers.

(AQW 12206/17-22)

Ms Mallon: At present, the priority is to process the 4500 valid applications that have been received from taxi drivers for the current scheme, with 3500 payments issued before Christmas. Staff in my Department are working at pace to process all the remaining applications as quickly as possible, once outstanding information is received, to enable payments to be made to those who are eligible without delay.

I have asked my officials to explore further options for helping those taxi drivers who were not eligible for the current scheme. At the same time, I also continue to press for the inclusion of the taxi sector in the various other support schemes being taken forward across the Executive, particularly Part B of the CBRRS run by the Department for the Economy.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the locations where NI Water have identified the urgent need for improved sewerage or waste water investment; (ii) the impact the needs for these works is having on planning applications; and (iii) the bids she has made to the Minister of Finance to address these needs.

(AQW 12211/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The locations that require urgent improvement in sewerage infrastructure or wastewater investment, as advised by NI Water, are set out in the table below.

Aghanloo 1 WwTW	Annsborough WwTW	Antrim Milltown WwTW
Ardglass WwTW	Armoy Bush WwTW	Ballycastle WwTW
Ballyclare WwTW	Ballygowan WwTW	Ballyhalbert WwTW
Ballymagorry WwTW	Ballymena WwTW	Ballynahinch WwTW
Ballyronan WwTW	Ballywalter WwTW	Belfast WwTW
Belleek WwTW	Blackwatertown WwTW	Bushmills WwTW
Cabragh WwTW	Cargan WwTW	Carrickfergus WwTW
Carrowclare WwTW	Castledearg 2 WwTW	Clogh WwTW
Clough East WwTW	Cookstown WwTW	Culmore 2 WwTW
Darkley WwTW	Derrycrin WwTW	Dervock WwTW

Desertmartin WwTW	Donemara WwTW	Downpatrick WwTW
Dromore Ballymaganlis WwTW	Drumaness WwTW	Drumquin WwTW
Dundrum WwTW	Dungannon WwTW	Dungiven WwTW
Dunloy WwTW	Edenderry Belfast WwTW	Ederney WwTW
Eglisk Dungannon WwTW	Enniskillen WwTW	Fivemiletown WwTW
Garrison South WwTW	Garvagh WwTW	Glenstall WwTW
Gortin WwTW	Grange Taylorstown WwTW	Greenisland WwTW
Greyabbey WwTW	Kilkeel WwTW	Killeen Dungannon WwTW
Killinchy WwTW	Killygonlan WwTW	Killymuck WwTW
Kilrea WwTW	Kircubbin WwTW	Larne WwTW

Lawrencetown WwTW	Limavady WwTW	Lough Macrory South WwTW
Loughries WwTW	Lurganare WwTW	Maghera Down WwTW
Maghera Derry WwTW	Magherafelt WwTW	Martinstown WwTW
Meigh WwTW	Moneymore WwTW	Moneyreagh North WwTW
Moneyslane WwTW	Monteith WwTW	Moss-Side WwTW
Moy WwTW	Newcastle WwTW	Newry WwTW
Newtownbreda WwTW	North Coast WwTW	Omagh WwTW
Portaferry WwTW	Poyntzpass WwTW	Rasharkin WwTW
Rathfriland Drumlough WwTW	Robinsonstown WwTW	Roughfort WwTW
Saintfield WwTW	Seahill WwTW	Strabane WwTW
Stranocum WwTW	Tamlaght WwTW	Waringstown WwTW
Warrenpoint WwTW	Whitehouse WwTW	

WwTW - Wastewater Treatment Works

NI Water is a statutory consultee in the planning process and, when an application is received for an area in which sewerage infrastructure is at, or nearing capacity, it considers the proposal and endeavours to work with developers, to ensure that development is possible, to enable a positive recommendation to the planning authority. In some cases, it may be possible for NI Water to recommend the approval of a planning application in an area where sewerage infrastructure is at, or nearing capacity, if: (i) a developer can demonstrate 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, (ii) a developer provides a temporary wastewater treatment works to treat the sewage discharge until the public wastewater system can be upgraded and (iii) a developer provides a permanent wastewater treatment works, to treat the sewage discharge, subject to receiving the required statutory approvals. However, the current constraints at several wastewater treatment works and sewer network areas may result in NI Water recommending that planning permission is refused, if the proposed new connections cannot be facilitated. NI Water works closely with Local Councils, to highlight the ever changing position with regard to available wastewater treatment capacity and this has helped to inform councils' Local Development Plans.

The Department currently operates within single year budget allocations and in year monitoring rounds are useful for rebalancing budget allocations across government. Any successful bids received in a specific monitoring round must: (a) be used within the same financial year and (b) used for projects agreed in the Utility Regulator's price control. It is within these boundaries that NI Water made a bid in the most recent October monitoring round, and was allocated £15m to help accelerate a specific list of water and sewerage infrastructure projects that have been delayed due to the COVID-19 mandatory lockdown. These are projects which the Utility Regulator expects NI Water to take forward as part of its previously agreed commitments under the Price Control process.

It is vital that NI Water receives the necessary strategic level of funding from the Executive to begin resolving the wastewater capacity issues within so many areas. Relying on bidding within monitoring rounds will never deliver the scale of funding that is required. It will take multi-year certainty of funding of NI Water, to deliver the PC21 Business Plan that is needed to begin transforming this essential infrastructure. Therefore, a long term funding commitment from the Executive is required to address the current state of water and wastewater infrastructure.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 7390/17-22, for an update on the assessment to be undertaken concerning speed limits on Ballyrobert Road.

(AQW 12316/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Following on from previous correspondence, officials have arranged for Automatic Traffic Counters (ATC's) to be positioned along the Ballyrobert Road. However given the current Covid-19 restrictions it would not be deemed appropriate to install these measures until February/March 2021 when traffic patterns are likely to be more reflective of normal levels therefore providing a more realistic outcome.

This information will then be assessed in conjunction with the Department's guidelines, entitled Roads Service Policy and Procedure Guide (RSPPG) E051 'Setting Local Speed Limits in Northern Ireland'.

Department for the Economy

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy when her Department will open the support scheme for company directors.

(AQW 12471/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): The Limited Company Directors Support Scheme (LCDSS) will open for applications at 6pm on Thursday 21 January.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 8 January 2021

Written Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Ms Armstrong asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) what actions they are taking to ensure the rights of citizens who designate as Both and politically as Other are being protected in legislation as outlined in part 25 of New Decade, New Approach; and (ii) whether they will update the definition of cross-community to include Others on an equal legal footing as Nationalists and Unionists.

(AQW 11195/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): The principles set out in paragraph 25 of New Decade, New Approach are provided for in the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (Amendment No.1) Bill. Our officials continue with preparatory work to bring forward this Bill together with the two other Bills appended to New Decade, New Approach. We will progress the legislation during 2020/2021, and establish the Office of Identity and Culture Expression as quickly as possible thereafter.

The statutory definition of cross-community in the Northern Ireland Act 1998 is an excepted matter, and outside the legislative competence of the Assembly. Legislation to amend the definition would be a matter for the Secretary of State following consultation with the political parties.

Mr Stewart asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in relation to the reopening of personal training classes in gyms from 11 December 2020, for clarification around the definition of non-aerobic exercise in the COVID-19 regulations.

(AQW 11790/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: For the purposes of the COVID-19 regulations that came into operation on 11 December, non-aerobic exercise relates to indoor sport or exercise activities that do not cause an individual to get out of breath.

Information on the current COVID-19 Regulations and what they mean for business sectors and individuals can be found on nidirect at: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-guidance-what-restrictions-mean-you>

Miss Woods asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) whether indoor live music or arts events can take place under the current COVID-19 restrictions in venues that are not designated as theatres or other events spaces such as hotels; and (ii) if so, under what circumstances.

(AQW 12102/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Indoor live events can take place under the current restrictions that came into operation on 11 December. However, indoor live events, and other indoor gatherings, are limited to a maximum of 15 people with adherence to the public health and social distancing guidance.

Live music, dancing or the provision of music for dancing is not permitted in licensed venues, except for professional dancers providing entertainment (subject to a maximum of 15 people including the dancers) or a first dance by a party to a marriage civil partnership.

Licensed venues must also adhere to the regulations governing the sale of alcohol.

Information on the current COVID-19 Regulations and what they mean for business sectors and individuals can be found on nidirect at: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-guidance-what-restrictions-mean-you>

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his Department's assessment on the environmental impacts of organic agriculture in comparison to conventional agriculture.

(AQW 10908/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Through crop rotation systems and prohibiting use of synthetic pesticides and fertilisers, organic agriculture can have positive environmental impacts in terms of biodiversity, water quality, soil quality and climate change mitigation.

A range of studies indicate that these environmental benefits are delivered on farms operating to certified organic standards. However, conventional farming can also deliver positive environmental impacts through appropriate farm management.

Therefore, I believe that both organic and conventional agriculture can contribute to addressing the range of environmental pressures that we currently face.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the impacts that organic farming has on biodiversity.

(AQW 10911/17-22)

Mr Poots: A range of studies indicate that biodiversity benefits are enhanced on farms operating to certified organic standards.

By prohibiting use of synthetic pesticides and fertilisers, certified organic agriculture can enhance the environmental value of crops for invertebrates, farmland birds and mammals. Allowing field margins and headland to develop and flower provides a vital source of nectar for pollinators.

Through regular cultivation, organic crop rotation systems help to avoid soil compaction and excessive weeds, making the land less susceptible to drought and water saturation. Recycling nutrients in manures and composts also benefit soil structure and quality. These practices help to support a diversity of plant species and wildlife.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what plans he has (i) for the mandatory and free microchipping of horses in conjunction with a horse passport; (ii) for the re-establishment of a Northern Ireland equivalent of a National Equine Database; (iii) to introduce any other measures that would protect the welfare of horses, including from practices such as acts of cruelty and fly-grazing; and (iv) to work with animal welfare groups, the PSNI and local councils in order to prevent cruelty and fly-grazing.

(AQW 11121/17-22)

Mr Poots:

i Micro-chipping of horses

Under the terms and provisions of Commission Implementing Regulation EU No. 2015/262 and The Equine Identification Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019, it is mandatory for a horse to be microchipped when an application is made for a passport. The charges for both of these services are levied by veterinary surgeons and Passport Issuing Organisations (PIOs), respectively. My Department has no plans to fund these services.

ii. National Equine Database

Under the provisions of Commission Implementing Regulation EU No. 2015/262 and The Equine Identification Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019, PIOs are required to upload the data from their local database to the United Kingdom Central Equine Database (CED). At present, my Department has no plans to establish a Northern Ireland equivalent.

iii. Abandoned / straying animals (including fly-grazing)

My Department currently has no specific powers to deal with the welfare of horses which have strayed or are being fly-grazed on another person's land.

However, Article 9 of The Animals (Northern Ireland) Order 1976, which comes under the remit of the Department of Finance, provides powers to deal with livestock which have strayed onto someone's land. "Livestock" includes cattle, horses, donkeys, sheep, pigs, goats and poultry, and domesticated deer.

The land owner or occupier who finds any of these animals on their land can detain the animals, however, they must then inform the PSNI within 48 hours that they have done so.

After 14 days, if no owner is identified, the land owner/occupier can then sell the livestock at a market or public auction. If this is not a viable option, the landowner can consider contacting an animal welfare or re-homing charity.

The right of the land owner/occupier to detain the livestock ends if the livestock is then claimed by its owner and this owner pays an amount to cover matters such as damages caused, and expenses incurred.

The Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 provides legislative protections for all farmed and companion animals in Northern Ireland, including horses. The Act makes it an offence to cause unnecessary suffering or fail to cater for the needs of any animal. Responsibility for upholding the welfare of horses under the Act falls to councils. A council animal welfare officer has powers under the Act to take possession of any animal, including a horse, which is suffering or likely to suffer.

The maximum penalty available for causing unnecessary suffering is up to five years imprisonment and/or an unlimited fine. It is noted that the penalties available in Northern Ireland are among the most stringent in the United Kingdom.

The maximum penalty in England and Wales is six months imprisonment and/or an unlimited fine; and the maximum in Scotland has only recently increased (from 30 November 2020) from twelve months imprisonment and/or a fine of up to £20,000 to a level that is equal to Northern Ireland's.

The Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill currently before Westminster will bring the maximum penalties available in England and Wales into line with those here.

iv. **Working with other organisations**

My officials continue to work with a range of organisations, including animal welfare groups, to ensure the welfare of all animals is protected.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to AQW 10116/17-22, whether he has written to the Minister of Justice with regard to creating a register of those convicted of animal welfare offences. **(AQW 11161/17-22)**

Mr Poots: I remain committed to exploring how a register of those convicted of animal welfare offences might be established. I can confirm that I have now written to the Minister for Justice on this matter.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the impact Brexit will have on the importation of potato seeds to Ireland. **(AQW 11205/17-22)**

Mr Poots: EU Regulations classify seed potatoes as having a high biosecurity risk and as such they are prohibited from entering the EU regulatory zone, including NI, from third countries unless a derogation has been agreed by the EU. Also, it will not be permitted to market seed potatoes in NI from third countries which have not been listed by the EU as equivalent. The UK Government has applied to the EU for a derogation on the prohibition and to be listed as equivalent, which until granted, will mean that seed potatoes from GB will be prohibited from entry to NI.

I remain concerned at the detrimental consequences not reaching agreement would have for the NI seed potato sector. Trade in potatoes from GB is a historic and vital component of the sector's ability to operate on a GB/NI/ROI basis. Currently 90% of seed potatoes grown on in NI are sourced from GB, mainly Scotland, and 50% of seed potatoes produced in NI are marketed in ROI. The NI sector has grown this business model over many years and responding to this forced change where its main seed source is prohibited could seriously disrupt the operation of many NI businesses.

Given the need for an urgent resolution, I have written to both the Secretary of State for Defra and the Irish Minister of Agriculture Fisheries and the Marine emphasising the importance of the supply of GB potatoes to NI businesses and the wider NI/GB/ROI potato sectors, requesting that they do all in their power to expedite and support reaching agreement with the EU in order to avoid disruption to this trade and NI businesses.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what proportion of municipal waste is (i) incinerated; and (ii) recycled. **(AQW 11245/17-22)**

Mr Poots: The proportion of local authority collected municipal waste sent for incineration (with energy recovery) in 2019-20 was 22.1%. Whilst the proportion of local authority collected municipal waste sent for recycling in 2019-20 was 51.1%.

These and other waste measures can be found in the latest local authority collected municipal waste report which can be found here (<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-local-authority-collected-municipal-waste-management-statistics-2019>) on my Department's website.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment on the impact the gasification plant, situated within Belfast's Harbour Estate, has on air quality levels in the surrounding areas. **(AQW 11246/17-22)**

Mr Poots: The NIEA currently regulate the Full Circle Generation gasification plant under Pollution Prevention and Control (Industrial Emissions) Regulations (NI) 2013. As part of their permit application the operator must demonstrate that emissions to air from the plant would not have any detrimental impact on the air quality in the surrounding environment using air dispersion modelling software. The operator demonstrated this by modelling the impacts from the plant in combination with the predicted background levels, which assumed that the plant would operate continuously at its maximum throughput in order to simulate the "worse case" scenario. This is a conservative approach to model emissions from industrial plants.

The results of the modelling submitted by the operator under the "worse case" scenario did not breach any of the Air Quality Objectives (AQO) for any of the agreed pollutants. However, unlike all other pollutants the Nitrogen Oxide(s) projected emissions were not deemed to be 'insignificant' as they were greater than 1% of the Long Term AQO (ie. >0.40 mg/m³ - annual mean).

After carrying out further air dispersion modelling for the plant, NIEA set an emission limit value of 170mg/m³ in the permit for Nitrogen Oxide(s) which was 15% below the mandatory limit of 200mg/m³ for incineration plants, set out in Annex VI of the

Industrial Emission Directive (IED), which ensures that even in the 'worst case' scenario, the air quality impact from emissions of Nitrogen Oxide(s) have been deemed to be 'insignificant'.

The reduced emission limit value for Nitrogen Oxide(s) gives the Department confidence that the emissions from the Full Circle Generation will not have any discernible effects on air quality in the local environment.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether his Department has made an assessment on the impact emissions from waste incineration in Northern Ireland have on meeting UK net-zero targets.

(AQW 11247/17-22)

Mr Poots: The waste sector in Northern Ireland is a relatively small contributor to total emissions in Northern Ireland, accounting for 4% of emissions in 2018. It is also important to recognise that this is a 58% reduction on 1990 levels.

Over 90% of the emissions from waste are in the form of methane, of which 75% comes from the breaking down of waste anaerobically in landfill, so it is important to ensure we reduce emissions by diverting waste from landfill to other treatment options. This includes recycling, composting, anaerobic digestion, mechanical biological treatment and incineration with energy recovery. Emissions from waste incineration would be in the form of CO₂ which is much less potent than methane from landfill.

The Committee on Climate Change report on Reducing Emissions in Northern Ireland published in February 2019 recognises the need to assess the role of energy from waste plants to treat BMW diverted from landfill and as such I continue to do so. It should also be noted that incineration is only one form of energy from waste and there are a range of other technologies which I am considering.

I would also direct you to my reply on AQW 7744/17-22 in relation to your question on the climate impacts of waste to energy plants.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how many waste-to-energy plants are currently operating in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 11248/17-22)

Mr Poots: NIEA currently regulates three waste to energy incineration plants which are permitted under the Pollution Prevention and Control (Industrial Emissions) Regulations (NI) 2013 (the PPC Regulations).

- Full Circle generation Limited - Permit Reference P0446/14A
- Tyrone Energy Limited - Permit Reference P0374/11A
- Evermore Renewable Energy - Permit Reference P0387/12A

The permit and reporting information for each facility can be found in the public register on the NIEA website (<https://apps.d. daera-ni.gov.uk/ipri/>).

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how many cases of Illegal dumping were reported as coming from the Republic of Ireland, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 11686/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department focuses its enforcement actions primarily on larger scale waste dumping activity rather than low level ad hoc dumping often referred to as 'fly-tipping', which is primarily addressed by District Councils (DCs).

Whilst historically there have been a number of investigations and prosecutions involving larger scale waste dumping which originated in the Republic of Ireland (ROI), there have been no significant issues within NI in recent years. The last case investigated by the NIEA which involved waste confirmed as originating in the Republic of Ireland was discovered in September 2015 and successfully concluded in the courts in September 2019.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what steps he is taking to support the Northern Ireland hydrogen economy.

(AQW 11715/17-22)

Mr Poots: Hydrogen policy lies within the remit of the Department of Economy. Nevertheless, having recently met with a number of stakeholders and discussed Hydrogen opportunities with Executive colleagues from DfE, DfI and DoF, I am aware of the potential cross cutting benefits of Hydrogen as a replacement for fossil fuels within the areas of energy and transport. Both areas will be key themes, as we develop the Executive's Green Growth Strategy and Delivery Framework. Hydrogen alternatives have potential to deliver significant carbon reductions, helping Northern Ireland move towards our carbon reduction targets while at the same time, promote economic growth through the creation of new green jobs. I expect Hydrogen development projects are likely to be relevant in terms of innovation in energy and sustainable transport, as part of the Green Growth Delivery Framework.

Therefore, in addition to leading the development of the Green Growth Strategy, DAERA will also be represented on a cross Departmental working group on hydrogen development to be established by DfE.

In addition NIEA Prosperity Agreements were launched in spring 2014 to enable NIEA to assist regulated companies to move beyond compliance. They are voluntary agreements through which NIEA and an organisation can explore opportunities for reducing environmental impacts in ways that create prosperity and well-being.

As part of this process my Department is already in active discussions with a number of companies in Northern Ireland wishing to sign Prosperity Agreements which contain an element of hydrogen energy to improve business efficiency and lower their carbon footprint.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how many wildlife licences were issued to permit the disturbance of protected animals in 2020.

(AQW 11742/17-22)

Mr Poots: Between the 1st January 2020 and the 9th December 2020, a total of 204 wildlife licences were issued to permit disturbance of protected animals in Northern Ireland.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what proportion of egg production in Northern Ireland is (i) free range; and (ii) from caged hens.

(AQW 11789/17-22)

Mr Poots: The volume of egg production within Northern Ireland is collated via a biannual DAERA survey of Egg Packers.

Using information available from the last survey summary published in September 2020, the percentages of the quantity of eggs produced by Northern Ireland farms using Free Range and Cage production systems were as follows:

- (i) Free Range 66%
- (ii) Cage 30%

Barn and Organic eggs made up the remaining 4% of production.

The most recent Egg Packers survey is in the final stages of completion and collation, and should be published in early 2021.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to AQW 10407/17-22, what considerations he has given to increasing funding, either directly or via supporting the NI Raptor Study Group, for the provision of greater security, potentially with technology such as cameras, in relation to preventing and penalising the persecution of birds of prey, in particular the hen harrier.

(AQW 11860/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Northern Ireland Raptor Study Group (NIRSG) undertakes valuable raptor conservation and monitoring work across Northern Ireland. The NIRSG has received payments from the DAERA-administered Environment Fund. This money, and previous Departmental financial assistance, provided support to assist the group with their work.

The persecution of birds of prey is regarded as a serious wildlife crime and reports are thoroughly investigated by the PSNI. The Partnership for Action Against Wildlife Crime NI (PAW NI) provides an opportunity for the PSNI to work in partnership with statutory and non-statutory agencies to combat wildlife crime.

The structure of PAW NI includes a number of sub groups, including one that deals specifically with birds of prey and related crime. Departmental officials are members of this subgroup and one of its recent projects (Hawkeyes) includes the monitoring of raptor nest sites by remote cameras. The project also deploys remote tracking devices on birds of prey to monitor their movements, and ultimately aims to promote awareness of raptor persecution in Northern Ireland. Funding was provided by the Department of Justice through their Assets Recovery Community Scheme (ARCS) which distributes the proceeds of crime to help various community projects.

In addition to this, the PSNI have been undertaking an annual campaign known as "Operation Peregrine Watch" in order to carry out surveillance using drones, cameras and deployed additional police patrols supported by raptor study group volunteers across Northern Ireland. This is undertaken annually at peregrine falcon nesting sites to both prevent, detect, and reduce crimes against this species.

Applications for financial assistance to the Environment Fund are open to a wide range of groups, and each application is considered individually by the NIEA Grants team in conjunction with an allocated client officer. The Department is happy to consider any future requests for financial assistance from groups who can assist the work of the PSNI, DAERA and PAW NI towards decreasing levels of raptor persecution in Northern Ireland.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how many Assembly Written Questions his Department received during the period 2 March 2020 to 30 November 2020; and to detail the total cost of responding to these questions.

(AQW 11914/17-22)

Mr Poots: I have received a total of 551 Assembly Written Questions (AQWs) during the period 2 March 2020 to 30 November 2020.

Unfortunately the total cost of responding to these questions is not readily available and could only be compiled at disproportionate cost.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on work being done by his Department to address factory farming.

(AQW 11997/17-22)

Mr Poots: Every livestock farm in Northern Ireland is subject to legislation which affords protections to all farmed animals. All livestock keepers must comply with requirements set out in the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 and the Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012.

These legislative requirements are diligently enforced by my Department's Veterinary Service. Farms are selected annually as part of the statutory cross compliance surveillance, to assess whether on-farm welfare meets the standards laid down in the legislation. If concerns are found, my Department has a number of enforcement measures, ranging from advice and guidance to formal prosecution, depending on the circumstances in each the case.

Welfare inspections are also carried out in response to complaints received from members of the public, or information from veterinarians working in meat plants. Similarly, where a private veterinary practitioner, or any other individual, has concerns about farmed animal welfare, they are actively encouraged to contact my Department. All allegations received from such sources, whether online, in person or by phone, are investigated as a priority.

In addition, larger intensive poultry and pig farms require an environmental (Pollution Prevention & Control) permit to operate and are regulated by the Department.

DAERA veterinary staff work closely with colleagues in CAFRE (Collage of Agriculture Food and Rural Enterprise) educating livestock keepers in good farming practice and standards of welfare for farmed animals. My Department has also published Codes of Practice for six types of farmed animals, which set out in detail the good practice of animal care and the systems and standards of management required of all those responsible for farmed animals.

Furthermore, DAERA is developing a Northern Ireland ammonia strategy which will be available for consultation soon. This strategy highlights the need for urgent action to reduce emissions from all farms in Northern Ireland. The strategy proposes a comprehensive approach to ammonia reduction, habitat protection and restoration, along with an economic analysis of the ammonia reduction measures.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what plans he has to bring forward legislative proposals to maintain animal welfare following the end of the transition period.

(AQW 12099/17-22)

Mr Poots: All animals in Northern Ireland are protected by the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 (the Act). The Act is an Act of the Northern Ireland Assembly and remains in place after the end of the transition period. In addition, under the terms of the Northern Ireland Protocol, EU legislation as listed below remains in force.

- Council Directive 98/58/EC – protection of animals for farming purposes
- Council Directive 1999/74/EC – minimum standards for the protection of laying hens
- Council Directive 2007/43/EC – minimum rules for the protection of chickens kept for meat production
- Council Directive 2008/119/EC – minimum standards for the protection of calves
- Council Directive 2008/120/EC – minimum standards for the protection of pigs
- Council Regulation EC No. 1/2005 – protection of animals during transport
- Council Regulation EC No. 1099/2009 – protection of animals at the time of killing

Safeguarding the welfare of animals is a priority for my Department and I am satisfied there is robust legislation in place, supported by a stringent regulatory and enforcement regime. My Department does, however, keep this issue under regular review. This is to ensure that legislation remains effective in ensuring that we continue to maintain the highest levels of animal welfare.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) for his assessment on the figure, given by the British Veterinary Society, of a 10-12 per cent shortage of vets in Northern Ireland; and (ii) what plans he has to address this shortage.

(AQW 12219/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am aware of the British Veterinary Association's figure, and believe this to be a reasonably authoritative statement of the position, especially in the run-up to Brexit. This figure is also supported by anecdotal information on the difficulties employers are encountering recruiting sufficient experienced vets for the vacancies that exist, both here in Northern Ireland and beyond.

It is not however within the gift of the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to address this shortage, though I am pleased that veterinarians have recently been added to the Shortage Occupation List, facilitating their recruitment from outside the UK.

I also note the recent increases in the capacity of the university system to supply higher numbers of graduates in the future, with larger class sizes in existing facilities, and new veterinary schools coming on stream in other colleges across the United Kingdom.

In this respect, I am also very supportive of proposals to develop undergraduate veterinary education here in Northern Ireland, should the local universities decide to take this forward.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether his Department has funding available to upgrade play areas in rural areas.

(AQW 12293/17-22)

Mr Poots: DAERA does not have statutory responsibility for play areas. However, my Department made available £70m for the LEADER programme (priority 6 of the NI Rural Development Programme 2014- 2020) which is delivered by Local Action Groups in each of the Councils (excluding Belfast). This funding primarily provides opportunity to support rural businesses, rural basic services and village renewal and is allocated based on the priorities identified in each LAG strategy. Some areas have utilised this funding to include play areas with implementation led by the Local Council.

DAERA also continue to work with Local Councils through the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI) programme to support the enhancement of recreational facilities in Forest Parks and this can include play area. Subject to budget I hope to continue this work in 2021/22.

Department for Communities

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities whether she has considered enabling childcare costs to be paid directly to childcare providers for Universal Credit claimants.

(AQW 7186/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister for Communities): The Department uses the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Universal Credit computer system to process applications for Universal Credit which was designed to pay childcare costs in arrears and to the claimant. The Department is exploring the potential to amend the functionality of the system however it should be noted that any changes to the Universal Credit computer system would need to be paid for by the Department and agreed with DWP.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister for Communities how she plans to deal with housing stress outside the areas she has ring-fenced for Housing Executive new builds.

(AQW 10903/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The projected outcome of my plans is about ensuring the supply of social homes can meet the needs of the increasing numbers of households in housing stress. Crucial to this is the protection of the homes we have; ensuring they can be maintained and I also remain committed to increasing the capacity of the current Social Housing Development Programme.

My officials have commenced work to update the analysis of the scale of the Housing Executive's investment challenge and to assess options for its revitalisation.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the waiting lists for social housing in West Tyrone, and the current points needed to be afforded a social home.

(AQW 12013/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has advised that the Waiting List and allocations figures for the West Tyrone Parliamentary Constituency as at the end of September 2020 were as follows:

- Total number of applicants including those in housing stress: 1,632
- Applicants in Housing Stress: 1,037
- Allocations to Applicants: 198

Points at the point of allocation in the West Tyrone Parliamentary Constituency were as follows:

Allocations for 1 Year to 30/09/20 by West Tyrone Parliamentary Constituency and Mean & Median Points at the Point of Allocation

Parliamentary Constituency	No. of Allocations	Mean Pts at the Point of Allocation	Median Pts at the Point of Allocation
West Tyrone	198	129.9	140.0

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.

Minister Ní Chuilín outlined in her statement to the Assembly on 3rd November plans to address some of the most significant challenges facing our housing system, including lack of supply. This included plans to enable the Housing Executive to build again, as well as a commitment to increase the capacity of the current Social Housing Development Programme.

The projected outcome of these plans is about ensuring the supply of social homes can meet the needs of the increasing numbers of households in housing stress.

My officials will shortly be commencing work to update the analysis of the scale of the Housing Executive's investment challenge and to assess options for its revitalisation.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities to detail the current waiting lists for social homes in the (i) Sperrin; and (ii) Derg District Electoral Areas, broken down to include the number of people in housing stress and those who are homeless. **(AQW 12150/17-22)**

Ms Hargey: The Housing Executive has confirmed that it does not report waiting list figures at District Electoral Area level. Instead it has provided the following table detailing the Waiting List, Housing Stress, Allocation and Full Duty Applicant status for the West Tyrone Parliamentary Constituency broken down by Housing Need Assessment Area as at September 2020.

Housing Need Assessment Area	All Applicants	Applicants in Housing Stress	Allocations to Applicants	Applicants with FDA Status
Ardstraw	<10	<10	<10	<10
Artigarvan	13	<10	<10	<10
Ballycolman	140	89	<10	65
Ballymagorry	18	15	<10	<10
Beragh	17	10	<10	<10
Carrickmore	13	<10	<10	<10
Castledearg	95	57	11	34
Clady Strabane	12	<10	0	<10
Donemana	21	12	<10	<10
Douglas Bridge	20	12	<10	<10
Dromore Omagh	36	24	<10	14
Drumquin	19	14	<10	<10
Dublin Road	179	105	18	66
Erganagh	<10	<10	<10	<10
Fintona	51	32	<10	16
Fountain Strabane	34	19	<10	10
Gortin	13	<10	<10	<10
Gortin Road	132	100	21	55
Greencastle	<10	<10	0	<10
Hospital Road	63	40	<10	27
Killen/Killeter	<10	<10	<10	<10
Magheramason	13	<10	<10	<10
Newhouse	31	22	<10	14
Newtown	96	63	<10	36
Newtownstewart	60	35	16	17
Omagh Cottages	<10	<10	0	0
Omagh General	391	245	43	145
Plumbridge	<10	<10	<10	<10
Sion Mills/Glebe	118	82	22	53

Housing Need Assessment Area	All Applicants	Applicants in Housing Stress	Allocations to Applicants	Applicants with FDA Status
Spamount	<10	<10	<10	<10
Trillick	<10	<10	<10	0
	1632	1037	198	613

NB: It is the practice of the Housing Executive not to release data which has the potential of identifying an individual – e.g. those on the waiting list. The Housing Executive normally classify any number of applicants or individual households that amounts to less than 10 as <10.

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister for Communities what plans she has to take a gender lens to the Review of Welfare Mitigations given the disproportionate impact of welfare reform policies on women.
(AQW 12226/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The forthcoming review of welfare mitigation measures will focus on ensuring that support is provided to those people who are most in need. This will be achieved by considering the impact of the current social security system on specific groups including analysis of any disproportionate impact arising from a person's gender.

I am also committed to the involvement of a range of interest groups in the mitigations review. This will provide the opportunity for organisations with a specific interest in the rights of women to directly contribute to the design of any future mitigation measures.

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister for Communities what measures will be taken to address the disproportionate economic impact the COVID-19 crisis has had on women and develop gender-sensitive responses.
(AQW 12227/17-22)

Ms Hargey: As Minister with responsibility for Gender Equality I am committed to tackling the structural inequalities and obstacles that directly affect the everyday lives of women, many of which have been starkly exposed by the current pandemic.

Alongside a Gender Equality Strategy, my Department has commenced work on a number of Social Inclusion Strategies, which will aim to address a range of barriers and inequalities in society. As work progresses on the Gender Equality Strategy, we will use available emerging evidence to ensure that the Strategy includes actions targeted at mitigating the medium to long term effects of the pandemic.

This pandemic, whilst first and foremost a health emergency, has also had a devastating impact on people's jobs, with job losses and reductions in both hours worked and earnings for many people. It will be important in developing the Gender Equality Strategy that all of these issues are considered and I will be working with my colleagues across the Executive to ensure that the Strategy includes actions to address them.

The Executive introduced an unprecedented number and range of financial support packages, in order to mitigate against the worst impacts, and to try and protect as many jobs and livelihoods as possible.

The Department for the Economy has led and continues to lead in the development and delivery of a number of schemes and financial support packages, many of which are aimed at those sectors where there is a high density of female business owners and employees.

In deciding on further interventions, it will be for the Executive collectively to decide on the best use of any additional funding allocation, in a manner that will address those most in need of support, and help us move towards a pathway of sustained economic recovery.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities whether she will ensure that the Disability Strategy includes agreed standards that must be adopted and implemented across all Departments, such as all disabled parking bays must comply with Disabled Parking Accreditation standards as designed by Disabled Motoring UK and managed by the British Parking Association.
(AQW 12280/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Work on a new Disability Strategy is ongoing. A Cross-departmental Working Group has been convened to consider and agree the actions that departments will take forward as part of the Strategy's action plan. The Department for Infrastructure is represented on this Group.

The Cross-departmental Working Group will work to ensure that actions are resourced, measureable and targeted at the areas of greatest need identified by the Disability Strategy Co-design Group. The Co-design Group is made up of representatives from the disability sector, including those with lived experience of access issues.

Any actions requiring cross-departmental agreement will be considered as the work of the Disability Strategy Cross-departmental Working Group progresses.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities how she plans to fund vital employment support services for people with disabilities, given the UK Government is limiting the purposes for what the Shared Prosperity Fund can be used.
(AQW 12281/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Department for Communities (DfC) currently provides match funding to 14 disability projects in the European Social Fund Programme 2014 -2020.

In order to consider the future policy and delivery options, DfE have established a project in collaboration with DfC to consider options and develop details of potential ESF succession arrangements. Whilst progress is being made on the project, the timetable for the development of a successor programme and securing the necessary funding is an extremely challenging one.

The Department of Finance leads the response to the Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) on behalf of the Executive

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister for Communities to what extent women's sector representatives have been involved in discussions around Recovery Planning as a result of the pandemic, to ensure that women's voices and experiences are central to discussions and decision-making in Recovery Planning.
(AQW 12296/17-22)

Ms Hargey: As Minister with responsibility for Gender Equality for the Executive I am committed to tackling the structural inequalities and obstacles that directly affect the everyday lives of women, many of which have been starkly exposed by the current pandemic.

My Department has developed its Departmental Strategy 'Building Inclusive Communities 2020-2025' which takes into account the anticipated longer term impacts of COVID-19 upon society, wellbeing and the economy, and aligns with the Executive's recovery plans.

As part of 'Building Inclusive Communities 2020-2025', and in line with the commitment in New Decade, New Approach, the Department will be developing a Gender Strategy through co-design and co-production with meaningful involvement from stakeholders at all stages of the process. It will be vital to reach out to women affected by the pandemic to ensure their voices are heard and considered, and to provide women with the opportunity to input specifically into actions that are needed to address issues that have arisen or been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is anticipated that alongside a number of other Social Inclusion Strategies, the Gender Strategy will be published by the end of 2021, subject to Executive agreement.

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister for Communities what plans are being developed to address the causes of poverty, in particular persistent poverty, in order to ensure that individuals, families and households can access a real living income, given that addressing the consequences of poverty through initiatives such as food banks does not produce sustainable change.
(AQW 12297/17-22)

Ms Hargey: As part of the commitments under New Decade, New Approach and the Executive's Programme for Government, it was agreed that alongside a suite of social inclusion strategies, an Anti-Poverty strategy would be developed.

To reduce poverty, it is essential that the Anti-Poverty strategy is meaningful and actions are based on evidence which will allow us to target where the need is greatest. The impacts of COVID-19 and the need to address food insecurity will be considered within the development of the Anti-poverty strategy, ensuring that it is well informed by involving our citizens and communities.

An Expert Advisory Panel was appointed to make recommendations on the key themes and priorities that the Anti-poverty Strategy should address. These recommendations will inform the work of a Co-Design Group made up of a cross section of Voluntary and Community Sector organisations.

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister for Communities what progress is being made to address the existing gaps in gender disaggregated data, which makes it difficult to fully assess the impact of COVID-19 on women and which will also make it difficult to determine if any progress is being made on addressing these issues.
(AQW 12298/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department has commenced work on a suite of new Social Inclusion Strategies, including a Gender Equality Strategy. The Strategy is being developed using a co-design approach with meaningful involvement from stakeholders at all stages of the process. It will aim to address a range of gender-related barriers and inequalities in society.

The impact of COVID-19 continues to be felt by all sections of society, including women. As work progresses on the Gender Equality Strategy, we will use available emerging evidence to ensure that the Strategy includes actions aimed at mitigating the medium to longer term impact of Covid-19 in relation to gender issues. As the Strategy develops, consideration will be given to potential actions to improve the use of gender disaggregated data. It is anticipated that the Gender Equality Strategy will be published by the end of 2021, subject to Executive agreement.

The Professional Services Unit within my department publish statistics disaggregated by Section 75 category, where available and continue to progress work to increase the availability of disaggregated data, including engaging with the Department for Work & Pensions on the availability of gender data within the benefits administrative system.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister for Communities to detail, since January 2020, the number of social housing units (i) approved by her Department but on which construction has not yet commenced; (ii) on which construction has commenced but is not completed; (iii) on which construction has been completed and the housing association has received a Completion Certificate from a contractor; and (iv) which have been allocated to new tenants by housing associations, in the East Derry constituency. **(AQW 12325/17-22)**

Ms Hargey: Within the East Derry Parliamentary Constituency there have been 12 social housing units approved since beginning of 2020, but construction has yet to commence. The detail of these units are included in Table 1 below.

There are currently 134 social housing units under construction. Details of these units are included in Table 2 below.

There have been 49 social housing completions, since the beginning of 2020. In this context, "completion" means that work on the dwelling is complete and that these 49 units have been handed over to a housing association (following receipt of a Completion Certificate from a contractor).

The housing associations have confirmed that 14 of the 49 units have been allocated to new tenant(s). The status of the remaining 35 units is not available as we have not as yet received this information. Details of these units are included in Table 3 below.

Table 1: Social housing units approved since 1st January 2020, but construction not commenced (12 units)

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Apex Housing	Hass Road, Phase 3A (T)	Dungiven	New Build	1	2020/21	2022/23
Choice	Keely Gardens (T)	Aghadowey	New Build	4	2020/21	2021/22
Triangle	Harpurs Hill, Phase 2 (T)	Coleraine	New Build	4	2020/21	2021/22
Triangle	Harpurs Hill, Phase 2 (T)	Coleraine	New Build	3	2020/21	2021/22

Table 2: Social housing units under construction (134 units)

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Apex Housing	Hass Road, Phase 3 (T)	Dungiven	New Build	18	2020/21	2021/22
Apex Housing	Hass Road, Phase 3 (T)	Dungiven	New Build	4	2020/21	2021/22
Ark	Railway Road	Coleraine	Off The Shelf	12	2020/21	2021/22
Choice	The Hill	Portstewart	New Build	9	2020/21	2022/23
Habinteg	45 Girona Avenue	Portrush	New Build	7	2018/19	2020/21
Habinteg	45 Girona Avenue	Portrush	New Build	3	2018/19	2020/21
Radius	(Site Adjacent to 191) Coleraine Road	Portstewart	Design & Build	57	2019/20	2021/22
Radius	(Site Adjacent to 191) Coleraine Road	Portstewart	Design & Build	12	2019/20	2021/22
Radius	(Site Adjacent to 191) Coleraine Road	Portstewart	Design & Build	6	2019/20	2021/22
Triangle	Portstewart Road	Coleraine	Off The Shelf	6	2019/20	2021/22

Table 3: Social housing unit completions since 1st January 2020 (49 units)

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Units	Onsite Year	Completed Year	Status
Triangle	21 Parklea	Portstewart	1	2016/17	2020/21	Allocated
Triangle	22 Ashdale	Coleraine	1	2016/17	2020/21	Allocated
Triangle	8-10 Upper Captain Street	Coleraine	5	2016/17	2020/21	Allocated
Triangle	8 Thornlea Drive	Coleraine	1	2017/18	2019/20	Allocated
Clanmil	13 Union Street	Coleraine	18	2017/18	2020/21	*
Rural	Site adjacent 299 Foreglen Road	Foreglen	3	2019/20	2020/21	*
Choice	Beresford Avenue	Coleraine	14	2019/20	2020/21	*
Triangle	Castlecroft Drive, Phase 2	Dungiven	6	2019/20	2019/20	Allocated

* Housing Association has not provided a response to NIHE's request for this information.

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 Hunter asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of (i) children deemed to be living in poverty; and (ii) individuals deemed to be living in fuel poverty, in the East Derry constituency in each year since 2015.

(AQW 12326/17-22)

Ms Hargey:

- (i) Official measures of absolute and relative poverty are derived from the Family Resources Survey (FRS). Both measures can be presented on a before and after housing costs basis. The number of children estimated to be living in poverty are presented in the table below.

Child Poverty Type	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Relative Poverty Before Housing Costs	93,000	99,000	85,000	107,000
Relative Poverty After Housing Costs	103,000	118,000	102,000	122,000
Absolute Poverty Before Housing Costs	78,000	82,000	69,000	92,000
Absolute Poverty After Housing Costs	92,000	94,000	87,000	109,000

Further information regarding the Family Resources Survey (Households Below Average Income) can be found at the link below.

Households below Average Income Northern Ireland 2018/19 | Department for Communities (<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/households-below-average-income-northern-ireland-201819>)

- (ii) Figures relating to Fuel Poverty are published every five years by the Housing Executive via the House Condition Survey. The 2016 report (most recently reported results) estimated that approximately 22% (160,000) households were in fuel poverty. These figures are not currently available at the constituency level.

Further information regarding the House Condition Survey can be found at the link below

<https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Research/HCS-2016-Main-Reports/HCS-Main-Report-2016.aspx>

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities what plans her Department has for holding the Housing Executive to account for maintenance issues to their housing stock.

(AQW 12328/17-22)

Ms Hargey: While my Department has oversight and governance responsibility for the Housing Executive, prioritising maintenance programmes with the limited funding available remains an operational decision.

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.

Department of Education

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education whether the Public Health Agency and the Department of Health contributed to and agreed the application of the public exam guidance to the hosting of post-primary transfer tests.

(AQW 11030/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): The Education Authority, Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment, and Council Catholic Maintained Schools, alongside a number of directorates within my Department drew up this guidance after engagement with the Public Health Agency which indicated that the guidance should continue to focus on the key mitigations within the main Departmental Coronavirus guidance.

Post-primary transfer tests are not administered by my Department and arrangements for pupils attending the transfer tests are a matter for the host schools.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education (i) whether he will bring forward a temporary continuity direction in order to ensure a minimum level of consistent access to Special Educational Needs support for all vulnerable children; and (ii) whether he will provide the associated resources required to cover these services for all future pandemic-related disruption to education.

(AQW 11867/17-22)

Mr Weir: Provision for Special Educational Needs is a statutory requirement as set out in the Education (NI) Order 1996, as amended, and the 1998 SEN Code of Practice and 2005 supplement to the Code.

Although my Department has been successful in securing additional funding to tackle COVID-19 to date, there is no guarantee of additional funding. Notwithstanding this, my Department will continue to monitor funding requirements, in conjunction with the Education Authority, as the pandemic progresses, and bid for additional resources as required.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 11586/17-22, what the considered explanation is for the disparity in these figures.

(AQW 11878/17-22)

Mr Weir: It is extremely difficult to draw definitive conclusions, as the nature of Special Educational Needs is complex and the available body of research on the gender differences is a limited one.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education, in light of the Children's Services Cooperation Act (NI) 2015, whether he will instruct the Education Authority to accept referrals for Special Educational Needs assessments and support directly from playgroups rather than the current indirect process via the health service route.

(AQW 12017/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Children's Service Co-operation Act (CSCA) requires the Education Authority (EA) to co-operate (within the exercise of its functions) with other children's authorities (listed in the Act) and with other children's service providers. There is no provision within the CSCA regarding a children's authority (e.g. the Department of Education) instructing another children's authority (e.g. the EA).

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Education to define the criteria he will be asking applicants to demonstrate to prove the required appropriate (i) experience; (ii) skills and (iii) personal qualities for the role of chair and panel members for the Independent Review of Education.

(AQW 12134/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department is currently working with the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointment (OCPANI) to finalise arrangements for the recruitment process, expected to commence in January 2021.

A candidate information booklet, appointment plan and other relevant documentation will be published in due course once agreed. This will include detail on the criteria, skills and personal qualities for each of the roles and the process for application.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Education to detail the grades and experience of (i) NICS staff; and (ii) non-NICS personnel who will sit on the recruitment panel for the Chair and the other panel members of the Independent Review of Education.

(AQW 12135/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department is currently working with the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointment (OCPANI) to finalise arrangements for the recruitment process, expected to commence in January 2021.

The recruitment panel is expected to include Senior Officials from a number of Departments including the Department of Education.

The selection panel will also include an Independent Assessor allocated by OCPANI.

Selection panel members will be fully briefed on the work of the Review and the Commissioner's Code of Practice and will have received appropriate training.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to detail the maintenance costs per school in the North Down constituency, for the last two years.

(AQW 12196/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) is responsible for undertaking maintenance work in controlled and maintained schools. Voluntary Grammar and Grant Maintained Integrated Schools are responsible for their own maintenance works; therefore the Department does not hold details of maintenance expenditure for these schools.

The following table details the amount spent by the EA on maintenance works at schools in the North Down area in the last two financial years. It doesn't include 'landlord' maintenance activities which are funded by schools from their LMS budget.

SCHOOL NAME	2018/19 £	2019/20 £
Bangor Central Nursery School	3,038	10,052
Hollywood Nursery School	7,684	5,164
Trinity Nursery School	2,986	5,217
Ballyholme Primary School	11,808	12,376
Ballymagee Primary School	10,146	4,132
Ballyvester Primary School	1,698	2,955
Bangor Central Integrated Primary School	12,649	22,952
Bloomfield Primary School	10,310	15,665
Clandeboye Primary School	16,737	14,007
Crawfordsburn Primary School	8,399	10,856
Donaghadee Primary School	20,571	5,012
Glencraig Integrated Primary School	8,720	6,657
Grange Park Primary School	7,855	17,706
Hollywood Primary School	7,701	7,000
Kilcooley Primary School	13,459	12,807
Kilmaine Primary School	19,098	13,664
Millisle Primary School	6,108	14,359
Rathmore Primary School	16,407	10,596
St Anne's Primary School, Donaghadee	4,328	3,715
St Comgall's Primary School, Bangor	10,866	8,006
St Malachy's Primary School, Bangor	9,583	11,201
St Patrick's Primary School, Hollywood	11,064	15,044
Towerview Primary School	14,228	8,070
Bangor Academy & 6th Form College	1,350	0
Glenlola Collegiate	56,139	36,365
Priory Integrated College	33,416	19,310
St Columbanus College	42,737	24,938
Total	369,085	317,826

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education what plans he has in place to support remote learning during January 2021 should schools remain closed.

(AQW 12210/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department has asked schools to have contingency plans in place for the delivery of remote learning in the event of a school closure, or that a class bubble or any larger group of pupils across a year group need to self-isolate.

On 4th January my Department published further Guidance for Schools on Supporting Remote Learning to Provide Educational Continuity, which provides additional advice and support to schools as they consider how to tailor and adapt delivery of the curriculum.

Practical advice and support is available to schools on remote learning from their COVID-19 Link Officer and from both the Education and Training Inspectorate and Education Authority more generally.

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 are being added on a regular basis.

We are fortunate in Northern Ireland that schools have access to a centrally provided IT system - C2K. This has supported online access to school services from the beginning of the COVID-19 school closures. Additional funding has been provided to EA to continue to improve the services available, including a number of additional learning applications and upgrading bandwidth.

My Department's scheme to provide IT devices and WIFI access (vouchers or MiFi devices) to our educationally disadvantaged and vulnerable learners to support access to remote learning has distributed over 11,000 devices and remains open.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education when the process for the reconstitution for Boards of Governors will begin.

(AQW 12270/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Boards of Governors for Controlled and Maintained schools are due to be reconstituted by June 2022.

Voluntary Grammar Schools have a set reconstitution date with the majority of them being due for reconstitution in late 2021. The Boards of Governors of Grant Maintained Integrated schools do not have a single reconstitution date, governor positions are reconstituted on an ongoing basis according to the end date of each individual governor's term of office.

My officials will begin preliminary work on the reconstitution process in early 2021.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 11543/17-22 and AQW 11544/17-22, to detail where in the Education Order or relevant legislation that AQE Ltd and the Post-Primary Transfer Consortium are defined as education purposes.

(AQW 12276/17-22)

Mr Weir: The term "education purposes" is not defined in the Education Orders in respect of the Department nor its arm's length bodies. The Association for Quality Education Ltd and the Post-Primary Transfer Consortium are private entities and their role is not set out in those Orders.

The term "educational" is one of a number of purposes for which an exemption to the general prohibition on gatherings of more than fifteen people can be granted under the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Education whether he will introduce a requirement for the compulsory wearing of face coverings in secondary schools in the new year to prevent an acceleration of the spread of COVID-19.

(AQW 12318/17-22)

Mr Weir: I am mindful of the need for a number of additional steps and actions to be taken in education to limit the spread of the virus and protect our students, parents and education staff alike. While a wide range of protective measures has been put in place, we must go further.

On 8 December my Department issued a revised Coronavirus Guidance to all schools outlining revised mitigating measures to be put in place, this will be reviewed and updated as we develop more stringent measures to try and prevent any further spread of the virus, which will include making use of face coverings in classrooms compulsory for post primary pupils unless exempt.

In developing a package of such interventions, which can be introduced swiftly, my Department will work not only with the Department of Health but with a wide range of other stakeholders such as principals, trade union representatives, the Education Authority (EA) and, in particular, the EA Youth Service, the Children's Commissioner, Translink and other Departments.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the experience in Germany and France of compulsory face coverings in schools.

(AQW 12319/17-22)

Mr Weir: Whilst I am aware that various countries around the world operate under differing circumstances, for instance in Germany new guidance has been published with varying requirements for schools depending on the number of cases per 100,000 in the state or region, whilst in France masks are mandatory for secondary students (excluding outdoors).

You will be aware from my statement in the Assembly on Monday 21 December that I have now moved to make face coverings mandatory in post-primary schools (including special schools, independent and grant aided schools).

I will continue to keep all guidance in respect of education settings under review in light of the latest medical and scientific advice.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education when pre-school and nursery settings will remain closed until.
(AQW 12372/17-22)

Mr Weir: All mainstream education providers, including pre-school education settings, primary and post primary schools are required to provide remote learning at home to their pupils rather than face to face teaching in school until the half term break in the middle of February.

I would expect schools to resume following their planned February mid-term holidays, although some schools may use exceptional closure day or staff training days. This of course will be subject to public health guidance.

Childcare settings, including those based in primary schools, are to remain open and childminders are also allowed to continue their provision.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education on how many occasions he was advised to delay the reopening of schools.
(AQW 12373/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department of Education, the Department of Health, the Education Authority and the Public Health Agency have worked closely throughout the pandemic to maintain the education of children, to reduce the risk of outbreaks and to respond when these occur. This work has continued in recent weeks and the proposed way forward has been informed by the evidence and the advice provided. The common aim has been to keep schools safe for children and staff, prioritise children's education and ensure any impact on overall transmission is as low as possible, while accepting that schools reopening as normal is not sustainable.

As part of executive discussions Minister Swann asked me to consider options for reopening schools in January and then wrote again on 29th December asking me to reconsider my decision. While previous arrangements have been informed by the advice of the Department of Health, unfortunately the deteriorating nature of the epidemic and the risks to public health has necessitated more substantial changes.

Therefore, having considered the advice from the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Advisor and following discussions with them, I decided that all primary and post-primary pupils will be taught remotely until the half term break in mid February.

I must stress that these decisions are not made lightly as I am aware of the negative impact on children's learning and mental health and well-being of not being in school. However, particularly after unprecedented levels of positive Covid-19 tests since Christmas, and the pressure this applies to our health service, it is critical that we all must consider the public health and scientific advice as we look forward to brighter days ahead.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of expected pupil numbers attending schools as part of the key worker definition.
(AQW 12375/17-22)

Mr Weir: From 23 March 2020 to 29 June 2020 educational settings in Northern Ireland were only open for the children of key workers and children deemed as vulnerable. During this time period educational settings were asked to respond to a daily survey that included questions relating to the number of children in attendance.

The survey covered Playgroups, Day Nurseries, Nursery Schools, Nursery Classes, Reception, Primary, Preparatory Departments, Secondary (Non-grammar), Grammar, Special and Educated Other Than At School (EOTAS) settings. It did not cover Independent Schools. The survey had an average response rate of approximately 70% (i.e. around 1,080 educational settings).

Publications related to this survey are available at Management Information relating to Attendance at educational settings during the COVID-19 outbreak | Department of Education (<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/management-information-relating-attendance-educational-settings-during-covid-19-outbreak>) and the underlying data and methodology are available at Management Information relating to attendance at Northern Ireland educational settings during the COVID-19 outbreak 23 March 2020 to 29 June 2020 - Datasets - Open Data NI (<https://www.opendatani.gov.uk/dataset/attendance-at-educational-settings-during-the-covid-19-outbreak-23-march-2020-to-29-june-2020>).

Questions specifically relating to key worker children were only asked from 8 April 2020. Based on the survey responses, and excluding the Easter break (9 to 17 April), the number of key worker children in attendance each day ranged from 719 to 1,869, with an average of 1,305. During June 2020 an average of 1,569 key worker children were in attendance, equating to approximately 0.4% of the total school population.

As we move through this new period of lockdown there is no guarantee that the same level of uptake of key worker children attending schools will apply as did during the first lockdown. Therefore a new weekly survey will resume on the week commencing 11th January to collect information from educational settings on workforce, children of key workers and children deemed as vulnerable.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Education (i) to provide a copy of the advice given to schools confirming face masks are to be worn in classrooms or exam halls; (ii) what, if any, advice has been provided regarding social distancing; and (iii) what risk assessment measures the Education Authority and Council for Catholic Maintained Schools have provided staff in relation to the wearing of face masks and social distancing in classrooms or exam halls.

(AQW 12380/17-22)

Mr Weir: Following the Executive's agreement to adopt a more ambitious approach to the return to school, revised Education Restart Guidance relating to practical arrangements for re-opening schools was revised and published on 8 December 2020 taking account of new information. This will be reviewed and updated as we develop more stringent measures to try and prevent any further spread of the virus: for instance making use of face coverings in classrooms compulsory for post primary pupils unless exempt.

While the Department of Health requirement for social distancing at 2m has not changed, the Executive, on 6 August 2020, agreed that the stringent application of social distancing requirements between pupils will be relaxed from 17 August.

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.

Social distancing applies to staff, older pupils, parents (and any others who may attend the school) and any external contractors or delivery people and should be considered in all relevant areas of schools, including classrooms, indoor and outdoor spaces as well as those not used for learning and teaching (e.g. cloakrooms, entrance halls, resource areas etc.)

The AQE examinations are planned to go ahead on 27 February, and I have written to the private organisation who host these tests asking them to advise me of the mitigating measures being put in place so that children sit the examinations in line with current guidance relating to social distancing and public health measures.

Risk assessments will be in the regulations, and that they will apply to the premises where more than 6 staff are present (formerly this was 15), and to the individual teachers.

I'll am seeking further clarity as this develops, my Department is working with EA colleagues to ensure that we have the relevant assessments in place within schools.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education, further to his statement on 31 December 2021, to detail his plans for school meals during January 2021.

(AQW 12385/17-22)

Mr Weir: I announced on 5 January 2021 (<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/news/weir-sets-out-plans-education-provision>) that pre-school, primary and post primary schools will be required to provide remote learning to pupils until the half term break in mid-February. Schools will remain open to children of key workers and vulnerable children and Special schools will remain open as usual.

Direct payments in lieu of free school meals will be made to families whose children are entitled to free school meals and are learning remotely from home. Children attending school, such as key workers' children and vulnerable children, should bring a packed lunch to school. School meals services will be available in Special schools and pupils entitled to free school meals attending Special schools will receive free school meals at school as normal.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education whether his assurance that face-to-face teaching will be available for pupils due to sit public examinations applies to those in Year 11 sitting GCSE examinations in February.

(AQW 12395/17-22)

Mr Weir: I have consistently said that my priority is to ensure that, if at all possible, exams should go ahead as planned. I have always wanted to support those students taking exams.

I now feel we have reached a point where, while I still believe examinations are the most appropriate and fairest awarding methodology, with a further 6 weeks of remote learning having to be imposed, we cannot continue with exams in the way that was planned. I have therefore decided that all GCSE, AS and A2 exams due to take place in January, February, May and June will be cancelled.

Department of Finance

Mr Chambers asked the Minister of Finance how many Assembly Written Questions his Department received during the period 2 March 2020 to 30 November 2020; and to detail the total cost of responding to these questions.

(AQW 12046/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): My Department has received 515 Assembly Written Questions during the period 2 March 2020 to 30 November 2020. This excludes Assembly Questions which my Department received but which was not within its remit to answer and those which were subsequently withdrawn by the Member. All written questions have been answered on time.

My Department does not currently estimate the cost of answering Assembly Questions, however my officials are looking at this with a view to determining the cost going forward.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Finance to detail (i) the number of applications received for the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme, by Assembly constituency; (ii) how many were rejected, by Assembly constituency; (iii) how many remain unpaid as at 16 December 2020, by Assembly constituency; and (iv) the total amount paid, by Assembly constituency. **(AQW 12133/17-22)**

Mr Murphy: Land & Property Services are unable to give figures by Assembly constituency as all figures are recorded based on District Council Area.

Please see the table below which give the figures for the initial Scheme and for the next phase of the Scheme when restrictions were extended to all non-essential retail.

There are a small number of cases which have been processed which do not have the District Council data available, in these cases the application has been made entering an address manually (before this facility was withdrawn). These have been included in the table.

The figures provided are the most up to date available, for 4th January 2021.

District Council	Received	Rejected	Unprocessed	Amount Paid
Antrim & Newtonabbey Borough Council	907	311	98	£3,248,800
Ards and North Down Borough Council	1291	384	123	£4,712,914
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council	1732	534	181	£5,712,000
Belfast City Council	3473	1145	354	£12,786,400
Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council	1847	529	160	£5,453,256
Derry City and Strabane District Council	1789	864	89	£5,714,576
Fermanagh and Omagh District Council	1366	510	105	£4,356,000
Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council	928	359	68	£2,968,000
Mid and East Antrim Borough Council	1203	396	90	£3,986,400
Mid Ulster District Council	1494	500	142	£4,892,000
Newry, Mourne and Down District Council	1661	515	198	£5,774,400
Council not known	354	248	23	£831,304
Total	18045	6295	1632	£60,436,050

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Finance why companies that provide catering services within sporting clubs are entitled to the Localised Restriction Support Scheme, whilst those that provide catering in-house are not.

(AQW 12289/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Department for Communities' Sports Sustainability Fund is available to provide financial assistance to recognised sports governing bodies and their affiliated clubs and entities. Further information on eligible governing bodies and their affiliated clubs and entities is available on the Sport NI website. The Sports Sustainability Fund recognises that hospitality is an important income stream for many sports clubs and will consider the effect on income and expenditure from club run bars and food provision. The Localised Restrictions Support Scheme is the appropriate Scheme to provide support for an independent business, such as a restaurant or shop, which has been restricted by the Health Regulations and which occupies part of sporting premises.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance how many shared parental leave requests have been made since the introduction of the regulations; and (ii) how many have been granted, broken down by department and agency.

(AQW 12320/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Department of Finance does not receive and hold centrally applications for Shared Parental Leave.

However, all absence occurrences with the reason "Shared Parental Leave" are recorded on the HR system since 5 April 2015 (the date on which the new legal entitlement came into effect) and are provided in the table below.

Department	2015 (from 5 Apr)	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020 (to 21 Dec)	Total
DAERA	3	3	3				9
DfC		6	4	3	2		15
DfE		1	1	2	1		5
DfI		2				1	3
DoF		1	2	1	6	5	15
DoH						3	3
DoJ			1	1			2
Total	3	13	11	7	9	9	52

The number of absence occurrences recorded as taken on the HR system may not reflect the total number of approvals, as there may be situations in which some staff receive approval and subsequently decide not to avail of it.

Department of Health

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether he has any plans to introduce more frontline healthcare staff to help protect against coronavirus.

(AQW 3331/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Since the beginning of the pandemic, my Department, working closely with HSC Trusts, has maintained a dedicated focus on ensuring there is sufficient capacity within the system to meet these exceptional demands.

The Workforce Appeal was established to manage the recruitment and deployment of healthcare professionals and non-healthcare workers across the health and social care system during the outbreak of Covid-19.

During the second wave of infections, the Workforce Appeal was re-launched in an effort to further build capacity, with particular focus on certain roles and positions across hospitals and community care. To date a total of 1,500 new appointments have been made across HSC of which 867 are clinical appointments.

In addition, as at 30/11/2020, the International Nurse Recruitment project has recruited 610 Nurses of the 622 target. 584 Nurses or 93% remain in post.

I am also committed to sustained investment in growing the local nursing and midwifery workforce to meet ever increasing demands. For example, this year my Department has commissioned the highest ever number (1,325) of pre-registration nursing and midwifery training places.

Furthermore, the overall vacancy rate for registered nursing and midwifery staff by the end of September was 7.4%. That is back to the level last seen in March 2017, and a major improvement from the peak vacancy rate of 13.1% recorded in June last year.

I am also supporting Ulster University's project to open a Graduate Entry Medical School which should help to address HSC's future requirements for medics.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health, after the NI Executive actions steps of Coronavirus Executive Approach to Decision-Making, whether the public can be challenged by the Police Service of Northern Ireland under the 'Restrictions on Movement' within The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2020.

(AQW 4140/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020, as amended, detail the restrictions that have been imposed in response to the serious and imminent threat to public health posed by the incidence and spread of coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) in Northern Ireland. Any person who contravenes a restriction regulation commits an offence and can be challenged by the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

Regulation 7, Enforcement of requirement, details the powers a relevant person has available to them in order to enforce any requirement imposed by regulations.

"relevant person" means—

- (a) a constable, or
- (b) a person designated by the Department of Health for the purposes of these regulations other than regulation 9;

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health for an update on plans to provide a regional respite and short break facility for children with complex needs.

(AQW 10504/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) established a regional group to consider the need to modernise and reform service provision for short breaks and family support. The work of the group is still ongoing, with a report expected early 2021. At this stage there are no plans for a regional respite and short break facility for children with complex needs.

Current guidance and best practice highlights the importance of small child centred provision located close to the family home and a number of such facilities are located within each Trust area.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health whether face-to-face mental health counselling has resumed; and whether guidance or advice has been issued to groups to assist them in delivering these services safely.

(AQW 10649/17-22)

Mr Swann: Mental health services have in general not stopped during the Covid-19 pandemic, albeit some services have been provided using different methods. The delivery of mental health services have been reviewed by Health and Social Care Trusts to protect service users and staff by minimising the risks of infection. They have continued to see service users at face to face appointments throughout the pandemic where this is assessed as necessary.

All organisations offering counselling services need to make their own risk assessment based on premises, nature of business and clientele. Guidance on practices during COVID-19 is available from the UK Government, Labour Relations Agency, NI Direct, my Department, and the Public Health Agency websites.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health to detail the services that are provided by the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust relating to (i) mental health services, (ii) addiction services; and (iii) family support services, broken down by (a) location; and (b) catchment area for each team.

(AQW 11017/17-22)

Mr Swann: The information requested is not readily available.

In Mental Health Services alone services provided by the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust are extensive. There are general services including CAMHS, community, and inpatient, but also specialist services such as eating and personality disorder services, self-harm services, psychological therapies, acute day treatment crisis and unscheduled care teams, and care management teams. To break this down as requested could only be done at disproportionate cost.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health whether they have considered plans to make a one-off gesture payment of £500, like the Scottish Government, to front line workers in the Health and Social Care Sector who have worked throughout the pandemic.

(AQW 11388/17-22)

Mr Swann: I refer the member to my answer to AQW 11529/17-22, answered on 16 December 2020.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister of Health what discussions his Department has had with GP's and Practice Managers in Mid Ulster to ensure GP clinics return to normal service.

(AQW 11620/17-22)

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. There were 116,292 COVID-19 related queries in General Practice across Northern Ireland from 6th April to 6th December 2020.

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.

Despite the need to ensure infection control and social distancing and the demands and capacity limits that COVID has created, along with an expanded flu vaccination programme and the pilot Phone First services, GPs have maintained over 80% of general practice services. Around 30% of all consultations still take place face to face, compared to 50% at the same time last year.

However, with the GP led element of the Covid-19 vaccination programme underway, there may be some small disruption to Practice services when vaccination clinics are running.

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 letter was also issued to all MLAs and local councillors providing an update on the current GP practice environment and asking that they share the key message that GP practices are open but working differently, with constituents and the wider population to ensure that patients know to contact their GP practice when they need health care and treatment.

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.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health how many private consultations, assessments or procedures by paediatricians were carried out privately between 2015 and 2020.

(AQW 11693/17-22)

Mr Swann: Tables 1-4 below provide the number of outpatient and inpatient appointments/procedures carried out within the independent sector either as private appointments or within the independent sector funded by the NHS.

Private Patients

Table 1. Elective Inpatient and Daycase Treatments Patient admitted during calendar year

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020*	Total
Total	16	10	14	18	11	10	79

Activity is based on: Category of Admission 'Private Patient' and age is under 16 at time of admission

CAWT activity has been excluded

*Activity during the period 1st January to 11th December 2020

Patients Treated by Independent Sector but Purchased by NHS

Table 2. Elective Inpatient and Daycase Treatments Patient admitted during calendar year

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020*	Total
Total	51	239	70	40	78	3	481

Activity is based on: Patient is aged under 16 at time of admission

*Activity during the period 1st January to 11th December 2020

Private Patients

Table 3. Outpatients Patient assessed during calendar year

New/Review	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020*	Total
New	104	208	197	161	196	108	974
Review	16	15	17	12	11	5	76
Total	120	223	214	173	207	113	1,050

Activity is based on: Category 'Private Patient' and age is under 16 at time of appointment.

*Activity during the period 1st January to 11th December 2020

Patients Treated by Independent Sector but Purchased By NHS

Table 4. Outpatients Patient assessed during calendar year

New/Review	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020*	Total
New	26	756	87	72	50	35	1026
Review	329	436	200	92	65	11	1133
Total	355	1,192	287	164	115	46	2,159

Activity is based on: Patient is aged under 16 at time of admission

*Activity during the period 1st January to 11th December 2020

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health (i) what assessment has been made of how much (a) intra-Northern Ireland tourism; (b) UK/ROI-tourism; and (c) foreign tourism has contributed to the spread of COVID-19 in Northern Ireland; and (ii) how this might inform future policy on COVID regulations.

(AQW 11791/17-22)

Mr Swann: There has been no specific assessment of how tourism alone has contributed to the spread of COVID-19 in Northern Ireland.

The Executive, when making decisions on restrictions, takes into account the scientific and medical evidence and also the impacts of the restrictions on the economy and society. The Executive weighs up the totality of the effect each restriction can have in combination with other restrictions in reducing the rate of infections of COVID-19. It is not always possible to disaggregate the precise impact on the rate of transmission of the virus in the community for each of the individual restrictions on their own.

The Executive maintains an ongoing process of review of the coronavirus restrictions regulations, which considers both the current level of the pandemic and the impact the restrictions have on the economy and society, and it is the Executive's clear intention not to retain restrictions for any longer than is absolutely necessary.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health which phases of the COVID-19 vaccination programme include adults with a learning disability within care settings.

(AQW 11819/17-22)

Mr Swann: Vaccination policy in Northern Ireland is based on the recommendations and advice provided by the independent Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) which advises the 4 UK Health Ministers.

JCVI advice on prioritisation of the vaccine was published on 2nd December 2020. JCVI has advised that the first priorities for the COVID-19 vaccination programme should be the prevention of mortality and the maintenance of the health and social care systems. As the risk of mortality from COVID-19 increases with age, prioritisation is primarily based on age. The vaccination programme will therefore be based on the prioritisation list as set out below:

- 1 residents in a care home for older adults and their carers
- 2 all those 80 years of age and over and frontline health and social care workers
- 3 all those 75 years of age and over
- 4 all those 70 years of age and over and clinically extremely vulnerable individuals
- 5 all those 65 years of age and over
- 6 all individuals aged 16 years to 64 years with underlying health conditions which put them at higher risk of serious disease and mortality
- 7 all those 60 years of age and over
- 8 all those 55 years of age and over
- 9 all those 50 years of age and over

Most adults with a learning disability will probably fall into priority groups 4 or 6. From early January 2021, subject to the availability of a suitable vaccine, it is intended to roll out the programme through primary care led vaccination clinics which will be responsible for the vaccination of the vast majority of eligible individuals. GPs will work their way down through the eligible cohorts starting with the oldest first.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health in which phase unpaid carers will receive a COVID-19 vaccine.

(AQW 11820/17-22)

Mr Swann: I very much value the role that unpaid carers play in our society however, as the risk of mortality from COVID-19 increases with age, prioritisation for vaccination will primarily be based on age. As more vaccine becomes available during 2021, we will be in a position to see if particular groups, such as unpaid carers, can be invited to receive vaccination at the same time as some of the older age cohorts.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health to detail his plans to (i) extend and improve emotional support and clinical mental health therapy to those living with diabetes; and (ii) improve education in schools about diabetes.

(AQW 11864/17-22)

Mr Swann: The need for emotional support and clinical mental health therapy for people living with diabetes was highlighted in both the 2017 Diabetes UK "Future of Diabetes" Report and in its 2019 report "Too Often Missing – making emotional and psychological support routine in diabetes care".

The Diabetes Network supports the implementation of the recommendations of the Diabetes Strategic Framework for Northern Ireland and works in partnership with clinicians, health and social care professionals, Diabetes UK and people living with diabetes on the design and delivery of better diabetes services. This includes ensuring that people living with diabetes have access to the treatment, care, information and support they need to manage their diabetes effectively and to optimise their physical and mental and emotional health and well-being.

The Diabetes Network recognises both the importance of emotional and psychological support for people living with diabetes and also the need for more work in this area. In the short term, Health and Social Care Trusts have been invited to avail of non-recurrent funding up to March 2021 to enhance the current provision of psychological support for people living with diabetes. Funding will be allocated to help Trusts follow guidance and best practice in order to consider ways to support people living with diabetes, including, for example:

- joint learning and training opportunities in mental health services for staff across different disciplines;
- the use of on-line questionnaires for mental health screening and video conferencing for talking therapies interventions and to inform conversations between diabetes health care professionals and people living with diabetes on their current mental health and coping strategies;
- on-line self-help psychological support and psychological education regarding emotional and mental health offered to individuals to help empower them to manage their emotional and mental health;
- signposting opportunities to resources such as the Public Health Agency's "Take 5 Steps to well-being" and "Steps to Deal with Stress" (https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/sites/default/files/2020-02/Steps_for_stress_1_20_final.pdf) and signposting to the NI Minding your head.info (<https://www.mindingyourhead.info/>) website and mindfulness exercises.

In relation to improving education in schools about diabetes, there is close co-operation between schools and local HSC Trusts to ensure a child who is living with diabetes can participate fully in school activities and that the school has access to the information required to help support the child.

When a child is diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes, the child and their family receive education and information about how to manage their diabetes. The child is then offered a group based programme of structured education (the CHOICE programme) in the first six months following diagnosis.

The school the child attends also receives education, information and advice from the diabetic specialist nurse about how the child's diabetes should be managed in a school setting. All children with diabetes have an individual healthcare plan that describes the care the child should receive while in school. There is also a communication booklet which enables the parent to advise on the daily doses of insulin required for their child's dietary requirements. There is a regionally agreed format for the health care plan and communication booklets used in all schools in Northern Ireland.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health whether he has identified any locations for a mother and baby perinatal mental health unit; and whether this service is included in future budgeting forecasts.

(AQW 11907/17-22)

Mr Swann: Appraisal of options on the future location of a Mother and Baby Perinatal Mental Health Inpatient Unit will form a key element of the business case development process, which will be progressed as soon as practicable.

A capital bid totalling £4m for a six-bedded perinatal mental health unit to commence from 2023/24 has been included in the Department's response to the recent 4 year budget exercise. Following the Chancellor's recent Spending Review a one year only budget has been confirmed for 2021/22 and therefore my ability to progress this project is subject to future budget availability.

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Health what consideration he has given to COVID-19 testing at ports and airports.

(AQW 11928/17-22)

Mr Swann: The future direction of the requirements for international travellers is under active consideration, including any role testing may play in ensuring the risk of transmission of COVID-19 by international travellers is effectively managed.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Health (i) how many prisoners have been diagnosed with a mental illness or mental health condition, in each of the last ten years; and (ii) how many prisoners diagnosed with a mental illness or mental health condition have spent time in Care and Supervision Units within the Northern Ireland Prison Service, in each of the last ten years.

(AQW 11971/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on (i) the number of prisoners diagnosed with a mental illness or mental health condition, and (ii) the number of prisoners diagnosed with a mental illness or mental health condition have spent time in Care and Supervision Units, is not available.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, in light of the new variant of Coronavirus associated with faster transmission that has been identified in England, what assurances he can give that the current vaccines will work to combat this variant.

(AQW 12045/17-22)

Mr Swann: There is no evidence to suggest that a new variant of coronavirus will evade the protection conferred by vaccines.

The new variant has mutations to the spike protein that the three leading vaccines are targeting. However, vaccines produce antibodies against many regions in the spike protein, so it's unlikely that a single change would make the vaccine less effective.

Over time, as more mutations occur, the vaccine may need to be altered. This happens with seasonal flu, which mutates every year, and the vaccine is adjusted accordingly. The SARS-CoV-2 virus doesn't mutate as quickly as the flu virus, and the vaccines that have so far proved effective in trials are types that can easily be tweaked if necessary.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health, in relation to the STOP COVID app, whether the Public Health Agency has issued, or plans to issue, guidance to businesses on staff's use of bluetooth whilst in work.

(AQW 12052/17-22)

Mr Swann: I refer the Member to my responses to AQW 10141/17-22 & AQW 10140/17-22.

In addition, the Chief Digital Information Officer held a number of information sessions, covering aspects of how the app should be used in work environments, with key employer groups.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health what measures his Department is taking to reassure those Health and Social Care staff who are opting out of taking the COVID-19 vaccine that it is safe, effective and necessary.

(AQW 12067/17-22)

Mr Swann: In the UK, vaccines are only approved and deployed for use following rigorous clinical trials and extensive analysis of the vaccine's safety, quality and effectiveness by experts from the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA). The first COVID-19 vaccine, developed by Pfizer/BioNTech, was granted approval for use on 2 December following a thorough review.

Health and Social Care staff were alerted to this in a letter from the Chief Professionals (HSS(MD)82/2020) on 7 December, where they were reminded that the Health and Social Care system has a professional and moral responsibility to protect patients. While vaccination is not compulsory, the vaccine is the best defence we have against the spread of the COVID-19. By getting vaccinated and increasing uptake rates, staff will not only protect themselves, but also their patients, their family and their community.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health when funeral workers, who need to enter domestic properties and care homes where a death has occurred due to COVID-19, will receive the COVID-19 vaccine.

(AQW 12095/17-22)

Mr Swann: Vaccination policy in Northern Ireland is based on the recommendations and advice provided by the independent Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) which advises the 4 UK Health Ministers.

JCVI has advised that the first priorities for the COVID-19 vaccination programme should be the prevention of mortality and the maintenance of the health and social care systems. As the risk of mortality from COVID-19 increases with age, prioritisation is primarily based on age.

The vaccine is being targeted at those considered most at risk or HSCWs working closely with those considered most at risk.

Following the launch of the vaccination programme on 8 December, Trust mobile vaccination teams have been concentrating on care homes, those most at risk from COVID-19 mortality, which is the number 1 priority group as recommended by JCVI. Health and Social Care Workers working closely with those considered most at risk are also being offered the vaccine.

From early January 2021, subject to the availability of a suitable vaccine, it is intended to roll out the programme through primary care led vaccination clinics which will be responsible for the vaccination of the vast majority of eligible individuals. GPs will work their way down through the eligible cohorts starting with the oldest first. At that stage consideration will be given to targeting groups such as funeral workers.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health whether the number of vaccinations undertaken is being recorded on a daily basis; and to detail the rationale for this decision.

(AQW 12112/17-22)

Mr Swann: I have assumed you are referring to COVID-19 vaccinations. I can confirm the number of COVID-19 vaccinations administered is being recorded daily. It is essential that we record this information to monitor vaccine supply and to identify uptake rates.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health why Northern Ireland is the only region in the United Kingdom to have not had military personnel assisting at COVID-19 testing centres, on Nightingale hospital sites or as ambulance crew support.

(AQW 12160/17-22)

Mr Swann: Officials in the Department have been engaged with armed forces representatives throughout the pandemic and on a range of issues. Armed forces colleagues have provided specialist advice and assistance in relation to testing, vaccination and surge planning, amongst other areas. In the initial surge period, military assistance was required to transfer patients requiring Extra Corporeal Membrane Oxygenation (ECMO) to specialist hospitals in England.

Full details of the circumstances in which it is appropriate for the civilian authorities to request military assistance are available on the Ministry of Defence website.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health whether he will publish regular updates on the number of people vaccinated on the departmental COVID-19 dashboard.

(AQW 12164/17-22)

Mr Swann: Regular information on COVID-19 vaccinations will be provided but the exact details of what information and how often it is provided has still to be agreed between the 4 UK nations.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health how many Northern Ireland residents are not registered with a general practitioner.

(AQW 12189/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information about the number of Northern Ireland residents who are not registered with a General Practitioner is not available.

The Business Services Organisation Family Practitioner Services Information Unit publishes an annual report on statistics for General Medical Services in Northern Ireland which includes basic summary statistics on GP registered patients including new patient registrations during 2019/20.

The latest report was published in June 2020 and can be viewed via this link: <http://www.hscbusiness.hscni.net/pdf/FPS%20General%20Medical%20Services%20Statistics%20201920.pdf>

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether they have any modelling of cases to ascertain the level of likely COVID-19 cases in January and February 2021.

(AQW 12203/17-22)

Mr Swann: The uncertainties in respect of the trajectory of the virus, including the impact of the measures agreed by the Northern Ireland Executive for the six week period from 26 December 2020, mean that it is not possible to produce reliable modelling of the number of Covid-19 cases in January and February 2021.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail the workforce composition within the Department of Health, by directorate.

(AQW 12247/17-22)

Mr Swann: Details of the workforce composition within the Department of Health at 1 December 2020 broken down by age and gender by group is set out in the tables below.

DOH Workforce Directorate by Age

Age	Headcount
DoH, Chief Digital Information Officer	15
31-50	5
51+	10
DoH, CMO Group	99
31-35	12
36-40	16

Age	Headcount
41-45	12
46-50	19
51-55	15
56-60	15
61-65	10
DoH, Communications Directorate	9
All ages	9
DoH, Health Service Operations Group	1
All ages	1
DoH, Healthcare Policy Group	89
31-40	17
41-45	16
46-50	17
51-55	14
56-60	18
61+	7
DoH, Nursing & Midwifery Advisory Group	14
21-50	6
51-65	8
DoH, Resources & Corporate Management Group	128
26-30	5
31-35	9
36-40	16
41-45	20
46-50	18
51-55	32
56-60	18
61+	10
DoH, Social Services Policy Group	95
31-35	9
36-40	12
41-45	12
46-50	15
51-55	16
56-60	24
61+	7
DoH, Transformation, Planning and Performance Group	19
31-40	6
41-50	6

Age	Headcount
51-65	7
Grand Total	469

DOH Workforce Directorate by Gender

Row Labels	Sum of Headcount
DoH, Chief Digital Information Officer	15
Female	6
Male	9
DoH, CMO Group	99
Female	49
Male	50
DoH, Communications Directorate	9
Female/Male	9
DoH, Health Service Operations Group	1
Female/Male	1
DoH, Healthcare Policy Group	89
Female	51
Male	38
DoH, Nursing & Midwifery Advisory Group	14
Female	9
Male	5
DoH, Resources & Corporate Management Group	128
Female	79
Male	49
DoH, Social Services Policy Group	95
Female	64
Male	31
DoH, Transformation, Planning and Performance Group	19
Female	12
Male	7
Grand Total	469

Notes:

- 1 All Numbers Exclude staff on Career Break, Contingent Workers, Payroll only and seconded out
- 2 Age bands presented vary due to small numbers in some groups
- 3 Where figures may identify individuals' further breakdown by age and gender cannot be provided.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail his Department's responsibilities under the Civil Contingencies Framework of 2011.

(AQW 12248/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Northern Ireland Civil Contingencies Framework (2011) is a guidance document that focuses on civil contingency arrangements at a regional level and sets out the principles of policy and practice that should be adhered to across public service organisations through their civil contingency activities.

The Framework consists of ten high level statements on how public service organisations should behave in relation to civil contingency responsibilities. These statements deal, in the main, with guidance relating to effective emergency preparedness with some aspects of prevention. For my Department, this means playing a key role in the strategic management of emergencies that occur within Northern Ireland, where there is a health or social care aspect to it.

A fuller list of the statements and activities suggested for how all public service organisations should behave in relation to their responsibilities can be found via:

https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/ofmndfm_dev/ni-civil-contingencies-framework.pdf

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health to detail the number and type of Serious Adverse Incident investigations for the mental health programme of care, for each year since 2014.

(AQW 12266/17-22)

Mr Swann: The table below provides details of all Serious Adverse Incident reviews within the mental health programme of care since 2014.

Current Level of Review	Calendar Year Reported							Total
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020*	
SAI Report Level 1	90	90	100	88	115	139	133	755
SAI Report Level 2	75	52	62	36	28	25	26	304
SAI Report Level 3	3	1	3	1	3	4	4	19
Total	168	143	165	125	146	168	163	1078

Data Source: HSCB Datix

*Position at 18/12/2020

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Health to detail the work being carried out by his Department to ensure that those impacted by the effects of long covid are receiving the treatment and support they require.

(AQW 12294/17-22)

Mr Swann: The National Institute for Care and Health Excellence (NICE) published a rapid guideline on the management of the long-term effects of Covid-19 on 18 December 2020. The guideline defines “post-Covid-19 syndrome” for those people with Covid-19 whose symptoms have not resolved by 12 weeks.

The findings of this work will be fully considered alongside the wider body of emerging evidence and research, to inform future policy and service decisions in Northern Ireland.

This will include consideration of the nature and form of multidisciplinary assessment services that should be available for those with “post-COVID-19 syndrome” locally, acknowledging the clinic based approach recently announced for England.

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister of Health whether patients in Northern Ireland will lose access to current and future medical technology available elsewhere in the United Kingdom after Brexit.

(AQW 12299/17-22)

Mr Swann: After EU Exit patients in Northern Ireland will have access to all current medical devices on the UK and EU marketplace that are CE certified. Great Britain will continue to recognise CE certified medical devices for a period of 2.5 years. Any new medical devices developed by GB manufacturers may not be available to NI patients if the manufacturer does not wish to place his device on the NI/EU market. If a manufacturer wishes to place his device on the NI/EU market the device needs to be certified in accordance with EU medical device regulations and appropriately CE or CE UK(NI) marked.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 10622/17-22, when this information will be available in the future.

(AQW 12305/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Patient Administration System (PAS), used in the main acute hospitals and which feeds the data available in the Regional Data Warehouse, does not contain a category of admission code for admission from a care home. To attempt to manually collect this information would incur disproportionate cost.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 9715/17-22, and as of the 18 December 2020, how many staff have been allocated to the Whiteabbey Nightingale facility, broken down by (i) the service; and (ii) the hospital from which staff have been redeployed.

(AQW 12309/17-22)

Mr Swann: As at 30 December 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
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	WAH
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	17.16	7.08wte existing Whiteabbey staffing 0.96wte internal voluntary transfer policy 1.56 external recruitment 7.56wte agency block bookings	WAH AAH external
B3 unregistered nurse	3.33	3	NHSCT MEM	WAH
B2 unregistered nurse	7.77	8.66	5.66wte NHSCT MEM 3wte agency block bookings	WAH
B6 Occupational Therapy	1.49	1	Temporary Internal NHSCT redeployment	WAH
B4 Occupational Therapy	2.48	1	Temporary Internal NHSCT redeployment	WAH
B6 Physiotherapy	1.74	1	Community Rehabilitation Service	WAH
B3 Physiotherapy	2.48	1	MEM Physiotherapy Service	WAH
B7 Speech and Language Therapy	1.49	0	NHSCT SLT core services providing support	AAH
B4 Speech and Language Therapy	1.24	0	NHSCT SLT core services providing support	AAH
B5 Radiography	1.74	2	Agency	external
B8A Clinical Pharmacist	1.24	1	1wte EOI	AAH
B8A Social Work	1	0.6	Temporary Internal NHSCT redeployment	AAH
B6 Social work	1.74	1	Internal NHSCT redeployment	Community Services
B7 Patient Flow	2.55	2	1wte Temporary Internal NHSCT redeployment 1wte bank	AAH
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 Gildernew asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 10628/17-22, for a breakdown the staff who availed of the Voluntary Exit Scheme by pay band, for the (i) Health and Social Care Board; and (ii) Public Health Agency. (AQW 12310/17-22)

Mr Swann: The breakdown requested is contained in the table below.

Grade/Band	HSC Board	Public Health Agency
2	1	
3	1	4
4	10	2
5	4	1
6	10	5
7	4	11
8A	9	3
8B	9	1
8C	2	5
8D	5	1
Sen Exec	2	
Medical & Dental	1	2
Grand Total	58	35

HSCB have advised that due to a coding error, the figure initially sent through in response to AQW 10628/17-22 was incorrect and should be 58 for the HSCB and not 56 as previously advised. The costs remain the same.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Health for an update on the review of the Continuing Healthcare system in Northern Ireland. (AQW 12313/17-22)

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.

The establishment of primary care COVID-19 centres are a GP-led innovation that was an urgent and immediate response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The centres ensure that primary care services can be maintained, by enabling patients who have COVID-19 symptoms to be treated separately from those patients who have other conditions which require assessment or treatment in primary care.

Primary care COVID-19 centres have been critical to ensuring that GP practices have been able to continue to deliver vital services and face to-face appointments for patients and have greatly reduced the flow of patients to Emergency Departments

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 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.

Going forward, the current model of primary care will need to significantly change the way in which it supports the health and social care needs of our population. In the wake of COVID-19, proposals to rebuild and transform primary care services seek to provide an integrated solution to improve patients' pathways, increase system capacity, better manage demand and ensure the safety, quality and sustainability of services.

Building on the COVID-19 Centre model of collaborative support, new arrangements are being developed to better support and co-ordinate unscheduled care.

GPs are playing a key role in development and implementation of the new models of care and pathways required to deliver the 10 Key Actions in the COVID-19 Urgent & Emergency Care Action Plan 'No More Silos'.

We are already starting to see the benefits of this work through the first Urgent Care Centres which are able to direct a number of patients planning to attend an Emergency Department to other more appropriate services. The 'Phone First' service that is also being introduced enables patients who have an injury or illness that requires urgent treatment to be assessed over the phone by a health professional who will then be able to book an appointment with the appropriate service.

We are seeing new approaches to scheduling unscheduled care, and we are developing new direct access pathways into the services that patients need.

These new models of care will ensure that patients can access assessment, advice and information whenever they need it, and that they receive their care in the most appropriate setting.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Health for an update on the timescales for provision of a new Primary and Community Care Centre in Bangor.

(AQW 12317/17-22)

Mr Swann: A Hub in Bangor was included as part of the Primary Care Infrastructure Development Strategic Implementation Plan (SIP), however given the constraints on budgets it is likely that it will take longer to deliver all hub developments than was first envisaged. With this in mind, my Department and the Health and Social Care Board reviewed the schemes within Tranche 2 of the SIP to identify which hubs would be the next to be developed. The draft plan for Tranche 2 roll out includes a development to serve the population of the North Down and Newtownards area.

As capital budget allocations have not been approved beyond 2020/21, I do not have confirmation of funding for Hub schemes at this point. While the South Eastern Trust has commenced the business case for the area, which will enable them to avail of funding when it becomes available, its development has been constrained by the ongoing impact of Covid 19.

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Health how many patients have been transferred to the Whiteabbey Nightingale facility, broken down by the Health and Social Care Trust or setting from which each patient was transferred.

(AQW 12349/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number of patients transferred to the Whiteabbey Nightingale facility by Health and Social Care Trusts is presented in the table below.

Admissions to Whiteabbey Nightingale (20 Nov - 31 Dec 2020)

HSC Trust (Transferred from)	No. of Admissions
Belfast Trust	8
Northern Trust	33
Southern Trust	1
South Eastern Trust	0
Western Trust	0
Total	42

Ms Rogan asked the Minister of Health how many carers are on the carers register in each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 12358/17-22)

Mr Swann: I refer the Member to AQW 10287/17-22.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health what action he is taking to ensure that (i) the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust are held to account for failing to pay 193 staff the minimum wage; and (ii) all wages owed are backdated to those staff.

(AQW 12367/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department is aware of the breach in National Minimum Wage law during 2017/18 by the HSC Trusts. This was due to delayed approvals from the Departments of Health and Finance leading to late payment of the increased rate in the National Living Wage effective from 1 April 2017. The correct rate was applied and paid to affected staff in August/September 2017, with arrears back to 1 April 2017.

It was always the HSC Employers' intention to pay the correct rate. However, a unique combination of factors meant that there was a delay, and this was entirely outside the HSC Employers' control.

My Department and the HSC sector are – and always have been - entirely respectful of the need to comply with the legislation.

Department for Infrastructure

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 11526/17-22 and AQW 10470/17-22, (i) to provide a breakdown of (a) the amounts paid to each transport operator; and (b) the purpose of each payment under the Concessionary Fares Scheme; (ii) to detail (a) how; and (b) on which route each transport operator was admitted to the scheme; and (iii) whether this was open to the public.

(AQW 12116/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure):

(i)(a) Payments made to transport operators participating on the NI Concessionary Fares Scheme in 2018/19 and 2019/20 are tabled below.

	2018/19	2019/20
Translink	47,037	41,201
Córas Iompair Éireann	531	118
ACE Coaches	58	58
Belfast Bus Company	87	80
Cavehill Coaches	65	58
Coach Connections*	15	5
PD Coaches	22	21
Yellow Line Coaches	25	31
	47,840	41,572

* Coach Connections left the Scheme in September 2019

(i)(b) The purpose of each payment is to reimburse the operator of the fare forgone under the concessionary fares scheme. Payments are based on claims compiled by the operator.

(ii)(a) Each operator currently participating in the scheme was required to confirm adherence to the Terms and Conditions of the Concessionary Fares Scheme, and to provide my Department with key documentation, which included:

- A valid Bus Operator Licence and a current Commercial Bus Service Permit for a Regular Stopping Service for each service applied for;
- A published timetable for each route, clearly marked and matched to the description of each route as shown in the Commercial Bus Service Permit(s); and
- A proposed fare structure for all routes, including a comprehensive breakdown of fares where a tiered pricing structure is in operation.

On receipt of these documents and subject to the availability of sufficient budget these operators were permitted to participate in the Scheme.

(ii)(b) The routes operated in compliance with the Scheme are tabled below.

Operator	Eligible Routes
NI Railways	All services, including the element of Enterprise services up to the border.
Metro	All regular stage carriage services.
Glider	All regular stage carriage services.
Ulsterbus	All eligible stage carriage services.
Córas Iompair Éireann	Enterprise services, element of journey north of the border only.
ACE Coaches	2 school services to and from St. Patrick's Academy/St. Patrick's College, Dungannon and St. Patrick's Primary School, Dungannon

Operator	Eligible Routes
Belfast Bus Company	4 school services from various locations in East Belfast to Ashfield Boys School. School service from Brompton Park to Our Ladys Girls Primary School and a school service from Ballynure Road To Boys/Girls Model School.
Cavehill Coaches	Belfast to Oasis Bingo, Bangor and Carrickfergus to Oasis Bingo, Bangor
PD Coaches	School service to and from Portadown to St, Catherine's College, Armagh
Yellow Line Coaches	4 school services to and from St. Mark's High School, Warrenpoint to Newry, Burren, Grinnan and Carrick.

- (iii) Prior to suspension of new applications due to a shortfall in funding for the scheme, it was open to any transport operator to apply.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the total amount of funding her Department has received for pressures relating to COVID-19.

(AQW 12121/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The table below details the total funding received in my Department due to Covid 19 in 2020-21.

Description	Resource Funding Received £m
Lost Revenue:	
Translink	90.0
DVA	19.5
Rathlin Ferry	0.6
Strangford Ferry	0.4
Roads – Parking charges and Penalty Charge Notices	5.7
Crumlin Road Gaol	0.1
Planning Applications	0.1
Other:	
NI Water lost income and increased costs	32.5
Bus/ Taxi Support	19.0
City of Derry & Belfast City Airports	4.4
License extension free of charge for taxi & coach drivers	1.4
Total	173.7

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in reference to securing sustainable public transport services and liveable communities vital for social inclusion and wellbeing of women and girls, and in relation to the lack of response from her Department to the women's sector Feminist Recovery Plan, how her Department proposes to engage women and girls effectively in planning future services.

(AQW 12223/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Well planned and delivered transport services are a key element of social inclusion and help promote wellbeing for all by connecting people with one another and with opportunities.

When engaging with stakeholders in planning transport services my Department recognises the extent to which women rely on public transport in order to access services and to participate in education, jobs and training and that, both overall and across most age groups, they are the main users of our bus and rail services. Also that women in rural areas and those with child and other caring responsibilities may have particular needs in relation to public transport.

My officials will therefore continue to engage with key stakeholders from the women's sector, including women and young people's groups, during the development of, and at pre-consultation and during consultation on any new planned public transport services. The Department relies on a regularly updated consultee list which includes representative organisations of all the S75 groups including gender and young people.

Translink will also continue to engage with young women through the Translink Youth Forum and with school age girls through the ongoing work of the School Safety Team. Furthermore, all of Translink's surveys can be analysed on a gender basis and the organisation has specifically researched issues that have been highlighted – such as perceptions of personal security on public transport – and has committed to continuing to do so.

My Department will also seek to work with stakeholders, including from the women's sector and young people's groups, to identify public transport related interventions that could contribute to the Executive's new Gender, Anti-poverty, Disability and Sexual Orientation social inclusion strategies as referenced in 'New Decade, New Approach'.

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans there are to secure public transport services in the COVID-19 recovery phase.

(AQW 12224/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister for Infrastructure, I am committed to the future of our public transport services given the key role they play in social and economic connectivity and prosperity here and also the significant part they have to play in helping to address the climate emergency.

As you will be aware, COVID-19 has significantly impacted on our public passenger transport numbers and, in turn, has led to a large reduction in revenue for Translink. In light of this, I have secured a commitment from my Executive colleagues to protect the future of our public transport services during the COVID-19 pandemic as we seek to make a green recovery. This commitment was underlined by the significant financial support made available to my Department in the current financial year to support the contractual and legal obligations in relation to the delivery of our public transport network.

Looking forward to the next financial year, I will continue to work with my Executive colleagues as we move in to the COVID-19 recovery phase to secure sufficient funding for our public transport services.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans her Department has for a pedestrian crossing on the A2 Ring Road for pupils attending St Columbanus' College, Bangor.

(AQW 12269/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Assessments for the provision of controlled crossing facilities at sites where the conditions encountered make it difficult to cross are carried out in accordance with my Department's Road Safety Engineering policy document which can be accessed using the following link:

<https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/controlled-crossings-assessment-procedures-rsppg-e005>

A previous assessment carried out concluded that provision of a controlled crossing at this location would not be ranked as highly as other schemes across the Ards and North Down Borough Council area. The situation will however be kept under review.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will bring forward regulations to ensure all parking bays that claim to be accessible must meet the criteria and standards defined in the Disabled Parking Accreditation as designed by Disabled Motoring UK and managed by the British Parking Association.

(AQW 12278/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Disabled Motoring UK introduced the Disabled Parking Accreditation (DPA) to recognise off-street parking facilities which are accessible to disabled people. The vast majority of public off-street car parks are managed by Councils. My Department has no current plans to introduce regulation to require compliance with this third party accreditation scheme.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will consider reopening the financial support scheme for taxi drivers.

(AQW 12329/17-22)

Ms Mallon: At present, the priority is to process the 4500 valid applications that have been received from taxi drivers for the current scheme, with 3500 payments issued before Christmas. Staff in my Department are working at pace to process all the remaining applications as quickly as possible, once outstanding information is received, to enable payments to be made to those who are eligible without delay.

I have asked my officials to explore further options for helping those taxi drivers who were not eligible for the current scheme. At the same time, I also continue to press for the inclusion of the taxi sector in the various other support schemes being taken forward across the Executive, particularly Part B of the CBRRS run by the Department for the Economy.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 9433/17-22, when a permanent solution will be found to prevent failures of the street lighting on the B511 Bangor Road, Groomsport.

(AQW 12333/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My officials have been working closely with NIE to address this ongoing problem and it is hoped the planned cable works will provide a lasting resolution. I am pleased to advise that, in conjunction with the cabling works, the lights along

the Bangor Road, Groomsport will be replaced with modern LED lights. Subject to the timely receipt of materials, works are expected to be completed by the end of this month.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether legislation exists to prevent a householder from permanently parking a cabin cruiser on a trailer on the public road outside their home that compromises neighbours' sight lines.
(AQW 12334/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Northern Ireland Highway Code set out the general rules relating to parking. <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/waiting-and-parking-238-252>

It is difficult to be definitive in my answer without knowing the specifics of the location, however there is legislation to enable parking enforcement to be carried out if the trailer has been parked in contravention of a parking restriction indicated by a traffic sign, otherwise this may be a matter to be raised with the Police Service of Northern Ireland. You may find it useful to engage with staff from the local Roads Division to determine if the trailer is in contravention of any legislation.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in circumstances where planning permission is granted by the Planning Appeals Commission, where does the power of revocation lie.
(AQW 12353/17-22)

Ms Mallon: If considered expedient to do so, planning permission determined by the Planning Appeals Commission may be revoked by a council under section 68 of the Planning Act (NI) 2011. While I acknowledge that my Department also has revocation powers under section 72 of the Planning Act, these powers are a check and balance in the two tier planning system intended to be used only exceptionally and as a matter of last resort. A council, as the local planning authority for the area, is both best placed to make a decision to revoke a Planning Appeal Commission decision and is the authority with responsibility to do so. This is in keeping with the spirit of the then NI Executive's decision to transfer local planning decisions to local councils and create the two tier planning system.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in the light of the fact that Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council has now stated their decision is not to revoke the 50MW Kells BESS permission that was approved on appeal by the PACNI, yet was processed incorrectly as local development on the false basis that the BESS was non-generating, whether her Department will now use its exceptional powers as a last resort to revoke the Kells BESS permission.
(AQW 12357/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I understand that Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council has decided not to revoke planning permission for the Kells BESS which is a discretionary council power under s68 of the 2011 Planning Act. While I acknowledge that my Department also has revocation powers, these powers are a check and balance in the two tier planning system intended to be used only exceptionally and as a matter of last resort. The Council, as the local planning authority for the area, is both best placed to make this decision and is the authority with responsibility to do so. This is in keeping with the spirit of the then NI Executive's decision to transfer local planning decisions to local councils and create the two tier planning system.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail consultation undertaken and rationale for change in planning policy concerning Battery Energy Storage projects.
(AQW 12361/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department issued a Chief Planner's Update (CPU7) on 16 December 2020, which clarified that, for the purposes of planning in Northern Ireland, the Department considers that electricity storage development (such as battery energy storage systems) falls within the meaning of an "electricity generating station". This advice follows consultation with the Department for the Economy, who have advised that, for the purposes of their licensing/consenting regime, electricity storage systems are a form of generating station. It also takes account of the position of the Utility Regulator that electricity storage is a form of generating station under the terms of the Electricity (NI) Order 1992. The rationale is based on several factors including the operation of electricity storage systems; their classification in other jurisdictions; pre-existing Northern Ireland Legislation; and the legislative history of the Planning (Development Management) Regulations (NI) 2015 and consistency with the Electricity (NI) Order 1992.

The CPU 7 makes it clear that this is not a legislative or planning policy change.

Department of Justice

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Justice what awareness or educational courses are provided for young people to raise awareness of judicial, legal and court services in Northern Ireland.
(AQW 12235/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): The Youth Justice Agency (YJA) provide a wide range of awareness and educational courses which address the impact of crime on young people's futures and increasing their understanding of the youth justice system in Northern Ireland. The YJA undertake programmes for young people referred to them and also through their Early

Intervention and a variety of diversionary projects. The YJA Schools Programme engages with thousands of pupils each year through educational workshops on issues which have the potential to bring children into the justice system.

The cross Executive Action Plan on Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime is hosted by my Department. Funding has been provided to projects which aim to build relationships with young people who are identified as being at higher risk of involvement in criminality and to deliver programmes that develop resilience and increase awareness of risk factors. The Executive Action Plan also supports projects which provide educational resources and activities to help young people develop new skills, build knowledge and examine their own attitudes to law and order.

Although they do not specifically organise any awareness or educational courses, the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS) hosts an annual Mock Trial Competition. Running since 1991, the Young Citizen Mock Trial Competition helps young people understand how the law touches every aspect of their lives. By taking part in the competition, young people can improve their life skills such as critical thinking and public speaking whilst also gaining an insight into how the legal justice system works. NICTS has also previously facilitated school visits.

My Department also offers a range of work placement opportunities to students including short-term placements for school children and longer-term placements for students in further and higher education. Further information is available at

<https://irecruit-ext.hrconnect.nigov.net/pages/content.aspx?Page=Work-Experience>

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Justice for an update on when the Outline Business Case 1 for the redevelopment of Magilligan Prison will be completed and submitted to Financial Services Division.

(AQW 12284/17-22)

Mrs Long: An Outline Business Case (OBC) 1 for the redevelopment of Magilligan Prison will be submitted to Financial Services Division (FSD) no later than Spring 2021. The proposals in the OBC will reflect the delivery model from the Estates 2020 discussion document, launched in December 2018 ie a 240 Accommodation Block, Independent Living Units (ILUs), a new Welcome & Visits Centre and a new Admin block.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice whether prisoners, who have been in full lockdown since March 2020, will receive the Covid 19 vaccine as a priority; and whether she will begin prisoner pre-release testing as a matter of urgency.

(AQW 12332/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Northern Ireland Prison Service has not implemented a full lockdown at any time since March 2020. It has, instead, implemented a landing based regime that has ensured those in our care, with the exception of those in our isolation/quarantine units, have remained out of their cells during the day and for evening association.

The provision of Healthcare services in our prisons, including the implementation of the vaccination programme, is the responsibility the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust. Consequently, the issue of prioritisation is a matter for the Trust and the Department of Health.

The Prison Service has throughout the pandemic sought to protect the health and wellbeing of all prisoners and staff. In light of the risks presented by Covid-19 all forms of Pre-Release Testing (PRT) were suspended in March 2020.

In July 2020 NIPS announced plans for the phased reintroduction of PRT with the initial phase focused on the reopening of the working out units at Murray House in August and Burren House in September. Both units remain open.

To date Accompanied Temporary Release (ATR) and Unaccompanied Temporary Release (UTR) have not been recommenced. This decision has been kept under review in the context of guidance issued by the Public Health Agency and the NI Executive. The most recent review took place on 21st December 2020.

Department for the Economy

Mr Easton asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of the timeframe for payments to be issued to those who applied under Part A of the COVID Restrictions Business Support Scheme.

(AQW 10187/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): All applications received to Part A of the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme will be assessed and verified as soon as possible.

Dr Aiken asked the Minister for the Economy whether the maritime consultants appointed by her Department to explore options regarding HMS Caroline are investigating the option of towing the ship to Portsmouth, rather than moving her by heavy lift ship which would be a safer option and remove the risk of this historic ship foundering.

(AQW 10284/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The maritime consultants engaged by the Department on the HMS Caroline project are experts in their field, and will consider all potential solutions as part of their remit to provide a comprehensive assessment of all viable options. They will provide advice and recommendations accordingly.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy what financial support she will put in place to support businesses impacted by new COVID-19 restrictions from 27 November 2020.

(AQW 10672/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I have introduced the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme (CRBSS) to support those businesses directly impacted by the Health Protection Regulations.

Businesses forced to close or severely limit their operations as a result of the increased Health Protection Regulations that came into effect on Friday 27 November could apply to the scheme if they met the eligibility criteria.

Businesses which had already applied and received support via the scheme, for the period commencing 16 October, did not need to make a further application for the additional period of restrictions commencing 27 November. The scheme closed for new applications on 16 December.

CRBSS supplements other support measures available such as the Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme. Details of support measures are available at <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/campaign/coronavirus-updates-support-your-business>.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) the support available for businesses to prepare for the end of the Brexit transition period for both a deal and no-deal Brexit scenario; (ii) how she has communicated this to businesses; and (iii) how it will be delivered in time for the deadline.

(AQW 11570/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I have been encouraging businesses to take whatever steps they can to prepare now, as there will be changes to their trading environment at the end of the transition period regardless of the outcome of FTA or Joint Committee negotiations. My Department has already made significant support available to businesses to prepare for EU exit through both Invest NI and InterTradeIreland and I continue to recommend that businesses visit these services and utilise the online Brexit tools, enrol for webinars, and if appropriate apply for EU Exit support vouchers. We have also ensured that the NI Business Info website provides an EU exit information that will help businesses prepare. I have also bid for further funding through DoF to HM Treasury to deliver further support to businesses in this and the next financial year. However, there has been no formal decision on these bids as yet. I continue to publicise these support measures online and through direct engagement with businesses. InvestNI and InterTradeIreland have also launched extensive communications campaigns making use of a range of media to encourage and support businesses to prepare for the end of the transition period. My Department will continue to provide advice, guidance and support to businesses in the months ahead in order that businesses can adjust to the new operating environment. Realistically, given the lack of clarity and time, it will be impossible for every business to be fully prepared by the end of the transition period. This is why it is vital to continue this work in the months ahead.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the expected rise in redundancies due to the COVID-19 pandemic over the next six months, unless support funds and grants further to those already announced are made available.

(AQW 12071/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: While my Department does not produce forecasts in this respect, it is clear that the economic impact of COVID-19 has been unprecedented and there has been an expectation that this crisis will lead to an increase in unemployment and redundancies.

We have already seen evidence of this to date with the latest Labour Force Survey estimates showing that the latest claimant count in November 2020 remains more than double the number in March 2020. Added to this, redundancies have shot up over the last few months. For example, in the last five months to November, my Department was notified of some 3,630 redundancies, 80% of the total redundancies confirmed within the last year. The Furlough Scheme and the ongoing actions of my Department continue to shield the economy from the full effects of the crisis but the risks of further unemployment and redundancies remain.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 11485/17-22, according to the Northern Ireland Skills Barometer, which STEM subjects in particular are undersupplied in higher education.

(AQW 12144/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Skills Barometer produced by the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre provides us with a detailed understanding of the future skills needs of the Northern Ireland economy under a high growth scenario.

Results from the 2019 update of the Skills Barometer model project that the top three subjects that will be undersupplied at degree level in STEM subjects are as follows: Engineering and Technology; Mathematical and Computer Science; and Physical/Environment Sciences.

It should be noted that the latest Skills Barometer update was produced prior to the current Covid-19 pandemic.

More detailed information on the Skills Barometer 2019 results can be viewed here: <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-skills-barometer-2019-update>.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) the assessment her Department has made of the impact of Brexit on the used car market in Northern Ireland; (ii) the tariffs that will be imposed on cars coming from Great Britain to Northern

Ireland; (iii) what engagement she has had with representatives of the sector; and (iv) what plans she has to support the sector.

(AQW 12213/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I remain concerned regarding the loss of the VAT margin scheme in Northern Ireland (NI), when purchasing goods from Great Britain (GB), and its impact on the used-car sector. My department estimates that approximately 30,000 used cars are brought into NI from GB on an annual basis. Any assessment of the economic impacts will be speculative until clarity emerges on the full arrangements for the movement of goods between GB and NI and also on the future trading relationship between the UK and the EU. I have written to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on this issue. Furthermore, I have met with some local car dealerships and corresponded with others on this matter. There is also ongoing communication between my officials and HMRC on this issue. There are no actions which the Executive could take to mitigate the impact of this on consumers or businesses as both VAT and tariff policy are reserved.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) the efforts made by her Department to prepare small and micro-businesses for a no-deal Brexit; (ii) the support provided; and (iii) the advice given to those who sell to GB and the EU.

(AQW 12218/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department, working alongside Invest NI and InterTradeIreland, made substantial efforts across the past year to prepare Northern Ireland's small and micro-businesses for the implementation of the Protocol against the context of a possible no deal, with the message being to prepare regardless of the outcome.

Now that a UK-EU deal has been reached and the Protocol implemented, I continue to work to help businesses prepare for the outworkings of these agreements and to seek longer term sustainable mitigations. It remains important that businesses consider the steps required to ensure they can continue to trade in this new environment as of 1 January.

Support is still on offer for businesses of all sizes. InvestNI continues to offer a range of support services to companies and InterTradeIreland's Brexit Advisory Service provides financial and professional support. The NI Business Info website draws together material from a wide range of sources to provide a 'one stop shop' for guidance and checklists geared towards smaller businesses.

These advice and supports have been tailored to those businesses, particularly small and micro, which trade with Great Britain in goods, and those that trade with the EU, primarily impacted by changes to the trade of services and data.

My Department will continue to provide advice, guidance and support to businesses in the months ahead to support our businesses to adjust to the new trading environment. I want to ensure NI businesses are well positioned to seize the market access opportunities ahead.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will consider developing a women's employment strategy which addresses the particular labour market inequalities faced by women, including, occupational segregation, gender pay gaps, low pay and insecure work.

(AQW 12255/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As Minister with responsibility for gender equality for the Executive, I am committed to tackling the structural inequalities and obstacles that directly affect the everyday lives of women.

Using a co-design approach, my Department has begun work to develop a Gender Equality Strategy which will aim to address a range of barriers and inequalities in society including particular issues faced by women, both within and outside of the labour market.

Whilst my Department will lead on the Strategy development, it is important to note that the issues this will address are cross-cutting. I will work closely with Executive colleagues and other Departments to ensure actions are aligned to Programme for Government outcomes and that action owners are signed up to deliver and report on their commitments within the Strategy

I am fully committed to tackling the Gender Pay Gap and implementing Section 19 (s19) of the Employment Act (NI) 2016. While the statutory responsibility for this function still remains with the Executive Office, I have written to the First and deputy First Ministers agreeing to the transfer of the function to my Department. Once it has been fully transferred, work will commence to bring forward the necessary legislation to bring it into force. The requirement contained within s19 for the publication of a Strategy and Action Plan to tackle the Gender Pay Gap will be incorporated into the development of the new Gender Equality Strategy.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy what plans she has to ensure (i) that parental leave is available as a day one right to all workers; and (ii) that it is remunerated to at least statutory maternity pay levels.

(AQW 12257/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I appreciate the many challenges that working parents face when juggling the demands of raising a family with managing a career. As such the employment law framework attempts to balance fairly the needs of workers with those of employers.

Whilst I recognise that there has been a call for the introduction of a paid element to parental leave and for a widening of its scope to include making it a day one right, I have no immediate plans to change this provision.

As with many family-related employment rights, the current right to unpaid parental leave, with a 12 month qualifying period, is the statutory minimum, and many employers go well beyond this in the interests of both their staff and their business.

It is my long term aim to build on existing Northern Ireland employment law with measures that will introduce better support for working families. Workers who also undertake a caring or parenting role will be considered as part of this strategic process.

My current priority remains to protect and rebuild our Economy following the devastating impact of COVID-19.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 15 January 2021

Written Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what is the agreed advice to a company which could operate with safe distancing but chooses to close in terms of that company's eligibility to participate in the Government's 80% support scheme.

(AQW 3902/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): We would encourage all firms to participate in the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme where necessary, but decisions on continuing operations are a matter for individual companies to determine in the light of their individual circumstances. Any matters concerning eligibility would be for HMRC to consider.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) whether complaints have been received by the Executive Office and the office of the Interim Advocate in respect of the conduct of the Interim Advocate for Victims/Survivors of Historical Institutional Abuse; and (ii) how many such complaints have been resolved.

(AQW 3920/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Concerns have been raised by members of one victims' and survivors' group and a separate individual regarding the Interim Advocate, and the Interim Advocate has responded to these. The Head of the Civil Service wrote to the group proposing a way forward and officials from the Executive Office have since met with representatives from the group.

Complaints were received by TEO and the Interim Advocate's Office following a data breach in the Interim Advocate's Office on 22 May. All of the complainants received a response and communications are ongoing as regards to potential legal action in a number of cases.

Mr O'Toole asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment on whether a form of all-island visa, which would extend the Common Travel Area to EU migrants on the island of Ireland, would benefit the Northern Ireland labour market and alleviate the justice and security issues around human exploitation of EU migrants by regularising EU migration across the open border.

(AQW 5829/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Immigration and the Common Travel Area are the responsibility of the UK Government and as far as we are aware there has been no assessment on an all-island visa with the Irish government. We have written to Prime Minister, Boris Johnston, on the importance of the migrant labour to our economy, and have been advised that the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) inquiry will show if a local Shortage Occupation List tailored for local needs is required. The MAC Inquiry closed on the 24 June 2020 and results are expected in early September 2020.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what views have been expressed by them to the Chinese authorities about China's legislation in Hong Kong.

(AQW 6067/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We held a courtesy call with the Chinese Consul General as part of our regular communications on areas of interest to the Executive. The Consul General also read a Chinese government statement on Hong Kong.

International relations are not a devolved matter, but we emphasised our awareness of all the issues, including the UK and EU positions, and stressed our hope for the matter to be resolved to the satisfaction of all concerned.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail what ministerial directions have been issued since January 2020.

(AQW 6400/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We have issued no directions in this period.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) why, and on what basis, was the Assembly told on 28 July 2020 by junior Minister Kearney that the Minister for Infrastructure could not exercise powers relating to planning, arising from the enactment of The Executive Committee Functions Bill, until the Ministerial Code was amended; and (ii) is that still the position of the Executive Office.

(AQW 6404/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The position articulated reflected the provisions of section 28A of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 relating to the Ministerial Code and Ministerial authority for decision making. The Executive Office has seen legal opinion not available at that time, and we are content that the Ministerial Code may now be interpreted in the context of the provisions of Executive Committee (Functions) Act 2020 in advance of its formal amendment.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given the guide on good practice of the Commissioner for Public Appointments (CPA) discourages automatic reappointments, whether a publicly advertised competition will be held to appoint the CPA upon the imminent expiry of the term of office of the current incumbent.

(AQW 6598/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Commissioner for Public Appointments for Northern Ireland, Ms Judena Leslie, was offered, and accepted, a short extension of up to one year with effect from September 2020, to ensure the Office continues to function and to fulfil what is a very important role.

It is our intention to proceed with a publicly advertised competition to appoint a new Commissioner for Public Appointments for Northern Ireland prior to the end of the extension period.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what is the current breakdown on the basis of (i) gender; and (ii) community background in respect of Judicial Officers, as defined by the NIJAC.

(AQW 9616/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: As at 5 November 2020 the current breakdown, based on 664 Judicial Officers, for whom NIJAC has a role in the appointment process is:

(i) Gender:	Male 50.9%	Female 49.1%
(ii) Community Background:	Protestant 44.7%	Roman Catholic 49.2%
	Non-Determined 6.1%	

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what is the cost to date of providing (i) English sign language translation; and (ii) Irish sign language translation at the regular COVID-19 press conferences.

(AQW 9794/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Up until 30 September, the combined cost of providing sign language translations in both British Sign Language and Irish Sign Language has been £19,883.40.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when compliance will take place with paragraph 3.3 of The Guidance for Ministers in the Exercise of their Official Responsibilities with regard to the publication of performance statistics for each of the departments in respect of answering Assembly Written Questions.

(AQW 11728/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Executive Office officials have recently concluded a cross departmental consultation with each of the departments on the proposed format, content and frequency of publication of Written Assembly Questions statistics. It is intended that these statistics will be published to align with the sitting periods of the Assembly, starting from January 2021 with statistics for the period September to December 2020.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to AQW 8256/17-22, to provide a breakdown of the £1.2 million expenditure on the Sustainable Use of Poultry Litter Project/ Small Business Research Initiative to support the development of sustainable technologies for utilising poultry litter.

(AQW 8935/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Phase 1 of the Small Business Research Initiative (SBRI) competition to find solutions for the Sustainable Utilisation of Poultry Litter (SUPL) was launched on 10 December 2012. The sponsor departments for the competition were Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) supported by InvestNI and Department of the

Environment (DOE), Construction and Procurement Delivery (CPD) and the Technology Strategy Board (TSB). Project Management of the competition was provided by Strategic Investment Board (SIB). Following an open SBRI competition, eight contractors out of 39 applicants were selected to carry out research and development on nine technology proposals.

The funding for each Phase 1 contract was up to £75,000, and the total funding for SBRI Phase 1 was approximately £650,000.

The eight companies which received funding were: Excel Energy Associates (£69,921), C-Tech Innovation Ltd (£62,750), Stream Bio-energy (£75,000), Broadcrown Ltd (£74,870), Carbogen Ltd (£74,974 & £74,880), Westland Horticulture Ltd (£75,000), Green Energy Engineering Ltd (£65,898) and Manure Bio-energy Systems Ltd (£74,914).

SBRI Phase 1 project management costs by SIB and other project support costs amounted to some £230,000.

Phase 2 was to develop a 'SUPL Loan Scheme' to lend, on commercial terms, up to 40% of the capital costs for the construction of commercial scale plants to process poultry litter. SIB developed the loan scheme in conjunction with the Departments and InvestNI. SIB received some £140,000 in project management support and approximately £160,000 was spent mainly on consultancy to carry out due diligence on the two loan applications. The SUPL Loan Scheme helped to support the construction of two poultry litter processing plants.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what action he is considering to reinstate trees, woods and hedgerows that have been lost due to countryside planning developments such as roads and windfarms. (AQW 10514/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Department for Infrastructure has responsibility for the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 within which removal of trees for planned development or conditions attached to their removal are considered.

My Department provides grant aid for tree planting to create new woodland through the Forest Expansion Scheme which I have recently modified to further encourage more trees. In particular, I have reduced the minimum threshold for eligibility to the grant scheme which has seen a very positive response, approximately doubling the number of applications this year. Additionally, I launched a new Small Woodland Grant Scheme in December 2020 which is designed to complement existing holdings by providing support to plant native woodland. My department also operates an Environmental Farming Scheme which encourages planting trees and shrubs on farms through grant aid to support planting native trees in woodland, hedgerows, tree enhanced boundaries and riparian buffers.

These incentives for tree planting will contribute to the 'Forests for Our Future' programme, which aims to plant 18 million trees over the next decade; and is one of the foundation initiatives of the Executive's Green Growth strategy being developed by my department.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail (i) the reasons for the increased levels of pollution recently experienced in Northern Ireland; and (ii) what (a) short-term; and (b) long-term steps he is taking to prevent future instances of such pollution. (AQW 11199/17-22)

Mr Poots: In order to protect public health and our environment, my Department has extensive monitoring and surveillance networks across Northern Ireland, in respect of a number of environmental pollutants. Where possible, in light of government health and safety guidance, monitoring and surveillance continues and I set out below some information relating to air quality, water quality and fly tipping during the lockdown period.

Air Quality

DAERA officials monitor air quality on a weekly, daily and if necessary, hourly basis. This enables air quality alerts to be issued as soon as high levels of air pollution are experienced or forecast. Levels of nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) remain lower in 2020 than the average for the preceding five years for almost all of 2020. Levels in 2020 are lower than the previous 5 year average both before and after lockdown, which started on 23 March 2020. Levels of NO₂ tend to be lower in summer months and, this is the case in 2020. Levels of particulate matter (PM) have varied considerably since the start of 2020. For the majority of the first quarter of 2020, levels of PM were lower than the 2015-2019 five-year average. Since lockdown levels have, for the most part, been higher than the five year average. A high air pollution alert was issued in respect of forecast high levels of particulate matter on 10 April 2020 and monitored levels on and 29 November 2020.

It is difficult to determine the precise cause of these trends seen in pollutants. Air quality is affected by weather. Strong winds can disperse pollutants, whilst temperature inversions can trap localised pollution close to the surface. It can also be impacted by human activities that are a source of pollution, such as residential solid fuel burning and use of vehicles.

A number of proactive steps have been taken by my Department to improve air quality in Northern Ireland. My Department continues to financially assist the district councils with monitoring and action plans to improve air quality through the Local Air Quality Management Grant. Funding is also provided to other organisations for activities that promote active travel and improve air quality.

My Department is developing the first Clean Air Strategy for Northern Ireland, a two-stage approach has been adopted. Initially a Clean Air Strategy Discussion Document, which presents an in-depth analysis of air quality in Northern Ireland and sets out current policy and evidence, was launched to a 12 week public consultation on Monday 23rd November 2020. The

Discussion Document seeks views on a wide variety of matters relating to air quality. It does not set out policy options or indicate a particular policy position. I encourage all Members to review to the Clean Air Strategy Discussion Document and respond to the questions posed in the document. The Discussion Document and Abridged version are available at:

http://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/clean_air_strategy_discussion_document

Following this period of public discussion, responses received will be reviewed, options considered and range of proposals formulated. Once I have considered the options and decided on a policy direction, officials shall begin to draft the first Clean Air Strategy for Northern Ireland. This will be a more focussed and shorter document than the Discussion Document and will contain specific proposals relating to policy and other measures which can improve air quality. This draft Clean Air Strategy will be subject to an additional public consultation and due to the cross-cutting nature of the policy area, Executive approval will also be sought at that time.

The DAERA Air Quality website was redesigned earlier this year and the improved website was launched on 31st July 2019. The website provides the general public with information on topics including, pollutants, forecasts, health impacts and Pollution Busters – a section exclusively for children about air pollution. In recognition of the cross-cutting benefits of this informative and educational resource, DAERA officials worked with Department for Infrastructure and Department for Health colleagues to ensure that all information available to the public was current and accurate.

The Air Quality App, launched on 7th May 2020, is a further example of the steps taken by my Department to reduce air pollution. The App informs the public of the issues, and importantly, the interventions individuals can take to tackle pollution. The Northern Ireland Air Quality App gives the public instant up to date information on the air pollution levels across Northern Ireland and a five day air quality forecast. It also provides the public with valuable health advice on the impacts of reduced air quality, to help them make informed decisions about their actions and activities on days when air quality is poor. The pollutants monitored are nitrogen dioxide, particulate matter (PM), sulphur dioxide and ozone.

Water Quality

It is the role of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) to conserve, protect and where possible improve the aquatic environment. We do this through a range of activities including the regulation of effluent discharges, farm inspections, catchment investigations and the promotion of good practice in new developments (through its response to planning consultations) and the education of the industry sector and the wider community.

Undertaking a targeted catchment approach to improving water quality requires a wide range of communication, engagement and partnership working both across Departments and across sectors.

In order to prevent or minimise the impact of pollution, NIEA co-ordinates and manages the response to reports of pollution within set time targets, depending on the severity of the incident.

The number of confirmed water pollution incidents have remained constant for 2020 in comparison to recent years. NIEA's water pollution response team remained operational throughout 2020 and have received 1576 reports of water pollution by 18/10/20. Of these, 772 were subsequently confirmed upon investigation. This compares similarly for the same time period in other years (see table below).

Year	No. water pollution incidents reported	No. of water pollution incidents confirmed
2017	1487	824
2018	1508	770
2019	1457	777
2020	1576	772

Fly tipping

With regard to waste, my Department focuses its enforcement actions primarily on larger scale waste dumping activity rather than low level ad hoc dumping often referred to as 'fly-tipping', which is primarily addressed by District Councils.

Since 1 January 2020 to date, my Department has received 1007 reported incidents of alleged illegal waste disposal, compared to 823 during the same period last year. Of these incidents in 2020, 165 recorded waste disposal by burning compared to 118 during the same period last year, representing an increase of 40%.

While I have no plans at present to strengthen or change the legislation around illegal dumping, my officials are working with councils to consider the effectiveness of the existing legislation and explore how we can work together to make best use of the powers contained within it.

This may create opportunities to deal more quickly and effectively with lower level offending on a local level through fixed penalty notices rather than being reliant on Court proceedings, the timings of which are outside of our control.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what efforts his Department has made to promote the understanding that Northern Irish agri-food will continue to have access to the European Union market after Brexit.

(AQO 1269/17-22)

Mr Poots: My department has established a focussed resource for the strategic promotion of key messages in relation to EU Exit including what the implications are for exporting to Europe beyond the transition period. Messages are promoted and delivered via a number of channels including ongoing two way engagement with a wide range of agri-food stakeholders and businesses and online channels such as the EU Exit pages on the DAERA website and social media platforms. Officials engage directly with key industry representatives through the Trade and Agriculture Committee (TAC). These communications and engagement activities complement the overarching UK communications campaign with additional interactions to ensure key messages reach NI stakeholders and businesses.

Prior to the 1 January we hosted three online EU Exit stakeholder events, which included a range of presentations from speakers across government including FSA, HMRC, DfE and DAERA, explaining that the steps to be taken by businesses exporting to the EU post transition would not change. Presentation materials and recordings of the event were made available on the DAERA website. The events, which were positively received, provided businesses with an opportunity to raise questions and issues of concern. Responses will be added to the repository of Frequently Asked Questions on the DAERA website and will be updated as more information becomes available.

A further webinar has been arranged for the 07 January 2021 and this will supplement our regular contact with stakeholders aimed at assisting them in implementing the new procedures. We will continue to use all other communications channels at our disposal to further promote messaging to the agri-food sector, support businesses and respond to any queries they have in regard to trading with Europe post-transition.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what measures his Department is taking to prevent the further development of zoonotic diseases.

(AQW 12051/17-22)

Mr Poots: Given that approximately 60% of known and emerging human diseases originate from animals, with up to 72% originating in wildlife, it is not possible to prevent the further development of new zoonotic diseases.

However my Department's Veterinary Service Animal Health Group is extensively engaged in the control of existing zoonotic diseases such as bovine tuberculosis, brucellosis, salmonellosis and BSE, and through the Veterinary Public Health Programme, preventing the spread of zoonotic food-borne pathogens through the human food chain; while a major function of the Agri-Food Biosciences Institute is the ongoing surveillance for novel or exotic pathogens – eg Avian Influenza.

In addition to these surveillance and disease control programmes my Department also carries out activities at Ports to prevent any possible entry of zoonotic diseases in imported animals and products; and is in regular communication with private veterinary surgeons and the agricultural industry to ensure the maintenance of a high degree of awareness and vigilance on livestock farms and veterinary clinics across Northern Ireland.

As advised previously (AQW 11998/17-22 refers), my officials are members of the Human Animal Infections and Risk Surveillance (HAIRS) group (<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/human-animal-infections-and-risk-surveillance-group-hairs>). This is a UK-based multi-agency cross government horizon scanning and risk assessment group. Established in early 2004, the group meet monthly, or more regularly when required, to identify and assess emerging infection risks to human health in the UK.

As a result of these programmes and activities, which have been thoroughly audited and accredited on numerous occasions over the years, Northern Ireland livestock and food have a well deserved reputation for health, wholesomeness and safety.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what research has been done by his Department on the effects of Mycoplasma Bovis.

(AQW 12082/17-22)

Mr Poots: Mycoplasma bovis is a world-wide disease of cattle, which was first recognised as a pathogen in 1961 in the United States of America, and has been present in the United Kingdom since the mid-1970's. As such, my Department does not currently undertake any research on its effects, and it is not notifiable in Northern Ireland.

I note however that as part of the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute's (AFBI) surveillance, M. bovis was the pathogen most commonly identified in cattle diagnosed with respiratory disease (at 30.9%, 73 cases) in 2018. AFBI identified a further 60 cases in 2019, and 45 cases in laboratory submissions to date in 2020.

Mycoplasma bovis has now spread worldwide, including to countries that for a long time were considered free of the pathogen, for example New Zealand, in 2017.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what action will be taken to address an identified danger at the Quoile River Pathway, Downpatrick.

(AQW 12085/17-22)

Mr Poots: Following a recent inspection of the Quoile pathway by NIEA staff and a qualified Departmental Health and Safety advisor, officials have confirmed that no specific dangers associated with the pathway infrastructure were identified at this time.

There are many natural hazards or dangers present at any riverside pathway, indeed when visiting any natural environment and it is not possible to eliminate them all. The Department maintains Health and Safety signage in the area to advise the visiting public of these hazards, and of the precautions they should take for their own safety, this is particularly important in seeking to strike the balance between the public's own responsibility to themselves and that of site management intervention by way of control measures.

My Officials are committed to ensuring the ongoing provision of safe public access and site staff routinely carry out visual inspections of the Quoile River Pathway under Departmental ownership. Remedial maintenance works are enacted by staff and undertaken where necessary. This process is underpinned by both inspections and audits undertaken by qualified Departmental Health and Safety advisors.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what level of maintenance work has been carried out at the Quoile River Pathway by his Department over the last five years.

(AQW 12086/17-22)

Mr Poots: During the past 5 years, officials in my Department have undertaken considerable works to enhance access and facilities for all visitors using the Quoile Riverside pathway. This includes extensive re-surfacing works of sections of the path in 2017, 2019 and 2020. Works in 2017 also included the replacement of a wooden bridge and repairs to a separate wooden bridge along this pathway. Cumulatively this significant investment has led to the entire length of pathway within the Department's ownership having been re-surfaced along the Quoile River down to Steamboat Quay.

My officials have confirmed that all infrastructure is subject to regular visual inspection by staff. Remedial maintenance works are then enacted and undertaken where necessary. This process is underpinned by both inspections and audits undertaken by qualified Departmental Health and Safety advisors.

My Department remains committed to the provision of safe public access for all members of the community and, in 2018, installed a new disabled access ramp and included the provision of picnic tables along the path in the same year. In 2019 these works received recognition in the form of a Prestige Access Award from the William Keown Trust in recognition of its works contributing to an accessible, user friendly environment.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the criteria set by his Department's health and safety advisors as to what would determine a risk to the public that is not a natural hazard.

(AQW 12087/17-22)

Mr Poots: My officials have confirmed that the policy on Risk Assessment which was approved by the DAERA Board through the Resourcing and Peoples Committee details the criteria as what would be considered a risk. A "risk" is the likelihood of potential harm from a particular hazard being realised, wherein a "risk" is distinct in its meaning from a "hazard". To qualify the amount of risk, comprising qualitative and quantitative elements, this is based upon a number of factors such as probability or chance of an event occurring; the number of occasions a person is exposed to the hazard; the number of people affected by a single event; and the maximum probable loss likely to be experienced.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he intends to bring forward legislation to ban fox hunting for sport.

(AQW 12100/17-22)

Mr Poots: Fox hunting is considered a field sport, similar to fishing and shooting, and, as such, there are no specific powers relating to such hunting. The legislative programme is currently busy. In relation to fox hunting I am content to keep this issue under review.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether the grace period announced by the UK Government and EU applies to mushroom substrate.

(AQW 12131/17-22)

Mr Poots: I can confirm that the grace period to which you have referred does not apply to requirements regarding the movement of mushroom substrate from Great Britain (GB) to Northern Ireland (NI) following the end of the EU transition period.

Post transition, if the compost has been produced/treated in an approved manure processing/compost facility as required under EU Regulation No.142/2011, a certificate for processed manure can be issued to allow it to move from GB to NI.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he will bring forward legislative proposals to ban environmentally destructive industrial fishing in Marine Protected Areas.

(AQW 12175/17-22)

Mr Poots: The term industrial fishing is often used to describe catching fish for processing into fish meal and oil, rather than for direct human consumption. This activity is not known to occur in the Northern Ireland marine area and therefore does not present a threat to Marine Protected Areas (MPAs).

While a ban on industrial fishing is not considered necessary, my Department is committed to establishing management measures for activities undertaken in the Northern Ireland marine area that could hinder the achievement of the conservation objectives for MPAs. I recently launched a public consultation on the development of fisheries management measures for MPAs in the inshore region. The consultation includes recommendations to prohibit demersal mobile gear fishing in MPAs with vulnerable habitats and species. Further details can be found at <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/consultations/consultation-development-fisheries-management-measures-marine-protected-areas-mpas-and-establishment>.

The recently introduced UK Fisheries Act 2020 provides new powers for my Department to manage fishing activities in the Northern Ireland offshore region for conservation purposes. My Department is considering the evidence that will be required to identify the necessary management measures for the three offshore MPAs and intends to commence stakeholder engagement in 2021.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what collaboration has taken place with the Irish Government to formally adopt conservation measures for Marine Protected Areas in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 12177/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Interreg VA funded MarPAMM (Marine Protected Area Management and Monitoring) project is developing management plans for Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) in Northern Ireland, Republic of Ireland and Scotland. This includes a cross-border management plan for Carlingford SPA and two regional MPA management plans; one for the Co. Down – Co. Louth region, and one for the North Coast – North Channel region.

The project is being led by AFBI and includes project partners from Northern Ireland, Republic of Ireland and Scotland, and is providing opportunities for cross-border collaboration between my Department and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. My Department is a member of the project advisory committee and the stakeholder steering groups that have been established for each MPA.

The management plans will identify the necessary conservation measures for each MPA and will be subject to public consultation. Decisions relating to the adoption of the plans will not be taken until the project is completed in September 2022.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what steps his Department has taken to encourage manufacturing businesses to (i) improve the recyclability of their products; and (ii) reduce waste sent to landfill.

(AQW 12178/17-22)

Mr Poots: Adoption of the new targets laid out in The Waste (Circular Economy) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 will require increased recycling and separate collection of waste of a household nature, including that from businesses. Proposals for how these targets can be achieved in Northern Ireland were consulted on recently in the discussion document "Future Recycling and Separation of Waste of a Household Nature in Northern Ireland". The consultation has now closed and a summary of responses will be published in due course. This summary will help the Department to map out the future landscape of recycling in Northern Ireland.

In addition to this, I am already working with my Ministerial colleagues across the rest of the UK to introduce further legislation for an extended producer responsibility (EPR) scheme that will place responsibility on producers for the full net cost of managing their products once those products reach their end of life. EPR will encourage producers to use plastic packaging that can be recycled, increasing recyclability of products, and this is anticipated to be legislated for in 2023.

Her Majesty's Treasury has proposed a new plastic packaging tax, which once implemented in 2022, will obligate businesses producing packaging containing plastic to pay the packaging tax unless the packaging contains at least 30% recycled plastic. This is also complimented by DAERA's membership to the UK Plastics Pact. 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. Work is already underway to achieve 4 key industry targets to eliminate unnecessary plastics and/or increase recyclability by 2025.

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.

Waste prevention is another key driver in reducing the adverse impacts of waste on the environment and human health. The 2019 Waste Prevention Programme was published earlier this year, following public consultation. The document includes a number of actions to assist businesses in preventing waste and increasing resource efficiency, for example through industrial symbiosis which promotes reuse and repair, diverting things like office furniture from landfill or energy recovery.

Finally, the Courtauld Commitment 2025, launched in 2016, brings together a broad range of organisations involved in the food industry to make food and drinks production and consumption more sustainable. The agreement has a collective ambition to reduce food and drinks waste arising in the UK by 20% by 2025 compared to 2015.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs why young farmers and new entrants are not permitted legal or expert representation when attending interviews with departmental officials.

(AQW 12214/17-22)

Mr Poots: Young farmer and new entrant applicants may be accompanied by a person of their choice when attending a Young Farmer / New Entrant interview, including legal or expert representation. Applicants are informed when invited to interview that they may be accompanied and have chosen to bring such representatives in the past. The primary purpose of the interview is to determine whether the applicant is Head of Holding and for that reason it is important that the applicant themselves is able to answer questions posed by the interview panel.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on actions taken by his Department to stop dredging along the River Foyle.

(AQW 12290/17-22)

Mr Poots: Since my last answer to you in January 2020, I can confirm that there have been no further incidents in 2020 of unlicensed dredging in the River Foyle downstream of Strabane. That section of the river has been regularly patrolled by Loughs Agency staff and officers from my own Marine and Fisheries Division.

The situation remains unaltered in that if dredging recommences, my officials will exercise appropriate enforcement action under the Marine & Coastal Access Act 2009, thereby protecting the waterway in the future. I am aware that there is reciprocal enforcement action being taken forward in the Republic of Ireland.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he has considered establishing an inquiry into the Meenbog landslide.

(AQW 12291/17-22)

Mr Poots: Investigation of the incident is underway and the Loughs Agency, as a cross border agency, is co-ordinating efforts and is supported by NIEA, EPA Ireland and Donegal County Council. The Cross-Border Multi-Agency Working Group established following the landslide is continuing to meet on an ongoing basis. I can update you that the focus of the working group has now moved from an incident response phase to an investigation, enforcement and restoration planning phase. Given this, two fora have been established by the agencies involved. One forum will co-ordinate the investigation and enforcement work of the agencies and the inputs required from various specialists. The other forum is leading the research into, and planning of, the restoration works that will be necessary to repair the damage to the environment caused by the pollution event. Officials from my Department are represented on both groups.

As the investigative phase of the incident is still ongoing, the investigating bodies treat all evidence and associated materials as if they are 'sub-judice'. As a result, I cannot provide you with any more specific details of the investigations.

In the first instance, any decision on establishing an Inquiry into the incident will have to wait until these investigative processes have been completed. Also, due to the transboundary nature of the impacts of the landslide, my Department is currently seeking technical legal advice on how the relevant environmental legislation can be applied. Until these matters have been resolved, I cannot consider establishing an Inquiry.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he has considered introducing a review of reporting processes so that local councils and Health and Social Care Trusts are required to prepare a clean air strategy with adequate control measures identified and acted upon.

(AQW 12337/17-22)

Mr Poots: As you will be aware, I recently launched a twelve week public consultation on The Clean Air Strategy Discussion Document, developed by my Department.

While a review of reporting processes so that local councils and Health and Social Care Trusts are required to prepare a clean air strategy with adequate control measures identified and acted upon, has not been specifically proposed in this document, I would like to highlight Chapter 6 to you titled, Local Air Quality Management (LAQM). This chapter outlines The Environment (Northern Ireland) Order 2002, as amended, which requires local government councils to review the quality of the air within their districts. Part of this review is an assessment of the quality of air against an agreed set of standards. This management system and associated questions, currently sets the foundations for improving air quality in Northern Ireland and is similar in part to your query.

The LAQM system does not address the Health and Social Care Trusts element of your query, however, the question raised in Chapter 5 - Industrial Emissions, may be of interest to you:

Q: Are there any industrial sectors or air pollutants that require new or further investigation?

The questions put forward in the discussion document are designed to generate discussion, however, you will note that they are 'open' in nature to encourage wide debate and discussion. Constructive comments relevant to any topic will therefore be greatly appreciated and strengthen the consultation process.

I would encourage you to consider the Local Air Quality Management and Industrial Emissions chapters, in addition to all other elements of the Discussion Document and respond through the formal route. This will ensure your important comments,

are captured as part of the final assessment. The Discussion Document, Abridged version and response details are available at: http://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/clean_air_strategy_discussion_document

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he has considered introducing a requirement that local councils develop a walking and cycling strategy with targets to decrease the percentage of journeys by private car.

(AQW 12338/17-22)

Mr Poots: As you are aware, I recently launched a twelve week public consultation on The Clean Air Strategy Discussion Document, developed by my Department.

Introducing a requirement that local councils develop a walking and cycling strategy with targets to decrease the percentage of journeys by private car, has not been expressly proposed in this document. I would, however, like to highlight Chapter 2 to you, which is titled Transport. This chapter outlines the importance of transport movements to our economy and way of life, as well as the significant air pollution generated by road transport. While road transport is responsible for a range of emissions, those of greatest concern are nitrogen oxides and particulate matter. High concentrations of nitrogen dioxide monitored at ground level in our towns and cities are largely due to vehicle exhaust emissions. Reduction of these emission is clearly a key objective.

The Air Quality Zone Plan for Greater Belfast, detailed in page 53 of the Clean Air Strategy Discussion Document (available at: http://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/clean_air_strategy_discussion_document) highlights some of the main local measures to tackle nitrogen dioxide emissions in Belfast. These include a; Bicycle Strategy for NI; Public bike-hire scheme; Urban car parking restrictions; and Park & Ride for bus and rail services, to name but a few.

Chapter 2 also explains the work ongoing towards a 'Modal Shift' in encouraging active travel (walking and cycling) and greater use of public transport. It is anticipated that such as shift, could have a significant impact on reducing air pollution from transport, whilst improving the health and wellbeing of individuals.

It is recognised within the Clean Air Strategy Discussion Document that increasing the proportion of journeys undertaken by walking, cycling and public transport has the potential to reduce the number of private cars on our roads, and to decrease associated emissions of nitrogen oxides.

The Discussion Document may not fully address the walking strategy element of your suggestion, however, active travel, in the form of a Bicycle Strategy for NI is firmly included. This is further supported by the increase in walked journeys encouraged through Urban car parking restrictions and Park & Ride for bus and rail services.

Recommendations are sought through responses to the Discussion Document and I would like to highlight the follow question to you, which you may have a particular interest in responding to:

Q: Are there any potential measures not included here that you believe could help encourage a shift away from private car use to walking, cycling, and public transport?

The Chapter 7 question relating to Communications may also be another opportunity for you to further promote the concept of a walking and cycling strategy. Please see question:

Q: Is increasing awareness of air quality impacts at a local level is the best way of promoting behaviour change by individuals to reduce air pollution?

As you will no doubt be aware, the questions put forward in the discussion document are designed to generate discussion, however, you will note that they are 'open' in nature to encourage wide debate and discussion. Constructive comments relevant to any topic will therefore be greatly appreciated and strengthen the consultation process.

I would encourage you to consider the Transport and Communications chapters, in addition to all other elements of the Discussion Document and respond through the formal route using the designated inbox (casni@daera-ni.gov.uk), this will ensure your important comments, are captured as part of the final assessment.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he has considered introducing a clean air fund that provides targeted funding for those local councils with consistent exceedances or elevated levels of air pollution.

(AQW 12339/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department financially supports district councils in monitoring air quality through the Local Air Quality Management (LAQM) grant and has done for many years. Through the LAQM grant scheme, councils can apply annually for financial support in connection with air quality monitoring, reviews, assessments, management and the preparation and implementation of action plans.

The criteria for funding are based on the identification of air quality problems where parameters listed in the UK Air Quality Strategy are exceeded or may be exceeded and support is needed for longer-term monitoring and council-led mitigation measures. This effectively means that funding is targeted for those local councils with consistent exceedances or elevated levels of air pollution.

As you are aware, I recently launched a twelve week public consultation, The Clean Air Strategy Discussion Document, developed by my Department. The matter of funding for local councils to support air quality improvements, has been addressed in this document.

Changes to the way in which grant funding may be allocated, is proposed on page 131 of the Discussion Document (available at: http://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/clean_air_strategy_discussion_document). It is proposed that the grant application process will change to allow Local Authorities and also non-governmental organisations or other similar bodies to bid for money to develop projects which demonstrate outcomes where the activities, supported by the grant money, will have a direct impact on the improvement of air quality in the region or location. These Projects could be designed to focus on tackling one or two sources of pollution or they may focus specifically on areas with exceedances.

The Discussion Document poses a LAQM question:

Q: What are your views on the proposals to change the LAQM process, in particular to grant funding for outcome-based measures as opposed to monitoring?

I would like to encourage you to review the proposed changes put forward and respond to this Discussion Document question, through the formal route using the designated inbox (casni@daera-ni.gov.uk) to help inform the final Clean Air Strategy for Northern Ireland. This will ensure that your important comments, are captured as part of the final assessment.

Department for Communities

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for Communities whether she has presented a business case to the Department of Finance for support for Northern Ireland Football League clubs.
(AQW 9161/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister for Communities): I recently secured a total of £25M funding for a Sports Sustainability Fund following a number of bids at the recent October Monitoring Round. This will provide much needed financial relief for Governing Bodies and clubs, including those operating in NI Football Leagues, who have incurred losses due to Covid restrictions.

The Fund was launched on 4 December with a closure date of 11 January to allow Governing Bodies and clubs time to gather the necessary information and complete a validated application as well as collate the necessary evidence to support their claim for assistance.

It is planned that the assessment and verification phase will take place during January with payments commencing in February.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities what steps she intends to take to ensure that Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) rents remain the lowest in the sector; and how this will be managed when the landlord section of NIHE moves to become part of the social housing network of providers.
(AQW 10147/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Officials have commenced work to assess options to revitalise the Housing Executive inclusive of a comprehensive rental review.

It is my preference that the landlord section of the Housing Executive becomes a co-operative or mutual model.

I intend to bring proposals to the Executive before the end of this mandate.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for Communities (i) on what date the Stability & Renewal for Arts Fund opened for applications; (ii) on what date the first payment was made; (iii) how many applications were received from each constituency up to and including Friday 27 November 2020; (iv) how payments were made by this date; and (v) to detail the total amount paid.
(AQW 11107/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Answer

The Stability & Renewal Programme for Organisations opened for applications on 28th October 2020 with a closing deadline for applications of 27th November. To date no payments have been made. Decisions will be made at the end of January 2021. A breakdown by constituency of applications received up to and including Friday 27th November 2020 is detailed below:

Breakdown of applications per constituency

Constituency	No. of applications
Belfast East	23
Belfast North	33

Constituency	No. of applications
Belfast South	50
Belfast West	13
East Antrim	4
East Derry	5
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	5
Foyle	16
Lagan Valley	7
Mid Ulster	5
Newry and Armagh	9
North Antrim	1
North Down	5
Republic of Ireland	1
South Antrim	3
South Down	6
Strangford	2
Upper Bann	3
West Tyrone	6
	197

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities how many years it will take the new mutual housing organisation to clear the existing backlog of repairs and maintenance.

(AQW 11181/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My revitalisation plans are at an early stage. My officials have commenced work to update the analysis of the scale of the investment challenge required, and then to assess options and timescales.

I can assure you that I intend to bring proposals to the Executive before the end of this mandate.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Communities what help is available for private home owners whose homes have been damaged by contractual work being carried out on Housing Executive properties.

(AQW 11733/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has advised that Private home owners should contact their local office for assistance and guidance in the event of damage to their property as a result of the actions of an agent working on behalf of the Housing Executive.

Private home owners whose homes have been damaged during contractual work being carried out to their homes have the option to submit a Public Liability Claim to the Housing Executive (PLC Claim Form available on www.NIHE.gov.uk); submit a claim to their own property insurers; seek legal advice and instruct a solicitor to pursue the matter on their behalf against a negligent party; or issue proceedings directly in the Small Claims Court if the damage is less than £3000.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for Communities what action she is taking to ensure that councils receive guidance and detail on new COVID-19 regulations in a timely manner.

(AQW 11833/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Local government representatives sit on the Cross-Departmental Working Group on COVID-19 Regulations.

Both NILGA and SOLACE are kept up to date by my Department's officials in relation to any changes to the COVID-19 regulations.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for Communities to detail her plans for the reintroduction of live music events.

(AQW 11905/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Executive is responsible for decisions to introduce, amend and relax regulations necessary in response to Covid-19. Any restrictions put in place, including those relating to live music, are intended to be temporary and will be relaxed and removed when circumstances allow.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for Communities whether she has had any communication with the Department for Work and Pensions regarding a delay or any issues with the Winter Fuel payment.
(AQW 12352/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I have had no communication with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) regarding a delay or any issues with the Winter Fuel Payment. However my officials are in regular contact with DWP on specific/individual issues concerning these payments.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister for Communities how many applications she received for discretionary support payments from the East Derry constituency; and how many were approved.
(AQW 12364/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Discretionary Support management information on applications is available for full years from 2016/17 through to 2019/20. For East Derry constituency, this information shows that there were 1550 applications received in 2016/17 3,390 in 2017/18, 4,060 in 2018/19 and 3,450 in 2019/20.

Management information on payments, for East Derry, shows that there were 920 payments in 2016/17, 2270 in 2017/18, 2610 in 2018/19 and 2360 in 2019/20.

Department of Education

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 8611/17-22, to detail (i) whether the CCEA itself developed the methodology for the algorithms on which CCEA examination grades were awarded in 2020; (ii) who the supplier was who reviewed the methodology; and (iii) the cost of the contract for the methodology review.
(AQW 11084/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): I am advised that the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) developed the methodology for the algorithms on which CCEA examination grades were awarded in 2020 taking account of discussions with other jurisdictions and feedback from a Peer Review Group.

The supplier who reviewed the methodology for the CCEA Awarding Body was AlphaPlus, who received a payment of £4,852. CCEA Regulation used an independent statistician at a cost of £9,075.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education who is accountable for decisions made to allow any test events that contribute to an outbreak of COVID-19, fatalities or long-term debilitation resulting from COVID-19 transmission in school test centres.
(AQW 11382/17-22)

Mr Weir: You will aware of the announcement made by AQE Ltd on 13 January to cancel its assessment which had been scheduled for 27 February citing uncertainties surrounding the easing of coronavirus restrictions. You will appreciate that this will come as a huge disappointment to many pupils and parents who have worked hard to prepare for the tests in the hope of getting into a school of their choice.

The announcement means that the risk you have identified no longer arises.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education whether he has considered extending the Christmas break for schools for a longer period into January 2021.
(AQW 11553/17-22)

Mr Weir: I have been working closely with the Department of Health and other colleagues throughout the pandemic to maintain the education of children, to reduce the risk of outbreaks and to respond when these occur. This work has continued in recent weeks and the proposed way forward has been informed by the evidence and the advice provided. The common aim has been to keep schools safe, prioritise children's education and ensure any impact on overall transmission is as low as possible, while accepting that schools reopening as normal is not sustainable.

Unfortunately the deteriorating nature of the epidemic and the risks to public health has necessitated more substantial changes.

Therefore, having considered the advice from the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Advisor and following discussions with them, I have decided that all pre-school, primary and post-primary pupils will be taught remotely for the period up to half term, with teaching staff working remotely, where feasible. Schools will open for the supervised learning of vulnerable children, and the children of key workers. Special schools will, however, remain open.

I am aware of the negative impact on children's learning, mental health and well-being of not being in school. However, particularly after unprecedented levels of positive Covid-19 tests since Christmas, and the pressure this applies to our health service, it is critical that we all must consider the public health and scientific advice.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Education to detail how much has been spent by the Education Authority (a) on rates each year since its inception, broken down by area; (b) on maintenance of vacant properties under its has responsibility; and for how many years the EA were paying for these properties before they were put on the open market, including which properties are yet to the open market.

(AQW 11801/17-22)

Mr Weir: Annex 1 below shows the EA Rates Costs provides detail of rates expenditure each year from 2017/18, broken down by Council Area as requested. Vacant rating is identified separately.

Annex 2 below shows the Current Vacant Properties Data details the maintenance cost data reported cumulatively from years 2016/17 onwards. This refers to current vacant properties under EA control and those currently on the open market.

Please note the data provided is based on available information within the EA's financial system (16/17 for maintenance data and 17/18 for rating information). To go back further than this would require interpretation of the Education and Library Boards' legacy systems, which would therefore entail a considerable delay in providing the required information.

The report focuses on the current list of vacant properties and does not detail information on any vacant properties that have been subsequently sold/transferred or repurposed for other educational use or occupied by third parties.

Annex 1

EA Rates Costs

Council Area	2017-2018 (£000's)	2018-2019 (£000's)	2019-2020 (£000's)	2020-2021 (£000's)
Antrim & Newtownabbey	3,173	3,409	3,162	3,741
Ards & North Down	2,841	2,963	2,979	3,421
Armagh & Bandbridge	4,897	5,130	5,173	5,604
Belfast	8,185	8,486	8,586	9,690
Causeway Coast & Glen	2,893	2,759	2,801	3,034
Derry City & Strabane	4,219	4,287	4,392	4,848
Fermanagh & Omagh	2,529	2,672	2,670	2,692
HQ & Corporate	661	546	478	408
Lisburn & Castlereagh	2,173	2,402	2,566	3,033
Mid & East Antrim	3,061	3,208	3,287	3,795
Mid Ulster	3,335	3,409	3,463	3,675
Newry Mourne & Down	3,764	4,363	4,131	4,408
Vacant Properties	222	270	258	230
Total	41,954	43,902	43,947	48,580

Annex 2

Current Vacant Properties

Name Of School	Address	Years Vacant	Open Market (Yes/No)	Year placed on open market	Maintenance Costs- 16/17 Onwards £000's
Annaghmore Primary School	57 Annaghmore Road, Portadown BT62 1LZ	15	No	N/A	1
Ardnabannon Outdoor Educational Centre	3-5 Ardnabannon Rd, Castlewellan BT31 9EN	3	No	N/A	43
Ballygolan Primary School site	41-83 Serpentine Road, Newtownabbey, BT36 7HB	7	No	N/A	13

Name Of School	Address	Years Vacant	Open Market (Yes/No)	Year placed on open market	Maintenance Costs- 16/17 Onwards £000's
Ballykeel Playing Fields	18 Crebilly Road, Ballymena BT42 4DN	N/A	No	N/A	0
Ballykeigle Primary School	2 Ballykeigle Road, Comber, BT23	7	Yes	2019-20	0
Ballymoney Music Centre	23 Charles Street, Ballymoney, BT53 6DX	2	No	N/A	4
Bellarena Primary School	260 Seacoast Road, Limavady, BT39 0JB	1	No	N/A	5
Brookfield Special School	6 Halfpenny Gate Road, Moira, BT67 0GN	8	No	N/A	0
Bruslee Primary School (Former Class Centre)	86 Belfast Road, Ballyclare BT39 9LS	8	No	N/A	0
Bushmills Outdoor Educational Centre	7 Priestland Roa, Bushmills, BT57 8QP	1	No	N/A	0
Cambridge House Grammar School Plot 1	Land at Dans Road, Ballymena BT42 2EH	N/A	Yes	2019-20	0
Cambridge House Grammar School Plot 2	Land at Dans Road, Ballymena BT42 2EH	N/A	No	N/A	0
Causeway School	52 Causeway Road, Bushmills, BT57 8SU	58	No	N/A	2
Collone Primary School	7 Redrock Road, Armagh, BT60 2BE	12	No	N/A	6
Cottown Primary School	92 Cottown Road, Bangor, BT19 7QH	7	No	N/A	5
Culnady Primary School	79 Ballymacilur Road, Upperlands, Maghera BT46 5TT	1	No	N/A	2
Derriaghy Primay School	14 Milltown Park, Lisburn, BT28 3TU	9	No	N/A	3
Dromore Central Primary School	2 Banbridge Road, Dromore, BT25 1AD	14	No	N/A	34
Ebrington Primary School site	Ulsterville Avenue, Lapwing, Londonderry, BT47 6LH	3	No	N/A	63
Erganagh Primary School	7 Listymore Road, Castledery, Co Tyrone, BT81 7JG	1	No	N/A	-1
Faughan Valley High School	35 Drumahoe Road, Drumahoe, Londonderry, BT47 3SD	13	No	N/A	234
Former Castle Gardens Primary School site	Portaferry Road, Newtownards	19	No	N/A	0
Former Cavehill Primary School (Land Only)	78 North Circular Road, Belfast, BT14 6TN	39	No	N/A	0
Former Forthriver PS (Land Only)	66-68 Ballygomartin Road, Belfast	17	No	N/A	0
Former Glencairn Youth Club Site (Land Only)	Forthriver Parade, Belfast	7	No	N/A	0

Name Of School	Address	Years Vacant	Open Market (Yes/No)	Year placed on open market	Maintenance Costs- 16/17 Onwards £000's
Former Parkhall Integrated College site	6 Birch Hill Road, Antrim BT41 2QH	2	No	N/A	14
Garvagh High School	1 Coleraine Road, Garvagh, Coleraine, BT51 5HP	7	No	N/A	6
Garvagh Youth Centre	157A Main Street, Garvagh, Coleraine, BT51 5AB	25 Years plus	No	N/A	6
Killowen Outdoor Educational Centre	7 Killowen Rd, Rostrevor, Newry BT34 3AF	3	No	N/A	0
Knockbreda High School	Wynchurch Road, Belfast	6	No	N/A	60
Lisfearly Primary School	64 Farriter Road, Dungannon BT70 1SH	1	No	N/A	3
Lisnakea High School	Castlebalfour, Enniskillen BT92 0LT	7	No	N/A	0
Lisnaskea Transport Centre	Mullynascorothy, Enniskillen BT92 0NZ	1	No	N/A	-1
Loanends Former PS - Land at	192 Seven Mile Straight, Crumlin, BT29 4YR	16	No	N/A	0
Magherafelt Old Primary School	7 Queens Avenue, Magherafelt, BT45 6BU	8	No	N/A	0
Mount Gilbert College (land Only)	237 Ballygomartin Road, Belfast, BT13 3NL	14	Yes	2020-2021	1
O'Neill Memorial Primary School	2 School Road, Crossnacreevy, BT5 7UA	18	No	N/A	2
Orangefield High School (Land Only)	Cameronian Drive, Belfast, BT5 6AW	6	No	N/A	108
Portrush YC and adjacent Out Centre	Dunluce Avenue, Portrush BT56 8BF	2	No	N/A	5
Ravernette Primary School	2 Legacurry Road, Lisburn	24	No	N/A	3
Riddell Memorial	Malvern Street, Belfast, BT13 1HW	3	No	N/A	0
School of Music	99 Donegall Pass, Belfast, BT7 1DR	10	No	N/A	7
Strabane/Liskey Road	4 Liskey Road, Strabane, BT82 8NW	1	No	N/A	143
Suffolk Primary School (Land Only)	Blacks Road, Belfast, BT11 9LT	12	No	N/A	0
Sunnylands - Land at	Hawthorne Avenue, Sunnylands, Carrickfergus, BT38 8ED	N/A	No	N/A	0
Toberlane Primary School	20 Toberlane Road, Cookstown, BT80 9QZ	17	No	N/A	0
Tullybane Primary School	Tullykittagha Road, Cloughmills	52	No	N/A	0

Name Of School	Address	Years Vacant	Open Market (Yes/No)	Year placed on open market	Maintenance Costs- 16/17 Onwards £000's
Tullygrawley Primary School	Dunminning, Tullygrawley/ Ballywatermoy Cross Junction, Ballymena	51	No	N/A	0
Upper Buckna Primary School	103 Carnalbanagh Road, Broughshane, BT42 4NT	35	No	N/A	0
Whiteabbey Manitenance Depot	9a Abbey Street, Newtownabbey, BT37 0AG	3	No	N/A	0
					772

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education (i) what additional support his Department is providing to school leaders to help them cope with the track and trace burden such high levels of COVID-19 related absences brings; (ii) why non-grammar pupil absenteeism is almost double the level seen in grammar schools and what does his Department intend to do to address this; and (iii) , in light of the uneven spread of infection rates, how his Department will allow for this when considering the cohort of young people facing exams this year.

(AQW 11865/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Public Health Agency has established a dedicated phone line to assist schools when there has been a positive (confirmed) test for coronavirus (COVID-19) in an educational setting. This phone line is available from 8am to 5pm, 7 days a week. The phone line will be staffed by specialist public health staff who will support schools through the risk assessment process and provide guidance on next steps when a case of Covid-19 is confirmed in the school.

In addition, the following support is also available to ALL schools:

- Education Authority dedicated telephone number for schools who require advice and support where a positive COVID-19 case is identified in a school.
- A dedicated Education Authority email address has been established
- All schools have a named cross-organisational Link Officer.
- Information and flowcharts are also available on the DE website, EA website and C2k exchange.

In regards to the issue of pupil attendance at school it is an on-going challenge, particularly in the context of Covid-19. The difference in attendance between grammar and non-grammar schools relates to the proportion of FSME pupils in the respective school sectors and this links in turn to the impact of poverty more generally. I am hopeful that the Expert Panel on educational underachievement will consider this issue alongside all of the other issues which impact on children's outcomes.

My Department has produced a range of documents to support schools in this regard. They include the "Miss School = Miss Out" Strategy which I published in 2016 <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/miss-school-miss-out-improving-pupil-attendance-strategy>;

the good practice report and case studies produced by ETI <https://www.etini.gov.uk/news/attendance-schools-eti-good-practice-report-and-case-studies>

and my Departments more recent case studies paper in 2018 <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/challenge-improving-pupil-attendance-school-case-studies-paper-november-2018>

In relation to exams, in my statement to the House on Tuesday 15 December2020, I set out a further package of comprehensive measures which I believe will ensure fair, inclusive and flexible public examinations in 2021, and which includes a significant reduction to the assessment burden for students to take account of the disruption experienced this year.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education why the old Cottown Primary School building is being left by the Education Authority to decay and be vandalised.

(AQW 12368/17-22)

Mr Weir: When an EA property becomes vacant, it may be put to alternative use, retained for a future educational use or disposed of in line with current guidance from Land and Property Services.

The former Cottown Primary School near Newtownards is being retained by the EA for potential use by CYPS for special education purposes. It is under consideration for additional special school provision. The initial consideration should be concluded by the end of March 2021.

In all cases, the EA endeavours to manage the expenditure on vacant properties by reducing all associated costs to a minimum while ensuring buildings are safe and secure. The EA has arranged for the building and site to be inspected and re-secured as necessary.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education on how many occasions (i) he; and (ii) his Department has been briefed about the rate of infection by the (a) Chief Medical Officer; and (b) Minister of Health.
(AQW 12374/17-22)

Mr Weir: I receive regular briefings on the rate of infection from both CMO and Minister Swann at Executive meetings and when required to inform policy changes, and have done since the outset of the pandemic and am fully aware of the NI position and that pertaining across the UK.

My officials meet weekly with Department of Health and Public Health Agency colleagues and receive updates on case numbers within schools and the overarching NI position. This includes briefings from CMO and CSA as and when required.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education to detail plans to introduce remote or recorded learning for pupils in Special Educational Needs environments.

(AQW 12376/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department issued, on 31 December 2020, a 'Contingency Framework for Vulnerable Children and Young People' for use when schools/education settings are directly impacted by COVID-19 restrictions.

Currently, all schools are operating at Level 2 of the Framework, meaning that schools and education settings are open for all vulnerable children and young people.

The Educational Continuity Direction published on 7 January 2021 gives legal effect to the operational arrangements in the education system and, while that remains in place, Special Schools (and Education Otherwise Than At School (EOTAS) Centres) are required to open for in-person provision of education.

Special Schools should ensure pupils who are not attending school, either on medical advice or due to parental choice, are supported and should liaise closely with parents and carers.

The Department is currently considering other options to support remote learning for children who attend Special Schools, whose parents have decided that it is in the child's best interest to remain at home.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Education to provide a copy of the advice provided to Boards of Governors regarding the cost to sanitise school premises following provision of the AQE or PPTC test.

(AQW 12378/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department, in conjunction with the Education Authority, will continue to monitor funding requirements as the pandemic progresses.

The Education Authority (EA) have not provided guidance or been asked for support for enhanced cleaning arrangements for any circumstances pertaining to the transfer test. The EA provide an enhanced cleaning service in the event of a positive COVID case.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Education to detail the COVID-19 tariff and criteria CCEA will be using for students sitting (i) GCSE; (ii) AS level; and (iii) A2 examinations in 2021.

(AQW 12381/17-22)

Mr Weir: Following my announcement on 6 January 2021 that CCEA's GCSE, AS and A level examinations are to be cancelled this year, work on a proposed COVID-19 tariff has ceased as it was to be applied to exam outcomes and is therefore no longer relevant.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children given a statement of Special Education Needs in each month for the past 5 years up to December 2020, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 12382/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) is unable to provide robust information on the number of completed statements by month over the last five years. Data in the table below shows the number of statements completed each month for the period April 2019 to December 2020 by each of the five EA area offices. It is not possible to provide information broken down by constituency, as it is not collected in that format.

Final Statements Issued by Month by Office

	Armagh	Ballymena	Belfast	Dundonald	Omagh	Total
2019						
Apr	28	22	29	53	19	151

	Armagh	Ballymena	Belfast	Dundonald	Omagh	Total
May	27	25	10	14	33	109
Jun	22	25	14	18	38	117
Jul	16	31	34	27	35	143
Aug	33	32	20	40	25	150
Sep	51	53	45	30	64	243
Oct	53	49	79	77	63	321
Nov	105	64	35	61	65	330
Dec	48	64	38	48	55	253
2020						
Jan	70	65	116	68	46	365
Feb	64	52	39	81	27	263
Mar	44	26	54	69	37	230
Apr	16	5	9	19	3	52
May	108	45	11	48	61	273
Jun	33	67	70	39	71	280
Jul	37	89	54	51	48	279
Aug	98	7	73	34	82	294
Sep	122	91	110	173	78	574
Oct	108	73	48	74	74	377
Nov	147	111	60	113	63	494
Dec	35	39	78	64	43	259
Grand Total	1265	1035	1026	1201	1030	5557

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education, further to his statement on 31 December 2020, whether post-primary transfer tests will go ahead as planned, be delayed or cancelled in schools in January 2021.

(AQW 12383/17-22)

Mr Weir: You will be aware the Post Primary Test Consortium announced that it has cancelled the GL assessment for this year. AQE Ltd also announced that it has cancelled its January tests and instead proposes to run a single test on 27 February subject to the public health advice which applies at that time.

There is no bar which would prevent primary schools from hosting the tests but this is a matter for individual schools.

My preference is for primary schools to host the transfer tests and indeed in 2016 I removed the instruction that had previously prevented this from happening. However, any move away from the current arrangements would require the consent of all primary schools and I cannot compel them to agree to this. However, I would urge the test providers, Principals and Boards of Governors to work together with parents and pupils to seek agreement on how this could be facilitated in future years.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education (i) whether he has any plans to facilitate post-primary transfer tests in the primary schools of children sitting the tests; and (ii) how he will support primary schools if this is an option.

(AQW 12384/17-22)

Mr Weir: You will be aware the Post Primary Test Consortium announced that it has cancelled the GL assessment for this year. AQE Ltd also announced that it has cancelled its January tests and instead proposes to run a single test on 27 February subject to the public health advice which applies at that time.

There is no bar which would prevent primary schools from hosting the tests but this is a matter for individual schools.

My preference is for primary schools to host the transfer tests and indeed in 2016 I removed the instruction that had previously prevented this from happening. However, any move away from the current arrangements would require the consent of all primary schools and I cannot compel them to agree to this. However, I would urge the test providers, Principals and Boards of Governors to work together with parents and pupils to seek agreement on how this could be facilitated in future years.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education whether special educational needs units within primary and post-primary schools will reopen from 4 January 2021.

(AQW 12387/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Assembly Statement to the Ad Hoc Committee on 6 January 2021, <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/news/statement-education-minister-ad-hoc-committee-1>, sets out clearly that all schools are to remain open to vulnerable children and young people, and children of key workers, for access to supervised learning.

The definition of Vulnerable Children and Young People includes, amongst others, all children with statements of Special Educational Needs.

Where there are Special Units attached to a school, these will not be open for normal teaching and learning, however, vulnerable or key worker children can still attend the school for supervised learning.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education (i) what measures he will take to ensure that online and remote learning will be carried out consistently across all schools; (ii) what resources will be put in place to enable schools to deliver the best remote learning offering possible, including the inclusion of live learning with a class teacher; and (iii) how the standard of online learning will be monitored.

(AQW 12431/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) What measures he will take to ensure that online and remote learning will be carried out consistently across all schools?

My Department has issued an Educational Continuity Direction, which makes it a legal requirement for all pre-school settings and schools to provide remote learning at the current time.

Alongside the Direction, on 4th January, my Department published further detailed guidance for schools on supporting remote learning. This sets out clear expectations, and provides additional advice and guidance to schools as they consider how to tailor and adapt delivery of the curriculum. Schools are required to have regard to this guidance, which will encourage a consistent approach to remote learning provision.

School leaders and Boards of Governors will wish to assure themselves that their remote education offer meets the expectations set out in the Department's Guidance by reviewing and self-assessing their remote education practice.

The EA, working with CCMS and a group of principals, has developed a Readiness for Continuity of Learning at Home Checklist to support schools in this process.

Practical advice and support on remote learning continues to be available to schools from their COVID-19 Link Officer and from both the Education and Training Inspectorate and Education Authority more generally. A wide range of guidance and support materials have been provided for schools.

- (ii) What resources will be put in place to enable schools to deliver the best remote learning offering possible, including the inclusion of live learning with a class teacher

Almost £7 million of funding has been provided to date to support remote learning this year. This has enabled my Department to make available up to 24,000 digital devices for learners and to continue to improve the online services available, including a number of additional learning applications and upgrading bandwidth.

My Department's scheme to provide IT devices and WIFI access to our educationally disadvantaged and vulnerable learners to support access to remote learning remains open. Further resources, guidance materials and case studies to support remote learning have also been produced by the Department's Continuity of Learning Project.

Information from COVID-19 Link Officers is being used to inform the development of additional resources. The Department will be working closely with ETI and other educational support bodies to identify additional support materials to be developed at pace over the coming days.

Schools may wish to consider implementing some live learning via a C2K supported digital platform, and I am aware that many schools are now doing this.

Scheduling one lesson a day or even one or two lessons a week at a regular time can be valuable and help to develop something of a routine for pupils. It also keeps a level of personal interaction and belonging to the school community, as well as allowing pupils direct access to high quality teaching.

There is, however, no compelling evidence to indicate that such synchronous learning is more effective at improving pupil outcomes than asynchronous approaches through for example pre-recorded lessons.

It is a matter for individual schools in conjunction with their staff to determine whether livestreaming represents an appropriate learning approach for their school community and to ensure that all child protection and safeguarding procedures are appropriately followed.

(ii) How the standard of online learning will be monitored.

My Department intends to survey schools to establish a baseline position around the provision of remote learning across the system, including the nature of remote learning provided, pupil engagement, planning and communication with parents.

My Department will monitor the implementation of remote learning through the school managing authorities. Where concerns or issues are identified or raised, including by schools themselves, the first priority for the Department, managing authorities and other education support bodies will be to help schools with their remote education plans and provision.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Education whether his Department intends to make a financial support package available for substitute teachers who will not have work during the period of school closures.

(AQW 12589/17-22)

Mr Weir: I have approved an income support scheme for substitute teachers, which will be similar to that provided in April to June 2020. Further information on the eligibility criteria and application process will be available in the coming days.

Department of Finance

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance whether the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme Part A and Part B will be automatically rolled out again to those businesses affected by the latest restrictions without having to reapply.

(AQW 12330/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): The Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme re-opened on 7 January.

Additional support payments will automatically be issued to successful applicants for the period that the restrictions apply up to Friday 5 February 2021.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Finance to detail, by constituency, (i) the number of applications received for the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme; (ii) how many were rejected; (iii) how many remain unpaid as at 30 December 2020; and (iv) the total amount paid.

(AQW 12388/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Land & Property Services are unable to give figures by Assembly constituency as all figures are recorded based on District Council Area.

Please see the table below which give the figures for the initial Scheme and for the next phase of the Scheme when restrictions were extended to all non-essential retail.

There are a small number of cases which have been processed which do not have the District Council data available, in these cases the application has been made entering an address manually (before this facility was withdrawn). These have been included in the table.

The figures provided are for 4th January 2021.

District Council	Received	Rejected	Unprocessed	Amount Paid
Antrim & Newtonabbey Borough Council	907	311	98	£3,248,800
Ards and North Down Borough Council	1291	384	123	£4,712,914
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council	1732	534	181	£5,712,000
Belfast City Council	3473	1145	354	£12,786,400
Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council	1847	529	160	£5,453,256
Derry City and Strabane District Council	1789	864	89	£5,714,576
Fermanagh and Omagh District Council	1366	510	105	£4,356,000
Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council	928	359	68	£2,968,000
Mid and East Antrim Borough Council	1203	396	90	£3,986,400
Mid Ulster District Council	1494	500	142	£4,892,000
Newry, Mourne and Down District Council	1661	515	198	£5,774,400
Council not known	354	248	23	£831,304

District Council	Received	Rejected	Unprocessed	Amount Paid
Total	18045	6295	1632	£60,436,050

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance to detail proposed locations for regional hubs to enable civil servants to work in offices near to where they live.

(AQW 12401/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Discussions on the locations of the hubs are continuing and a paper will be brought to the Executive shortly to agree. I will then update the Member and other Members.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance whether town centre locations have been considered as priority locations for regional hubs to enable civil servants to work in offices near to where they live.

(AQW 12402/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Please refer to the response provided to AQW 12401/17-22.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance whether collaboration with (i) local councils; and (ii) local business organisations is being explored concerning the establishment of regional hubs to enable civil servants to work in offices near to where they live.

(AQW 12403/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Please refer to the response provided to AQW 12401/17-22.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Finance (i) what measures are to be implemented from the 4 November 2020 meeting with representatives from the Association of Northern Ireland Travel Agents; and (ii) how this will cover all travel agents including privateers and independents.

(AQW 12452/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The First Minister, deputy First Minister and I had a useful meeting with the Association of Northern Ireland Travel Agents (ANITA) on 4 November where they outlined the impact of COVID-19 on the sector and the need for support. It was agreed that FM/dFM would identify and designate an appropriate Department to take forward the necessary work to examine the case for, and potentially design a scheme for the sector. This is currently under consideration by TEO.

It was also agreed that in parallel, ANITA would provide further information on the need for financial support, their specific ask of the Executive in that regard, and that my officials would advise them how this could be collated. Once that information was received, I wrote to FM/dFM on 7th December with that so that it could inform the work of the Department taking this forward once designated. The Department for the Economy is the lead Department on business support and in my view is best placed to take forward such a scheme.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Finance for his assessment of payment delays for the localised restriction support scheme.

(AQW 12465/17-22)

Mr Murphy: It will always be a challenge to introduce emergency grant support at speed while simultaneously ensuring that money is allocated for the intended purposes and to eligible recipients.

The principal challenge in the Covid 19 schemes handled by Land and Property Services (LPS), which is not easily surmountable, is the quality of data available for validating applications at speed. The rating system which has been used as a basis for this scheme is inherently a property centric database and as such does not contain a comprehensive record of all businesses.

The absence of a comprehensive database of active businesses (limited companies, partnerships and sole traders) has meant that in all grant schemes a significant volume of manual processing and validation of applications has been required.

The receipt of a high volume of applications supplying incorrect details and of duplicate applications has also hampered progress.

LPS has applied the lessons learned from the Small Business Support Grant (SBSG) scheme in the administration of the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS). Particularly in the design and build of the digital application processes and a back office portal for processing the collected data. The back office portal has continually been developed throughout the administration of the LRSS.

As of 13th January 2021 there were 14,906 applications for phase 1 and phase 2 of the LRSS and 951 remain outstanding. Applications continue to be received every day. The other outstanding cases are particularly complex and require extra validation. LPS is working hard to address these remaining cases. I would point out that some of these will be incorrect applications or duplicates and will not all result in a payment being made.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Finance, pursuant to AQW 9488/17-22, of the ten matters of disciplinary proceedings, how many members of staff are on (i) paid leave; and (ii) long-term sickness leave.

(AQW 12613/17-22)

Mr Murphy: There are no members of staff on paid leave. There is one member of staff on long term sick absence.

Department of Health

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister of Health what are the current waiting times for MRI scans which require anaesthetic for babies and young children referred from the Child Development Clinic at Antrim Hospital.

(AQW 4352/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Northern Health and Social Care Trust do not have a specific radiology referral source for the 'Child Development Clinic' (CDC) at Antrim hospital, therefore an automated extraction of accurate figures is not possible. A manual interrogation of files to provide this data would be disproportionately costly.

The Department can, however, provide the current waiting times for all babies and young children who require an MRI under anaesthetic at Antrim Hospital. These figures include patients who were referred from the Child Development Clinic. The waiting times for these patients are indicated in Table 1. It is important to note that this is not the length of time patients will wait to have their MRI, but rather displays the length of time on the waiting list as at 4th January 2021.

Table 1: Number of Patients Waiting for MRI Scans Which Require Anaesthetic for Babies and Young Children at Antrim Hospital at 4th January 2021

Number of Weeks Waiting	Number Waiting
0-6	6
>6-9	4
>9-13	0
>13-21	6
>21-26	8
>26-36	15
>36-52	15
>52-65	16
>65-78	12
>78	5
Total	87

Source: Northern Health and Social Care Trust

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Health when new advice and guidance for people previously advised to shield in order to protect themselves from COVID-19 will be published.

(AQW 8775/17-22)

Mr Swann: I recognise that this is a difficult and worrying time, particularly for those who have an underlying condition which means they are more clinically vulnerable to the impact of COVID-19.

As part of the approach to managing the current wave of the pandemic, from 26th December 2020, the Chief Medical Officer advises clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV) people who are working and are unable to do so from home not to attend the workplace. This is advice only and it is for clinically extremely vulnerable people to make their own judgements about whether or not they attend work, depending on the COVID-security of their working environment.

The Chief Medical Officer has issued a statement to this effect which can be accessed at:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/statement-changing-advice-clinically-extremely-vulnerable-people>

The Chief Medical Officer is writing to those who have been identified as clinically extremely vulnerable to advise them of this change. The letter from the Chief Medical Officer is evidence for an employer and it is not necessary for a person who is clinically extremely vulnerable to get a fit note from their GP. If there is a delay in receiving the new letter from the Chief Medical Officer, a CEV person can use their original 'shielding letter' as evidence that they are clinically extremely vulnerable in relation to COVID-19. Anyone who is clinically extremely vulnerable and who chooses not to attend work due to the Chief Medical Officer's updated advice will be eligible to apply for Statutory Sick Pay.

This advice was reiterated in a statement issued by my Department on 7 January 2021.

Advice for Clinically Extremely Vulnerable remains in place | Department of Health (<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/advice-clinically-extremely-vulnerable-remains-place>)

Information and guidance for those who are Clinically Extremely Vulnerable is available on NIDirect at: Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance for 'clinically extremely vulnerable' and 'vulnerable' people | (<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-clinically-extremely-vulnerable-and-vulnerable-people>)

It remains particularly important that those who are clinically extremely vulnerable continue to be especially careful because they remain more vulnerable than the general population. However, there is no return to shielding as it was previously. The wider advice for those who are clinically extremely vulnerable continues to be that they do not need to remain indoors and can go outside for exercise if they are able to do so, in line with restrictions and guidance that are in place and observing social distancing.

The duration of this advice will be dependent on many factors including the course of the spread of the virus, the capacity of the Health and Social Care system, and what restrictions are in place going forward.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health what percentage of contacts supplied to the Public Health Agency COVID-19 contact Tracing Service were unable to be reached, in each week since February 2020.
(AQW 8937/17-22)

Mr Swann: Weekly Management Information relating to the activity of the Contact Tracing Service is published by the Public Health Agency (PHA) and can be accessed at:

<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus/testing-and-tracing-covid-19/contact-tracing-service-management-information>.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of Serco's involvement in the testing system.
(AQW 9839/17-22)

Mr Swann: The National Testing Programme is managed by the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), London, working in partnership locally to implement the programme with the Public Health Authority and the Department of Health in Northern Ireland.

Serco are centrally contracted by DHSC to support delivery of Pillar 2 testing as part of the National Testing Programme. Testing capacity has increased significantly in Northern Ireland since the start of the pandemic.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the decrease in the trend in testing under Pillar 2 while the positivity rate of tests is increasing.
(AQW 10105/17-22)

Mr Swann: Testing across pillar 2 at the time of the question (26 November) reflected the relatively lower numbers of symptomatic people in the community at that time who are eligible for testing.

Demand for testing across Pillar 2 sites has since increased significantly in recent months, reflecting significantly higher rates of community transmission.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Health whether he plans to introduce a system of testing university students for returning to their home residences from their term-time addresses for the Christmas period.
(AQW 10214/17-22)

Mr Swann: A programme of asymptomatic testing using Lateral Flow Devices for students studying at Northern Ireland universities was implemented in the run up to Christmas.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health (i) what protocols exist around the use of do not resuscitate agreements; (ii) whether they can be withdrawn by the patient or members of the immediate family after being put in place; (iii) what monitoring processes exist to ascertain if hospitals are abiding by the protocols; and (iv) for his assessment of the adequacy of the arrangements in protecting vulnerable patients and ensuring they get best care.
(AQW 10872/17-22)

Mr Swann: Established clinical and professional guidance is available to support clinicians in decision-making and providing quality treatment and care for patients towards the end of life. This includes the General Medical Council's 'Treatment and care towards the end of life: good practice in decision making' which outlines key principles and models to underpin decision-making, including decisions relating to cardiopulmonary resuscitation and The British Medical Association, Resuscitation Council and the Royal College of Nursing guidance 'Decisions relating to Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation'. Policies to support decision-making in relation to CPR in place in Health and Social Care Trusts reflect the principles set out in this guidance. National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) Guidelines such as NG142 End of Life Care for Adults and NG31 Care of Dying Patients in the Last Days of Life also provide guidance for clinicians.

Decisions about cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) are best made as part of a holistic approach to advance care planning (ACP) which includes timely, honest and sensitive discussions with a person to identify their wishes, values, beliefs and preferences for their future care including, where they are content to discuss this, their wishes in relation to CPR in the event of a cardiac or respiratory arrest.

Advance care planning discussions or decisions can take place in any setting, including hospital and in the community, when the person has the mental capacity to make decisions, is medically stable and has had time to adjust to changes in their condition or outlook. ACP decisions will be activated whenever the person cannot be directly involved in decision-making about their treatment and care because of a lack of sufficient mental capacity or where they are unable to communicate what their wishes are.

Discussions and decisions relating to advance care planning should be revisited and reviewed over time to ensure they remain up to date and appropriate, for example when the person's condition changes. This can be initiated by the person and/or their health and social care professional. Any changes should be documented and shared with those involved in the person's care.

Where a person lacks mental capacity or is unable to communicate what their wishes are, the senior clinician with clinical responsibility for the patient, in conjunction with the clinical team, has responsibility for making best interest decisions about the patient's treatment and care, including deciding if cardiopulmonary resuscitation is in the patient's best interests. This should be based on their experience and understanding of the person's circumstances and also informed by advance care planning discussions about CPR with the person, where these are known. Those important to the person should also be included in discussions.

In Northern Ireland, there is no legal authority to allow anyone else to consent to treatment or care on behalf of an adult lacking mental capacity. Discussion with those important to the patient has the primary aim of seeking to clarify what would have been the patient's views prior to the onset of incapacity in order to guide clinicians in making best interest decisions. Where a patient lacks capacity, a decision not to attempt CPR should be explained to those important to them, unless this is contrary to confidentiality restrictions expressed by the patient when they had capacity.

The Mental Capacity Act (NI) 2016 when fully commenced, will provide a statutory framework for decision-making when a person lacks capacity and will cover all areas of care, treatment and personal welfare. It will include provision for Lasting Power of Attorney to allow a person to appoint others to make decisions on their behalf.

A decision not to attempt CPR can prevent the inappropriate, potentially harmful or futile intervention of cardiopulmonary resuscitation. Where a decision not to attempt cardiopulmonary resuscitation is made, this should be documented and placed in the patient's clinical notes. It is important to note that where a decision is made not to attempt CPR, this relates only to cardiopulmonary resuscitation - all other appropriate treatment and care for the person should continue. Furthermore, blanket decisions about CPR based solely on age, disability or a senior clinician's view of quality of life are discriminatory and unethical.

Arrangements for local monitoring may include for example, audits of random sample cases to ensure adherence to policies and guidance. Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland also participate in the National Audit of Care at the End of Life (NACEL) managed by the NHS Benchmarking Network. This is a comparative audit of the quality and outcomes of care experienced by the dying person and those important to them during the last admission leading to death in acute, community hospitals and mental health inpatient facilities in England, Wales and Northern Ireland with the overarching aim of improving the quality of care at the end of life.

Work is underway to develop a health-related advance care planning policy for adults in Northern Ireland. The development of the ACP policy is a key element of a wider public health approach to palliative care. The policy will support a regional approach to advance care planning, including Advance Decisions to Refuse Treatment and decisions around cardiopulmonary resuscitation, and will be underpinned with a suite of supporting documentation, comprehensive staff training and public messaging.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health how many of the successful applicants to the relaunched Health and Social Care Workforce Appeal have been offered posts in Northern Health and Social Care Trust.
(AQW 10894/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Northern Health and Social Care Trust has endeavoured to maximise workforce supply routes, particularly during the pandemic.

As at close of play Monday 11th January 2021 there have been 44 appointees to the Northern HSC Trust from the Winter 20/21 campaign of HSC Workforce Appeal. This includes 10 registered nurses, 31 nursing assistants and there are a further four candidates 'under offer'. Additionally, normal recruitment continues at a significant level through HSCJobs.com and the Trust continues to redeploy staff and offer additional shifts to help during the COVID-19 surge.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health to detail the whole full time equivalent of staff working within each (i) children and adolescent mental health team; (ii) addictions team; (iii) eating disorders team; and (iv) community mental health team, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust.
(AQW 10922/17-22)

Mr Swann: The information requested is not readily available and to break this down as requested could only be done at disproportionate cost.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health to detail the services that are provided by the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust relating to (i) mental health services, (ii) addiction services; and (iii) family support services, broken down by (a) location; and (b) catchment area for each team.

(AQW 11016/17-22)

Mr Swann: The information requested is not readily available.

In Mental Health Services alone services provided by the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust are extensive. There are general services including CAMHS, community, and inpatient, but also specialist services such as eating and personality disorder services, self-harm services, psychological therapies, acute day treatment crisis and unscheduled care teams, and care management teams. To break this down as requested could only be done at disproportionate cost.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health what plans his Department has to extend palliative care services to non-cancer terminal conditions.

(AQW 11872/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department's palliative and end of life care strategy for adults 'Living Matters:Dying Matters' was published in March 2010 with a vision that any person with an advanced, non-curative condition is supported to live well and die well, irrespective of their condition or care setting. A 5 year action plan supported the implementation of the Strategy.

The Palliative Care in Partnership programme, co-led by the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) and Public Health Agency (PHA), was established in 2016 to support the continued development of palliative and end of life care for adults in Northern Ireland living with any life-limiting condition.

The scope of the Palliative Care in Partnership programme includes any adult with palliative and end of life care needs, irrespective of their condition, as well as the needs of those important to them. This includes addressing individuals' physical, psychological, social and spiritual care, from identification of having palliative care needs through to bereavement.

One of the key principles of the Palliative Care in Partnership programme is that palliative care is not just for cancer and that the development of palliative care services should reflect this.

A key aim of the Palliative Care in Partnership programme is to provide regional direction so that everyone identified as likely to benefit from a palliative care approach, regardless of their condition:

- is allocated a palliative care keyworker
- has the opportunity to discuss and record their advance care planning decisions; and
- is supported with appropriate generalist and specialist palliative care services to be cared for in their preferred place (whenever it is safe and appropriate to do so).

A rolling action plan is in place to support the development and implementation of services for people who are living with palliative and end of life care needs and those important to them.

The Palliative Care in Partnership programme has been instrumental in leading the significant progress that has been made in palliative and end of life care in Northern Ireland over recent years and a range of initiatives have been developed to support better palliative care services. Key achievements include:

- extending education and training in palliative care across health and social care;
- the development and roll out, in partnership with Marie Curie, of its Rapid Response Service across all HSC Trust areas to provide out of hours support for people with palliative and end of life care needs in their own homes, helping to reduce avoidable attendance at Emergency Departments and admissions to hospital;
- working with General Practice to improve earlier identification of people with palliative care needs in primary care to support timely intervention and planning and co-ordination of treatment and care;
- a role description and competencies have been established for a palliative care keyworker to ensure that everyone identified as being in their possible last year of life has an allocated keyworker who is appropriately trained and that operational processes are in place for 24/7 contact/cover. The keyworker will typically be the District Nurse.
- scoping work has been undertaken to inform the availability and provision of out of hours specialist palliative care advice for health and social care professionals; and
- a review of the specialist palliative care work force has been undertaken.

In addition to the development of palliative and end of life care services, there is a growing recognition of the need for a public health approach to palliative care. My Department has been working closely with the HSCB, PHA and Palliative Care in Partnership programme as part of a wider engagement with stakeholders to develop an agreed definition and framework to support the implementation of a public health approach to palliative care in Northern Ireland.

Such an approach seeks to increase public awareness and understanding of palliative and end of life care; develop the role of communities in supporting people with palliative care needs; and encourage and promote advance care planning to help people plan ahead for their final years and ensure their wishes, feelings, beliefs and values are known. A key element of

the public health approach will be to continue to raise awareness and understanding of palliative care and change public perception about it, including the misconceptions that palliative care is only for people with cancer and only appropriate for the last weeks/days of life. Work is also being progressed to develop a health-related advance care planning policy for adults in Northern Ireland.

My Department will continue to work with the Palliative Care in Partnership programme to build on the progress that has been made to develop and improve palliative and end of life care services to support anyone with a life-limiting condition living with palliative and end of life care needs and those important to them and to engage with the wider community in promoting and implementing a public health approach to palliative care.

In terms of palliative care for children, my Department published a ten year Strategy for Children's Palliative and End of Life Care 2016-2026. This set the strategic direction for the palliative and end of life care for all ill and dying children and young people with life threatening or life limiting conditions, not just those suffering from cancer. It aims to enhance care and support available for these children and young people, as well as their families. It includes information, advice and support for parents on perinatal hospice and palliative care, in the case of a pre-birth diagnosis

Ms Rogan asked the Minister of Health to detail the percentage of care homes (i) with; and (ii) without, a named GP.
(AQW 11959/17-22)

Mr Swann: GP practices are responsible for the care of all their registered patients, including those living in care homes. Patients are registered with a practice rather than a specific GP and all patients, including those in care homes, are entitled to their choice of GP practice. No care homes therefore have a named GP.

In June 2020, I announced plans for the **Chief Nursing Officer to co-design a new framework in partnership with the care home sector for the provision of clinical care in care homes. This work will include examining how to expand nursing, medical and multi-disciplinary support, clinical leadership and specialist skills. This will include building on the important role of GPs in care homes. The aim of the project is to ensure** that care homes are supported to deliver care, with the right level of clinical in-reach available at the right time to ensure that people who live in care homes are supported to lead the best life possible.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health how many patients who have been admitted to intensive care or placed on a ventilator due to COVID-19 did not have a serious underlying health condition.
(AQW 12138/17-22)

Mr Swann: Data on the number of patients who have been admitted to intensive care or placed on a ventilator due to COVID-19 that did not have a serious underlying health condition is not centrally available.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health what percentage of patients admitted to intensive care or placed on a ventilator due to COVID-19 were aged over 75 years.
(AQW 12139/17-22)

Mr Swann: Data on the percentage of patients admitted to intensive care or placed on a ventilator due to COVID-19 were aged over 75 years is not centrally available.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health whether the drug pembrolizumab, also known as keytruda, can be obtained on the NHS in Northern Ireland.
(AQW 12161/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department has a formal link with NICE under which NICE Technology Appraisals are reviewed locally for their legal and policy applicability here, and where found to be applicable, they are endorsed for implementation within Health and Social Care. Where NICE has recommended pembrolizumab (Keytruda) for use, it is available for suitable patients in Northern Ireland.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 10623/17-22, when this information will be available in the future.
(AQW 12240/17-22)

Mr Swann: The information originally requested in AQW 10623/17-22 on the number of care home residents transferred to hospital due to a condition other than COVID-19 for each week since 13 October 2020 would require the manual collection of this data from the Patient Administration System (PAS) due to their being no category of admissions code which denotes admission from a care home. Due to this, the requested information will be unavailable for the foreseeable future.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health to detail the capital spend by project within each inpatient mental health setting, for each year since 2015.
(AQW 12265/17-22)

Mr Swann: The following table provides detail of the capital expenditure by project within each inpatient mental health setting since 2015.

Financial Year	Trust	Project	Expenditure £000
2019/20	Western	Rathview	2
	Western	Omagh Mental Health In-patient - Task & Finish	880
	Western	Grangewood Mental Health Crisis Unit	12
	Southern	CAH Bluestone - Supply and install of doors	116
	Belfast	BCH Mental Health Inpatient Unit (RRI)	2,855
	Northern	Holywell Hospital Mental Health Inpatient Wards	922
	Northern	Causeway Hospital Ross Thomson Unit MH Wards	368
	South Eastern	General Risk funding - Ulster Hospital ward 27, Lagan Valley Hospital Ward 12, Downshire Ward 27, Down Hospital Ward	80
	South Eastern	RQIA Environment Works – Ulster Hospital ward 27, Lagan Valley Hospital Ward 12, Downshire Ward 27	45
	South Eastern	Replacement Windows to all Wards – Lagan Valley Hospital Ward 12, Downshire Ward 27	40
	South Eastern	Ulster Hospital Ward 27 - Construction of a New External Garden to the Rear of the Ward	350
South Eastern	Downshire - Design fee for New 6 Bed PICU Centre	30	
2018/19	Western	Rathview	254
	Western	Grangewood Mental Health Crisis Unit	55
	Southern	CAH Bluestone - Supply and install air con units	15
	Belfast	BCH Mental Health Inpatient Unit (RRI)	10,763
	Belfast	Psychiatry Mater Hospital - Alarm System	23
	South Eastern	General Risk funding	80
	South Eastern	RQIA Environment Works – Ulster Hospital ward 27, LVH Ward 12, Downshire Ward 27	45
	South Eastern	New Panic / nurse call alarms to each ward – Ulster Hospital ward 27, Lagan Valley Hospital Ward 12, Downshire Ward 27, Down Hospital Ward	225
	South Eastern	Fire Risk Works – Ulster Hospital ward 27, Lagan Valley Hospital Ward 12, Downshire Ward 27	40
	South Eastern	Upgrade of Plant Room Care of the Elderly - Ulster Hospital Ward 27	35
2017/18	Western	Rathview	2,494
	Western	Grangewood Mental Health Crisis Unit	5
	Southern	CAH Bluestone - Supply and install air con units	15
	Belfast	BCH Mental Health Inpatient Unit (RRI)	15,077
	Belfast	Shannon Clinic Knockbracken Healthcare Park - Video Conferencing Equipment	8
	Belfast	Shannon Clinic Knockbracken Healthcare Park - Address ligature risk issues - bathrooms x 3	50
	Northern	Holywell Hospital Mental Health Inpatient Wards	178
	South Eastern	General Risk funding - Ulster Hospital ward 27, Lagan Valley Hospital Ward 12, Downshire Ward 27, Down Hospital Ward	80
	South Eastern	RQIA Environment Works – Ulster Hospital ward 27, Lagan Valley Hospital Ward 12, Downshire Ward 27	45

Financial Year	Trust	Project	Expenditure £000
	South Eastern	Replacement Windows to all Wards – Lagan Valley Hospital Ward 12, Downshire Ward 27	40
	South Eastern	Fire Risk Works – Ulster Hospital ward 27, Lagan Valley Hospital Ward 12, Downshire Ward 27	20
	South Eastern	Ventilation System - Lagan Valley Hospital Ward 12	57
	South Eastern	New Air Locks to Ward Entrances – Ulster Hospital ward 27, Lagan Valley Hospital Ward 12, Downshire Ward 27	36
2016/17	Western	Rathview	616
	Western	T&F Omagh - Ligature	57
	Belfast	BCH Mental Health Inpatient Unit (RRI)	7,081
	Belfast	Shannon Clinic Knockbracken Healthcare Park - Create a new therapeutic space	20
	Belfast	Shannon Clinic Knockbracken Healthcare Park - Upgrade of Alarm System	49
	Belfast	Psychiatry Mater Hospital - Smoke free project	25
	Belfast	Psychiatry Mater Hospital - Security Cameras	24
	Belfast	Clare Ward Knockbracken Healthcare Park - Replacement of taps with anti- ligature taps	21
	Northern	Holywell Hospital Mental Health Inpatient Wards	121
	Northern	Causeway Hospital Ross Thomson Unit MH Wards	30
	South Eastern	General Risk funding	80
	South Eastern	RQIA Environment Works – Ulster Hospital ward 27, Lagan Valley Hospital Ward 12, Downshire Ward 27	45
	South Eastern	New Air Locks to Ward Entrances – Ulster Hospital ward 27, Lagan Valley Hospital Ward 12, Downshire Ward 12	18
	South Eastern	Upgrades to Gardens and Fencing – Ulster Hospital ward 27, Lagan Valley Hospital Ward 12, Downshire Ward 27	250
2015/16	Western	Rathview	167
	Western	T & F Omagh - Ligature & Flooring etc	53
	Belfast	BCH Mental Health Inpatient Unit (RRI)	787
	Belfast	Shannon Clinic Knockbracken Healthcare Park - Two-Way Radio system	12
	Belfast	Shannon Clinic Knockbracken Healthcare Park - Refurb Reception Area	30
	Northern	Holywell Hospital Mental Health Inpatient Wards	15
	Northern	Causeway Hospital Ross Thomson Unit MH Wards	8
	South Eastern	General Risk funding	80
	South Eastern	RQIA Environment Works – Ulster Hospital ward 27, Lagan Valley Hospital Ward 12, Downshire Ward 27	45

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Health to detail the staff complement for the Public Health Agency by pay band, since 2015, broken down by (i) pay band; and (ii) full-time working equivalent.

(AQW 12350/17-22)

Mr Swann: The staff complement of the Public Health Agency from 2015 to date (with figures taken as at the end of March each year), broken down by (i) pay band and (ii) full time working equivalent, is as follows:

Pay Band	2015 (FTE)	2016 (FTE)	2017 (FTE)	2018 (FTE)	2019 (FTE)	2020 (FTE)	2020 (FTE)
2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
3	35.31	32.72	27.82	30.53	29.63	22.62	26.62
4	32.31	27.02	32.96	30.36	27.31	29.22	29.63
5	17.25	17.05	15.5	12.93	13.42	12.07	14.07
6	53.43	51.42	46.02	52.42	48.71	55.28	119.03
7	61.42	59.74	47.78	49.8	63.58	68.01	69.54
8A	28.2	30.2	31.33	33.93	40.18	37.11	36.65
8B	21	22	24	22	21	25.6	25
8C	15.5	14.5	11.5	12.5	13.5	14.5	16.5
8D	4.12	5.22	4.9	4.9	4.9	4.9	5
9	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Senior Exec	4	3	2	2	2	3	2
Med & Dent	36.4	33.5	33.4	33.7	30.6	30.1	37.75
Totals	309.94	297.37	278.21	286.07	295.83	303.41	382.79

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health when letters will be sent out to people who were previously told to shield, concerning their rights not to attend employment from 4 January 2021.

(AQW 12390/17-22)

Mr Swann: I recognise that this is a difficult and worrying time, particularly for those who have an underlying condition which means they are more clinically vulnerable to the impact of COVID-19.

As part of the approach to managing the current wave of the pandemic, from 26th December 2020, the Chief Medical Officer advises clinically extremely vulnerable people who are working and are unable to do so from home not to attend the workplace. This is advice only and clinically extremely vulnerable people are free to make their own judgements about whether or not they should attend work, depending on the COVID-security of their working environment.

The Chief Medical Officer has issued a statement to this effect which can be accessed at:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/statement-changing-advice-clinically-extremely-vulnerable-people>

The Chief Medical Officer is writing to those who have been identified as clinically extremely vulnerable to advise them of this change. The letter from the Chief Medical Officer is evidence for an employer and it is not necessary for a person who is clinically extremely vulnerable to get a fit note from their GP. If there is a delay in receiving the new letter from the Chief Medical Officer, a CEV person can use their original 'shielding letter' as evidence that they are clinically extremely vulnerable in relation to COVID-19. Anyone who is clinically extremely vulnerable and who chooses not to attend work due to the Chief Medical Officer's updated advice will be eligible to apply for Statutory Sick Pay.

This advice applies to clinically extremely vulnerable individuals only. Others living in a household with someone who is clinically extremely vulnerable are not advised to follow it, but should continue to stringently follow the guidance on social distancing, face coverings and hand hygiene.

The duration of this advice will be dependent on many factors including the course of the spread of the virus, the capacity of the Health and Social Care system, and what restrictions are in place going forward.

Department for Infrastructure

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will publish a telephone number that applicants to the Taxi Drivers Financial Assistance Scheme can ring for an update on the status of their application.

(AQW 12362/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): No plans were made to publish a telephone number for applicants to ring for an update on their application for this scheme. To ensure that all our resources were focused on processing the thousands of applications received as a matter of priority, queries about an application were directed to the dedicated mailbox for response

by a member of the team. However, provision of a contact number for the next scheme is currently being considered in advance of its launch.

Payments have now been made to over 4100 taxi drivers, with some 90% of eligible applications being processed for payment. The remaining applications unfortunately did not meet the criteria for the scheme and will be notified of this outcome this week.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the number of accessible parking bays in the Belfast City Council area under the remit of her Department, broken down by the current and the last four financial years; and (ii) how many of those have been temporarily out of use during 2020.

(AQW 12400/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My officials have confirmed that records on the number of accessible parking bays are not retained for individual years but rather consist of a rolling total. Currently there are 63 accessible bays within the controlled parking zone within Belfast City Council area all of which have been available for use in 2020.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure for a timescale for the installation of 20mph speed limit signage at Andrews Memorial Primary School, Comber.

(AQW 12425/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am delighted to have committed funding in this year's capital budget towards introduction of part-time 20 mph speed limits at around 100 schools across Northern Ireland. These measures will increase driver awareness and achieve reductions in vehicle speeds outside and near these schools ensuring that parents, children and staff will be safer as they go to and from the schools on a daily basis.

All 100 schools included in the part-time 20 mph programme for the current financial year have been informed, including Andrews Memorial Primary School in Comber, and the process to develop the enabling legislation has commenced. I can confirm that, in parallel with the statutory processes, my officials are working to deliver these schemes and it is hoped that they will be in place and operational within the next 3 months.

Department of Justice

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) the number of cases involved in the pilot to fast track serious sexual offence cases involving children under 13 years old; (ii) the outcome of the cases to date; and (iii) whether an evaluation report on the pilot will be published outlining its findings.

(AQW 12365/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): I am unable to provide the information requested as this is a judge-led protocol and outside the scope of my Department. Participating organisations are working together on a voluntary basis to expedite cases involving very young children in order to maximise the opportunity for them to provide their best evidence and minimise the stress and emotional impact of the criminal justice process. I am aware that the protocol has been successful in making a difference to the children and their families involved in these cases and in reducing the average time for such cases to complete. I can also confirm that participating organisations have agreed to extend the operation of the voluntary protocol for a further year.

I have agreed that my Department will coordinate the further development of the protocol (in line with recommendations in the Gillen Review into the law and procedures in serious sexual offences in relation to child victims) to ensure that the benefits gained to date can be extended and formalised in practice. This will be in tandem with the ongoing operation of the existing judge-led initiative.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Justice, in light of the Gillen Review's key recommendation 2, and the recent roll-out of technology to pre-record cross examination in all Crown Courts in England and Wales, to detail the timescales for running a pilot of this special measure in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 12366/17-22)

Mrs Long: As noted by Sir John Gillen in his Review of the Law and Procedures in Serious Sexual Offences in Northern Ireland, there are a number of issues relating to disclosure that must be resolved before consideration can be given to the recommendations in the review relating to pre-recorded cross examination.

Operational partners within PPS and PSNI have been working collaboratively since the publication of the Gillen Review to develop and implement a Disclosure Improvement Plan. Implementation of this plan has progressed well and as such, this will allow us to focus on developing special measures relating to pre-recorded cross examination in the coming months.

Department for the Economy

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department has provided any funding for research into problem gambling over the last five years.

(AQW 1411/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): My Department has not provided any funding for research into problem gambling.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister for the Economy to outline what steps her Department has taken, and is currently undertaking, to implement the Rural Needs Act 2016.

(AQW 1808/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: This is not within my Department's remit.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy what progress has been made toward becoming a living wage employer as outlined in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 2800/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: This is not within my Department's remit.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy whether she intends to mirror changes in employment legislation in the rest of the UK, in response to COVID-19, to allow for the payment of Statutory Sick Pay from the first day of illness.

(AQW 3141/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: This is not within my Department's remit.

The legislation underpinning statutory sick pay is not regarded as employment legislation but as social security legislation and is therefore within the remit of Department for Communities.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will re-tool other viral research labs for COVID-19.

(AQW 3567/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: This is not within my Department's remit.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy whether she agrees that all research and development information relating to COVID-19 should be made available for public use.

(AQW 3779/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: This is not within my Department's remit.

Mr Catney asked the Minister for the Economy to detail her plans to review the register of company information to address fraud and money laundering, as highlighted by the FinCEN files.

(AQW 7302/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: This is not within the remit of my Department.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy to detail what venues and on which occasions live music is permitted.

(AQW 7783/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: This is not within my Department's remit.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the number of times she has appeared before her Statutory Committee since the restoration of devolution.

(AQW 8108/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Since the restoration of devolution, and up until the date of this question, I have appeared before the Economy Committee a total of 6 times.

I also hold weekly telephone conversations with the Chair of the Economy Committee.

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister for the Economy when AQW 6936/17-22 will be answered.

(AQW 9477/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: AQW 6936 was answered on 11/11/2020.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) a list of local councils currently running outdoor markets; and (ii) the process by which this was arranged.

(AQW 9491/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: This is not within my Department's remit.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for the Economy what assessment has been made about the number of firms based on the UK mainland who are considering withdrawing from the Northern Ireland market due to barriers to trade that are expected to be created from 1 January 2021.

(AQW 9829/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Work published previously by my Department has emphasised that the long term outcome for Northern Ireland will depend greatly on our trading relationship with Great Britain and the implementation of the Protocol.

As there is much detail to be finalised on this, not least a decision on what constitutes an 'at risk' good moving from GB to NI, it is not possible at this time to provide a definitive assessment or quantify the impact on GB firms trading into NI.

What is clear to me is that GB is our most important market, a major supplier of goods to NI businesses and consumers and any impact on them, including businesses in NI which operate UK wide, must be avoided.

I am pushing the UK Government hard to ensure any impacts are foreseen and mitigated. I expect the UK Government to honour its commitments to maintaining Northern Ireland's place as an integral part of the UK Internal Market. This means ensuring unfettered access for NI goods to the market in Great Britain, but also taking action to prevent regulatory and customs barriers to trade from GB to NI.

I am also encouraging all businesses to take steps now to prepare for the end of the transition period, including signing up to the new UK Government Trader Support Scheme. InvestNI and InterTradeIreland are also providing a range of support services, and I encourage businesses to avail of these measures.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for the Economy (i) for an update on the due diligence process being carried out in relation to Project Stratum; and (ii) whether she is in a position to sign off on the tendering process.

(AQW 9841/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) An Open Procurement process using the Restricted Procedure was adopted for Project Stratum, which was robustly managed by Construction and Procurement Delivery, a division within the Department of Finance. The project team secured additional expertise through the Strategic Investment Board and engaged with external independent technical and financial advisors throughout the process, with key milestones approved by the Project Board. The necessary knowledge, skills and experience were available throughout this robust procurement process including during the evaluation of tenders. The entire process underpinned by Building Digital UK's State aid Assurance role, utilising established ITT and contractual templates that have formed the basis for multiple UK-wide telecommunications procurement projects.

The robust corporate governance processes and internal approvals procedures that are in place to ensure the efficient delivery of this major project include:

- A Full Business Case (FBC) that has been developed to support the investment decision for Project Stratum;
- The FBC and wider project management procedures that were considered under a Gateway 3 Review;
- Building Digital UK engagement that has quality assured the value for money proposition presented by the preferred bidder;
- The DfE Departmental Casework Committee Review that considered and approved the FBC; and
- Engagement with the Project Advisory Panel in advance of approval of the FBC by the Project Board.

- (ii) 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.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for the Economy what discussions her Department has had with UK counterparts regarding the setting up of a Life Sciences-Charity Partnership Fund.

(AQW 10488/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department has not had any discussion with its UK counterparts about setting up such a fund. This is not within my Department's remit.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy (i) what plans she has to introduce a £500 payment to workers forced to self-isolate for 14 days, similar to the Council-operated scheme in England; and (ii) for her assessment of whether such a scheme would have a positive effect on the number of workers failing to adhere to the rules of their 14-day self-isolation by instead going to work to earn money.

(AQW 10755/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department for Communities has already introduced a non-repayable Discretionary Support Self-Isolation 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.

The financial assistance this grant provides has helped around 15,000 people throughout this pandemic to a value of £2.1m. Unlike the scheme operated in England, these payments are not taxable, are not linked to enforcement, are not time limited to 14 days and include a specific amount for all dependent children in the household. This means, in fact, payments here can exceed £500 according to individual and family circumstances.

Further details can be found at <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/extra-financial-support#toc-2>

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy, given that, compared to English and Welsh postgraduate students, Northern Irish postgraduate students have access to only 50 per cent of the tuition loans, and have no access to living support loans, while paying the same fees, whether her Department plans to address this inequality and review the current postgraduate loan system.

(AQW 10861/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I can confirm that I do intend to examine this issue.

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 the 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 shortly. 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.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy to detail her plans to provide COVID-19 financial support to (i) the newly self-employed; (ii) company directors; and (iii) others that have not yet received such support.

(AQW 10952/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I am pleased to announce the Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme (NSESS) launched 3 December 2020 and will provide £10 million in financial support to newly self-employed individuals (sole traders and those in partnerships) whose business is adversely impacted by Covid and who have not been able to access support from the UK government's Self-Employed Income Support Scheme.

A one-off taxable grant of £3,500 will be provided. This will enable support to be provided to approximately 2,900 newly self-employed individuals.

Further eligibility details and an eligibility tracker are available at this website:

<https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/newly-self-employed-support-scheme>

The NSESS will close for applications at 6pm 7 January 2020

Additionally, the Executive has agreed a funding allocation of £20million to support sole limited company directors who have been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic but were not eligible for the UK Government's Self Employed Income Support Scheme.

My Department continues to work on bringing forward further details of this scheme as a matter of a priority and these will be made available on the NI Business Info website in due course.

I am committed to continue to work with my Executive colleagues to identify further means of support for as many local businesses as possible during this difficult time.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy whether businesses who classed themselves as essential retail and remained open from 27 November would still be eligible for the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme for those affected by the COVID-19 restrictions in place.

(AQW 11251/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: This is not within my Department's remit.

The Localised Restrictions Support Scheme is a scheme administered by the Department of Finance.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy for (i) an update on the progress and terms of reference of the High Street Taskforce and Future City Centre Programme; (ii) its composition; and (iii) the timetable for its work.

(AQW 11460/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: This is not within my Department's remit.

Mr Stewart asked the Minister for the Economy how many times she has attended a meeting of the Committee for the Economy since 11 January 2020, broken down by (i) in person; and (ii) remotely.

(AQW 11483/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As a Member of the Committee, the Member will know that since 11th January, I have appeared before the Committee for the Economy a total of 6 times. Of these 5 have been in person, and 1 has been remotely. I also speak to the Chair of the Committee on a regular basis.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for the Economy whether she intends to bring forward legislation to safeguard the rights of consumers by regulating the issuance of giftcards.

(AQW 11520/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I have no plans at this time to bring forward legislation to regulate the issuance of gift cards.

A small proportion of gift vouchers and cards are already regulated, and consumers purchasing these benefit from greater protection than when purchasing gift cards issued by individual retailers or service providers. These are "open loop" electronic cards, which can be used in a wide range of retailers. These gift cards and vouchers are subject to the Electronic Money Regulations 2011, which implement a European Directive, and require the issuer to safeguard all funds received in exchange for the electronic card issued.

To introduce further statutory protection of gift cards would require complex consideration. Gift cards are frequently purchased as gifts and in this circumstance it is likely that the purchaser would benefit from any protection, rather than the gift card recipient.

Consumers who purchase gift cards exceeding £100 can currently seek redress on retailer insolvency by pursuing a refund from their credit card provider, who is jointly liable under section 75 of the Consumer Credit Act 1974. Alternatively, if the gift card value is below £100, consumers may be able to make a claim under chargeback rules of certain credit or debit card providers.

Concerned consumers can seek free advice on gift card and voucher purchases from my Department's Trading Standards Service consumer helpline on 0300 123 62 62 or by email to: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/services/contact-consumerline-make-complaint-or-ask-advice>

It is generally good advice for consumers to spend any gift vouchers received as soon as possible.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy (i) how households and home-workers will be informed of interruptions to their internet supply during local work on the Fibrus broadband scheme; (ii) how much notice they will be given of the interruption; and (iii) whether they will be given an estimate of how long they will be without an internet supply for.

(AQW 11631/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: There is no expectation of interruptions to consumers existing broadband connections during the build phase of Project Stratum. The Fibrus network is a new broadband installation and will not impact households and homeworkers broadband from their current Internet Service Provider. Any interruption would only take place when a consumer decides to switch supplier. It is recommended that consumers keep their existing broadband connection live until any new connection is installed, tested and signed off, to ensure there is no service interruption.

A Portal has been developed by Fibrus Networks to provide key information throughout the development phase of the project, which is being accelerated across a period of some 40 months. This can be accessed at www.hyperfastni.com and will enable citizens and businesses to confirm if/when their premises are included for upgrade. The website will be updated and expanded in the weeks ahead.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for the Economy whether rules concerning wedding receptions from 11 December 2020 shall revert to previous rules, whereby table sizes must be no more than ten persons, not including children aged 12 or under, with the top table having no limit placed on persons who may be seated.

(AQW 11750/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: This is not within my Department's remit.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will make further assistance available to support local businesses going online.

(AQW 11828/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Following the announcement on the 23rd of November of an additional £3M of funding approved by the NI Executive to help businesses grow online sales, I have asked Invest NI to deliver a scheme similar to the recent Digital Selling Capability Grant call to help more retail businesses including sole traders. Invest NI is working through the options and developing the business case. Further details of the scheme, levels of support and specifics on the businesses the support is aimed at will be publicised when finalised. Pending business case approval, it is hoped the funding call will launch before the end of January 2021.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will allocate further hardship funding to student teachers given that St Mary's Teaching College has already drawn down its full hardship allocation.

(AQW 11936/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Hardship Funds are allocated to our Higher Education Institutions on request, in advance of need. St Mary's have confirmed to my Department that they are holding a balance of these funds and have not spent their full allocation. My Department will consider any bids for additional hardship funding from the Institutions, should they be required.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for the Economy (i) for her assessment of the disparities between student hardship funds being drawn down across universities, given that each university is operating within her Department's Higher Education Support Funds 2020/21; and (ii) whether she will engage with institutions regarding the relaxation of evidential requirements for student hardship allocations.

(AQW 11937/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- i Hardship funds are allocated by my Department to the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) on the basis of student numbers, and drawn down by them on request. HEIs are free to draw down hardship funds from the Department as needed, resulting in different amounts of funding drawn down by each HEI.
- ii. My Department does not set the evidential requirements for hardship payments to students. Institutions are asked to ensure that the need for a payment is in each case properly supported by evidence of a gap between income and expenditure, but it is a matter for each institution as to what evidence they accept.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for the Economy (i) how many applications have been received for Part A of the Covid-19 Restrictions Business Support Scheme; and (ii) how many of those applications have been paid.

(AQW 11946/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Information in relation to the number of businesses that that have applied to the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme and received payment can be accessed online via the following webpages

Part A: <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/covid-restrictions-businesssupport-scheme-part>

Part B: <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/covid-restrictions-businesssupport-scheme-part-b>

Here you can find information about the operation of the scheme to date. Based upon applications received this details applications by status (draft/submitted/processed/rejected/paid), and provides a facility to interrogate by District Council area and Parliamentary Constituency.

This data will be updated on a weekly basis.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for the Economy to detail how much it costs per litre to transport liquid petroleum gas in a lorry across the Irish Sea.

(AQW 11991/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) market in Northern Ireland is not regulated, and the information requested is not held by the Department.

Mr Wells asked the Minister for the Economy what proportion of the renewable energy generated in each of the last 5 years was not used.

(AQW 11999/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As a general principle, energy is not generated if it cannot be used. This includes the energy generated in each of the last 5 years, which was generally all used, with the main exception being the losses that occur naturally on the electricity networks as a consequence of transporting electricity along wires from the point of generation to supply.

It should be noted that the system operator manages the system to ensure that supply meets demand and that the system remains stable and secure at all times. This can result in instructions to all forms of generation, including renewable generation, to adjust their output to deliver the needs of the system and keep the supply secure.

If you require any further detail I would direct you to the SONI website where the Transmission System Operator publishes a range of system data. Their library of publications can be found here: <http://www.soni.ltd.uk/library/>

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 11307/17-22, to detail the reasons for the different lower and maximum loan amounts for Northern Irish students living away from home, compared to those for the other regions of the UK.

(AQW 12012/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The difference in maintenance loan amounts for HE students across the UK is a direct result of the devolution of Higher Education. Each country has differing policy priorities around Higher Education and differing budgetary constraints, and it is therefore inevitable that student financial support amounts and terms and conditions will vary in each jurisdiction.

The level of maintenance loans available to NI domiciles have been maintained at the same level since academic year 2009/10. Changes to the level of support were considered for the 2014/15 academic year by Minister Farry. However, it was considered that the freezing of maintenance support was an integral part of the funding package approved by the Executive which provided for lower tuition fees for NI students at local universities in the context of fees rising to £9k in England.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of collective bargaining rights for workers in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 12050/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As I have stated previously, I am fully aware of the important role which collective bargaining plays in the workplace.

In terms of the current framework, I would encourage employers and recognised trade unions to develop, insofar as possible, a close working relationship to assist in the identification of their common interests, objectives and, as a result, the collective bargaining process as a whole.

In the immediate term, my focus, and that of my Department, is on Northern Ireland's economic recovery as it continues to be affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and I have, therefore, no immediate plans to amend current legislation relating to trade unions, collective bargaining or sectorial bargaining operating in Northern Ireland.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the post codes in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area that will be included in Project Stratum.

(AQW 12110/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Project Stratum will deliver gigabit-capable broadband infrastructure to more than 76,000 primarily rural premises across Northern Ireland. Of these, 3,545 premises are in the Derry City & Strabane District Council area.

The postcodes containing those premises have not been published. Information on the deployment plan has been published by Fibrus Networks on its Project Stratum dedicated website at www.hyperfastni.com. An on-line postcode/address checker that will enable citizens and businesses to confirm if/when their premises are included for upgrade will be added to the website by early January 2021. Fibrus Networks will continue to update and expand the website in the weeks ahead.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has considered implementing any changes to sectoral collective bargaining arrangements.

(AQW 12126/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As I have stated previously, I am fully aware of the important role which collective bargaining plays in the workplace.

In terms of the current framework, I would encourage employers and recognised trade unions to develop, insofar as possible, a close working relationship to assist in the identification of their common interests, objectives and, as a result, the collective bargaining process as a whole.

In the immediate term, my focus, and that of my Department, is on Northern Ireland's economic recovery as it continues to be affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and I have, therefore, no immediate plans to amend current legislation relating to trade unions, collective bargaining or sectorial bargaining operating in Northern Ireland.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has any plans to introduce day one rights for workers.

(AQW 12127/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Most workers irrespective of employment status, are entitled to certain employment rights subject to qualifying periods and conditions. There are a number of 'day one' rights which apply to a wide group of workers, including those in relation to:

- National Minimum Wage;
- protection against unlawful discrimination for reasons including maternity, parental and paternity leave;
- assertion of rights under Working Time Regulations; and
- protection against being treated unfairly if they work part time.

Some statutory employment rights such as protection against unfair dismissal (for reasons other than those specifically listed in legislation) are available only to employees.

Anyone who believes their employment rights have been breached may have a right to complain to an Industrial Tribunal.

As a first step, they should contact the Labour Relations Agency to discuss their situation in detail and to receive free, confidential and impartial information. The LRA can be contacted at its Enquiry Point on 03300 555 300.

I have no immediate plans to review qualifying periods or conditions for employment rights at this time.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy to detail her plans to increase the rights for workers who are facing redundancy.

(AQW 12130/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I would refer the member to the reply I gave to AQO 892/17-22.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will re-open applications under the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme in light of the delays in adjudicating on Localised Restrictions Grant applications.

(AQW 12185/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I am pleased to advise that the CRBSS reopened to support affected businesses on 7 January.

The CRBSS will maintain the previous payment structure and payments will be issued automatically to previously successful applicants.

The scheme will also open for businesses that have now fallen within scope of the restrictions, and which were not previously eligible to apply. For businesses which were previously eligible but did not apply, they may now apply and, if successful, will receive backdated payments for the full period which restrictions applied to the business.

This continuing support to businesses in Northern Ireland, alongside the unprecedented national schemes provided by the UK Government, will put us in the best position to rebuild a stronger economy throughout 2021.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the rationale for providing greater financial incentives under the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation to smaller wind turbines that were less cost effective.

(AQW 12188/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation is technology neutral and provides support for a range of renewable technologies and sizes. This is consistent with the rest of the United Kingdom, where support for small-scale onshore wind is provided through the Renewables Obligations and the Feed-in-Tariff.

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 was scrutinised by the Enterprise, Trade & Investment Committee and the associated legislation was debated and approved by the Assembly.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy how many cases of employment law breaches have occurred from 2015 to 2020.

(AQW 12199/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The table below sets out the total number of cases registered in the Industrial Tribunals and Fair Employment Tribunal from 2015 to 2020. One claim may contain several employment breaches: the total number of jurisdictions contained within the claims registered is set out in the second row of the table:

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Claims registered	3051	3921	13159	19794	27636
Jurisdictions registered	7615	8635	26582	40538	54781
Claims allowed by a Tribunal	657	739	830	629	*
Claims dismissed by a Tribunal	898	604	525	844	*
Conciliated via Labour Relations Agency	2731	2532	1689	2363	*
Settled between the parties	1051	402	268	821	*
Withdrawn	2816	1489	2194	2584	*

*Figures not available due to lockdown and remote working

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the average cost associated with taking an employment case to a tribunal for a worker.

(AQW 12201/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Whilst my Department does not routinely gather this information we do from time to time establish estimated average Tribunal costs. The most recent estimate was established as part of an impact assessment for the introduction of Early Conciliation in January 2020. At that time my Department determined and attributed an estimated average Tribunal cost of approximately £1600 per claimant.

However care should be taken with this figure due to potentially wide variation in the individual or personal cost for workers, depending upon the circumstances in relation to any particular Tribunal claim. These variations include the complexity of any given case and whether a case is taken on an individual or collective basis. Further variations include whether a worker self-represents or has representation costs covered by a Trade Union or insurance policy.

It is hoped that the introduction of Early Conciliation will help to eliminate or alleviate this cost. Early Conciliation allows workers and employers alike to avoid the financial cost of pursuing workplace disputes through Employment Tribunal proceedings. It also provides an opportunity for workers and employers to explore and resolve workplace issues with the help of the Labour Relations Agency and in doing so helps to maintain or promote a more positive working relationship.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy how many individual cases of breaching the national minimum wage have occurred in the period from 2015 to 2020.

(AQW 12202/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The National Minimum Wage (NMW) is a reserved matter, with policy responsibility resting with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS).

Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) is responsible for implementation of the NMW across the UK as a whole. The member should contact HMRC directly for this information.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy what plans have been made to ensure that Invest NI does not have its budget negatively impacted by the loss of European Structural and Investment funding.

(AQW 12207/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: EU funding will continue to support Invest NI programmes until December 2023. However, Invest NI has identified a budget gap from 2021/22 to support new business for Innovation and R&D projects as the EU funding supporting this activity has been fully utilised. My department submitted bids in January monitoring to provide certainty of funding for Invest NI budgets in 2021/22 and to allow time to negotiate a more sustainable future settlement.

The UK Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) is being developed by the UK Government to replace EU Structural & Investment funds. Full replacement spending power, with local control over spending, is essential to ensuring that the SPF meets longer term local needs, including those of Invest NI.

Details of the SPF to date are limited and the timescales are of concern. I am liaising closely with the Minister of Finance, Economy Committee and Executive colleagues to ensure that any budget gap between EU Structural Funds and the SPF is closed and I will continue to work to ensure that we receive full replacement funding to meet Northern Ireland's priorities and to support our economic recovery.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy what actions are being taken to extend additional employment rights, in the form of paid leave, to victims of domestic abuse and violence.

(AQW 12253/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: There is a growing recognition among employers of the need to provide better support for employees who are victims of domestic abuse and violence and I would agree that this should be the case.

In relation to the issue of paid leave from work for those facing such traumatic circumstances, I am aware that some progressive and compassionate employers have already implemented such provisions. Unfortunately, though, this is not universal and there will likely be gaps in provision as not all employers will be able or, possibly, willing to meet these needs.

I am presently awaiting the outcome of the recent GB review into support in the workplace for survivors of domestic abuse. As part of the review process, officials at the Department for the Economy facilitated a roundtable discussion between Northern Ireland stakeholders and Government officials from the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy.

I am committed to exploring this issue further and have absolute compassion and empathy for anyone who finds themselves in this distressing position. This important issue will form part of my department's thinking for achieving a fit for purpose employment law framework in NI in the longer term.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy what actions are being taken to extend additional employment rights, in the form of paid leave, to carers.

(AQW 12254/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: It is my long term aim to build on existing Northern Ireland employment law with measures that will introduce better support for working families. Leave for those in work who also undertake a caring role will be considered as part of this strategic process.

I am keen that we start to make progress in developing longer term proposals for the Employment Law framework in NI as soon as practicable, but I am cognisant of the many pressures being faced by my department in our response to COVID-19. That said, I am interested in hearing the views of all interested stakeholders and would encourage you to participate in any relevant forthcoming consultations, when published.

My current priority remains to protect and rebuild our Economy following the devastating impact of COVID-19.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy what plans she has to reform the flexible working regulations to ensure (i) that it is available to all workers as a day one right; and (ii) that the right is extended to ensure that all workers have a right to flexible working.

(AQW 12256/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I appreciate the many benefits that flexible working can bring to both employers and employees alike. I also recognise the challenges that many businesses face in attempting to balance the needs of employees and the provision of suitable flexible working arrangements with the needs of the business. These challenges have been magnified greatly by the impact of COVID-19.

Whilst I recognise that there has been a call for the widening of the scope for requesting flexible working, including making it a day one right, I have no immediate plans to change flexible working provisions.

It is important to note that the existing right for employees to request flexible working, once in any 12 month period and following a 26 week qualifying period, is the statutory minimum right and many employers find it both in their business interests and the interests of their staff to go beyond this.

It is my long term aim to build on existing Northern Ireland employment law with measures that will introduce better support for workers and working families. Flexible working will be considered as part of this strategic process.

My current priority remains to protect and rebuild our Economy following the devastating impact of COVID-19.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for the Economy, following the announcement of the southern Government signing the Toledo Declaration, to detail how she will assist the growth of social enterprises as potential key drivers of inclusive and sustainable COVID-19 economic recovery in Derry and across the north.

(AQW 12259/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Social enterprises will play an important role as potential key drivers of inclusive and sustainable COVID-19 economic recovery throughout Northern Ireland.

My Department leads on social economy policy and chairs the Social Economy Policy Group (SEPG), which includes departments, agencies and local government. SEPG's focus is to consider how departmental policies / programmes support sector growth across Northern Ireland and to contribute to the development of an integrated strategic approach to the social economy. For example, in response to COVID 19, the Department for Communities has launched their Social Enterprise Fund to support social enterprises whose ability to trade has been impacted in recent months and more recently on 14 December

2020 the Department of Finance announced that the Dormant Accounts Fund which is open to Community and Voluntary organisations and Social Enterprises, would open in January 2021.

My Department also currently funds Social Enterprise NI (SENI) to represent the collective interests of the social economy sector in delivering a Social Economy Work Programme, which seeks to identify and implement a programme of initiatives to enable the continued growth of a sustainable social economy sector across Northern Ireland.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister for the Economy (i) what date the Business, Planning and Financial Support Programme for tourism businesses opened for applications; (ii) what date the first payment was made; (iii) how many applications were received from the East Derry constituency up to and including Wednesday 16 December; (iv) how many payments were made by this date; and (v) to detail the total amount paid.

(AQW 12263/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

The Tourism NI Covid Business and Financial Planning Support Programme 2020-2021, was launched on 6th October 2020 and opened for applications from tourism businesses on 7th October 2020. Full details of the scheme including nature of support and eligibility are published on Tourism NI's dedicated industry website: <https://covid19.tourismni.com/support-centre/business-support-advice/financial-support/covid-tourism-recovery-planning-support-programme/>

- (i) [//covid19.tourismni.com/support-centre/business-support-advice/financial-support/covid-tourism-recovery-planning-support-programme/](https://covid19.tourismni.com/support-centre/business-support-advice/financial-support/covid-tourism-recovery-planning-support-programme/)
- (ii) The programme is designed to work directly with eligible tourism providers to develop business and financial plans to help their businesses to recover and compete as we emerge from the impact of the current pandemic. The programme does not provide direct financial payments to businesses, but is delivered as part of a managed service framework which Tourism NI has in place to provide support and mentoring to the tourism industry. Applicants to the programme will be able to draw down support from experts on the framework to support them with the development of their business and financial plans.

- (iii) The programme received seven successful applications from the East Londonderry constituency.
- (iv) As detailed in the answer to point (ii), no payments will be made directly to businesses through this programme.
- (v) No direct payments to businesses will be made from this programme. Applications for business and financial planning support are currently being assessed and as such, the individual cost of support to individual businesses has not yet been determined. However, the programme allows for support to individual businesses up to a maximum cost of £8k per business.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will commit to a regular meeting schedule with NUS-USI in 2021 to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on higher education students.

(AQW 12274/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Given the overlap between the above questions, I have decided to answer them both in a single response.

Both I and my officials remain open to meeting with NUS-USI and other representatives of students on an ad hoc basis, as major issues arise. However, my already demanding diary commitments prevent me from agreeing to a regular meeting schedule.

I have no doubt that correspondence on issues of student concern will continue to be forthcoming from student representatives, and I therefore look forward to receiving these valuable insights in due course.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy how often she will meet NUS-USI and other student representatives to discuss the outworkings of COVID-19 regulations.

(AQW 12275/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Given the overlap between the above questions, I have decided to answer them both in a single response.

Both I and my officials remain open to meeting with NUS-USI and other representatives of students on an ad hoc basis, as major issues arise. However, my already demanding diary commitments prevent me from agreeing to a regular meeting schedule.

I have no doubt that correspondence on issues of student concern will continue to be forthcoming from student representatives, and I therefore look forward to receiving these valuable insights in due course.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the sports in (i) Queen's University Belfast; and (ii) Ulster University which have a development officer employed by the university or currently being recruited; and the cost of the same over the past 3 years.

(AQW 12304/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Higher education institutions are autonomous bodies, and are responsible for their own recruitment processes.

The Department does not therefore hold the information requested. You may wish to contact the universities directly to seek this information.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will expand the support available for hospitality and catering apprenticeships for those over the age of 25.

(AQW 12315/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As part of my Department's response to COVID-19 I have been giving ongoing consideration to removing age-related funding criteria on the ApprenticeshipsNI programme.

I recognise that removal of this criteria would improve access to apprenticeships, thus providing reskilling opportunities and pathways to employment and life-long learning for all. However, 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.

It is also imperative that any changes relating to the introduction of all-age apprenticeships are carefully considered and monitored to help ensure that proposals will lead to additional apprenticeship opportunities rather than displacing young people.

I do, however believe that consideration of age related eligibility requirements is critical and will have a key role to play in improving skills, supporting employment, and economic recovery. I have therefore instructed my officials 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, subject of course to funding considerations. Higher Level Apprenticeships, including funding, are already available for applicants of all ages who meet the qualifying criteria.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will allow late applications to the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme for businesses that had applied for the Localised Restrictions Scheme, but were notified of their ineligibility for the latter scheme after 16 December 2020.

(AQW 12340/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme re-opened for applications on 7 January 2021.

For any new applications which are successful, grant payments will be backdated for the period that the restrictions applied to each business.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy when the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme will reopen for applications.

(AQW 12343/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme re-opened for applications on 7 January 2021.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the timescale for re-opening applications for financial assistance under the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme Part A and Part B.

(AQW 12359/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Covid Restrictions business Support Scheme reopened for applications on 7 January 2021.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the plans for teaching and training within further education colleges from 4 January 2021.

(AQW 12386/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: On 17 December 2020, the Northern Ireland (NI) Executive announced a six week lockdown, to come into operation on 26 December 2020. During this period colleges must deliver distance learning to the maximum extent possible. Only essential face-to-face learning should take place when it is a necessary and unavoidable part of the course. Learners and staff will be permitted on-site to undertake assessments and examinations. This position will be kept under review in line with NI Executive decisions.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy what plans have been put in place to communicate the practical implications of the Trade and Co-operation Agreement between the EU and the UK and its interactions with the protocol, with businesses and other stakeholders.

(AQW 12396/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My officials have been analysing the Trade and Co-operation Agreement (TCA) to determine the interaction between it and the Protocol, particularly with a view to alleviating frictions to trade from GB. Engagement with stakeholders has identified that urgent clarity is still required on the interaction between 'at risk' and rules of origin and on what actions companies that do not qualify for the UK Trader Scheme need to take. Clarity is also needed regarding online deliveries and parcels from GB after 31st March 2021.

These are significant challenges for businesses and consumers. I continue to engage with stakeholders and to press the UK Government to urgently provide clarity and guidance on these areas of concern.

My Department, Invest NI and InterTradeIreland continue to offer practical support for business on dealing with the new trading environment arising from the TCA and Protocol. This builds on the work they have been undertaking for the past year to prepare business for the Protocol and the risk of a non-negotiated outcome. Guidance is being refocused to reflect the TCA but many of the key messages, such as those around data transfer and engaging with the Trader Support Service, remain the same.

It remains important that businesses continue to plan, strengthen their supply chains and consider the steps required to ensure they can continue to trade within the UK, with the EU or the rest of the world. I will continue working to ensure NI businesses are represented and well positioned to seize the market access opportunities ahead.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy what contingency planning has been undertaken by her Department and Invest NI in relation to the risk of EU funding not being replaced to the same level.

(AQW 12397/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Invest NI has identified a budget gap from 2021/22 to support new business for Innovation, and Research and Development (R&D) projects as EU funding supporting this activity will be fully utilised by 31 March 2021. My Department submitted bids in January monitoring which, if approved, would provide a mechanism to defer the remaining EU budget for Innovation and R&D into 2021/22. This would provide some certainty of funding for Invest NI budgets in 2021/22 and to allow time to negotiate a more sustainable future settlement. Other EU funding will continue to support Invest NI programmes until December 2023.

Invest NI is working closely with businesses and continues to support them to set-up, to expand and to attract new investors into Northern Ireland. Invest NI is very much open for business and welcomes approaches from businesses seeking support.

The UK Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) is being developed by the UK Government to replace EU Structural & Investment funds. Full replacement spending power, with local control over spending, is essential to ensuring that the SPF meets longer term local needs, including those of Invest NI. Details of the SPF to date are limited and the timescales are of concern, with further details awaited from the "UK-wide investment framework" due to be published in the Spring.

I am liaising closely with the Minister of Finance, Economy Committee and Executive colleagues to ensure that any budget gap between EU Structural Funds and the SPF is closed and I will continue to work to ensure that we receive full replacement funding to meet Northern Ireland's priorities and to support our economic recovery.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy (i) for a breakdown of the funding for the apprenticeship programmes; (ii) what proportion of this is EU funding; and (iii) how long the EU funding will be in place.
(AQW 12399/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department supports the ApprenticeshipsNI and Higher Level Apprenticeships programmes at a total annual cost of approximately £21m and £5m respectively.

These programmes are currently part funded by the EU under Priority 3 of the 2014-2020 Northern Ireland European Social Fund Programme with support of 40% (€65m) for eligible expenditure available up to 31 December 2023.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister for the Economy what action (i) is being taken; and (ii) can be taken in incidents reported where large workplaces are not complying with COVID-19 restrictions and safety guidance.
(AQW 12441/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

i) When HSENI receive information indicating that any workplace which they have enforcement responsibility for are not complying with COVID-19 restrictions and safety guidance, inspectors carry out enquiries to identify any shortcomings and where necessary require the business to take appropriate remedial actions.

ii) In the majority of cases compliance has been achieved however, where a business continues to fail to implement appropriate COVID-19 control measures, HSENI inspectors may serve an improvement notice (under the Health and Safety at Work (Northern Ireland) Order 1978) requiring the business to implement the required measures. Failure to comply with an improvement notice may result in a further investigation which may result in a file being submitted to the Public Prosecution Service for consideration. Again given the current demands and available resources HSENI's activity has been focussed at assisting and ensuring employers achieve compliance.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for the Economy when the £200 High Street Stimulus Voucher Scheme will begin.
(AQW 12485/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department for the Economy had been provided with a financial allocation of £95 million by the NI Executive for a new High Street Stimulus Scheme.

The focus of this scheme is to provide much needed economic stimulation for our local high streets, and across many of the sectors that have been most impacted by this pandemic, in particular, through the restrictions that have been deemed necessary by the Executive, as a consequence of the ongoing public health crisis.

Unfortunately, due to the recent rise in the number of cases of Coronavirus, and the subsequent restrictions which have been deemed necessary by the Executive, it has been decided that it would not be appropriate to implement the High Street Stimulus Scheme in the current financial year, ending 31 March 2021.

This is due to the fact that its primary policy intent is about encouraging people to visit and spend in our local towns and cities throughout Northern Ireland. In addition to the fact that much of the retail and hospitality sector remains closed, any implementation in the immediate future would be contrary to the current Coronavirus Health Regulations and the latest information and advice from the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Adviser.

The Department for the Economy intends to put forward a bid to the Executive for this scheme in 2021/22.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for the Economy what steps she is taking to support and help students that are unable to meet full rent costs and are trapped in accommodation contracts.
(AQW 12504/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: While my Department is responsible for higher education policy in relation to teaching and research in Northern Ireland, as autonomous institutions, universities are ultimately responsible for their own policies in relation to student accommodation. This includes setting the cost and also ensuring there are robust protocols in place to minimise the spread of Covid 19. My Department has no role or legal basis to intervene regarding student accommodation, whether that is for university-managed Halls of Residence or private rental.

However, any students experiencing financial hardship should first of all ensure that they have applied online at www.studentfinancenir.co.uk for all the financial assistance to which they may be entitled. My Department delivers financial support to eligible Northern Ireland students through Student Finance NI, and by the end of November 2020 had provided £84m

in maintenance loans and a further £37m in maintenance grants as a contribution towards students' living costs during the academic year, including the cost of accommodation

Students who continue to find themselves in genuine financial hardship should contact their University to see if they are eligible for a hardship payment. These payments are funded through my Department and managed on my behalf by the universities, and in the 2020/21 financial year I have doubled the total amount of funding available for them from £2.8m to £5.6m in recognition of the economic conditions caused by the pandemic.

Revised Written Answers

This section contains the revised written answers to questions tabled by Members.

The content of the responses is as received at the time from the relevant Minister or representative of the Assembly Commission, and it has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process or changed.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 1 January 2021

Revised Written Answer

Department for Communities

In this Bound Volume, page WA 274, replace the answer given for AQW 1018/17-22 with:

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Communities, given the increase in domestic violence, what resources her Department is allocating to meet the increased demand for Women's Aid services and refuges.

(AQO 1018/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister for Communities):

- The Department of Justice have confirmed an increase in calls to the domestic violence helpline in recent times. The Housing Executive have advised they have also seen a similar increase in demand for Women's Aid services. During the period 1 April to 30 September 2020, there was an increase in people presenting as homeless as a result of domestic violence during same period of the previous year up from 620 to 668, with 594 acceptances, up from 589.
- The Housing Executive, through the Supporting People Programme, fund 134 units in 13 Women's Aid Refuges for women at risk of domestic violence at a cost of just under £2.6 million per year. Through the programme they also provide an additional 1173 units of floating support at a cost of just over £1.8 million.
- Belfast & Lisburn WA (BLWA) – Ulsterville Ave operates as an 'emergency crash pad' which is utilised for 24 hours before women and their families are moved on to more suitable accommodation. During the COVID-19 lockdown period, the BLWA emergency crash pad remained open for referrals and its length of stay was increased to 48 hours.
- 'Crash Pads' are now in operation in Belfast, Ballymena and Foyle operated by each corresponding Women's Aid Organisation.
- In response to COVID-19 cost pressures faced by Supporting People service providers, additional funding of £10m was secured from the Executive. A total of £32k has been issued to date to providers funded to provide services to the women at risk of domestic violence client group and is based on estimated spend until May 2020. Actual expenditure (April to July 2020) will be paid following an agreed process.
- £400k has been allocated to Foyle Women's Aid as a contribution to the development of the Family Justice Centre – One Safe Place, to be located at Bishop Street, Derry, with the aim to provide a wraparound support service to victims of domestic violence.
- The Department of Health has provided Women's Aid with an additional £60,000 to provide an initial care package for families who have experienced, or been a victim of, domestic abuse. This package provided food parcels, home based resources and games for families, including laptops and mobile phones.
- A full range of work is ongoing, in partnership with our statutory and voluntary partners, to help raise awareness of the support services available and to ensure the provision of practical measures for victims during this challenging period. Areas of support include the 24 hour Domestic and Sexual Abuse Helpline, funded by Government and run by Nexus: 0808 802 1414, advice and practical help such as accommodation and free travel for those needing to leave their homes.

Journal of Proceedings

Minutes of Proceedings

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 14 December 2020

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Matter of the Day

Outcome of EU Trade Talks

Dr Caoimhe Archibald, under Standing Order 24, made a statement on the Outcome of EU Trade Talks.

3. Public Petition

3.1 Lucy's Law for Northern Ireland

Ms Rachel Woods was granted leave, in accordance with Standing Order 22, to present a Public Petition relating to Lucy's Law for Northern Ireland.

4. Assembly Business

4.1 Motion: Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Ms Cara Hunter replace Mr Colin McGrath as a member of the Committee for Health.

Mrs Dolores Kelly

Mr Colin McGrath

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

4.2 First Stage: Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill (NIA Bill 13/17-22)

Mr Robbie Butler, on behalf of the Assembly Commission, introduced a Bill to amend the Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 to make provision about the name, functions and membership of the Independent Financial Review Panel and for connected purposes.

The Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill (NIA Bill 13/17-22) passed First Stage and was ordered to be printed.

5. Executive Committee Business

5.1 Statement: North/South Ministerial Council Health and Food Safety Sectoral Meeting

The Minister of Health, Mr Robin Swann, made a statement regarding the recent North/South Ministerial Council Health and Food Safety Sectoral Meeting, following which he replied to questions.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr McGlone, took the Chair.

5.2 Statement: Dormant Accounts Fund Strategic Plan

The Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy, made a statement regarding the Dormant Accounts Fund Strategic Plan, following which he replied to questions.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

5.3 Motion: The draft Alien and Locally Absent Species (Aquaculture) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Proposed:

That the draft Alien and Locally Absent Species (Aquaculture) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

The Executive Office

Debate ensued.

The debate stood suspended for Question Time.

The Speaker took the Chair.

6. Question Time

6.1 The Executive Office

Questions were put to, and answered by, the First Minister, the Rt Hon Arlene Foster. The junior Minister, Mr Gordon Lyons, also answered a number of questions.

6.2 Finance

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy.

7. Assembly Business (cont'd)

7.1 Motion: Extension of Sitting on Monday 14 December 2020 under Standing Order 10(3A)

Proposed:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 14 December 2020 be extended to no later than 11.00pm.

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 Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

8. Executive Committee Business (cont'd)

8.1 Motion: The draft Alien and Locally Absent Species (Aquaculture) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (cont'd)

Debate resumed.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried** (Division).

The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, took the Chair.

8.2 Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 17) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020**Proposed:**

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 17) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Minister of Health

Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 18) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020**Proposed:**

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 18) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Minister of Health

A single debate ensued on both motions.

The Question being put, the motion on the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 17) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 was **carried**.

The Question being put, the motion on the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 18) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 was **carried**.

8.3 Motion: The Maximum Number of Judges Order (Northern Ireland) 2020**Proposed:**

That the Maximum Number of Judges Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 be affirmed.

Minister of Justice

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

8.4 Motion: The Draft Carriage of Explosives (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020**Proposed:**

That the draft Carriage of Explosives (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Minister of Justice

Debate ensued.

The Speaker took the Chair.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

8.5 Consideration Stage: The Harbours (Grants and Loans Limit) Bill (NIA Bill 12/17-22)

Minister for Infrastructure

The Minister for Infrastructure, Ms Nichola Mallon, moved the Consideration Stage of the Harbours (Grants and Loans Limit) Bill.

No amendments were tabled to the Bill.

Clauses

The question being put, it was agreed without division that Clauses 1 to 3 stand part of the Bill.

Long Title

The question being put, the Long Title was agreed without division.

The Harbours (Grants and Loans Limit) Bill (NIA Bill12/17-22) stood referred to the Speaker.

9. Committee Business

9.1 **Motion: Extension of Committee Stage: Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill (NIA Bill 11/17-22)**

Proposed:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 11 June 2021, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill (NIA Bill 11/17-22).

Chairperson, Committee for Justice

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

10. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 6.31pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

14 December 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

14 December 2020

Division

Motion: The draft Alien and Locally Absent Species (Aquaculture) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Proposed:

That the draft Alien and Locally Absent Species (Aquaculture) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

The Executive Office

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 74

Noes: 11

AYES

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Ms Brogan, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Clarke, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Mrs Dodds, Ms Dolan, Mr Dunne, Mr Durkan, Mr Easton, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gildernew, Mr Givan, Ms Hargey, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Ms Hunter, Mr Irwin, Mr Kearney, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyons, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Miss McIlveen, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Middleton, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Mr Newton, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Harvey, Mr McGuigan.

NOES

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

Tellers for the Noes: Mrs Barton, Mr Wells.

The motion was **carried**.

The following Members' votes were cast by their notified proxy in this division:

Mr Lyttle voted for Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Mrs Long and Mr Muir.

Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr Buckley, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Storey and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Beggs, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, and Mr Stewart.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Brogan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan and Ms Sheerin.

Mr O'Toole voted for Ms Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Mallon, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin and Mr McNulty.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 9 December 2020 to 14 December 2020

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly

2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly

Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill (NIA Bill 13/17-22)

3. Orders in Council

4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly

Child Maintenance Service Annual Report on Decision Making 2019-2020 (Department for Communities)

Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute 2019-20 Annual Report and Accounts (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

Report on the Second Independent Review of the PIP Assessment Process (Department for Communities)

Strategic Action Plan for Dormant Accounts Fund NI (Department of Finance)

Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report April 2019-March 2020 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

5. Assembly Reports

Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees Sixteenth Report of Session 2020 – 2021 (NIA 66/17-22) (Examiner of Statutory Rules)

6. Statutory Rules

SR 2020/310 The Addition of Vitamins, Minerals and Other Substances (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/318 The Pension Protection Fund (State Aid) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Communities)

SR 2020/319 The Seed Marketing and Fertilisers (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

SR 2020/323 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 19) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/322 The Seed Marketing (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

SR 2020/320 The Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Suspension of Liability for Wrongful Trading) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for the Economy)

SR 2020/321 The Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Amendment of Certain Relevant Periods) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for the Economy)

SR 2020/324 The Agriculture, Animals and Aquaculture, Health ID, Welfare Trade etc.) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

SR 2020/325 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Public Health Advice for Persons Travelling to Northern Ireland) (No.2) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/326 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 25) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/327 The Plant Health and Diseases of Animals (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

SR 2020/328 The Horses (Free Access to Competitions) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

For information only

SR 2020/309 The Special Educational Needs and Disability (2016 Act) (Commencement No. 2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Education)

SR 2020/311 The Parking and Waiting Restrictions (Donaghmore) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2020/312 The Parking Places on Roads and Waiting Restrictions (Cookstown) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2020/313 The Parking Places on Roads and Waiting Restrictions (Newry) (Amendment No. 2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2020/314 The Waiting Restrictions (Lisburn) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2020/315 The Parking Places on Roads (Coaches) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2020/316 The Parking and Waiting Restrictions (Londonderry) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)

Explanatory Memorandum for SR 2020/261 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Travel from Denmark) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

Explanatory Memorandum for SR 2020/323 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 19) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

COVID-19 Charities Fund (Minister for Communities)

Additional Support for Vulnerable People (Minister for Communities)

Neurology Independent Inquiry and Terms of Reference (Minister of Health)

Changes to the Blood Donor Deferral Rules for Men who have Sex with Men (MSM) (Minister of Health)

COVID Temporary Time Limited Financial Support for Belfast International Airport and Belfast City Airport (Minister of Finance)

8. Consultation Documents

Consultation on the Introduction of a Statutory Opt-out System for Organ Donation (Department of Health)

9. Departmental Publications

Domestic Homicide Reviews Commencement Order (Department of Justice)

10. Agency Publications

11. Westminster Publications

12. Miscellaneous Publications

Amendment of numbering of Reports of the Examiner of Statutory Rules (Examiner of Statutory Rules)

Proxy Voting Notices – Monday 14 December 2020

The following Members notified the Speaker, under Standing Order 112, that they wished to avail of proxy voting arrangements for the sitting on Monday 14 December 2020:

Andy Allen	Dolores Kelly
Martina Anderson	Gerry Kelly
Caoimhe Archibald	Liz Kimmins
Kellie Armstrong	Naomi Long
Rosemary Barton	Gordon Lyons
Roy Beggs	Séan Lynch
John Blair	Nichola Mallon
Cathal Boylan	Declan McAleer
Paula Bradley	Fra McCann
Sinead Bradley	Daniel McCrossan
Paula Bradshaw	Patsy McGlone
Nicola Brogan	Colin McGrath
Jonathan Buckley	Philip McGuigan
Pat Catney	Maolíosa McHugh
Alan Chambers	Sinead McLaughlin
Stewart Dickson	Justin McNulty
Linda Dillon	Andrew Muir
Diane Dodds	Karen Mullan
Jemma Dolan	Conor Murphy
Gordon Dunne	Mike Nesbitt
Mark Durkan	Robin Newton
Alex Easton	Carál Ní Chuilín
Sinéad Ennis	Michelle O'Neill
Arlene Foster	Edwin Poots
Órlaithí Flynn	George Robinson
Colm Gildernew	Emma Rogan
Paul Givan	Pat Sheehan
Deirdre Hargey	Emma Sheerin
Harry Harvey	Christopher Stalford
David Hilditch	John Stewart
Cara Hunter	Mervyn Storey
William Irwin	Robin Swann
Declan Kearney	Peter Weir

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 15 December 2020

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Assembly Business

The Speaker advised the Assembly that as the Business Committee was not meeting that afternoon there would be no lunchtime suspension and that business would continue until 2.00 pm, when it would be interrupted for Question Time.

3. Public Petition

3.1 Provision of Free Period Products in all Schools

Mr Chris Lyttle was granted leave, in accordance with Standing Order 22, to present a Public Petition relating to the Provision of Free Period Products in all Schools.

4. Executive Committee Business

4.1 Statement: North/South Ministerial Council Tourism Sectoral Meeting

The Minister for the Economy, Mrs Diane Dodds, made a statement regarding the recent North/South Ministerial Council Tourism Sectoral Meeting, following which she replied to questions.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

4.2 Statement: North/South Ministerial Trade and Business Development Sectoral Meeting

The Minister for the Economy, Mrs Diane Dodds, made a statement regarding the recent North/South Ministerial Council Trade and Business Development Sectoral Meeting, following which she replied to questions.

The sitting was suspended at 11.36am.

The sitting resumed at 11.45am.

4.3 Statement: Summer 2021 Examinations Contingency Arrangements

The Minister of Education, Mr Peter Weir, made a statement regarding the Summer 2021 Examinations Contingency Arrangements, following which he replied to questions.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, took the Chair.

4.4 Statement: Terms of Reference for the Independent Review of Education

The Minister of Education, Mr Peter Weir, made a statement regarding the Terms of Reference for the Independent Review of Education, following which he replied to questions.

The Speaker took the Chair.

4.5 Further Consideration Stage: The Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill (NIA Bill 03/17-22)

The Minister of Justice, Mrs Naomi Long, moved the Further Consideration Stage of the Executive Committee (Functions) Bill.

Seventeen amendments were tabled to the Bill and selected for debate.

Debate ensued.

The sitting was suspended at 1.51pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, in the Chair.

5. Question Time

5.1 Health

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Health, Mr Robin Swann.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr McGlone, took the Chair.

5.2 Infrastructure

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Infrastructure, Ms Nichola Mallon.

The Speaker took the Chair.

6. Executive Committee Business (cont'd)

6.1 Further Consideration Stage: The Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill (NIA Bill 03/17-22) (cont'd)

Debate resumed.

The sitting was suspended at 6.36pm.

The sitting resumed at 6.50pm.

Clauses

After debate, Amendment 1 inserting new clause 'Information-sharing with schools etc' was **made** without division and it was agreed that the new clause stand part of the Bill.

After debate, Amendment 2 to Clause 26 was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 4, as an amendment to Amendment 3, was **negatived** on division (Division 1).

After debate, Amendment 5, as an amendment to Amendment 3, was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 6, as an amendment to Amendment 3, was **negatived** on division (Division 2).

After debate, Amendment 3, as amended, to Clause 27, was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 7 inserting new clause 'Proposals as to the availability of civil legal' was **made** without division and it was agreed that the new clause stand part of the Bill.

After debate, Amendment 8 to Clause 28 was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 9 to Clause 29 was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 10 to Clause 30 was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 11 to Clause 31 was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 12 to Clause 32 was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 13 to Clause 38 was **negatived** on division (Division 3).

After debate, Amendment 14 to Clause 38 was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 15 to Clause 38 was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 16 to Clause 39 was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 17 to the Long Title was **made** without division.

Bill NIA Bill 03/17-22 stood referred to the Speaker in accordance with Section 10 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, took the Chair.

7. Committee Business

Proposed: Committee for the Executive Office Report on the evidence received from local councils on the impact of the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union

That this Assembly notes the evidence from local councils to the Committee for the Executive Office in its Report on the evidence received from local councils on the impact of the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union (NIA 58/17-22); and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to urge the UK Government to provide clarity on the implementation of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland to allow local councils to prepare for the post-transition period.

Chairperson, Committee for the Executive Office

Debate ensued

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

8. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 10.42pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

15 December 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

15 December 2020

Division 1

Further Consideration Stage: Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill (NIA Bill 03/17-22) – Amendment 4

Proposed:

As an Amendment to Amendment 3

Clause 27(1), in inserted text (1A), after ‘funding of’ insert ‘advice and assistance or’

Miss Rachel Woods

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 25

Noes: 56

AYES

Ms Bailey, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Carroll, Mr Clarke, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Newton, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Carroll, Miss Woods.

NOES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Ms Brogan, Mr Butler, Mr Catney, Mr Chambers, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O’Dowd, Mrs O’Neill, Mr O’Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Mr Stewart, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms Armstrong, Ms Bradshaw.

The Amendment was **negatived**.

The following Members’ votes were cast by their notified proxy in this division:

Mr Lyttle voted for Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn and Mr Muir.

Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Newton, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford and Mr Storey.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Beggs, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

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

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

Northern Ireland Assembly

15 December 2020

Division 2

Further Consideration Stage: Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill (NIA Bill 03/17-22) – Amendment 6

Proposed:

As an Amendment to Amendment 3

Clause 27(1), in inserted text (1A), leave out (a) and (b) and insert-

‘the Director is satisfied that—

(a) the client is or appears to be the victim of abusive behaviour perpetrated or apparently perpetrated by another party to the proceedings, and

(b) the other party to the proceedings is someone to whom the client is personally connected.’

Miss Rachel Woods

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 25

Noes: 56

AYES

Ms Bailey, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Carroll, Mr Clarke, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Newton, Mr Robinson, Mr Stafford, Mr Storey, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Carroll, Miss Woods.

NOES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Ms Brogan, Mr Butler, Mr Catney, Mr Chambers, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O’Dowd, Mrs O’Neill, Mr O’Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Mr Stewart, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms Armstrong, Ms Bradshaw.

The Amendment was **negatived**.

The following Members’ votes were cast by their notified proxy in this division:

Mr Lyttle voted for Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn and Mr Muir.

Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Newton, Mr Robinson, Mr Stafford and Mr Storey.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Beggs, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

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

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

Northern Ireland Assembly

15 December 2020

Division 3

Further Consideration Stage: Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill (NIA Bill 03/17-22) – Amendment 13

Proposed:

Clause 38, Page 32, Line 27

At end insert -

'(1ZA) Section 27 comes into operation at the end of the period of 12 months beginning with the day on which this Act receives Royal Assent.'

Chair, Committee for Justice

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 25

Noes: 44

AYES

Ms Bailey, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Carroll, Mr Clarke, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Newton, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Frew, Mr Givan.

NOES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms Bradshaw, Ms Brogan, Mr Butler, Mr Chambers, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Mr Stewart, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms Armstrong, Ms Bradshaw.

The following Members voted in both Lobbies and are therefore not counted in the result:

Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Mr O'Toole.

The Amendment was **negatived**.

The following Members' votes were cast by their notified proxy in this division:

Mr Lyttle voted for Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn and Mr Muir.

Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Newton, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford and Mr Storey.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Beggs, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Brogan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan and Ms Sheerin.

Mr O'Toole voted for Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin and Mr McNulty.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 15 December 2020

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly Legislation:

Stages in Consideration of Public Bills

First Stage: Introduction of Bill.

Second Stage: General debate of the Bill with an opportunity for Members to vote on its general principles.

Committee Stage (Comm. Stage): Detailed investigation by a Committee which concludes with the publication of a report for consideration by the Assembly.

Consideration Stage (CS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, the details of the Bill including amendments proposed to the Bill.

Further Consideration Stage (FCS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, further amendments to the Bill.

Final Stage: Passing or rejecting of Bill by the Assembly, without further amendment.

Royal Assent.

Proceedings as 15 December 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		17/11/20	15/12/20		
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	19/11/20				

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	25/11/20
The Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 10/17-22)	19/10/20	03/11/20	15/05/21					
The Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill (NIA Bill 11/17-22)	03/11/20	16/11/20	11/06/21					
The Harbours (Grants and Loans Limit) Bill (NIA Bill 12/17-22)	23/11/20	01/12/20	/	/	14/12/20			

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	11/11/20	24/11/20			
Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill (NIA Bill 13/17-22)	14/12/20							

/ Bills progressing by accelerated passage

Proxy Voting Notices – Tuesday 15 December 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 15 December 2020:

Andy Allen	Dolores Kelly
Martina Anderson	Gerry Kelly
Caoimhe Archibald	Liz Kimmins
Kellie Armstrong	Naomi Long
Rosemary Barton	Trevor Lunn*
Roy Beggs	Gordon Lyons
John Blair	Séan Lynch
Cathal Boylan	Nichola Mallon
Paula Bradley	Declan McAleer
Sinead Bradley	Fra McCann
Paula Bradshaw	Daniel McCrossan
Nicola Brogan	Patsy McGlone
Thomas Buchanan	Colin McGrath
Jonathan Buckley	Philip McGuigan
Pat Catney	Maolíosa McHugh
Alan Chambers	Sinead McLaughlin
Stewart Dickson	Justin McNulty
Linda Dillon	Andrew Muir
Diane Dodds	Karen Mullan
Jemma Dolan	Conor Murphy
Gordon Dunne	Mike Nesbitt
Mark Durkan	Robin Newton
Alex Easton	Carál Ní Chuilín
Sinéad Ennis	Michelle O'Neill
Arlene Foster	Edwin Poots
Órlaithí Flynn	George Robinson
Colm Gildernew	Emma Rogan
Paul Givan	Pat Sheehan
Deirdre Hargey	Emma Sheerin
Harry Harvey	Christopher Stalford
David Hilditch	John Stewart
Cara Hunter	Mervyn Storey
William Irwin	Robin Swann
Declan Kearney	Peter Weir

**proxy in place for votes on Further Consideration Stage: The Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill

Northern Ireland Assembly

Wednesday 30 December 2020

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Executive Committee Business

2.1 Motion: Trade and Co-operation Agreement between the United Kingdom and the European Union

Proposed:

That this Assembly takes note of the Trade and Co-operation Agreement between the United Kingdom and the European Union.

The Executive Office

Amendment 1

Proposed:

Insert after 'Assembly':

'asserts our opposition to leaving the European Union; calls for the full implementation of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland to mitigate some of the most negative impacts of Brexit; and'

Mr John O'Dowd

Dr Caoimhe Archibald

Mr Colm Gildernew

Mr Declan McAleer

Amendment 2

Proposed:

At end insert:

'; and calls on the United Kingdom Government, in view of the very serious impediments to the Northern Ireland economy being created by the Trade and Co-operation Agreement and the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, to apply safeguard measures as laid out in Article 16 of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland for a period of at least one year.'

Dr Steve Aiken

Amendment 3**Proposed:**

At end insert:

'but regrets that while a free trade deal is better than no deal, for Northern Ireland this agreement does not undo the detrimental aspects of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland; and calls on the Northern Ireland Executive to continue to work with the United Kingdom Government to mitigate against those damaging outcomes flowing from the Protocol.'

Mr Paul Givan

Mr Gary Middleton

Mr Christopher Stalford

Mr Mervyn Storey

Amendment 4**Proposed:**

At end insert:

‘; rejects Brexit, in line with the democratically expressed view of the people of Northern Ireland; notes that this deal will mean new barriers to trade and other negative consequences for Northern Ireland’s economy and society; and calls for the implementation of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, positive efforts to make arrangements work for all the people of Northern Ireland, and for this Assembly to decline legislative consent to the British Government to impose the European Union (Future Relationship) Bill, their inferior trade deal and their Brexit against the will of the people of Northern Ireland.’

Ms Nichola Mallon

Mr Matthew O’Toole

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, Amendment 1 was **negatived** (Division 1).

The Question being put, Amendment 2 was **negatived** (Division 2).

The Question being put, Amendment 3 was **negatived** (Division 3).

The Question being put, Amendment 4 was **made** (Division 4).

The Question being put, the motion as amended was **carried** (Division 5).

3. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 3.52pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

30 December 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

30 December 2020

Division 1

Motion: Trade and Co-operation Agreement between the United Kingdom and the European Union – Amendment 1

Proposed:

Insert after 'Assembly':

'asserts our opposition to leaving the European Union; calls for the full implementation of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland to mitigate some of the most negative impacts of Brexit; and'

*Mr John O'Dowd
Dr Caoimhe Archibald
Mr Colm Gildernew
Mr Declan McAleer*

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 26

Noes: 38

AYES

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

Tellers for the Ayes: Dr Archibald, Mr McAleer.

NOES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Stewart, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Givan, Mr Stalford.

The following Members voted in both Lobbies and are therefore not counted in the result:

Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Blair, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Dickson, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Muir, Mr O'Toole, Miss Woods.

The amendment was **negatived**.

The following Members' votes were cast by their notified proxy in this division:

Mr Dickson voted for Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle and Mr Muir.

Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Beggs, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Brogan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan and Ms Sheerin.

Mr O'Toole voted for Ms Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Mallon, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin and Mr McNulty.

Ms Bailey voted for Miss Woods.

Northern Ireland Assembly

30 December 2020

Division 2

Motion: Trade and Co-operation Agreement between the United Kingdom and the European Union – Amendment 2

Proposed:

At end insert:

‘; and calls on the United Kingdom Government, in view of the very serious impediments to the Northern Ireland economy being created by the Trade and Co-operation Agreement and the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, to apply safeguard measures as laid out in Article 16 of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland for a period of at least one year.’

Dr Steve Aiken

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 38

Noes: 49

AYES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Stewart, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Ayes: Dr Aiken, Mr Givan.

NOES

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Ms Brogan, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O’Dowd, Mrs O’Neill, Mr O’Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McAleer, Ms McLaughlin.

The amendment was **negatived**.

The following Members’ votes were cast by their notified proxy in this division:

Mr Dickson voted for Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle and Mr Muir.

Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Beggs, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

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

Mr O’Toole voted for Ms Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Mallon, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin and Mr McNulty.

Ms Bailey voted for Miss Woods.

Northern Ireland Assembly

30 December 2020

Division 3

Motion: Trade and Co-operation Agreement between the United Kingdom and the European Union – Amendment 3

Proposed:

At end insert:

'but regrets that while a free trade deal is better than no deal, for Northern Ireland this agreement does not undo the detrimental aspects of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland; and calls on the Northern Ireland Executive to continue to work with the United Kingdom Government to mitigate against those damaging outcomes flowing from the Protocol.'

Mr Paul Givan

Mr Gary Middleton

Mr Christopher Stalford

Mr Mervyn Storey

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 37

Noes: 49

AYES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beggs, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Stewart, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Ayes: Dr Aiken, Mr Givan.

NOES

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Ms Brogan, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McAleer, Ms McLaughlin.

The amendment was **negatived**.

The following Members' votes were cast by their notified proxy in this division:

Mr Dickson voted for Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle and Mr Muir.

Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Beggs, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Brogan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan and Ms Sheerin.

Mr O'Toole voted for Ms Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Mallon, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin and Mr McNulty.

Ms Bailey voted for Miss Woods.

Northern Ireland Assembly

30 December 2020

Division 4

Motion: Trade and Co-operation Agreement between the United Kingdom and the European Union – Amendment 4

Proposed:

At end insert:

‘; rejects Brexit, in line with the democratically expressed view of the people of Northern Ireland; notes that this deal will mean new barriers to trade and other negative consequences for Northern Ireland’s economy and society; and calls for the implementation of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, positive efforts to make arrangements work for all the people of Northern Ireland, and for this Assembly to decline legislative consent to the British Government to impose the European Union (Future Relationship) Bill, their inferior trade deal and their Brexit against the will of the people of Northern Ireland.’

Ms Nichola Mallon

Mr Matthew O’Toole

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 49

Noes: 38

AYES

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Ms Brogan, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O’Dowd, Mrs O’Neill, Mr O’Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms McLaughlin, Mr Muir.

NOES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Stewart, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Noes: Dr Aiken, Mr Givan.

The amendment was **made**.

The following Members’ votes were cast by their notified proxy in this division:

Mr Dickson voted for Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle and Mr Muir.

Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Beggs, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

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

Mr O’Toole voted for Ms Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Mallon, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin and Mr McNulty.

Ms Bailey voted for Miss Woods.

Northern Ireland Assembly

30 December 2020

Division 5

Motion as amended: Trade and Co-operation Agreement between the United Kingdom and the European Union

Proposed:

That this Assembly takes note of the trade and cooperation agreement between the United Kingdom and the European Union; rejects Brexit, in line with the democratically expressed view of the people of Northern Ireland; notes that this deal will mean new barriers to trade and other negative consequences for Northern Ireland's economy and society; and calls for the implementation of the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, positive efforts to make arrangements work for all the people of Northern Ireland, and for this Assembly to decline legislative consent to the British Government to impose the European Union (Future Relationship) Bill, their inferior trade deal and their Brexit against the will of the people of Northern Ireland.

The Executive Office

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 47

Noes: 38

AYES

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Ms Brogan, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms McLaughlin, Mr Muir.

NOES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Stewart, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Noes: Dr Aiken, Mr Givan.

The motion, as amended, was agreed.

The following Members' votes were cast by their notified proxy in this division:

Mr Dickson voted for Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle and Mr Muir.

Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Storey and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Beggs, Mr Chambers, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Brogan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan and Ms Sheerin.

Mr O'Toole voted for Ms Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Mallon, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin and Mr McNulty.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 16 December 2020 to 30 December 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 Regional College Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 July 2020 (Department for the Economy)

Registrar General Annual Report 2019 (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency)

National Museums Northern Ireland Annual Report and Accounts for year ended 31 March 2020 (Department for Communities)

Quarterly Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service July 2020 - September 2020 (Department of Finance)

Tourism Northern Ireland Annual Report and Accounts 2019/20 (Department for the Economy)

Belfast Metropolitan College Annual Report and Accounts for year ended 31 July 2020 (Department for the Economy)

Northern Ireland Police Fund Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20 (Northern Ireland Police Fund)

5. Assembly Reports

Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees Seventeenth Report of Session 2020 – 2021 (NIA 67/17-22) (Examiner of Statutory Rules)

Joint Report on Management of the NI Direct Strategic Partner Project – helping to deliver Digital Transformation and The LandWeb Project: An Update (NIA 68/17-22) (Public Accounts Committee)

The Northern Ireland Assembly Members' Pension Fund Annual Report and Accounts (NIA 69/17-22) (Finance Office)

6. Statutory Rules

SR 2020/330 The Health and Safety (Amendments and Revocation) (EU Exit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for the Economy)

SR 2020/331 The Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Amendment of Relevant Period for Meetings of Registered Societies and Credit Unions No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for the Economy)

SR 2020/332 The Business Tenancies (Coronavirus) (Restriction on Forfeiture: Relevant Period) (Northern Ireland) (No. 3) Regulations 2020 (Department of Finance)

SR 2020/334 The Road Traffic Offenders (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) Order 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2020/335 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 20) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/336 The Road Traffic (Fixed Penalty) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2020/338 The Regulation (EC) No 1370/2007 (Public Service Obligations in Transport) (Amendment) (EU Exit) (Northern Ireland) (Revocation) Regulations 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2020/341 The Addition of Vitamins, Minerals & Other Substances (Amendment) (Revocation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/342 The Financial Assistance (Coronavirus) (Airports) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Finance)

SR 2020/343 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 21) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/344 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 26) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/345 The Producer Responsibility Obligations (Packaging Waste) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

SR 2020/346 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No.2) (Amendment No. 22) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/351 The Statutory Sick Pay (General) (Coronavirus Amendment) (No. 7) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Communities)

SR 2020/352 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 23) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/353 The Animals (Health, Identification, Trade and Veterinary Medicines) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

SR 2020/354 The Financial Assistance (Coronavirus) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Finance)

SR 2020/355 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 27) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/356 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 24) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/358 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 25) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

For information only

SR 2020/333 The Alien and Locally Absent Species (Aquaculture) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

SR 2020/339 The Marketing of Plant and Propagating Material (Legislative Functions) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

SR 2020/340 The Carriage of Explosives (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Justice)

SR 2020/248 The Maximum Number of Judges Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Justice)

Explanatory Memorandum for SR 2020/335 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 20) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/347 The Social Security (Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway) (Citizens' Rights Agreement) (Revocation) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Communities)

SR 2020/348 The Social Security (Switzerland) (Citizens' Rights Agreement) (Revocation) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Communities)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

Decisions of the Executive on COVID-19 (First Minister and deputy First Minister)

COVID-19 Vaccination Programme (Minister of Health)

8. Consultation Documents

Consultation on Legislative Options to Inform the Development of an Adult Protection Bill for Northern Ireland (Department of Health)

Consultation on the draft Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031 (Department of Health)

9. Departmental Publications

Coronavirus Act 2020 Temporary Disapplication of Education Duties (No.17) Notice (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Education)

Coronavirus Act 2020 Temporary Modification of Education Duties (No.18) Notice (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Education)

10. Agency Publications

11. Westminster Publications

SI 2020-1557 - Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading Scheme (Amendment) Order 2020 (Privy Council Office)

12. Miscellaneous Publications

Proxy Voting Notices – Wednesday 30 December 2020

The following Members notified the Speaker, under Standing Order 112, that they wished to avail of proxy voting arrangements for the sitting on Wednesday 30 December 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
Paula Bradley	Fra McCann
Sinead Bradley	Daniel McCrossan
Paula Bradshaw	Patsy McGlone
Nicola Brogan	Colin McGrath
Thomas Buchanan	Philip McGuigan
Jonathan Buckley	Maolíosa McHugh
Pat Catney	Sinead McLaughlin
Alan Chambers	Justin McNulty
Linda Dillon	Andrew Muir
Diane Dodds	Karen Mullan
Jemma Dolan	Conor Murphy
Gordon Dunne	Mike Nesbitt
Mark Durkan	Robin Newton
Alex Easton	Carál Ní Chuilín
Sinéad Ennis	Michelle O'Neill
Arlene Foster	Edwin Poots
Órlaithí Flynn	George Robinson
Colm Gildernew	Emma Rogan
Paul Givan	Pat Sheehan
Deirdre Hargey	Emma Sheerin
Harry Harvey	Christopher Stalford
David Hilditch	John Stewart
Cara Hunter	Mervyn Storey
William Irwin	Robin Swann
Declan Kearney	Peter Weir
Dolores Kelly	Rachel Woods

Northern Ireland Assembly

Thursday 31 December 2020

The Assembly met at 11.00am, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Private Members' Business

2.1 Motion: COVID-19 Impact on School Opening

That this Assembly notes with concern reports that the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies may have recommended school closures; is deeply concerned by the number of deaths from COVID-19; recognises the concerns of teachers, pupils and parents; calls for urgent clarity from the Minister of Education on what work has been undertaken with the Department of Health on protecting school children, teachers, parents and the wider public from the spread of COVID-19; and further calls on the Minister of Education to outline the medical and scientific advice his Department has received and to explain whether he will consider additional mitigations, including a phased return or extended school closure, if this has been recommended by the medical and scientific advice.

Mr Daniel McCrossan

Mr Justin McNulty

Mr Colin McGrath

Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'mitigations' and insert:

'and protections, while welcoming the announcement today by the Minister detailing a phased return to schools and seeking assurances from the Minister on the work his Department will now undertake to ensure the safety of staff and pupils during the remainder of the pandemic.'

Mr Daniel McCrossan

Mr Justin McNulty

Mr Colin McGrath

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Amendment was **made**.

The Question being put, the motion as amended was **carried**.

3. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 1.05pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

31 December 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 31 December 2020

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules
 - SR 2020/359 The Marketing of Seed Potatoes, Plant and Propagating Material Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)
 - SR 2020/360 The Official Controls (Plant Protection Products) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)
 - SR 2021/1 The Covid-19 Heating Payment Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Communities)
 - SR 2021/2 The Universal Credit (Transitional Provisions) (Claimants previously entitled to a severe disability premium) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (Department for Communities)
7. Written Ministerial Statements
 - Further changes to COVID restrictions in Education settings from January 2021 (Minister of Education)
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 31 December 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		17/11/20	15/12/20		
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	19/11/20				

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	25/11/20
The Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 10/17-22)	19/10/20	03/11/20	15/05/21					
The Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill (NIA Bill 11/17-22)	03/11/20	16/11/20	11/06/21					
The Harbours (Grants and Loans Limit) Bill (NIA Bill 12/17-22)	23/11/20	01/12/20	/	/	14/12/20			

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	11/11/20	24/11/20			
Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill (NIA Bill 13/17-22)	14/12/20							

/ Bills progressing by accelerated passage

Proxy Voting Notices – Thursday 31 December 2020

The following Members notified the Speaker, under Standing Order 112, that they wished to avail of proxy voting arrangements for the sitting on Thursday 31 December 2020:

Steve Aiken	Declan Kearney
Andy Allen	Dolores Kelly
Martina Anderson	Gerry Kelly
Caoimhe Archibald	Liz Kimmins
Kellie Armstrong	Naomi Long
Rosemary Barton	Gordon Lyons
Doug Beattie	Séan Lynch
Roy Beggs	Nichola Mallon
John Blair	Declan McAleer
Cathal Boylan	Fra McCann
Paula Bradley	Daniel McCrossan
Sinead Bradley	Patsy McGlone
Paula Bradshaw	Philip McGuigan
Nicola Brogan	Maolíosa McHugh
Keith Buchanan	Sinead McLaughlin
Thomas Buchanan	Justin McNulty
Jonathan Buckley	Gary Middleton
Pat Catney	Andrew Muir
Alan Chambers	Karen Mullan
Stewart Dickson	Conor Murphy
Linda Dillon	Mike Nesbitt
Diane Dodds	Robin Newton
Jemma Dolan	Carál Ní Chuilín
Gordon Dunne	Michelle O'Neill
Mark Durkan	Matthew O'Toole
Alex Easton	Edwin Poots
Sinéad Ennis	George Robinson
Arlene Foster	Emma Rogan
Órlaithí Flynn	Pat Sheehan
Colm Gildernew	Emma Sheerin
Paul Givan	Christopher Stalford
Deirdre Hargey	John Stewart
Harry Harvey	Mervyn Storey
David Hilditch	Robin Swann
Cara Hunter	Peter Weir
William Irwin	

