

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department for Infrastructure

ANNOUNCEMENT OF DECISION ON CAPITAL ALLOCATIONS IN 2022-23 IN THE ABSENCE OF AN EXECUTIVE AGREED BUDGET

Published at 3.00 pm on Friday 1 July 2022.

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister for Infrastructure): I wish to inform Members of my decision on capital allocations for my Department in 2022-23 in the absence of an Executive agreed budget.

Members will no doubt agree it is vital that capital spending is maximised now to deliver much-needed investment in our infrastructure, on the maintenance of our roads, or in the provision of safe drinking water to all households.

With the continued DUP boycott of the Assembly, Executive and the North South Ministerial Council and the absence of an Executive agreed three-year budget, my Department was allocated a capital contingency planning envelope. This is no substitute for a fully functioning Executive and political institutions but this will allow, in the absence of proper institutions, for a degree of planning and as much delivery as possible of schemes in year.

Essential services are under serious pressure including water and sewerage, roads and transport. In the absence of an agreed budget, my Department has no choice, in order to maintain essential public services, but to work at risk. I have weighed this against the greater risk of essential public services stopping. Unlike others, I am not prepared to put essential public services at risk or duck my statutory responsibilities. Our people deserve better.

I have, therefore, agreed that my Department, in order to maintain essential public services, should plan investment beyond the current envelope by some £143 million and therefore capital schemes which amount to over £725 million this financial year will proceed. This will go some way to alleviate concerns that, once budgets are agreed, my Department would not be able to spend to a sufficient level, and the resulting impact this would then have in potentially leading to an underspend of the Executive's budget.

I have asked officials to continue to monitor other potential works which could benefit from further investment in year. I am determined not to let the actions of others stymie investment in our vital infrastructure, which in turn creates new jobs while protecting existing jobs and boosts the economy.

This approach is not without risk, in that the budget, once agreed, may be less than my Department actually requires. I can assure members it is my intention to robustly defend the current planned spend in any future budget discussions.

This announcement will enable NI Water to meet its regulatory obligations and continue the delivery of essential water and wastewater services, and the Living With Water Programme.

It will also allow for projects within the public transport network to be progressed, including essential health and safety works which will ensure better accessibility to the bus fleet and a safe environment for both customers and staff.

For the road network, this decision will enable additional structural maintenance activities to be carried out, along with the implementation of a range of local safety measures to improve the safety and efficiency of the road network. It will also allow for the replacement of a number of street lighting columns and associated cabling and the retrofitting of a number of sodium street lights with energy

efficient LED units. Progress can also be made on active travel schemes to help us address the climate emergency.

As Minister for Infrastructure, I am committed to ensuring planned capital schemes can progress and I know that this will also provide much-needed support and assurance for the construction industry and our delivery partners during these challenging times. As Minister I am in no doubt that completion of large capital projects will not only benefit our citizens, but will also contribute to an increase in economic activity and boost local areas.

I regret I have to make this statement in written format. I would have much preferred to make an oral statement to the Assembly and take questions from my fellow MLAs about it. However for reasons well-rehearsed that is not possible.