



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

Volume 127
(9 March 2020 to 26 April 2020)

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

B

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Barton, Mrs Rosemary (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
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Buchanan, Thomas (West Tyrone)
Buckley, Jonathan (Upper Bann)
Bunting, Ms Joanne (East Belfast)
Butler, Robbie (Lagan Valley)

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Carroll, Gerry (West Belfast)
Catney, Pat (Lagan Valley)
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Clarke, Trevor (South Antrim)

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Dolan, Ms Jemma (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
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Durkan, Mark (Foyle)

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Ennis, Ms Sinéad (South Down)

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Foster, Mrs Arlene (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Frew, Paul (North Antrim)

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Givan, Paul (Lagan Valley)

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Harvey, Harry (Strangford)
Hilditch, David (East Antrim)
Humphrey, William (North Belfast)

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Irwin, William (Newry and Armagh)

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Kimmins, Ms Liz (Newry and Armagh)

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

O

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

P

Poots, Edwin (Lagan Valley)

R

Robinson, George (East Londonderry)
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S

Sheehan, Pat (West Belfast)
Sheerin, Ms Emma (Mid Ulster)
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Official Report (Hansard)

Assembly Sittings

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 9 March 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Committee Membership

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

Resolved:

That Mr Pat Catney replace Mr John Dallat as a member of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. — [Mrs D Kelly.]

Resolved:

That Mr Fra McCann replace Ms Emma Sheerin as a member of the Committee for Communities; that Ms Martina Anderson replace Mr Fra McCann as a member of the Committee for the Executive Office; and that Ms Emma Rogan replace Ms Martina Anderson as a member of the Committee for Justice. — [Mr O'Dowd.]

Executive Committee Business

Budget Bill: Final Stage

That the Budget Bill [NIA 02/17-22] do now pass. — [Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]

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

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): Today's Final Stage debate concludes the financial legislative process for the 2019-2020 year. I recognise concerns that there has not been enough opportunity to consult on and debate the public expenditure position set out in the Budget Bill. The circumstances for this financial year have been far from ideal. However, these institutions have been restored for only a matter of weeks. I express my gratitude, once again, to the Finance Committee, which acknowledged the unique circumstances that we have found ourselves in this year. Accelerated passage was essential to allow the continuation of public services, and that will not be the situation for the next financial year.

There will be every opportunity for Members to debate the Executive's 2020-21 Budget plans when I bring the Budget to the Assembly later this month. There will be a further opportunity when the Main Estimates and Budget (No. 2) Bill come to the Assembly before the summer. The debates on the earlier stages of the Bill and the associated Supply resolutions have been informative, and I thank all the departmental Committees for the level of scrutiny that they have brought to the process.

I hope that it is now completely clear to everyone that the Budget Bill is focused on the 2019-2020 financial year. Whilst it also provides legal authority for Departments to spend into the first few months of 2020-21 through the Vote on Account, that does not constitute the setting of the 2020-21 Budget. The Vote on Account is simply a mechanism that allows Departments to deliver services at the start of the new financial year pending the Assembly's consideration of the Main Estimates and Budget (No. 2) Bill. That Bill will set out the detail of the 2020-21 spending plans in the Executive's Budget.

Since the restoration of the institutions, I have announced allocations of some £59 million. Those allocations are helping to address the backlog in the assessment and diagnosis of children with special educational needs and meet the shortfall in contractual pay costs for teachers and non-teaching staff. They are increasing the financial support for people affected by the contaminated blood scandal. They fund the preparation costs involved in

taking forward the recommendations from the historical institutional abuse inquiry and the victims' payment service scoping study. They ensure that the Department for Infrastructure can maintain our roads, provide winter services and maintain street lighting.

This is the Final Stage of our financial legislative process for 2019-2020, and the legislation has already been subject to considerable debate. I now look forward to hearing any final thoughts from Members on this important legislation.

Mr Frew (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): As Members will be aware, the Budget Bill provides the statutory authority for expenditure in 2019-2020, as specified in the spring Supplementary Estimates, which take account of what happened during the in-year monitoring rounds. The Bill also includes the Vote on Account, which allows public expenditure to continue in the early part of the next financial year until the Assembly votes on the Main Estimates for 2020-21 in June.

The Committee for Finance took evidence on the Budget Bill from Department of Finance officials on 19 February. As I alluded at Second Stage, that session marked a very short period of Committee consultation on the Bill. The Committee was grateful to Mr Allister for raising an issue at Second Stage about the:

“sole authority of the Budget Act being used for much more substantial costs than is normally the case in black-box issues.” — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 126, p153, col 1.]

He referred specifically to black-box provisions of more than £105 million in the Executive Office for victims and survivors. That provision was duplicated in black-box provisions in the Department of Justice. Almost £15 million of black-box provisions highlighted in the Department for the Economy's budget for Northern Ireland Screen appeared again as grant resource for Northern Ireland Screen. The Committee considered that further at its meeting on 26 February and is due to receive oral evidence from the Department on the matter at next week's meeting. Perhaps the Minister is in a position to update the House on those black-box issues during his winding-up speech.

At the meeting on 19 February, the Committee asked the Department for clarification of the adjustments in DAERA between the Main Estimates position and the spring Supplementary Estimates. The Committee also asked the Department to provide more detail on the breakdown of the Department of Finance's resource requirements of £24 million for 2020-21. Those responses were emailed to the Committee on Friday morning.

It is apparent from the response to the Committee that the Department of Finance faces considerable pressures of over £24 million in the coming financial year, including more than £8 million relating to the 2020-21 census, the loss of almost £4.5 million in land registration income and just over £4.5 million in costs associated with EU exit. Mr Speaker, I am aware of the agreed timescales for interaction between Departments and Committees and the agreement that the Department has 10 days to respond to questions raised in Committee. The responses were received from the Department within that target. However, because they were not received in time for the Committee

to consider them in advance of today's debate, I am not in a position to provide the House with a Committee for Finance view on these important issues. I ask the Department and, indeed, all Departments to remain mindful that the agreed timescales refer to deadlines and not targets. That said, it is worth mentioning that, in most cases, the Department of Finance responses to Committee queries and departmental papers for Committee evidence sessions have been provided to the Committee promptly and within the agreed timescales. I thank the Minister and the Department of Finance officials for their commitment in adhering to those agreed timescales, and I look forward to that continuing as the mandate progresses.

I recognise that this is about tidying up the 2019-2020 financial year and making provision for the first part of the next financial year. The Department considers the latter to be routine. However, the Committee considered the fact that approximately £9 billion of public expenditure for the next financial year was authorised through the Budget Bill without any indication of how allocations would be distributed within each Department. It is, therefore, much more than merely routine. Statutory Committees — the Committee for Finance in particular — have a duty and a responsibility to scrutinise how that £9 billion of public money is being used. It is also important that the House knows where money goes and how Departments intend to spend it between April and the Budget (No. 2) Bill receiving Royal Assent in late July. The Committee was grateful to have received information from all Statutory Committees on the spending priorities for their Departments in the 2020-21 financial year which forms the Vote on Account. The Committee for Finance and other Statutory Committees have, therefore, been able to undertake some scrutiny in that respect and get some idea of where the priorities and pressures are for Departments. I thank the Chairpersons and members of all Statutory Committees for requesting the information and for responding to the Committee for Finance on that important matter in such a timely manner.

The Committee will continue to consult on spending priorities and pressures and to treat the budget process as a key Committee priority. Once we know the detail of the Budget later this week, the Committee for Finance will ensure that consultation with the Committee provides sufficient time for meaningful consultation, provides sufficient information to give informed consideration and is at a sufficiently early point in the process to give the Committee an opportunity to influence decisions. That will enable the Committee to provide a comprehensive response to the Department to help inform the final budget allocations in the Main Estimates. On behalf of the Committee for Finance, I support the motion.

I now wish to speak as the DUP finance spokesperson. Whilst today will feel like we are going through the drill, having already debated the Bill with no amendments, there should never be a feeling of routine for the House. Through the Budget Bill, £9 billion of public money for the next financial year will be authorised without any indication of how allocations will be distributed within each Department. But we look to the future. This week's Budget on Wednesday must start a process for a new and fresh Budget by the Executive. That is one prong of the process. The other prong must be that the Executive also puts in place procedures and measures to commence the work on the Budget for 2021-22 as soon as possible so that there

is maximum input from the Assembly, all the Statutory Committees and, of course, the public with a timely and sufficient public consultation, hopefully in the autumn.

12.15 pm

It would be remiss of me not to add that all those processes will be undermined if the Finance Minister does not give some sort of closure to the Quinn family. This is not about politics but about decency, so I appeal to the Minister: please give the Quinn family some sort of closure; please say that Paul was not a criminal; and please cooperate with the gardaí investigation and answer the questions that they put to you.

Mr O'Toole: As the Deputy Chair of our Committee said, today is somewhat like Groundhog Day. We are speaking again about a Budget Bill that reflects spending that has already occurred or that will occur in the first half of the new financial year. Nevertheless, it is extremely important that we debate the Budget Bill and discuss our priorities for the forthcoming financial year and the improved scrutiny that we wish to see in our budgetary processes going forward. I do not intend to take up too much of the Assembly's time, but I will touch on a couple of matters that relate to the budgetary process and specifically to the Budget Bill that we are discussing.

I congratulate the Minister on coming to sit through another debate on the Budget. I am sure that he would rather be spending his time deciding what his budgetary priorities are for 2020-21 with his Executive colleagues, but we are glad that he is here, and I hope that he gets used to sitting here and facing Assembly scrutiny, because hopefully we will be doing a lot more of it in the months and years ahead.

I reiterate what we have discussed twice already, in the Vote on Account debate and at the Second Stage of the Budget Bill, and that is to welcome the fact that the Bill is proceeding at all and that we are here to debate it. For three years, we have not been. As the Deputy Chair of the Finance Committee made clear, it would be better if we had been part of a longer-term scrutiny process and if the spending that the Bill relates to had been discussed in the Assembly in more detail, this year and last. However, we are where we are, and the Bill is proceeding.

The Deputy Chair raised a couple of technical matters relating to black-box spending. During our scrutiny of the Bill, I raised issues around financial transactions capital. The Minister has given a pledge, as have others inside government, to improve radically the way in which we deploy financial transactions capital in the Northern Ireland institutions, given what we all know, which is that we are not overburdened at the minute with capital resources and need to maximise them when we have them. The Supplementary Estimates, which were published just a few weeks ago, showed how much we have to do to improve that capability. However, since we started to debate the Bill, we have seen how unique and strange the situation in which we find ourselves is, and by that I mean not just what is happening in Northern Ireland but what is happening across these islands and internationally.

I want to touch on those points in my remarks. We can sometimes fall into the trap of thinking that the Budget process in Northern Ireland is about only what we debate in the Chamber, when, in fact, we are part of a much broader and more complicated set of political and

economical relationships within these islands. We get a block grant from Westminster, but we are also part of a global economy. Since we last debated the Bill, we have entered into a major international public health emergency. We have also seen the markets' reaction to that public health emergency, which is, to put it at its least strong, somewhat troubling. We have yet to see the UK Budget. The UK Budget will presumably be produced in the light of an updated forecast from the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR), which may also reflect the fact that economic growth in the UK and internationally will be lower as a result of the coronavirus issue and broader global economic trends. Therefore, although we hope to see delivery from the UK Government on financing for some of the pledges that they agreed to in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, we have to be realistic about the fact that, first, the UK Government do not have a record for living up to their promises to Northern Ireland and that, secondly, they are not likely to be in a position to have a particularly fortuitous economic and fiscal forecast from the OBR.

What does that mean for us? It means that, in the financial year 2020-21 and when a Budget is set for the forthcoming year, we need to speak with a united voice, insofar as is possible in the Chamber, to maximise pressure on the UK Government to live up to the promises that they made to this place in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document. We need to be robust in our scrutiny with the Department of Finance and all relevant devolved Departments on their spending priorities and how they intend to deploy what will be, unfortunately, limited resources after a decade of very limited resources for this place and jurisdictions elsewhere. We need to ensure that, insofar as is possible, we have a changed approach and, hopefully, a move towards more transparent multi-year budgeting, which enables the devolved institutions and the public bodies that receive their funding to plan their spending in a more thought-through and strategic way. As we know, short-termism has been a chronic failing of the institutions here.

I want to make one final point on a related subject, which I have harried and hassled the Minister about in the few weeks that I have been in the Chamber. It is something that I am personally interested in — I think that he is interested in it and, I hope, others from all sides of the House are — and that is the construction of a fiscal council and the related idea of creating an independent fiscal commission. A fiscal council was promised in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document. It would, hopefully, not only provide independent scrutiny of how we spend money but, I would argue, provide detailed economic forecasting for this place, and the related question of an independent fiscal commission to look at the long-term picture of public spending in the North along with related challenges, including how we spend money in the long term.

Those two things are completely critical to the future proper running of this place, whatever your constitutional perspective, frankly. Let us not pretend that constitutional perspectives are the same in this place. Whether your preference is for Northern Ireland to stay in the United Kingdom or is for a new or united Ireland, we need to have a clear picture of exactly what we are spending and what we are spending it on, and we need a long-term view on it.

To return to the Budget Bill that we are discussing for 2019-2020 and to authorising spending for the first few

months of the next financial year, I congratulate the Minister and his team for bringing the legislation to the Assembly. It is much better that we are doing this, albeit belatedly and in a slightly hurried way. It is also extremely important that we scrutinise in a much more planned and coherent way in the years ahead and, hopefully, have independent and robust information to improve the quality of scrutiny in the Assembly.

Mr Muir: In speaking to the Budget Bill at its Final Stage, I am conscious that the debate is not timed and that many issues have been well rehearsed previously. We are here today to discuss the Budget Bill rather than many other issues, important though they are, but not directly related to the Bill. I will vote for the Bill at Final Stage with my Alliance Party colleagues, in the clear knowledge that failure to pass it would, in fact, result in the collapse of public services. Wages would not be paid, and we cannot let that happen. I am in politics to lead and take decisions, not to dodge them.

The full Budget for 2020-21 will, hopefully, be presented soon, and we can debate the merits of the overall package. Today, however, we are here to keep the wheels turning, to have services delivered and wages paid. Failure to do that would be a dereliction of duty. As I said, many of the issues relating to the Bill have been well rehearsed before at length.

One matter that I wish to focus on today is the revenue derived to cover the expenditure to be authorised. As Members will be aware, the direct revenue-raising powers of the Northern Ireland Executive are rather limited, with the overwhelming majority of revenue raised directly by the UK Treasury. One power that does exist, however, is domestic and non-domestic rating and, in particular, the regional rate.

In the circumstances in which we find ourselves, with the UK Budget not to be delivered until Wednesday, the regional rates order has not been made. I have been advised by the Finance Minister that domestic and non-domestic rates bills will be issued in April once the order is made, but I call on the Department and the Minister to provide more clarity on what that means, especially the collection of direct debits from those who pay by instalments and when the first instalment will be taken.

Many people will be waiting for their bill to arrive and need to know what is due to happen for budgeting and planning purposes. The delay in the dispatch of rates bills may, however, be a blessing in disguise for some, especially for owners of non-domestic properties, who have been badly affected as a result of Reval2020. The relatively short notice that was given to businesses about the potential rise in their net annual value (NAV) and subsequent rates bills is not ideal and puts real pressure on the finances of local businesses at a time when they are under more and more strain, especially in the context of the downturn now being experienced as a result of coronavirus. The timing of Reval2020 is a matter of real concern in the context that I have outlined and something that I hope the Finance Minister will look at.

As part of the informal review and appeals process for the new NAVs, Land and Property Services (LPS) ought to consider any material changes that have occurred since valuations were done on 1 April 2018. I urge the Minister to explore that and ensure that Northern Ireland is brought into line with other parts of the UK, where a material change in circumstances is considered.

If we are to pass the Budget, we must be confident that businesses are able to pay the rates to be levied. Failure to provide support via, for example, transitional relief, risks a Budget that cannot be properly funded. We must therefore consider transitional relief for businesses affected by Reval2020.

The wider review of the non-domestic rating system is in the pipeline and will herald some welcome changes. In considering the Budget Bill, however, we need to be providing flexibility and support now, not promises of action. Whatever comes in the future is not certain. The independent oversight of the recommendations arising from the Department and LPS will be essential to ensure that whatever proceeds attracts credibility and confidence from businesses that will be affected. I ask the Minister to ensure that that occurs.

Securing the funding for this and future Budgets is not easy, with difficult decisions to be made. However, with genuine engagement, independent oversight of changes and a willingness to respond flexibly, the task can be made much easier with a listening Government striking Budgets in an open style.

Striking a Budget is a fundamental duty of any Government. Governments survive and fall on the ability to pass a Budget. After three years without a Government, people deserve these institutions to continue. The process for striking a full Budget for the next financial year needs to be done in an engaging manner, recognising that the reasons why we are in the financial situation we are in are not related just to the politics of austerity but the failure of these institutions to effect proper structural reform and attend to the cost of division.

It is important that we do that, but today we need to pass this Budget and give certainty for public services.

Ms P Bradley: I want to make some remarks first as Chairperson of the Committee for Communities. As the Minister said in the House, the term "Budget Bill" is something of a misnomer. What we have considered to date is the reallocation of surrendered moneys to reach agreement on the Vote on Account in order to allow Departments to provide services over the next few months.

I imagine that we are looking forward to debating the Main Estimates, which we hope to see in June. A key issue addressed by the Minister, and specific to the Department for Communities, is the requirement to spend £7 million until the end of May 2020 for the extension of welfare reform mitigations. That is required until the necessary legislation is passed. The Committee heard from the Minister for Communities a number of weeks ago on the need for accelerated passage for the Bill to extend mitigation payments on the social sector size criteria. We have yet to see anything following those discussions. I can only assume that the matter is in hand. All members of the Committee had considerable sympathy for the views of stakeholders in relation to welfare reform mitigations, yet some of the figures discussed that are required to extend and strengthen all other mitigation measures were startling — around £200 million per year.

That is just one of a multitude of areas crying out for resources. We will, undoubtedly, be faced with the prospect of prioritising our expenditure more than ever. As a result, I fear that some stakeholders of every Committee

and Department may learn that sympathy is possibly all that they can get from us.

Our ambition has to be tempered by our finances. That is not to say that we should show a lack of ambition. Rather, when the Executive are determining the required outcomes for the Programme for Government, they should ask whether the support they are providing to service providers is sufficient to achieve those outcomes. If not, we are just fooling ourselves and misleading the public. We need to be clear about the link between the setting of the Budget and the establishment of outcomes in the new Programme for Government.

12.30 pm

We often hear the phrase:

“Politics is the art of the possible”.

The Canadian-American economist and diplomat, J K Galbraith, took a different view:

“Politics is the art of choosing between the disastrous and the unpalatable”.

If we find ourselves in that position when we come to look at the Main Estimates in June, we should have the honesty to tell the people that. The idea that we can pay for everything is an illusion. That is not political dogma or pessimism; it is simply fact.

We find ourselves in a budget-setting phase at a time when a virus looks set to impact on our society in ways that we are yet to understand. However, it seems certain that the impact on the global economy will be strongly negative. We cannot escape that impact, but what will it mean for future budget priorities? What recourse to financial assistance will the Executive have to address the short- and longer-term impact of the virus? In an era when we have heard stories about our public transport, education, sewerage systems and, of course, the health service in the most dreadful terms, how do we choose where to spend our limited resources? I certainly do not have the answers to the difficult questions that the Minister of Finance and his colleagues face. I can only assure him that the Committee for Communities will work closely with the Department for Communities to achieve all that we can in the limited time ahead on the issues under its remit, whatever the budget allocation might be.

I want to say a few words as DUP spokesperson for communities. It would be remiss of me not to mention that we celebrated International Women’s Day yesterday. Much of what we are discussing in respect of the Department for Communities has deep impacts on women and families here in Northern Ireland. I talked about how we have to be honest, but we should not lack ambition. We need to empower those women and make a difference to their lives. The Department for Communities should certainly do that, but we need to look at all those other things as well. We need to look at better childcare in Northern Ireland. We need to look at better infrastructure. We need to look at apprenticeships for women to empower them to go out and provide. I am ambitious, and I look forward to working with the Minister for Communities and the Minister of Finance.

Mr Catney: Most of the points that I was going to make have been made. I welcome the opportunity for us to pass the Budget Bill in these uncertain times. As I have said

before, I hope that we can get to the stage of having multi-year budgets to provide greater certainty and security for all our small businesses. I thank the Minister and the Department for always having their door open and being readily available, despite their busy schedule. I also thank and say, “Well done”, to the Deputy Chair of the Finance Committee, who stepped in for our Chairperson, who is away, and did an excellent job. I hope that our Finance Committee will be able to work alongside the Department and the Minister to bring about better scrutiny. We did not have much time to scrutinise the Bill, but we are where we are. We must consider revenue in the context of Reval2020, as my Alliance Party colleague said. I hope that the Minister will make sure that the regional rate takes Reval2020 into consideration so that businesses are not hit at both ends.

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

We will talk about COVID-19 later. I hope that the Minister is confident, maybe through the borrowing powers in clause 5, that there is scope in the Budget to deal with the pressures that a full outbreak would bring. Can emergency funding be given to the health service for more intensive care unit (ICU) beds? Could businesses hit by the quarantine protocol be given access to short-term loans? Is there scope for an emergency payment to workers who have lost earnings due to having to self-isolate? I welcome the Budget Bill as an opportunity for us to work together to the betterment of everyone, which is the job that we were all sent here to do.

Mr Beggs: I, too, recognise that the Budget Bill regulates the expenditure for 2019-2020, taking on board the in-year monitoring that occurred during that process. It also authorises 45% expenditure in the following year — some £9 billion — which should not be taken lightly. However, although we have to recognise that this budget process is flawed to a degree, we are doing the best that we can given the circumstances. In particular, there was a gap of three years, and Ministers are only recently back in post, as are the Committees, which do detailed scrutiny. Secondly, there has been limited time since January to do something. We have to recognise that, even before that, there was a flawed process, because we had been doing something that was not hugely dissimilar: we got into the habit of discussing the Budget and the next year’s expenditure much too late. As I indicated to the Minister at Second Stage, lessons were set out in 2012, when the Finance Committee made recommendations about wider and fuller consultation so that we got better decisions. In particular, I understand that online tools have been developed and that much better processes are available so that we can engage directly with the public. I hope that, in the future, we will introduce that so that we can benefit from a much earlier process and a much more effective means of consulting.

Others mentioned the black-box provision. That is like some magic trick. I think that we, as Members, all need training on what this black-box provision is. I confess that I do not recall having heard of it previously; I may have, but I do not recall it. It also appears that civil servants need some training on it, because, as indicated, mistakes have been identified in how it has been processed. I hope that the entire process will be improved to be much more user-friendly and meaningful so that the public will have much more direct engagement with Budget decisions

and processes. Doing so will help to connect the public to politics and to decisions that are being made up here on the hill, so there is much to learn.

There is huge uncertainty at present, as others indicated, because of the coronavirus. I appreciate that the Budget moves forward 45%. I hope that the Executive will move speedily forward to finalise the detailed expenditure during the subsequent year, because none of us knows how the virus may impinge on society or on health expenditure. We may think, "Oh, 45% expenditure; that is safe", but we need to move speedily to ensure that there are mechanisms to ensure that, if additional moneys are needed for health because of the emergency that may be developing in our midst, we will be able to react.

As I indicated, this has been a flawed process, but we have all done as well as we could. I hope that we have a much better process in the future.

Mr Buckley: I will be brief, as I spoke on this at Second Stage, but I think that it is only right that I make comment today. I realise that this is mainly going through procedure and process, and I very much look forward to the Budget (No. 2) Bill, when we will get into the depth of what Westminster brings in the Chancellor's new Budget.

At Second Stage, I listened to some passionate pleas from Members about priorities in their constituencies. I heard some good examples of how the lack of governance in this place really has affected day-to-day communities, whether that be at a constituent level or more regionally on infrastructure projects or our health service. With that said, I recognise that, as a lot of Members have said today, fundamentally, the process has been flawed. The lack of a Government for three years has meant that there is pressure on our public services like never before. The processes around that need to change, whether that is moving towards a multi-year Budget or something else. More importantly, it will be about allowing for proper scrutiny from Members, be that in the Finance Committee or here in the House.

In closing, I want to hit on a key point. As has been mentioned, our economy is in a state of flux at the moment with fears surrounding the coronavirus, and it is about time that Members got real and started to deal with the people's priorities: education, health and the economy. Many Members talked in the House last week, the week before and since this place has been restored about the projects and priorities in their constituency, but we must be realistic about what can be achieved and not only in the next budgetary year. Going forward, there must be long-term strategic thinking.

I want to put on record the impact that the coronavirus could have not only on our economy and the Economy Department but, indeed, on the health service, given the pressures that it already faces. I fielded calls over the weekend about the pressures facing Craigavon Area Hospital, which is putting out constant daily reminders to constituents to stay away, if possible, from an already overburdened health service. We have people on trolleys; we have severe pressure on our staff. This will have a severe impact on future Budgets. I know that there has been collective agreement across the House about how we try to address waiting lists, but we face a public scare now like we have never seen before, namely coronavirus. While I welcome the work being done across the Executive

to allay public fears and allow the correct information to get out there, more needs to be done.

It is on public record that one of the confirmed coronavirus cases is in Portadown in my constituency of Upper Bann, and I was talking this morning to a representative from the construction company that the individual is associated with. He told me that he has already had to close down sites for fear of the spread of coronavirus and that he is liaising with the Public Health Agency about it. There is also grave concern among employees about what it means for them. We must factor in those concerns.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way and welcome his comments and his example. Is it not the case that the Executive, particularly the Communities Minister, alongside the Minister for the Economy, should be looking at a hardship fund for people in the self-employed sector or, indeed, those on zero-hour contracts so that they are supported whilst they have to self-isolate?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. Just one moment. While I am keen to allow debate and discussion, the Member was in danger of veering away from the content of the Budget Bill.

Mr Buckley: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. On that point, it is important to note that this will have an impact on our economy and our community that will, indeed, have an impact on budget allocations, so it is important now that we are vigilant and that we have that a joined-up approach from government to look at how we tackle the impending crisis. I hope that I have linked that adequately to the Budget.

In reality, we must be real and practical about what we as an Assembly can achieve. I hope that, going forward, the Minister has outlined the severe pressures that face this place in the next year or more. It is important that we as Members look strategically at Northern Ireland and at our constituencies and deliver best value for money, which, sadly, to date, has been lacking.

Ms S Bradley: I speak as a member of the Health Committee and as the SDLP spokesperson on health. The Minister may recall that, at Second Stage, I sought an assurance from him that the remaining in-year Budget and the start of next year's Budget would allow adequate flexibility for all front-line public service across all Departments to fulfil their duties in accordance with public health requirements. Whilst I appreciate that we are, today, effectively tidying up the 2019 Budget and allowing provision for the 2020 financial year, it is clear to everybody in the House that significant financial pressures will arise as a result of COVID-19. Whilst I appreciate that it is difficult to measure that, we must be assured that we are financially prepared.

Disruption and pressure on all our public services are, at this stage, sadly inevitable. In that context, those services may not be graced with having the waiting times to wait for the Main Estimates. Whilst it may be unusual practice, these are unusual circumstances, and the Minister may wish to use the opportunity to advise whether he has bid for additional funding or is confident that sufficient scope exists in the Budget as presented to deal with those pressures.

12.45 pm

Finally, the health service's transformation agenda simply cannot and will not be delivered with short-term budgeting. There is agreement across the House that we should be looking for longer-term fiscal proposals, and I will second any such proposal being made to the House.

Mr Butler: My speech will be as short as the time that we have had to scrutinise the Budget Bill, although I recognise the work done by the Committee and departmental officials to get the Bill to this stage.

The allocation of funds to support children with SEN in particular is timely. Given the emerging picture of the struggles and difficulties faced by pupils and parents who are having to start to try to navigate the statementing process, the reality of the lived experience of those children and their families is compounded by the pressures that are placed unfairly on our teachers and classroom assistants.

We are not speaking today about future Budgets, but I welcome any commitment that the Minister can make to the early production of future Budgets, for the House to scrutinise and to instil confidence. However, given recent events globally, with the outbreak of the coronavirus, and closer to home, with the collapse of Flybe, job losses and the difficulties that businesses are going to face should make us focus on the absolute need for a collegiate approach to be taken to fiscal responsibility and the responsibility that we owe the taxpayer. That applies not just to future Budgets but to the current Budget.

With that in mind, I seek assurance from the Minister that, when addressing mental health and the creation of a mental health framework and strategy that fit not only within the Department of Health but within other Departments, particularly Education, he will make significant and particular commitments to timely allocations to allow us to fix the problem together.

Mr Allister: Like other contributions to the debate, mine will be mercifully short. There are, however, a couple of issues to which I will direct the Minister's attention.

There has been reference made to the unfolding coronavirus crisis, which, of course, is having an impact across the world, and our economy and the demands on our finances will not be immune from it. It is in that context that I want to hear from the Minister about the budgetary provisions that we make for contingencies to deal with unforeseen emergencies.

In the document that the Treasury published in November 2015 titled, 'Statement of funding policy: funding the Scottish Parliament, National Assembly for Wales and Northern Ireland Assembly', paragraph 6.2 states:

"Devolved administrations also have the freedom to adopt whichever arrangements they deem suitable for establishing Departmental Unallocated Provisions or retaining budgets at the centre as contingencies."

What unallocated provisions have we in Northern Ireland? What budgets have we retained at the centre for contingencies? Will the Minister cast some light on that? Is he reviewing the scale and extent of such contingency funding in the light of the emerging crisis from the coronavirus? It is clear from that document that it is not just a matter of waiting for the next handout from Westminster. There is an obligation on the devolved institutions to think ahead, to retain budgets at the centre as contingencies

and to ensure that, insofar as they can, they make appropriate provision. Will the Minister indicate what provision is being made and what steps have been taken?

I refer briefly to the infamous black boxes. The Minister has yet — maybe he will do so today or maybe he will write to me or the Finance Committee — to give us a fulsome explanation of that matter. I look forward to obtaining that.

Finally, I endorse entirely the comments of the vice-Chairman of the Committee that the Minister's credibility is on the line so long as he fails to do the right thing by his constituents, the Quinn family. We now have an indication from the gardaí that they are anxious to speak to the Minister, although the Minister hitherto, I believe, had told us that he had answered all the gardaí's questions. Clearly not. I hope that the Minister —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member will resume his seat. I said earlier that I am loath to stifle debate, but I ask the Member to return to the content of the Budget Bill, please.

Mr Allister: Principal Deputy Speaker, I was following the august example of the vice-Chairman of the Finance Committee.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Yes, but I was not here then.

Mr Allister: I thought that I could not possibly go wrong if I followed such an example. The point is made, and I make it again. It is a serious point that goes to the very heart of public confidence in those who hold office in these institutions.

Mr Carroll: I will make my comments brief because I have already made clear my views on the lack of scrutiny and accountability involved in approving past financial decisions in the Budget Bill. It is somewhat coincidental that the Bill will likely be passed in the same week that the RHI report will be published, given how fundamental issues such as a lack of accountability, scrutiny and transparency were in the RHI scandal. Indeed, the last Assembly was plagued by these issues long before the RHI crisis eventually brought it to its knees.

It is difficult to see what is new about this approach of ramming through a Budget Bill unscrutinised, and it would not inspire any hope in an electorate that wants nothing more than a clean break from the scandal-laden past of the Assembly.

I have said this before but I will say it again because it is important to reiterate it today: a key test for this new Executive will be whether or not they overcome the negative perception that Stormont is a gravy train where politicians turn up and sign off on legislation, schemes, public statements and more that have been prepared by officials or unelected advisers, with little oversight or transparency. The passing of this Budget Bill with so little scrutiny is a failure of that test as far as I am concerned.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Carroll: I will give way briefly.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member advise how he proposes to pay workers if the Bill does not pass?

Mr Carroll: It was very easy for the Assembly to bring forward a different Budget Bill with ample time for scrutiny. Indeed, I outlined in detail how that could have been done

during the previous debate on the Budget Bill. Time could have been made, but time was not made by the Assembly and the Executive.

I will return to my comments. We were told that the financial changes in the Budget Bill are just totting up figures, just run-off from Departments and just the usual movements of unspent or unnecessary funding. If that were the case, it should be very easy to explain, for example, where the massive £24 million reduction in DAERA came from and who thought that it was pertinent not to use whatever financial ability we had to tackle the climate crisis in the Department that is responsible for the environment. Unfortunately, answers to that question could not be given at Committee level, nor when I spoke to the Department, nor when it was raised in the Assembly at a previous stage of the Budget Bill. For me, that is not good enough, and I suspect that it will not be good enough for those environmental activists who watch the actions of the Assembly very closely.

To sum up, as one member of this very small opposition in the Chamber, I cannot support this kind of roughshod practice, and I see it very much as my role to challenge it.

Mr Murphy: I appreciate and thank Members for the views that they have expressed in the debate. As I have done in previous debates on the Bill during its earlier stages, I will respond to Members who raised issues that were actually pertinent to the Bill.

A number of Members, primarily those who sit on the Committee for Finance, raised the issue of the black-box payments and the sole authority of the Budget Act. As the Deputy Chairperson mentioned, the Department, as a consequence of the debate at an earlier stage, has arranged a session with the Committee in order to take members through that and how it is done. I think that that session will occur next week. The use of the sole authority of the Budget Act occurs when no specific legislation has been passed by the Assembly to authorise the delivery of a service, and the Department relies on the Budget Act not only to authorise the money to pay for that service but to authorise the service itself.

Ordinarily, sole authority of the Budget Act should be used only for relatively small levels of expenditure — below £1.5 million — or for a relatively short period of no more than two years. However, as Members know, the Assembly has not sat for the past three years. Therefore, it has not been possible for a number of pieces of legislation to have been brought through the Assembly to authorise a range of services which must be delivered. As a result, services are highlighted in the black boxes in the Estimates for larger than normal amounts and that have been delivered under the sole authority of the Budget Act for longer than would normally be the case.

Guidance on the use of sole authority of the Budget Act is set out in 'Managing Public Money Northern Ireland' (MPMNI). That is guidance for the Civil Service to follow in normal circumstances. The situation that we have been in for the past three years has not been normal. MPMNI does not limit the Assembly's ability to legislate for anything that is within its competence to ensure that services are delivered for citizens. Ministers are now in the process of bringing legislation for those services to the Assembly to be considered and debated in the proper manner. As the Assembly legislates separately for those functions, the number and scale of services that are being delivered

under sole authority of the Budget Act will be reduced. In future, it will exist only for the purposes for which it was designed, which is very small levels of expenditure or delivery of services for a very short period, that do not warrant the passing of separate primary legislation. As I said, officials will be with the Committee in the next week or so to go through that process in much more detail.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for giving way. Whilst we will have to see what will come out of the session with the Committee for Finance, I think that we all understand the total amounts. However, the Minister has not addressed the issue of duplication, whereby it is on two different pages and budget lines.

Mr Murphy: If the Member can recall, I did address that issue in the debate on the previous stage, when I said that it was not yet certain which Department would be responsible for HIA payments. Therefore, the ability of either the Department of Justice or TEO had to be covered in that regard. If the Member did not get it at that stage, officials can explain it further to the full Committee next week. Essentially, it is to ensure that at least one of those Departments could cover that cost; certainly not that both would cover it.

In relation to some of the other issues that were raised, of course there are broader economic trends. I will deal with the Coronavirus, which seemed to be a common theme for most Members who spoke. We continue to engage with Treasury on the New Decade, New Approach money, as we do on the confidence-and-supply money. I will be there again in the morning, although that will be a meeting with the Scottish and Welsh Finance Ministers as well, primarily to do with the European money that will be lost to us and to get some certainty around that, and on the money that we will be required to spend with regard to the protocols here. We will continue that discussion with Treasury. We will certainly not let up on that.

Mr O'Toole raised, as he has previously — we have spoken about it on a number of occasions — the fiscal council and a fiscal commission. That remains as I outlined previously.

Andrew Muir raised the issue of rates bills. Of course, there was a discussion at the Executive about the pros and cons of waiting until the Budget is done in London before we do our Budget here. One issue that raises a challenge is the issuing of rates bills. The Executive are very aware of the pressures that that puts not only on those who issue rates bills, but on ensuring that people who pay by direct debit have them in time.

That was taken into consideration, and the Executive decided, nonetheless, to wait until beyond 11 March before producing our Budget. We spoke to LPS to ensure that it believes that it is in a position to get rates bills out in a timely fashion so that we do not cause any unnecessary delay and ensure that people can pay in a timely manner the bill that will come to them in April. He raised other general rates issues that will be part of a future debate. Members will be aware, of course, that district councils have already set their rates.

1.00 pm

I share the ambition of Paula Bradley, on behalf of the Committee for Communities, and a number of other Members for women and groups who are generally unrepresented. That is for a future Budget debate, but I look forward to hearing from her and others who want

to see genuine change in the support, promotion and ambition for sectors and communities that have not received those as part of previous Budget allocations.

Several Members asked questions on coronavirus, and I will deal with that in general. The Executive do establish central funds, but they do not routinely hold Departments' unallocated provisions; instead, we use the in-year monitoring rounds to reallocate resources when new pressures emerge. We are at the very tail end of this financial year, when all of the remaining money available to us has been allocated; indeed, a late adjustment by the British Treasury left us in a position where we had to cut spend on the repayment of capital and put that back to next year. The Treasury clawed that back due to its accountancy issues. Therefore, it is not possible to do what Members suggest. However, the Executive are able to access reserve in the same way as Whitehall Departments and other devolved Administrations for exceptional and unforeseen circumstances that cannot be easily absorbed without the major dislocation of existing services. As Members know, coronavirus is an unfolding issue. There was a COBRA conference call this morning, and, as far as I know, we are still officially at the containment stage. The situation will unfold as the virus continues to spread. Of course, we will talk to the British Treasury about that. We are able to access reserve, but, as yet, it would be hard for people to identify what costs might be associated with coronavirus, other than the general sense that there will be an impact on economic performance, probably globally. Certainly, that will take its effect here. It is an unfolding issue, and the Executive are availing themselves of not only the best medical advice they can in advising citizens but advice on the impact on our budgets and spending.

Gerry Carroll again raised the point that the Bill had not been properly scrutinised. We have not been here. That is the problem. We were not here to scrutinise in the normal fashion. I am not sure whether that passed him by, but we have not been here to do the work. We were upfront about that and readily accepted that it has not had the same scrutiny process as a normal Budget Bill at this stage of the year would have had. That is simply down to the fact that, until 11 January, we had not been here for three years. The next Budget Bill will be fully and properly scrutinised according to Assembly procedures, and the Member will have full opportunity through the Committee that he sits on and, indeed, in the Assembly Chamber to scrutinise all the issues that he wants to scrutinise before making a choice on how to vote.

I do not recall the Member raising the reduction of DAERA spend, particularly in relation to the environment. I will have officials check Hansard. I will be surprised if he cannot get the answers that he wants from the Department or at the Committee; part of their function is to provide answers to MLAs on these matters. He can take that up with the Business Office, if he feels that he has not been given appropriate answers by the Department. Departments are required to answer questions that are properly put to them and to give Committees the information that they ask for. The Committees have statutory powers and can request the attendance of persons and the provision of papers from Departments. I would be surprised if that is the case, but, nonetheless, we will check through Hansard to see if that issue was raised. The primary Department that he would want to bring it up with is DAERA, but we will have a look as well.

I have tried to respond to as many of the relevant issues raised as possible in today's debate and in previous debates on the Bill. As in previous debates, we have strayed into future spending and plans; of course, that is a debate for another day and one that we will have in the not-too-distant future. It is imperative that the legislation debated today completes its passage through the Assembly so that public services here can be delivered without delay or interruption.

In conclusion, I ask Members to support the Bill, thereby authorising spend by Departments in 2019-2020 and into the early months of 2020-21 in the Vote on Account. That will ensure the continued delivery of public services.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I advise Members that, as this is a Budget Bill, the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 66; Noes 4.

AYES

Nationalist

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGuigan, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilin, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin.

Unionist:

Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Mr Butler, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Frew, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.

Other

Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Lyttle, Mr Muir.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Boylan and Ms Kimmins.

NOES

Unionist:

Mr Allister.

Other

Ms Bailey, Mr Carroll, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms Bailey and Mr Carroll.

<i>Total Votes</i>	<i>70</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>66</i>	<i>[94.3%]</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>34</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>34</i>	<i>[100.0%]</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>28</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>27</i>	<i>[96.4%]</i>
<i>Other Votes</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>Other Ayes</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>[62.5%]</i>

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Budget Bill [NIA 02/17-22] do now pass.

Bereavement Support Payment (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): I beg to move

That the Bereavement Support Payment (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 be approved.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate. I therefore call the Minister to open the debate.

Ms Hargey: The Bereavement Support Payment (No. 2) Regulations (NI) 2019 set out the detail of the bereavement support payment scheme that was provided for in the Pensions Act (NI) 2015. The regulations were introduced following a public consultation that sought views on the reform of bereavement benefits, the principal aim of which was to consider how the former scheme could be improved to make it more effective and relevant in the 21st century.

Today, many bereaved spouses and civil partners are already in regular employment, calling into question the need for bereavement benefits to provide a subsistence level of income after the household breadwinner has passed away. The death of a working-age spouse causes a particularly acute financial impact in the months following bereavement. Accordingly, the main aims of the bereavement support payment are to focus financial support on that period, to provide a more effective and supportive system without encouraging long-term benefit dependency and to ensure fast direct help to people of working age to meet the immediate financial needs that can arise at a difficult time.

The new bereavement support payment simplifies financial provision and extends eligibility to those under the age of 45 with no dependent children and replaces the previous suite of bereavement benefits for new claims with effect from 6 April 2017. Those already in receipt of bereavement benefits will continue to receive their current benefit over the lifetime of their award. An initial lump sum with a further 18 monthly instalments is payable to a surviving spouse. Recipients with children will receive an initial larger payment of £3,500 and 18 subsequent monthly payments of £350. Those without children will receive a smaller payment of £2,500 and 18 monthly instalments of £100.

Contribution conditions have been simplified. The surviving spouse will receive a full payment if the deceased had paid National Insurance contributions at 25 times the lower earnings limit for any one year prior to their death. Payments will not be taxable and will be disregarded from means-tested benefits, contributory jobseeker's allowance and employment and support allowance and in the assessment of benefit income.

Age is not a factor in determining entitlement to bereavement support payment or the amount received. However, as that is now the case, entitlement will cease at state pension age. Remarriage or repartnering will not disqualify the bereaved individual from receiving the payment, as it is intended as a help with the additional costs of bereavement rather than as a replacement for earnings. Stopping payment because of repartnering or remarriage would be inconsistent with the revised function of bereavement support payment.

The original regulations were subject to confirmatory procedure, which meant that they ceased to have effect if not approved by resolution of the Assembly within six months of the operational date of 6 April 2017. As that was, obviously, not possible, the original Bereavement Support Payment Regulations have been revoked and remade twice each year since the Assembly fell in 2017, thereby ensuring continuing statutory cover under which to pay the bereavement support payments.

The current regulations, with an operational date of 29 September 2019, will cease to have effect on 29 March 2020 and, therefore, prevent further payment to new claimants if not formally approved by the Assembly.

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): The Committee considered the regulations on 6 February. As the Minister stated, the regulations stem from the Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2015, which makes provision for bereavement support payment to surviving spouses and civil partners after 6 April 2017. The bereavement support payment replaces three existing payments: bereavement payment, bereavement allowance and widowed parent's allowance.

The restriction of the payment to surviving spouses and civil partners was the focus of the Committee's discussion with the Department during its consideration of the regulations. A number of members expressed concern that the eligibility criteria excluded cohabiting couples from receipt of the payment and queried the human rights implications of that position, particularly in light of the Supreme Court ruling in the McLaughlin case, in 2018, in respect of widowed parent's allowance. The Supreme Court ruled that restricting eligibility to the allowance to married couples and those in a civil partnership, therefore excluding cohabiting couples, was incompatible with human rights law. The regulations that we are discussing were already in effect and had replaced widowed parent's allowance, but the exclusion of cohabiting couples from receipt of bereavement support payment has also been considered by the courts. In February 2020, the High Court in GB also ruled that the eligibility criteria, which denied payment of the higher-rate bereavement support payment to unmarried, cohabiting partners with children, are incompatible with human rights law.

Clearly, courts do not make laws, but they can often point politicians in the direction of where laws should be made or amended. The Department told the Committee that it has been in detailed discussions with DWP on the issue and is actively considering possible options, but, clearly, the law has not changed yet.

The Committee urges the Minister to look closely at the issue and engage with DWP on the back of the recent ruling by the High Court in GB to bring the bereavement support payment into line with human rights law and make cohabiting couples eligible for the benefit. The Committee is otherwise content to recommend that the Assembly approves the regulations.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Minister for bringing the statutory rule forward. Our Committee Chair, Paula Bradley, has outlined the discussions that we had in relation to ensuring that couples who are not married but cohabiting and their families are not discriminated against.

The move to change the statutory rule was already in progress when the McLaughlin case took place. We

need to get it cleared so that we can go forward with more definition and detail. As the Committee Chair, Paula, mentioned, the case in England, last month, has ramifications for the statutory rule here.

1.30 pm

This is a good move, and it provides much more clarity. It does not discriminate between families with married parents and those with unmarried parents. The process ensures that everybody has clarity, particularly children and families, on the bereavement payment. It goes without saying that bereavement is hard enough. Families have to deal with their emotional loss and all that comes with that, and, on top of all that, there is the financial burden. The new rule makes things easier, and the Committee looks forward to the introduction of statutory rules that provide greater clarity and certainty for everybody concerned.

Miss Woods: The motion is to maintain parity of payment with the legislation in the rest of the UK. It is a formality of legislating locally now that we have the opportunity to do so, and I am thankful for that. I want to reiterate a point that was brought up by others. The High Court in England ruled that denying bereavement support payments to unmarried cohabiting partners with children is incompatible with human rights. Currently, payments are made to those whose husband, wife or civil partner has died, but not to those who are living with but not married to their partner. That means that, each year, around 2,000 families with children lose out on a payment worth almost £10,000. Grieving children and their surviving parents deserve support whatever their marital status.

I want to bring the case of Siobhan McLaughlin to the House's attention. Siobhan was denied bereavement support by the then Department for Social Development when her partner of 23 years and father of their four children died in 2014. Eighteen months ago, she won a landmark Supreme Court judgment that the decision to deny her the widowed parent's allowance in respect of her four children was incompatible with human rights law, but she has still not heard how she will be compensated.

A recent case was brought by the Child Poverty Action Group on behalf of two families. The mothers had died, leaving the fathers caring for their young children. That case tested the principle that was established by the McLaughlin case. Both fathers were denied bereavement support payments on the basis that they were not married to the mother of their children, despite living with them for 14 years and 10 years respectively.

More recently, the Department for Work and Pensions was refused leave to appeal that decision, so we need to ask: what steps is the Minister discussing with DWP to amend the legislation? In addition, this question needs to be asked: what measures has the Minister explored to assist that family and others in the same situation in Northern Ireland while they wait for the legislation to be amended? For example, could an extra-statutory payment be made?

Grieving children's needs are no less for the fact that their parents did not marry.

Mr Carroll: I am very concerned that the motion, if successful, will introduce Tory austerity through the back door. The bereavement support system that we are voting on today was designed by the Tory-led Department for Work and Pensions, and its motive was clear. A

Department statement championed the fact that it could save up to £40 million a year. Let us consider for a moment a system designed to take money from vulnerable, grieving families to make savings for the Government. That is exactly the kind of logic behind the brutal welfare reform system that the Assembly voted for on the Tories' behalf. It is exactly the kind of rotten Tory austerity that we have heard decry in the Chamber over the past few weeks.

Just a few weeks ago, as I sat in a Unite community branch educational session, I heard about the devastating impact that these changes have already had on people. Last week and today, I spoke to benefits advisers. They told me that the system is a disgrace and that it should be scrapped and replaced by something that provides for people in their time of need. It is astounding to me, then, that the Minister for Communities would ask us to introduce a blatant tool of Tory austerity.

This new system leaves some recipients, including widowed parents, up to £12,000 worse off, and bereaved parents will lose out on financial support in the long term. Widowed parents with young children are hardest hit. The Childhood Bereavement Network estimates that 91% of widowed parents will be supported for a shorter period and claims that the latest DWP figures show that 75% of bereaved families will be worse off in cash terms under the new scheme. Worse still, because the new bereavement support payment will not rise in line with inflation, the support will lose value over time as the cost of a funeral or the cost of bringing up a child increases.

As the cost of living rises, we should be looking at how we can provide additional support to vulnerable people, not how to make savings at their expense. That is not even to mention the High Court case, as mentioned previously, which challenged the blatant disregard for human rights that this payment system upholds. That partners and parents who are not married cannot receive the payment has been legally proven to be incompatible with human rights. How, then, can the Minister expect us to support this system? To vote for this, as far as I can see, would be to endorse Tory austerity, approve human rights violations through the Chamber and send out a message to the recently bereaved that we do not think that they should get the financial support that they deserve.

I call on Members to vote against the motion, and I call on the Minister for Communities to bring forward urgent legislation that will introduce our own bereavement payment scheme to ensure that no parent or partner is left without support and to reintroduce those aspects of the previous system that were brutally cut out by the Tories.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As there are no further speakers listed, I will —. *[Interruption]* I am about to, yes. I will call the Minister. They are very keen to keep me right. I call the Minister for Communities to conclude and make a winding-up speech.

Ms Hargey: Thank you to all those who contributed. I share the concerns that Members have about recent judgements in the McLaughlin and Jackson cases and even about the comments of Mr Justice Holman in the High Court about looking at the human rights implications. When I came into the Department, I gave a commitment to protect the most vulnerable and to embed a rights-based approach at the heart of the Department and government.

There are concerns. I am moving on this today, and I am not here to defend what the British Government do. I am here to protect the most vulnerable. If the motion is not passed, it will affect families that are bereaved and going through a really hard time. I come from a family that was bereaved, when I lost my daddy, and I saw the impact of that on my mother, who had seven children.

I do not want to leave any family in circumstances whereby, by the end of March, they will not have support through the bereavement support allowance. That is not to say that we do not need to look at the seriousness of the alleged human rights breaches that the High Court commented on. I am liaising with my departmental officials and with the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that we uphold international human rights obligations and standards. I will roll out my intention on that in the coming weeks. I have touched on this in the wider welfare agenda, which is to ensure that we are embedding a rights-based approach and protecting the most vulnerable.

I have engaged with a variety of human rights and welfare organisations, and they know my intentions. I will outline in the weeks ahead how I will take forward all this work, again while protecting the most vulnerable.

By approving the regulations, we will ensure that continuing statutory cover is provided under which we can financially assist those who, sadly, will suffer a bereavement in the future. I thank Members for their interest in the regulations and the concerns that they genuinely raised. I hope that they will now back them. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Bereavement Support Payment (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 be approved.

The Social Security Benefits Up-rating (No. 2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2019

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: There will be a single debate on both motions. I will ask the Clerk to read the first motion, then I will call the Minister to move it. The Minister will then commence the debate on both motions. When all who wish to speak have done so, I shall put the Question on the first motion. The second motion will then be read into the record, and I will call the Minister to move it. The Question will then be put on that motion.

If that is clear — as mud — I shall proceed.

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): I beg to move:

That the Social Security Benefits Up-rating (No. 2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2019 be approved.

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

Ms Hargey: These two rules are part of the annual uprating package, which increases the rates of certain social security benefits, pensions and lump sum payments. Uprating usually occurs on an annual basis, and these two rules relate to the 2019-2020 uprating package.

Under sections 150, 150A and 151A of the Social Security Administration Act 1992, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in Britain undertakes a review each year of the level of benefits relating to the general level of prices. This is measured by the growth of the consumer price index (CPI) and determines the rate at which the various amounts should be increased, which allows benefit levels to maintain their value against inflation. The percentage uplift rate is determined by the change in the CPI in the previous 12 months up to September. The 2019-2020 uprating package is based on the rate at September 2018. For the period up to the end of September 2018, the CPI indicated a positive growth of 2.4%. It was therefore determined that price-indexed benefits will also be increased by 2.4%. When an uprating order is made for Britain under sections 150, 150A and 151A of the Social Security Administration Act 1992, my Department is empowered to make a corresponding order. My Department cannot increase the amounts of the benefits by a different or greater amount in the annual uprating order.

Most Members will be aware of the triple-lock guarantee, where the basic and new state pension would be increased in line with the highest of the growth in earnings and the growth in prices of 2.5%. The growth in earnings is measured by the increase in the average weekly earnings for the quarter ending July 2018. It showed an increase of 2.6%. Therefore, the basic state pension and new state pension were increased for 2019-2020 by 2.6%. The pension credit standard minimum guarantee also rose in line with average earnings at 2.6%.

Some technical provisions relating to the annual uprating are required to be made by regulations and, therefore, cannot be included in the uprating order. The Social Security Benefits Up-rating (No. 2) Regulations (NI) 2019 make the technical provisions required for the correct implementation of the increased rates. The regulations are made as a consequence of the uprating order. For the 2019-2020 uprating package, these regulations are

included in the increase to the carers' allowance earnings limit, which was usually made as a separate rule in previous years.

As a result of the 2019-2020 uprating package, approximately an additional £110 million will have been paid out by my Department to people here on social security benefits and pensions. I will shortly bring the 2020-21 uprating package before the House for approval. In the meantime, I am sure that Members will wish to ensure that people here can continue to receive the 2019-2020 rates and will, therefore, join me in supporting the uprating order and the consequential uprating regulations.

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): Statutory rule 2019/188 provides, as the title suggests, for the annual uprating of a range of social security benefits. Members will note that the majority of benefits will increase by 2·4%, and others by 2·6%. Quite a number of benefits are subject to this increase and referred to in the regulations. However, it would be disingenuous not to mention that some benefits were not uprated. That is a result of the Westminster Government's decision, in the summer Budget of 2015, to freeze increases to certain benefits for four years beginning in 2016-17. Therefore, the following are not being uprated: the personal allowance element of income support and jobseeker's allowance; the personal allowance and work-related activity components of the employment and support allowance and housing benefit; and the standard allowance limited capacity for work element and the lower disabled child addition under universal credit. That freeze is due to end this April, and we look forward to a possible increase in those benefits as well.

The Department informed the Committee that it has no power to set any other rates in respect of benefits or pensions in the annual uprating order. Overall, therefore, the Committee was content to recommend that the Assembly approves statutory rule 2019/188.

On statutory rule 2019/189, the Social Security Benefits Up-rating (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019, the Committee was informed that that package of seven regulations makes technical provisions that cannot be made in an uprating order.

They are necessary to ensure that the increased rates provided by the uprating order are implemented correctly.

The regulations, specifically regulation 4, include an increase in the amount that a person can earn in the preceding week without losing their entitlement to carer's allowance. The amount has increased from £120 a week to £123 a week. I am sure that Members will agree that carers are the unsung heroes of our social care sector, although the ability to earn an extra £3 will not noticeably improve their circumstances. There are also some increases in the earnings limit for child dependency payable with a carer's allowance, although those apply only to transitional cases. The Committee is content to recommend that the Assembly approve both sets of regulations.

1.45 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: No other Members are listed and no one has indicated a wish to speak, so I call the Minister for Communities, Ms Deirdre Hargey, to conclude and wind up the debate on the motion.

Ms Hargey: Thank you to the Chair of the Communities Committee and its members for considering the regulations. All benefits from April of this year will have the increase applied to them. That includes those that had the four-year freeze. I am pleased with the consensus and support across the Assembly for the uprating order and regulations. I again thank the Chair of the Committee and its members for the positive way in which they looked at and dealt with the rules, which provide for the continuation of the 2019-2020 increases in the rates of benefits and pensions. I commend the motions to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Social Security Benefits Up-rating (No. 2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2019 be approved.

Social Security Benefits Up-rating (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019

Resolved:

That the Social Security Benefits Up-rating (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 be approved. — [Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]

Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions and Amounts) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): I beg to move

*That the Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments
(Conditions and Amounts) (Amendment No. 2)
Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 be approved.*

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

Ms Hargey: The regulations are part of the annual uprating package and increase the compensation payable under the Mesothelioma, etc., Act (NI) 2008. There is no explicit legislative requirement to review the level of the payments each year, and the mesothelioma scheme stands apart from the main benefit uprating procedure. However, the regulations have increased the amounts payable in line with the rate of inflation. The amounts payable under the mesothelioma scheme have been increased for 2019-2020 by 2.4%, in line with the uprating of industrial injuries benefits.

I will provide a little background to the mesothelioma scheme. Under the scheme, those who have been exposed to asbestos can claim a lump sum payment if they are not entitled to claim under the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (NI) Order 1979 or have a civil claim elsewhere. The scheme provides financial help to persons diagnosed with diffuse mesothelioma or, if the person has died, to their dependants within a matter of weeks of diagnosis and without the need to establish an occupational link or, indeed, any causal link. That means that people who suffer from mesothelioma are eligible for a payment regardless of whether they were employees, self-employed or have never worked, provided that they have not already received a compensation payment from another source. For 2019-2020, the amount payable, for example, to a person aged 37 or under at diagnosis has increased from £90,097 to £92,259, which is the same maximum as can be paid under the scheme.

The regulations ensure that the compensation provided under the mesothelioma scheme maintains its value relative to inflation. I am sure that all Members will warmly welcome the provisions.

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): I thank the Minister for saying "mesothelioma" so many times. That will maybe help me in what I have to say.

As detailed in the explanatory memorandum, the regulations increase mesothelioma payments by 2.4%, in line with the increase in industrial injuries benefit. The Committee is content to recommend that the Assembly approve the regulations.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

*That the Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments
(Conditions and Amounts) (Amendment No. 2)
Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 be approved.*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The next item of business in the Order Paper is Question Time. I therefore propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 1.51 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr McGlone] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Communities

Social Housing: East Antrim

1. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on any plans she has to improve social housing stock in East Antrim. (AQO 282/17-22)

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): In respect of the maintenance of existing social homes, over this year and the next three years, the Housing Executive has programmed some £20 million of investment in improving and maintaining its stock in the east Antrim area. This will involve a range of scheme types, including the replacement of bathrooms, kitchens, electrics, windows and heating systems; external cyclical maintenance; the installation of external wall insulation; and other external improvements. Such a programme will be subject to the necessary funding being available and the timescales required for programme and scheme approvals.

In the East Antrim parliamentary constituency, 20 new social housing units have been completed to date in 2019-2020, and 117 social housing units are under construction. Currently, 50 social housing units are programmed to start through the social housing development programme in 2019-2020 and 2020-21: 20 units in 2019-2020; 30 units in 2020-21. Of course, programmed schemes can be lost or slip to future programme years for a variety of reasons, such as those relating to delays in acquiring sites or difficulties with securing planning permission.

'New Decade, New Approach' committed the Executive to:

"enhanced investment in new social home starts".

Mindful of this, I am considering the plans of my Department's social housing development programme for the next three years, and I should soon be able to set these out in detail.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for her answer. It is encouraging to hear that some investment will come. Recently, I have been trying to assist a disabled constituent who, following major surgery, has been virtually imprisoned on the first floor of his private rental property for over three months and unable to get to some hospital appointments as that requires four Ambulance Service personnel. Minister, will you review the currently inadequate provision of three-bedroom, disabled-friendly accommodation in my constituency with a view to providing more?

Ms Hargey: I am more than happy to look at that, and, if you want to share the specific details with me, I will get the Department and the Housing Executive to address that directly. I am more than happy to discuss the wider implications and the issues in your area.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for the information that she has imparted to the Assembly today. A scheme that was to take place in April 2020 at Bridewell Drive, Sunnylands Grove and Greenisland in Carrickfergus has now been pushed back, supposedly to September. We are always out to try to improve the stock. Can the Minister guarantee that that scheme will take place in September, as I think that the funding is already available?

Ms Hargey: Yes, I am keen to move with schemes as quickly as possible, but I will double-check that specific scheme and follow up in writing to you as soon as possible.

Ms Anderson: Minister, what plans are in place to improve the Housing Executive stock, particularly in places like Foyle?

Ms Hargey: We are looking at the quality of stock. I have raised that at Question Time and at the Committee previously. There are huge challenges in the Housing Executive, given its budget requirement over the next 30 years and the £3 billion of investment that is needed over the next 11 years. I am engaging in the Department and having discussions with the Department of Finance around issues such as corporation tax and debt legacy issues to see whether we can do something. Our obvious priority is to ensure that we retain our current stock and make sure that it is fit for purpose. Once I have concluded all those conversations, I will lay out plans on the longer-term trajectory of the Housing Executive to ensure that stock is maintained to the highest standards.

Mr Blair: Can the Minister confirm her commitment to shared housing by ensuring that new housing that is planned for the south Antrim area and, indeed, all other areas will be shared housing? Will she also commit to ensuring that all shared housing projects are promoted and managed as being inclusive for all citizens?

Ms Hargey: Previous Executives made commitments to look at shared housing. It is part of the overall housing agenda to build communities and neighbourhoods, but there is also a priority for me to ensure that I deliver housing going forward on the basis of objective need and where that objective need sits. I will outline that in the new housing development programme in the coming weeks.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Question No 2 has been withdrawn.

Liquor Licensing: Reform

3. **Mr O'Toole** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the reform and implementation of liquor licensing legislation. (AQO 284/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Licensing laws have remained largely unchanged since the 1990s, since there has been increasing concern about alcohol-related harm. On the other hand, there has also been a change in the social landscape here, with people going out later to enjoy what the night-time economy has to offer. For those reasons, reform of licensing laws is an Executive priority under New Decade, New Approach, and it is one that I am keen to progress as soon as possible.

Last week in the Chamber, the First Minister and deputy First Minister outlined the Executive's legislative programme. It includes a commitment to introduce

the licensing reform Bill before the summer recess. Towards the end of last year, my Department carried out a consultation to determine public opinion on current licensing laws. It also sought views on what should be changed in order to make the system more modern and flexible. There was a huge response to that consultation exercise. Over 1,500 responses were received, with an overwhelming number — there were 1,418 — coming from individual members of the public.

I have engaged over the last few weeks with stakeholders as part of my consideration of those issues. I have heard at first hand the impact that the current licensing framework is having. My officials have analysed the responses to the consultation, and I am considering them. I will move on with the next step over the coming weeks, which is to send a draft report to the Committee for Communities and to allow members time to comment on the consultation. An announcement will be made in the coming weeks.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Minister for her answer. As we all know, pubs are a critical part of the fabric of our society here. They are part of the tourism offer on the island. They are a unique part of how we define ourselves and our communities. However, in this part of Ireland, we have to put up with the absurd anachronism of our licensing laws, which have been overdue for reform for far too long. Pubs are already struggling with the threat of increased rates bills. Indeed, some are dealing with the reduced connectivity that has come about thanks to the Flybe collapse. Has the Minister given any consideration to the impact that delay and not having reform of those absurd, anachronistic licensing laws in place by Easter will have on those businesses?

Ms Hargey: Just on that, of course there needs to be change. There is no doubt about that. Most people reflected that there needs to be change, hence the consultation and why the issue is now included in the legislative programme before the summer recess. It will not be done before Easter this year, because time constraints just would not allow it. Obviously, it has to go through due diligence at the Committee and then in the Chamber. I am committed to bringing the paper to the Executive in coming weeks and then for that to go into the Committee system and to the Assembly itself. In the interim, I have met Hospitality Ulster and others, listened to their views and concerns and outlined my intent on the way forward.

Mr Stewart: I thank the Minister for the update and the commitment to bring forward licensing legislation. It is long overdue. One area in the licensing laws that needs to be changed is support for our microbrewers and microdistillers. The Minister will know that, as part of the consultation, there was a mass response from that industry. They are the innovators and entrepreneurs of Northern Ireland. There is a significant opportunity to drive the economy forward. Can you, Minister, give a commitment that their concerns and the limitations that that industry faces will be heeded and reflected in the new legislation? Will you also commit to meet the Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA) and other brewers when I bring them here in two weeks' time to air their ongoing concerns?

Ms Hargey: Thanks very much. Having read articles on this issue over the past couple of weeks, I am acutely aware of it. This is one of the new areas that was picked up in the most recent consultation that maybe was not there a number of years ago, because obviously the

industry has developed. I am aware of the constraints and it is something that I am considering strongly in the new legislation and proposals. If diary commitments allow me, I will be more than happy to meet that organisation in the next two weeks.

Ms Bradshaw: Minister, as a fellow South Belfast MLA you will be aware that, while pubs and hoteliers provide great benefits to our local economy, there is sometimes a downside. In what way are you engaging with councils around the renewal of entertainment licences as part of this process? As you know, sometimes they can contribute to the antisocial behaviour that falls out into our streets.

Ms Hargey: Obviously, I have a good experience of looking at issues in the Holylands and the Ormeau Road from being a councillor in Belfast up until two months ago. I am conducting a review of entertainment licensing, which will come forward soon, along with looking at renewed gambling legislation. All of this is being considered in the round. I will be moving first on the reform of liquor licensing, and, in the coming months, I will be looking at issues around entertainment licensing. I will obviously want to listen to residents and to drinking establishments and to engage with councils. I know that they will be putting in formal responses to the review and the consultation, as they have done with the liquor licensing review. I will be considering all of that in the round as I move forward with my recommendations.

Ms Ennis: I concur with the comments from my colleague across the Chamber, and I think that restrictive licensing laws have really hampered the growing industry of craft breweries. I hope that any legislation will reflect that and will enable our craft breweries to grow and flourish and actively contribute to our tourism product. In the interim, will the Minister look at increasing the Easter opening hours for licensed premises?

Ms Hargey: I will consider that, going forward. The consultation has picked up the emerging issues of craft breweries and microbreweries, and they will be reflected in the new legislation that will be put to the Assembly.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member who was due to ask the next question is not in his place.

Regional Stadium Fund: Casement Park

5. **Mr M Bradley** asked the Minister for Communities whether the recent announcement of the additional funding required for the redevelopment of Casement Park will impact other applications to the regional stadium fund. (AQO 286/17-22)

Ms Hargey: In March 2011, the Executive allocated a budget of £110 million to deliver the regional stadia programme. While both rugby and soccer stadia have been delivered, resulting in benefits for sport and the wider community, there have been delays to the Casement Park project. These delays have resulted in cost estimate increases which are higher than the budget approved nine years ago.

The Member asked about the regional stadium fund. To clarify, in March 2011, the Executive also endorsed a programme budget of £36.2 million for a subregional stadia programme for soccer, to be confirmed in a future budget period. On that basis, the Executive endorsed a programme budget of £36.2 million at that time.

I have stated my clear intention to deliver against the commitments in the New Decade, New Approach agreement for both Casement and the subregional stadia programme. Given the time that has elapsed, it is important that the programme reflects the current needs of the sector. To that end, my officials have been engaging over the past few weeks with key strategic stakeholders, including the IFA, the NI Football League and district councils, to inform the development of detailed plans for delivering a successful subregional stadia programme. Once that engagement is complete, I will consider proposals on how best to take the programme forward, including budget considerations.

Mr M Bradley: I thank the Minister for her detailed response. The state that Northern Ireland's football stadiums are in means that they need emergency help. How soon do you think you will be able to roll out this programme, and how soon will the funds be available to be drawn down?

2.15 pm

Ms Hargey: As was said, staff in my Department's sports branch are engaging with organisations. The initial report that was done in 2011 was updated in 2012, and there was an interim review of subregional stadia in 2016, but those are almost 10 years and three years respectively out of date. Since 2016, there have been changes in intermediate football, and those have had a knock-on effect on councils. I want to make sure that we future-proof anything that we do to meet the needs of soccer in the here and now and going forward. I am keen to move on the issue as urgently as possible. Once the initial engagements are concluded, I will outline my plans to take the programme forward. I am meeting the IFA in the next few weeks, so I will discuss that directly with it.

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Minister has already said that there are plans to go out to further consultation on the subregional stadia. In her discussions with the IFA, the Minister needs to raise the primacy rule and designated grounds, because, otherwise, other soccer clubs will be hampered.

Will she provide details about any future subregional stadia to the three big sporting bodies? Are there any plans to introduce funding measures for them?

Ms Hargey: All those matters will be part of the discussion that I will have with the IFA. I need to work closely with it in the time ahead to ensure that the investment that the Assembly puts in has a long-lasting impact on sport and participation in sports.

When I looked at the subregional stadia programme, the two other stadia, for rugby and Gaelic games, were not included. There was a commitment from a previous Minister for a subregional stadia phase 2, and I have asked officials to start scoping out that work. I will update the Committee and the House once that work is done.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Minister be seeking to increase the budget available for the subregional football stadia fund, similar to the increase that she is bidding for for the regional stadia fund? As part of her consultation, will she be engaging with football clubs? If so, I would be delighted to invite her to visit Glentoran Football Club in east Belfast.

Ms Hargey: The current budget commitments are £36.2 million for the subregional stadia. The increase for

Casement Park, as I explained to the Committee and previously in the Chamber, is as a result of uncontrollable costs. There was a redesign of the stadium as the result of a judicial review hearing, and its spectator capacity was reduced. The budget commitments also take into account inflation over the past six years, with increased inflationary rates year-on-year. We will not know the final budget until planning permission has been determined, and we will then go out to tender. As I said, the subregional stadia budget is £36.2 million, and I am keen to make a commitment to deliver on that programme. If there is a phase 2, I will look at what else needs to be done for soccer, but also for Gaelic games and rugby.

I have had 700 invites from organisations right across the Department's remit, and it will take time to get through them. I want to engage with the sporting code. That is why I am meeting with the IFA, but I am more than happy to go out and try to meet as many local football teams as I can. Glentoran has a good lobby. I have had a number of invites from the club. I am more than happy to go there when my timetable allows me.

Mr Nesbitt: To follow on from Mr Lyttle's point, if my maths is right, the uplift for Casement is 43%. Will the Minister commit to a similar 43% uplift for the subregional stadia, which, I think, would take the figure up to £51.8 million? I would love to invite her to visit Ards Football Club, but we do not have a permanent home.

Ms Hargey: On the reasons for the Casement uplift, there was court case. Therefore, Casement Park differs from what is happening with the subregional stadia programme. I have to consider the regional significance of the stadium. The increases are to do with health and safety, the redesign of the stadium and the six-year delay. There is a commitment to deliver on the £36.2 million for subregional stadia, but, as I said, I have already started scoping work to look at a phase 2. That would look at new moneys potentially coming forward to address any outstanding issues for the three sporting codes of soccer, rugby and Gaelic games. If time permits, I would be more than happy to visit.

Urban Regeneration: East Londonderry

6. **Mr Robinson** asked the Minister for Communities to outline any urban regeneration projects in East Londonderry. (AQO 287/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Through its regeneration programmes, my Department has an important role in delivering the Executive's Programme for Government outcome 10: creating places where people want to live, work, visit and invest in. Those regeneration programmes are designed to reverse the economic, social and physical decline in areas where market forces will not do that without our support.

Our main programmes are the public realm and revitalisation schemes, which are delivered in close partnership with councils. Officials in the appropriate development offices liaise with councils in the planning and delivery of those schemes. My Department has invested £11 million in a number of urban regeneration projects in the Member's constituency, including £10.7 million on the Portrush regeneration programme to prepare the town for the successful Open championship, and a £213,000 revitalisation scheme in Limavady that was

delivered recently and complements previous public realm works that were carried out in the town.

My officials continue to work with Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council to consider regeneration initiatives in towns in the constituency and recently agreed to provide funding to allow a public realm scheme at the Recreation Grounds in Portrush to proceed to full design.

Mr Robinson: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she outline any planned projects that her Department has to improve access to accredited training for young people in my East Londonderry constituency?

Ms Hargey: I do not have those details at hand, but I will follow that up with you in writing.

Mr Durkan: I am delighted to hear that more public realm schemes are in the pipeline for East Derry; it is great to see them wherever they may be. Will the Minister assure the House that any maintenance contracts associated with the upkeep of such schemes will ensure, or at least demand, swift responses from contractors to repair remedial defects?

Ms Hargey: Yes, all those things are considered when you go to procurement. The issue was raised recently, so we are scoping that out and looking at it. We will obviously consider that as we write procurement contracts. If the Member has any specific details, I would be happy to respond to him directly, but we will want to tighten up that area in the foreseeable future.

Mr Buckley: I also welcome the words about the increase in public realm works. The Minister may be aware that there is a considerable issue with some of the legacy public realm schemes, where there has been a failure to supply adequate disability access. Will the Minister commit from the Dispatch Box today that, going forward, disability rights and access will be at the forefront of any public realm schemes that come from the Department?

Ms Hargey: Yes, it is important to ensure that all our public realm schemes are accessible to all members of the public. I am responsible for the disability strategy, which will include co-design with those who are disabled and organisations that represent them. We will consider the issue of regeneration and public spaces as part of that strategy. If the Member has any specific points about legacy projects, I am more than happy to look at those. In the time ahead, we will want to ensure that we design public spaces that are public and accessible to people, no matter what their disabilities. I commit to doing that.

Disability Strategy

7. **Ms Rogan** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on a new disability strategy. (AQO 288/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Yes, thanks very much. In line with New Decade, New Approach, I will publish a timescale for the delivery of a new disability strategy in the coming weeks. That deal sets out that I should publish timescales on all the strategies by the end of March, and I have a commitment to meet that timetable.

As I said, the strategy will be developed using a co-design approach, which will be based on meaningful engagement with disabled people at all stages of the process. My Department will work closely with disability stakeholders and engage with people at the grassroots to identify the

issues and barriers that are faced by disabled people in the North.

The disability sector has spoken to me about ensuring that the voices of disabled people are heard and has emphasised the need for measurable outcomes that will make a real and lasting difference to be built into the new strategy.

I trust that my commitment to embedding the principles of co-design and co-production into the strategy's development will address those concerns. Through this approach, we will work together with stakeholders and other Departments, which is obviously key — this has to cut across the Executive — to put in place a strategy that targets and measures the things that will make a noticeable improvement to quality of life for all those with disabilities.

I am committed to ensuring that the most vulnerable have their voices heard and receive equal opportunities to participate in society. That will be reflected throughout the development and implementation of our new disability strategy.

My officials are drawing up the terms of reference for it at the moment and looking at who the engagement groups are. It is important that we engage with those at the grassroots, and, obviously, we will be engaging with the sector as to the best way to do that.

Ms Rogan: How will you ensure that all the Departments are signed up to deliver on their commitments in the strategy?

Ms Hargey: I have asked for engagement across all these strategies. Senior officials in each of the Departments can ensure that their people who are responsible for delivering policies can make decisions and look at the allocation of budgets within each of their Departments. That will be picked up in the terms of reference. Obviously, there is a responsibility on the other Ministers to ensure that the officials sent are at a high enough level to take the strategy forward in a meaningful way.

Ms P Bradley: The Department for Communities has many strategies that have waited an awfully long time to be brought forward. I welcome the fact that the Minister hopes to bring some of those forward before the end of March.

We had a briefing last week with engaged communities, and it was highlighted to us that an arts strategy is lacking, just to add to the list. Will the Minister also consider that in the round?

Ms Hargey: That is an issue that I looked at early on. We have an arm's-length body, the Arts Council. However, I am looking at how we can develop a coherent, overarching arts strategy within the Department, and that will impact on the Arts Council as well. Once I start to formulate my position and approach to that, I will be more than happy to present it to the Committee and, ultimately, to the Assembly, if it is requested.

Ms Armstrong: I am delighted to hear the Minister state her commitment to co-production and co-design. I was very interested when she described the terms of reference that are going to be used for the disability strategy. How many people with disabilities are working to pull together those terms of reference?

Ms Hargey: I am not sure about individual staff members. The terms of reference are, at the moment, being worked on by the equality unit in the Department. It is looking at

international obligations and domestic law around equality and disability rights. Before the terms of reference are formally adopted, I will discuss them with the sector to ensure that co-production starts from the terms themselves. I will be doing that across all the strategies that my Department has responsibility for. I will lay that out in the time ahead. I have not received the draft back yet. I have just had an initial meeting, but those sectors will see the terms of reference in draft before they are implemented and signed up to.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): There is time for one more quick question.

Ms S Bradley: I, too, welcome the news that the strategy is moving forward and that there is co-production and co-design so that the voices of disabled people are heard there. While the Minister has the stakeholders at the table, and, more importantly, she hears the voices of disabled people, could she also tell me what scoping exercise, if any, will be carried out to look at international good practice?

Ms Hargey: That is part of what the group will look at. Obviously, the strategy must reflect international human rights and embed those at a domestic level. It will also look at good practice in other Governments and local authorities here, across the island and, more broadly, across these islands. I imagine that it will be directed by those involved in the development of the strategy, which is a co-design piece. Looking at international standards and best practice across all the strategies is an element that will be addressed seriously.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Before we move to topical questions, I want to clarify to Members that they should continue to indicate if they wish to ask a question during oral questions. Otherwise, it will be presumed at the top Table that a Member has been fully informed by the Minister's previous answer and has no requirement to ask a question.

2.30 pm

PIP: Successful Appeals

T1. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister for Communities, given the high number of personal independence payment (PIP) applications, whether she knows how many people submit appeals and, of those appeals, how many result in a decision being overturned. (AQT 201/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I do not have the exact figures with me, but I can send them to you. I know that the rate of appeals overturned is higher, and I will seriously consider that in the time ahead. I will outline plans to look at the overall social security system, which includes PIP, universal credit and any future mitigations. I want to engage with the advice sector, human rights organisations — for example, the Human Rights Commission — and particularly those who are impacted on by social security benefits. I want to see what we can do to improve them in order to ensure that they protect the most vulnerable and that they embed a rights-based approach to the impact that the social security system should have on protecting the most vulnerable. I am more than happy to provide you with the specifics in writing.

Mr Clarke: In the short term, could a piece of work be done on the number of people whose initial application is refused, only for that decision to be subsequently overturned at appeal? In our offices, many of us hear about people who, when they go to appeal, are told by the appeal panel that they should not be there in the first place. That suggests that there is a problem with some of the people carrying out the initial assessments.

Ms Hargey: Marie Kavanagh, a former head of Gingerbread NI, is carrying out an independent review of PIP. She comes from the sector that represents people at the grassroots who are impacted on. I look forward to hearing about it. I have not been involved in it yet. I cannot engage, because it is independent, but I know that she is asking to speak to people on the ground. Information has gone out to the advice sector, where she, as the independent assessor, wants to engage with them to look at their experience. She will, obviously, engage with my Department and officials. We want a system that really meets the needs of people as and when they need it and without having to go through an appeal process, so I will look at that. However, I will not just rest and wait for the independent review. In the coming weeks, I will outline plans to look at the social security system, including PIP, and how we can make it more effective in meeting the needs of those who need it most. I am more than happy to discuss it with you after this sitting, and, in the time ahead, I will come back to outline my plans.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Mr Kelly's question has been withdrawn.

Neighbourhood Renewal Programme

T3. **Ms Anderson** asked the Minister for Communities, after welcoming her recent announcement on the neighbourhood renewal programme, within which a number of organisations, including the Glen Development Initiative, were very pleased to hear that she is to consider workers' rights, to outline how that funding will assist those in the most deprived areas to access the best services. (AQT 203/17-22)

Ms Hargey: As Members may know, I wrote to neighbourhood renewal partnerships just over a week ago to advise them that, to give certainty, I am securing their funding as is for this year and into the next financial year. Over 900 people are employed through the neighbourhood renewal programme. In our 10 most deprived communities, it delivers a variety of services both in the community and in a statutory setting. For me, as somebody who came from a neighbourhood renewal position and lives in a neighbourhood renewal area, it was fundamental that I give that certainty. I also gave a commitment that neighbourhood renewal areas will be involved in the co-design of the new programme. Obviously, the neighbourhood renewal programme needs to be reviewed to ensure that it meets the need and that we look at how we can eradicate poverty and address inequality. Those partnerships and communities will be involved in a co-design process over the next two years of the programme.

As you touched on, I have initiated a review of workers' rights, because there are concerns and issues in that people have not had a pay increase over the last nine years. There are no maternity leave entitlements for those working in the community and voluntary sector. It

is a sector that I have worked in my whole life, and I have committed to an urgent review of all those issues and at how we can address them. I will meet the neighbourhood partnership chairs on 18 March to discuss the issues.

Ms Anderson: Thank you, Minister, for that comprehensive answer. It is welcome news that you are meeting the neighbourhood renewal chairs. In line with the planning of that review, their workers would also like to be involved in the co-design. Will that be part of your outreach work when you take the plan forward?

Ms Hargey: The review will be with the partnerships, those involved in the partnerships, those who develop programmes and, more widely, those in the neighbourhood renewal area. Things have changed in the last 10 or 15 years since the neighbourhood renewal strategy, "People and Place", was first implemented. We need to make sure that, in a new programme, we address not only new and current needs but those needs that may emerge in the time ahead. I want there to be a serious co-design approach, and, as part of my engagement on 18 March, I will start to look at how we address that. I will also work with, for example, the Human Rights Commission on human rights issues and, again, on embedding a rights-based approach to the programme.

Protect Life 2 Strategy

T4. **Ms Flynn** asked the Minister for Communities to make a commitment that her Department will work with the Department of Health to progress the implementation of the Protect Life 2 strategy. (AQT 204/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Yes. The Executive's new working group looking at health and well-being — mental health and well-being — and suicide met for the first time last week. Minister Swann chairs that group, and there was a good discussion at the meeting among all the Ministers who were there, including the two First Ministers. There is a commitment that we will follow up with specific actions in the Department for Communities looking at positive mental health and well-being and suicide to see if there are more actions that we can take. More importantly, there was a good discussion about these issues being cross-cutting across the Departments, and it is important that resources, commitment in time and priorities are shared and discussed and not sectionalised in each of the Departments. There is a commitment to work with the Health Minister on that strategy and to look at mental health and well-being more broadly. In my Department, I have good instruments to do that in social security benefits, housing and tackling inequality in our most deprived communities. For all the issues, I rely on the Department of Health and all the Departments in the implementation, going forward. I have a commitment that I will continue that engagement with Robin and with the House on this crucial issue.

Ms Flynn: I thank the Minister for her response, and I commend some of the sporting and community activists who have recently established a new well-being forum in my constituency of West Belfast. Building on the Department's 'Wellbeing in Sport Action Plan', does the Minister agree that we need more mental health awareness training and initiatives for sporting and community groups, such as the well-being forum in West Belfast?

Ms Hargey: Yes, you are right. Participation in sport and physical activity has a really strong role to play in addressing positive mental health and well-being and tackling suicide. Working with the Department, Sport NI and partner bodies, we are looking at how we can increase efforts on that. Part of that will include looking at training programmes, and that is where the discussion with the Minister of Health last week and the other Ministers was useful. When you look across the Departments, you see a variety of programmes and training being organised, and we need to make sure that it has the impact that it needs to have and targets the areas that we know about. One of the alarming but unsurprising figures is that it is areas of poverty and deprivation that really feel the impact of this. Particularly as we are a society that is emerging from a political conflict, we need to address those issues. I am committed to doing that. We will also look at how we can involve our sports and community sector, because, in many ways, they are leading the debate and the campaign on the issues, and we need to support them in doing so.

Event Grant Scheme

T5. **Mr Harvey** asked the Minister for Communities, given that she will be aware of the rich culture and heritage associated with the Strangford constituency, and in light of the commencement of the latest event grant scheme for Belfast, does she have any plans to introduce similar grant schemes for other parts of Northern Ireland. (AQT 205/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I answered some of that in a question a few weeks ago. The Belfast grant scheme is something of a legacy programme that has been there for a long time. Whilst there is no intent to develop other programmes, my Department works with the other 10 councils in running programmes. We have a festivals fund that is disseminated across the 11 councils in which programmes are developed. Indeed, some of the moneys from our regeneration programmes and the neighbourhood renewal programmes go into events and funding. I will meet the Member soon, so I am more than happy to look at the issues, and, if there is anything that the Department can do in specific programmes, I will consider it and discuss it with you.

Mr Harvey: Does the Minister agree that it is vital that we use any publicly funded grants to grow our tourism potential and attract more major events to all parts of Northern Ireland?

Ms Hargey: Yes, we see the impact that having events and international events can have on a place. It will be important to work with local government, because it knows the issues on the ground, the impact and the cultural and arts organisations that we can dovetail into. If we can adopt a partnership approach to these events, I will be more than happy to do that. My officials already engage with the 11 councils, including the Member's council area, and, if there is something specific that we can look at, I will be more than happy to do that.

Finlock Gutters: Silverstream

T7. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister for Communities to work with her Department and the Housing Executive to put an end to the appalling conditions at Silverstream in North Belfast, given that she might know that, last year,

he met with the chief executive of the Housing Executive and the permanent secretary of her Department in relation to the Finlock gutters that have been installed on houses in Silverstream, where many constituents are having to endure dreadful conditions, including damp, while problems in other parts of the estate have been addressed through previous schemes. (AQT 207/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I do not have the specifics of that case, but I am more than happy to look at it after Question Time. I am meeting the chair of the board of the Housing Executive soon. We will look at such issues as upgrading its stock, and the issue of damp has come up in discussions. I am more than happy to bring up the specific issue and write to the Member with an answer.

Mr Humphrey: On 9 January, we received information from the Minister's Department in relation to funding for cricket over the past five years. Over the past five years, the Department has funded somewhere in the region of £1.8 million towards cricket — I declare an interest as the vice president of Woodvale Cricket Club — but, sadly, only £232,000 of that has gone to local cricket clubs in Northern Ireland. Will the Minister address that situation? I was speaking to the president of the Northern Cricket Union on Friday. Local cricket clubs are struggling. They need support; they need funding. That is a derisory amount of money over a five-year period, given the amount of money — £1.1 million — that was given to Cricket Ireland over the same period.

Ms Hargey: I hit a cricket ball in Woodvale park a number of years ago when I was on Belfast City Council. It is an excellent venue — just within Woodvale. You would not know it is there until you walk in. Obviously, Sport NI is the main arm's-length body for the dissemination of funds for sporting events and with the sporting codes. I am more than happy to look at that issue and to engage with the cricket union in the time ahead to see what we can do.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That concludes topical questions to the Minister for Communities.

2.45 pm

Economy

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): We now move on to questions to the Minister for the Economy. The Minister has given notice to the Speaker that she is not available to respond to questions, as she is overseas. The Minister of Education has agreed to respond to questions on her behalf today.

Transition of Young People into Careers (14-19) Project

1. **Ms C Kelly** asked the Minister for the Economy what action is being taken to ensure that young people and student representatives are given the opportunity to contribute to the transition of young people into careers (14-19) project. (AQO 294/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): I thank the Member for her question. Following on from the previous question, my aim is not to be stumped or bowled in the next 45 minutes by some of the questions.

The transition of young people into careers project is a collaborative project, jointly funded by the Department for the Economy and the Department of Education. The project aims to implement a more strategic and joined-up approach to the 14-19 education and training provision. Stakeholders are critical to the success of a 14-19 strategy. In recognition of that, the project has adopted a co-design approach, working alongside stakeholders to identify key challenges and build the evidence base that will support the development of a future strategy.

The project has engaged with a range of stakeholder groups, including young people, parents, schools, further and higher education institutions, training organisations, work-based learning providers and employers. The engagement with young people has been crucial, and it has focused on their personal experiences of progressing through the 14-19 education and training system. To date, the project has met a range of youth councils, youth clubs, young people on training programmes and further education students who are attending the South Eastern Regional College, the North West Regional College and the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE). The meetings have included young people aged between 12 and 25, who are from many different backgrounds and following a range of pathways.

The engagement has been immensely valuable, with the young people clearly articulating areas of strength and weakness in the current provision. Their views have informed the work of the project and will support ongoing policy development. It is essential that the 14-19 strategy be focused on the needs of our young people. As its development progresses, we will continue to ensure that their views are central.

Ms C Kelly: I thank the Minister for his answer. The strategy will affect students and young people more than it will any other group. Does he agree that it is essential that student unions and other organisations be afforded adequate opportunity to have input into the development of the strategy?

Mr Weir: I agree that they are central to the strategy. As we develop the 14-19 strategy, it will be important that it is fit for purpose and, given the learner experience of those who have gone through the existing strategy, that there is a level of future-proofing to make sure that whatever is done is fully available, if you like, and fit for purpose as we move ahead. For organisations such as the Youth Council and some of the further and higher education bodies, it is critical that, from submissions received and one-to-one engagements with officials, the widest possible amount of information be obtained. That can come from what is effectively a representative body of students or, indeed, from individual students' experiences. Sometimes, it is about learning from the successes of the past, but it is also about trying to ensure that, where there has perhaps been a failure at some point, we do not repeat it.

On behalf of both Departments, we are open to having that engagement. The restoration of devolution will also create an opportunity whereby a lot of the groundwork that has been done, particularly by officials, can be examined by Ministers and scrutinised by the Economy Committee to make sure that what we have is fit for purpose as we move ahead.

Mr Robinson: Given the challenges in agreeing a joined-up position on 14-19 education and training, what can we expect to be addressed in a strategy?

Mr Weir: Alongside the Minister for the Economy, I recognise that the 14-19 education and training landscape is complex. We are committing to working together to progress the development of a 14-19 strategy. To progress the development of the draft strategy, the project has identified a number of work streams. The identified areas that the project is focusing on include progression and pathways, funding, careers, curriculum delivery and post-16 education. That is based on the original ministerial correspondence, which dates back to the previous Assembly; the issues that arose through the innovation lab in 2018, when it was progressed; and subsequent engagement with stakeholders. A wide range of those are being covered by the work streams.

The project's initial output will be a high-level draft strategy that will outline the vision and guiding principles, the challenges associated with the current approach, and the features of a more strategic, joined-up approach. This will be cross-cutting, and the project is finalising a baseline position. It is also arranging to engage with further stakeholders, such as those mentioned by the previous Member, to agree the strategic priorities and to ensure that we have something that is fit for purpose.

Apprenticeships

2. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister for the Economy what plans her Department has to increase apprenticeships in local businesses. (AQO 295/17-22)

9. **Ms Ni Chuilín** asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department's apprenticeship strategy focuses on creating apprenticeships in areas that are most deprived. (AQO 302/17-22)

Mr Weir: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 2 and 9 together. They come from a similar position.

Increasing participation and awareness of apprenticeship programmes is a key objective for the Department for the Economy as apprenticeships play a central role in creating an effective and sustainable pipeline for skills development across Northern Ireland. Around 6,000 apprenticeships are created by employers across Northern Ireland each year — that number will vary from year to year — supported by the Department across a wide range of sectors.

The Department supports apprenticeships by funding the cost of off-the-job training through ApprenticeshipsNI and the higher-level apprenticeship programmes. Apprenticeship funding is paid directly to further education colleges, universities and contracted non-statutory training providers operating across Northern Ireland, several of which are in areas of deprivation.

The Minister for the Economy has met a number of employers and business organisations that are benefiting from the apprenticeship programmes. Minister Dodds attended the Northern Ireland Apprenticeship Awards 2020 ceremony during the first Northern Ireland apprenticeship week. She got to hear at first hand about the positive impact that apprenticeships are having on

businesses as well as the difference that the programmes are making to the lives and careers of apprentices.

The Department is working to increase demand for apprenticeships through a range of measures. It has initiated a project to widen access and increase participation, including considering the current apprenticeship age policy and the role that public-sector apprenticeships might play; improving support for employers; how participants access partnership opportunities; and considering what more can be done to widen access to a greater range of participants, particularly among under-represented groups.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for his answer. How can we ensure that local employers have the same rights as those in England and can access their contribution to the apprenticeship levy?

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for his supplementary. The apprenticeship levy is a UK-wide fiscal policy. The levy is a reserved matter for the UK Parliament. While Northern Ireland receives the Barnett consequential from the levy, that has not had a significant impact on the block grant. Although the collection of the levy is a reserved matter, with no scope for derogation for Northern Ireland, the delivery of apprenticeships is a devolved matter.

The Department provides funding to support the cost of apprenticeship training for private-sector employers regardless of the level of their levy contribution. Those apprenticeship programmes are largely demand-led. All employers are encouraged to avail themselves of the programmes to drive business growth.

The Department continues to consider the issues raised by employers during the consultation on the impact of the levy in Northern Ireland, including the current age-related criteria; potential public-sector apprenticeships, which are, effectively, barred; and how to improve transparency for employers on the level of funding support that is available through participation in apprenticeship programmes.

Mr Beggs: The Minister rightly referenced the scheme in England. He also indicated that there is a need to increase the demand for these schemes. I understand that, in England, 90% of the cost is paid by the Government and 5% by the employer, whilst, in Northern Ireland, 50% is paid by the employer. Does he accept that, if we were to follow the English model, we would encourage many more firms to come forward and invest their time and energy in developing the workforce for the benefit of the entire economy?

Mr Weir: Anything that the Department can do to help to facilitate an increase in the number of apprenticeships should be looked at and encouraged. While all of us would like to reach an ideal funding mix, it will need to be examined in the context of the available resources. If we are going to change the mix to create a much greater resource allocation coming directly from the Government, that will need to be funded. As part of the overall Budget settlement, there will be an examination of what is available through the Department for the Economy and what can be done. Clearly, if there is going to be a shift in resources, that will have to be centrally funded.

Mr Lyttle: How are the Minister for the Economy and the Minister of Education working together to promote parity of esteem for apprenticeships as part of the 14-19 strategy?

Mr Weir: The Member raises a very valid point. While, broadly speaking, in Education, we have seen an upward trend in academic success, there is a need — it was raised an issue when I spoke to the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, for instance — to ensure that there is a much more-level playing field and that non-academic routes are valued. We need to ensure a greater parity of esteem. In that context, we will be considering pathway proposals. It is about ensuring that society places that parity of esteem on non-academic routes, but it is also about having clear pathways for those non-academic routes, particularly into business. That will be of potential value both to employees and employers, who will not get such a diverse range. It is about ensuring that we have that recognition. The Minister and I will be working to take the work that was done in the non-devolutionary phase and embed it in a proper 14-19 strategy.

Ms Dolan: The latest NISRA report on apprenticeships measures a programme's success on apprentices completing their final year and attaining a qualification. There is no reference to retention rates during the first or second year, when apprentices are more likely to drop out. Will the Minister review how success rates are monitored on apprenticeship programmes?

Mr Weir: The Department will always want to look to see that we deliver success from the investment that is put in and, indeed, in respect of the life chances of the young people who go through the apprenticeships. We will keep under review the monitoring of the apprenticeship intake — obviously, the aim is not simply to give a year's or two years' training and for that simply to go to waste — to try to ensure that we get that follow-through in apprentices helping to feed the economy. The Member makes a valid point in that regard. By their nature, apprenticeships are not necessarily an end in themselves. They are a means to an end of ensuring, from an economic point of view, that there is a throughflow of a technically skilled workforce but also, from the point of view of being able to transform the lives of young people, that they benefit from it and are helped to develop as economically active citizens.

Mr Allister: Does the Department think that our larger employers, who are paying the national apprenticeship levy, are getting a fair deal? Yes, money comes back in Barnett consequentials, but is that money even spent on apprenticeships? Are we not in a situation where major employers are paying a hefty levy but not getting anything like the return that their GB colleagues are getting?

3.00 pm

Mr Weir: The Member has to realise that the levy is a reserved matter. Therefore, the amount that comes from various employers is not set by the Department in Northern Ireland. Indeed, there are concerns — wearing my hat as Minister of Education — that a levy will come from schools when there is no opportunity for apprenticeships in the public sector, which means, effectively, that it will become a drain on our resources.

As I indicated, the funding of apprenticeships is very much demand-led. Consequently, although we do not have any particular control over the amount taken out by the apprenticeship levy, part of it is to help to facilitate and encourage employers to take on apprentices. What is drawn out is very much in the hands of the employers. That is managed by the various sectoral bodies that were

set up to look at various sectors of the economy. Although the Department can be the facilitator, it cannot be the provider that says, "Here's precisely where this money is diverted to". It has to be demand-led.

Ms Bailey: Will the Minister let us know what the balance is between available apprenticeships for those educated to degree level and those not educated to degree level? Where can we get information on all available apprenticeship courses? Is that published by the Department?

Mr Weir: Undoubtedly, the Department can provide that information. I think that the Minister will be happy to provide you with the balance and statistics in writing. I do not have the detail of the balance. The Department has been trying to encourage uptake. For instance, the number of employers has increased. We have tried to make sure that, through widening participation in apprenticeships, there is encouragement for those who come from a less academic background or, indeed, a background that does not always take up apprenticeships, and that there is greater availability. There has been some success with that. As with all these things, it is a work in progress.

Broadband

3. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of the basis for the statement that 18,390 more houses are now receiving broadband coverage of at least 30 megabytes. (AQO 296/17-22)

5. **Mrs Barton** asked the Minister for the Economy whether premises in rural areas with the poorest access to broadband will be the first to benefit from Project Stratum. (AQO 298/17-22)

Mr Weir: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will take question 5 with question 3.

On receipt of updated broadband coverage data from suppliers during the procurement process, the number of premises in the targeted intervention area has been reduced to just over 79,000. That means that some 18,000 premises already access, or will be able to access, services of 30 megabits per second or greater over the period of the open market review. That is positive news because the public funding, together with the anticipated bidder contribution, will, potentially, go further in extending coverage across a reduced intervention area. The significant proportion of the 18,000 or so premises removed from the initial targeted intervention area relate to a data refresh exercise that was carried out by a major supplier on a national UK basis. Minister Dodds is satisfied with the progress that followed. The outcome has been validated by Building Digital UK and assurance provided to all UK regions and devolved institutions.

Over 95% of the revised target area is rural, defined using the NISRA guidelines as band H villages, which have a population of fewer than 1,000 and premises that are in open countryside. Analysis undertaken by the Department and advice from independent advisers indicate that it is not possible to prioritise specific geographical areas without potentially sacrificing overall coverage, increasing cost and slowing delivery. Although the precise number and location of premises that are to directly benefit will not be known until after the contract award, the continued aspiration of

the Department is to maximise broadband coverage from the funding available.

Mr McAleer: I thank the Minister for his response. He will be aware from my previous question to him in his former role as Education Minister that we are very interested in Project Stratum in the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council area, which has the worst access on these islands to superfast broadband. Does he believe that the Department for the Economy is accurate in its assessment that 18,390 fewer premises will require superfast broadband under Project Stratum?

Mr Weir: I appreciate the Member's concerns, particularly about the Fermanagh and Omagh area. The statistics that I have are based upon constituency returns rather than council area returns, and they suggest that Fermanagh and South Tyrone has the lowest level of coverage above 30 megabits and that West Tyrone has, I think, the second lowest level. I appreciate the Member's concern. I can only reiterate the assurance on the accuracy of the figures. Obviously, the figures on the roll-out have been verified on a UK-wide basis as being accurate. Clearly, from the point of view of what is still to be covered, particularly in the Member's constituency of West Tyrone, just under 10,000 premises in West Tyrone do not have access to 30 megabits, and those are within the overall 79,000 that we are looking at in the targeted intervention. The aim is to deliver the whole project. As I said, this is very much based, particularly as 95% of the premises are in rural parts of Northern Ireland, on having those from a rural background on a level playing field with those in other parts of Northern Ireland. There are variations throughout Northern Ireland, and even in Belfast, there are some pockets in very urban constituencies that do not have the full roll-out of 30 megabits.

Mrs Barton: You spoke, Minister, of villages with fewer than 1,000 people being targeted for this broadband, which is excellent. However, you also talked about value for money. Once again, that seems to avoid the most rural areas that still will not have broadband at the end of the roll-out. In rural areas, you do not get value for money if you target those who are most isolated.

Mr Weir: To be fair, I am not sure that I used the expression "value for money". It is about trying to ensure that whatever resources we have are spread as widely as possible. Again, I may have given the slightly wrong impression, but, when I talked about settlements of below 1,000, I was also covering open countryside. The definition in the NISRA statistics is, I think, band H. That is used as part of the definition for the rural side. Using that condition, 95% of the 79,000 premises targeted will be in band H. That can be smaller villages, but it can also be individual properties in the open countryside. It is meant to cover both those. As indicated, the aim is to get that level of coverage throughout Northern Ireland as a whole and to cover even individual properties. It is not aiming to discriminate against any individual. Clearly, if we are in a position to provide it, hopefully, there will be 100% coverage, or we will, at least, get the vast bulk of areas covered.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his response today in his new role in his new Ministry. I obviously welcome the Minister's commitment to deliver on this project, with £150 million being allocated through confidence-and-supply.

Can he advise when the contract is likely to be in place and when installation work is planned to commence?

Mr Weir: Obviously, there is an issue with securing all the funding. As has been mentioned, this project was initiated through confidence-and-supply, which probably puts it in a different position to some other projects. There is ongoing work with Treasury in relation to the delivery timetables, but, on the open-market side, the contract is expected to be awarded in September of this year. The Department's early engagement with industry indicates that about a six- to nine-month period is required for network design and delivery preparation. It is therefore anticipated that the deployment of infrastructure will not commence until April 2021. The aim is to look at the earliest point of completion, and it will probably take three years to roll out as a minimum. So it is not something that is going to happen instantaneously; there will be progression over time to deliver it.

Mr McCrossan: The Minister will join me in acknowledging the importance of this infrastructure, particularly for rural communities like West Tyrone, when we see the closure of rural banks, homework being done online and also the benefits system being online. It is vital for my constituents. The Minister clarified that 10,000 homes in West Tyrone are affected. What is the figure for Fermanagh? How quickly will this be rolled out in my constituency, which is suffering quite a bit?

Mr Weir: Obviously, we are taking this as the number of premises in West Tyrone that do not have access to the 30 megabits. The exact figure that we have is 9,973 premises. We will not know the specific time frame until the evaluation of the bids has been completed and a contract awarded, because the time frame will play a part in that. As I said in answer to the previous question, we are looking at work on the infrastructure starting in 2021 and hopefully being completed by 2024 at the earliest.

On the comparison of numbers, as I said in answer to a previous question, West Tyrone has the weakest provision. The proportion of people who receive above 30 megabits in West Tyrone is 74%; the proportion in Fermanagh and South Tyrone is lower than that at about 70%. I do not know offhand the exact population figures for West Tyrone and Fermanagh and South Tyrone, but, proportionately, that means that there is a slightly higher number to be delivered in the Fermanagh and South Tyrone area. Across the piece, the next lowest percentages are Mid Ulster at 76% and South Down at 78%. There is no constituency that is 100% above the 30 megabits that may be regarded as having superfast broadband. Clearly, the more rural the constituency, the lower the provision at present, which means the higher the level of intervention that will take place. As I said, around 12.5% of the overall number of properties that will need to be hit will come from the West Tyrone area.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): A brief question from Mr Humphrey.

Belfast Zoo

Mr Humphrey: The Minister is doing rightly in his double-jobbing role. He will, I am sure, accept that Belfast Zoo is an important regional attraction for Northern Ireland in tourism, animal husbandry and education. Will the Minister commit to meeting the directors of Belfast City Council to

take forward Belfast Zoo and develop it as a growing and important tourism destination in Belfast?

Mr Weir: The Member is right that there has not been any recent engagement between the Department for the Economy and Belfast City Council on Belfast Zoo or its site. As with other Departments of the Northern Ireland Executive, the Department for the Economy is facing a very challenging budgetary environment, so any potential spend for tourism development at Belfast Zoo would need to be considered in the context of the emerging tourism strategy and strategic priorities for the economy.

However, that strategy needs to be based on the greatest level of knowledge and engagement. I am sure that the Economy Minister will be happy and keen to meet representatives of the city council to look at the zoo, which is essentially a regional facility.

3.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That ends listed questions to the Minister. We now move on to topical questions.

Childcare Workers: NICICTU Policy Paper

T1. **Ms Rogan** asked the Minister of Education, representing the Minister for the Economy, what action will be taken to improve the pay conditions for childcare workers in the light of findings published in the Irish Congress of Trade Unions' (NICICTU) report on the sector. (AQT 211/17-22)

Mr Weir: Development of childcare is, to a certain extent, cross-cutting, particularly for the Executive as a whole. As part of that, the Department of Education is aiming to bring a childcare strategy to the Executive fairly soon, and the level of support for workers will form one element of it. It is clear that, if there is to be a further level of intervention and a greater level of support for childcare, the Executive will need to be able to commit to that, because, although childcare strategy lies within the Department of Education and has implications for certain economic facilities, there is not the budget in the Department of Education to pay for an expansion per se. It will therefore need to be an Executive commitment.

On the broader childcare strategy, a commitment to increase the offer is made in New Decade, New Approach, so there is a requirement to do that. That having been said, the Executive will have to weigh up the various pressures that are there, because, as has been highlighted by the Finance Minister and others, the amount being sought for a range of activities is beyond what the overall budgets will be. That is also on another track. The Finance Minister has been engaging with Treasury on the issue to try to ensure that there is that support, particularly for the delivery of New Decade, New Approach.

Ms Rogan: The report published in June 2019 highlighted the fact that childcare workers are paid below the median rate of other workers and are less likely to be paid the real living wage, despite the important work that they do. Meanwhile, average weekly childcare spend by workers here is higher than in England, Scotland and Wales. Will the Minister address the issues that affect childcare workers and working families?

Mr Weir: There is a conjunction of issues within that. An expanded childcare offer is critical to being able to support our education system. It is important to get that earlier intervention, because it leads to an educational bonus.

There is also an economic bonus, because the focus has been on three- to four-year-olds and the aim is to provide an affordable childcare offer. That will require, as I said, a level of investment from the Executive. That is not to say that any childcare strategy will focus purely on three- to four-year-olds, and we will debate that issue tomorrow. Any increase, even in the offer that can be made for three- to four-year-olds, will require a large expansion of the sector. At present, for instance, about 62% of those who are receiving support through the preschool programme are getting it on the basis of the place being a part-time one. That needs to change. With expansion, we will create further opportunities for people on the workforce side.

As we move ahead, it is not simply a question of getting some additional resources, putting them in and the strategy happening. We will also need to look at where we can have greater support for workforce development. A more holistic approach is required. Even if the Executive give the green light to a childcare strategy, it will not be able to be delivered overnight. Time will be required to help build up the sector. Much of that is revenue-based, but, in part, a certain level of capital assumption will need to be made, because we simply do not have the scale of premises. Some childcare providers have one group of children in the morning and one group in the afternoon. If we move to a situation in which there are more full-time places, that will create pressure on the capital side as well.

Flybe

T2. **Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister of Education, representing the Minister for the Economy, what efforts are being made to mitigate the current difficulties being experienced at Belfast City Airport and beyond, given that the collapse of Flybe has resulted in job losses, customer chaos and a direct hit to our local economy, particularly the tourism sector. (AQT 212/17-22)

Mr Weir: There has been engagement. Flybe was very much an anchor airline at Belfast City Airport. Clearly, some work was done in January 2020 with the UK Government. They announced that they had reached agreement with the shareholders of Flybe, who would put more money into the business on the basis that there would be reviews into air passenger duty (APD) and connectivity. That turned out not to be enough. We can speculate about the extent to which current travel problems with regard to coronavirus have exacerbated the situation.

On 5 March 2020, the Minister met the airport's management and was encouraged to note that it had stated that there was interest in all of the route network, and it was confident of announcing backfill in the next few days and weeks. As a result, the chief executive of Belfast City Airport was able to reach agreement with Loganair to take up the first two of those slots. It is hoped that there will be good news as we move forward.

That is a very specific issue with that element of Flybe. Clearly, if the overall situation is to flourish, air connectivity and air passenger duty, which are reserved matters, need to be examined thoroughly. The Minister has raised the issue with the UK Minister for aviation, Paul Maynard,

and the Secretary of State. Due to the geographical location, there is a dislocation, which means that available substitutes for travellers by the road or rail infrastructure in other parts of the UK are simply not available here. It is important that the Government take heed of the very clear message that the Minister has given and ensure that there is a thorough review that actually leads to changes to APD and air connectivity.

Ms S Bradley: Flybe cited COVID-19 as being the final stress for its business, which forced its closure. Will the Minister advise the House on the measures that are being considered or delivered by the Department for the Economy in order to ensure that businesses and the economy in general are protected in the best possible way against the impact of COVID-19?

Mr Weir: The Member rightly highlights the fact that COVID-19 was seen very much as the final straw for Flybe. We should recognise that, unfortunately, Flybe was in difficulty prior to that, which led to intervention by the Government.

On the broader preparations, the Department for the Economy is working closely with the rest of the Executive, and particularly with Treasury, because it is likely that the Budget will be announced on Wednesday 11 March 2020. That will look particularly at additional measures that can be put in place to provide protection for business. We can speculate about what some of those measures will be, but we need to ensure that there is follow-through for Northern Ireland businesses. Some measures are likely to be direct support for businesses. Some will be about at least seeing whether some of the burdens on businesses can be postponed. The Department will work closely with its counterparts in London to ensure that the full range of measures is available. There is no doubt that it is a fast-moving situation. It will, therefore, be a question of trying to anticipate, where possible, where changes can take place and then be able to try to implement those as quickly as possible.

Coronavirus: Zero-hours Contracts

T3. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Education, representing the Minister for the Economy, in continuing the coronavirus theme, whether she has held discussions with the Minister for Communities about the establishment of a hardship fund for people who are employed on zero-hours contracts. (AQT 213/17-22)

Mr Weir: I know that we are in an era of fluid gender recognition and self-identification, but I was not aware that the Member was going to self-identify me on my behalf with regard to my gender.

Part of the UK action plan looks at the impact on workers, particularly with voluntary leave, and ensures that, where there are temporary absences, it is able to kick in at an earlier stage to ensure that those workers are covered. We will be working with the UK Government, and we will be seeing where there are any examples from other devolved Administrations. I suppose it is about seeing what additional money can be brought in and then what can be spent, because we cannot spend beyond what is available. The Department will be looking at having those ongoing discussions to try to ensure that maximum provision is made to combat the economic impact of coronavirus.

Mrs D Kelly: I trust that the Minister will understand and appreciate that my question referred to the Minister for the Economy, thus the use of “she”. It was not an attempt to realign his gender in any way. I do not think that people listening will be content with the answer given. People will be thinking that much more needs to be done to help people who have to self-isolate and who are on zero-hours contracts or are self-employed. Will the Minister undertake to urgently address this matter and provide some confidence to the people who are affected?

Mr Weir: I am sorry that the inadequacy of my answer has disappointed the Member. I think that work will take place and that there will be discussions between the Northern Ireland Executive, particularly the Department for the Economy, and the Treasury. To be fair, this will be responded to as soon as it can be, and the detail that emerges out of that will lie within the direct remit of the Minister for the Economy and will be based on the information that she has. I am sure that, as announcements are made, Members and all of us who are in a very concerning situation will be informed of developments as they take place.

Teachers: Irish-medium Sector

T4. **Ms Mullan** asked the Minister of Education, representing the Minister for the Economy, whether the Department for the Economy has had any discussions with the Department of Education about developing a workforce strategy to increase teacher numbers in the Irish-medium education sector. (AQT 214/17-22)

Mr Weir: There will be ongoing discussions on that. There is an unusual situation, which is that the Department of Education sets the numbers for any section of teacher training, and the Department for the Economy is responsible for paying for that. I have met representatives from Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG), who, I think, are drawing up more detailed proposals. I am certainly taking on board what is being said, and that will form the basis of any discussion. I think that that organisation has some initial thoughts on that, and we have to scope that out to ensure that what is there is deliverable.

There is also the issue of what is done in the medium term for Irish-medium-education training. Clearly, you cannot turn someone from being a student, even a postgraduate student, into a teacher overnight. Even if additional numbers were provided this September or the September after that, we would then be seeing what interim measures could be put in place to ensure that sufficient support is being provided for this sector — indeed, all sectors — to meet the needs of their students. We will be working with the sectoral body on that. That may be a question of identifying people with teaching backgrounds who could do a conversion course or examining the issue through an audit. I am open to whatever suggestions are made. The main aim is to ensure that there are sufficient numbers of teachers to be able to provide for the students who need to be taught.

Ms Mullan: I thank the Minister for his answer. I think he crossed over to speak as Minister of Education. I thank him for his meeting with CnaG and the action he has already taken. I suppose, in working with his colleague in the Department for the Economy, it is about ensuring that the increased resources will be provided to facilitate the

teaching of subjects through the Irish medium, as it is the fastest-growing education sector here at the minute.

Mr Weir: It is important that initial teacher education is fit for purpose and provides for that. Obviously, we will be working on the numbers and what interim measures to take, but the matter of longer-term financial commitments will directly involve the Department for the Economy. I am sure that the Minister will be mindful of the Member's comments.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That concludes topical questions to the Minister. I thank Members and the Minister for their cooperation throughout. Members should take their ease as we move to the next item of business.

3.30 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

Education

Coronavirus Advice to Schools

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

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education for an update on the advice he has provided to schools in relation to coronavirus.

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): Although, primarily, tackling coronavirus is a health issue, my Department is leading on the issue of relevant and appropriate advice and guidance to schools and education partners provided by the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency (PHA).

The Department of Education advises parents and schools to keep up to date with the Public Health Agency guidance on COVID-19. Information is available on the PHA website, and we have been including that link in any contact that we have with schools. If a school has any concerns about suspected or confirmed cases of coronavirus, it should, in the first instance, contact the NHS 111 helpline.

More specifically, on 27 February, I wrote to all school principals and education sector partners enclosing the link to the PHA website, which is updated as the situation develops, and emphasised the importance of monitoring the website regularly. I have encouraged schools to follow the guidance, in particular the need to practise good hand hygiene amongst staff and pupils. I reiterated that the PHA is available to speak to individual schools, which it has offered to do, that may have specific concerns about COVID-19; indeed, it has also offered advice on levels of risk assessment. Included in my email was the updated Chief Medical Officer's advice and a link to the UK Government's latest advice and guidance. I also had the opportunity to speak to the Chief Medical Officer when the first issue arose.

My Department continues to communicate with our education sector partners, schools and education settings using existing communication links and has issued PHA school advice leaflets and self-isolation advice leaflets to the education sector groups. I have also ensured that a link to the PHA website is prominently placed on the Department of Education website.

Earlier today, given the change in position that was outlined last night by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my Department issued an update to all schools highlighting the change in the advice on travel to areas of northern Italy. For those who have not seen that advice, it

is that, unless travel is essential, people should not go to the areas in northern Italy that have been quarantined.

The welfare, health and safety of pupils and staff are paramount. Departmental officials and I, in collaboration with the Department of Health and the PHA, will continue to monitor the evolving situation. We will update schools and education settings where appropriate and as soon as practically possible when there is any change to the situation.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for providing an update to the Assembly on his advice to schools on coronavirus containment. Does he accept that there are school leaders across Northern Ireland who feel that they have been passed from pillar to post to get clear guidance, particularly regarding pupil travel to areas affected by coronavirus? Will he assure the Assembly that schools will have direct contact with an appropriate person to seek up-to-date advice on any and all pupil travel of that nature? Will he also advise the Assembly what contingency planning is taking place to maintain education provision should it be necessary to consider school closures?

Mr Weir: We are working with officials on contingency planning to see what is appropriate. This is a moving situation. As part of that, the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), for instance, is developing its work should school exams be hit.

The Member mentioned clear guidance. I know that at least one school had an issue with the PHA on day one. He mentioned a single point, and it is vital that there is a single point of information. That is what has happened with the advice. We have said that the PHA is the single point for health advice, and that is where we advise people to go. It is not my or the Department's place to give an interpretation of other people's advice or, indeed, to provide contradictory advice, which could be worse. We have also made it very clear that schools should get travel advice directly from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, which is a single point of advice. Getting conflicting advice on travel or hygiene would be irresponsible and dangerous. It is also the case that, while there is the direct advice of the NHS helpline, the PHA has made that very publicly clear. The Chief Medical Officer has also made contact with a number of schools where that has happened and, indeed, has held a conference call with school principals so that that single point of advice was there and he was able to answer questions directly. As we move ahead, the responsible action must be to maintain a single piece of advice and a single point of advice so that there is no confusion or contradictory positions out there.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Minister for his answer on the serious issue of coronavirus. Will he outline what engagement he has had with his colleagues and counterparts at a national level across the UK following on, of course, from the First Minister's meeting this morning with COBRA?

Mr Weir: There are a number of points. First, where COBRA has operated and will continue to operate will involve not simply the national Government but all the regional Administrations, including the Executive as a whole. From working with colleagues in the Executive Office and the Health Department, I know that they have been directly involved in those COBRA discussions. I have spoken specifically to the Health Minister and the

Executive Office through the First Minister to highlight where, we feel, there are emerging issues. I know that Northern Ireland has made particular and specific contributions to the discussions on school trips. It was important that an overall, central UK-wide decision was taken and that, again, there was consistency of information. There has also been a range of discussions between officials at a level directly below COBRA. Those have taken place on a nationwide basis with the relevant officials also taking part, and that has involved not just Health officials but Education officials. Some of those were discussions of the communication side of things.

Ms Mullan: I thank you, Minister, for your speedy response last week to my colleague Caoimhe Archibald. I know that a number of schools were very anxious, so I thank you for that response.

Minister, we will, hopefully, welcome you to the Committee on 18 March to discuss special educational needs issues and, of course, a response to the coronavirus. The Committee has written to your Department to seek clarity on trips and deep cleans, so I thank you for your updates today. England, Scotland and Wales have established an education working group specifically on coronavirus under the leadership of EdTech UK and Independent Schools Council (ISC) digital group. It is specific to schools, in order to give emerging advice in practice. Department of Education (DE) England has also produced excellent guidance, alongside a specific helpline for schools. Will the Minister establish a similar group here to update school leaders with emerging advice and practice and to provide advice on preparation for GCSE and A-level examinations?

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for her comments. I will meet officials directly after this Question Time to be updated on progress on coronavirus. I am keen to ensure that there are single points of contact for advice. For departmental plug-ins as regards schools, I will look to see whether the best route on that is to coordinate with other jurisdictions so that we have a consistent message or whether there needs to be something bespoke for Northern Ireland. I want to ensure that whatever advice is given is, as much as possible, accurate and up to date as regards schools.

Mr McCrossan: I will follow on from a point made earlier. Principals have been telling me that they feel isolated, for want of a better description. They say that EA has been unhelpful, there has been no clear guidance or policy and they are under huge pressure to make the right decision in the interests of their children and staff. What happens, Minister, if a principal makes the decision to go ahead with a trip and a child is contaminated? Who is liable in that case?

Mr Weir: In those circumstances, if they make a decision that goes against Foreign and Commonwealth Office advice — the advice is to follow the expertise. I know that, over the last few years, there have been question marks at times over whether we listen to experts or not: it strikes me as a no-brainer. We should go to the best sources of information, which, for travel, is the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and, for health, is the PHA.

There may well have been an issue that, on day 1, there was some level of confusion. However, there has been very clear guidance given to schools that the PHA advice is the advice to follow on the health side, but we have not

simply been saying, "Go and look at the PHA advice"; we have been giving the direct links to the PHA advice. We have been acting similarly with regard to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office advice.

As with the public as a whole, the Public Health Agency can give advice to schools and individuals. Whether individuals choose to follow that advice lies beyond the power of any public health body or, indeed, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. I would say that people would be very well advised to follow the specific advice. That means that we take the issue seriously but are approaching it in a measured manner.

Unfortunately, in other aspects of this, not in the school system, we have seen irresponsible panic set in and, in some cases, criminal behaviour has happened, particularly around the issue of sanitisers. That is not acceptable. The reality is that, if we keep a single message and single points of contact for advice, that is the critical aspect. People will ultimately have to make their own decisions, but I strongly urge them to follow the expert advice.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for coming in at short notice on such an important issue. You spoke about the PHA being the port of call for that expert advice. I want to ask your opinion with regard to special schools where pupils have severe and moderate learning disabilities. Are they perhaps more at risk in this instance? If that is the case, is it not your responsibility to be their advocate and to give that advice, as opposed to the Department of Health?

Mr Weir: We will continue to raise issues nationally, but, again, it is not my place to second-guess the quality of the advice that comes from the PHA. If they feel that there is specific advice needed for particular schools — it may be that particular circumstances have arisen in a school or because of the nature of the school — they will give that advice. We will certainly make sure that PHA is aware of the issue. However, I am not a clinician, nor, indeed, are any of the excellent staff in my Department.

We have to follow the direct advice of medical professionals, and the PHA is the most appropriate route for us to do so.

3.45 pm

Ms Bailey: I thank the Minister for his update on the ongoing work with his UK counterparts. Can he give us an update on what work he is doing with his counterparts across this island, given that our schoolchildren will be moving around this land mass rather than travelling abroad?

Mr Weir: We have a seamless border, so we will be keeping in touch on all aspects. Specifically, however, there is a national response, which is why we are plugging into COBRA and associated bodies.

On movement, there are cases throughout the world and there are cases in different parts of the island. Nobody is at any greater or lesser risk from travelling cross-border than they are from travelling within Northern Ireland or within the Republic of Ireland. If there is specific advice to the contrary, we will make sure that it is brought to people's attention. We are happy to work with any providers of information.

There is no doubt about the sheer volume of what is here at present and what is coming towards us. We need to

make sure that we have appropriate responses ready for each potential stage.

Mr Allister: As the Minister will be aware, we are about two months out from the key exam time in our schools for our school-leavers and our GCSE pupils. If there should be any necessary disruption to the programme of exams, whose decision is it to act on that? Is it the decision of the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), the Education Authority or the Minister, and what thought has been given to the matter?

Mr Weir: I know that CCEA has been working on contingency plans. I want to meet CCEA to determine where the exact points of demarcation lie should interventions be needed for exams and what action can then be taken. Again, we are in a fairly fluid situation, and we will need to drill down to the detail with particular bodies as time moves on.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Minister for his statement thus far and for the seriousness with which he has taken the issue. Coronavirus continues to cause widespread disruption across the world, but there is a lot of concern locally from teachers, staff and parents on the potential impact if coronavirus does indeed spread throughout our school population. With that in mind, and given the fluidity of the situation, will the Minister outline what legislative powers are in place if it does come to a point at which we have to close schools?

Mr Weir: There has been some discussion throughout the Executive but particularly with the Department of Health about the overall legislative position. The UK Government are considering, and this was outlined by the Prime Minister, introducing emergency legislation to respond to a coronavirus pandemic. Any emergency legislation is likely to include powers for the Department of Education and the Department of Health that may, if we reach that particular point, lead to the direct closure of schools and childcare provision.

From a Northern Ireland perspective, the Department of Education has indicated that it wants to ensure that the maximum number of powers is available. As with a lot of these things, all of us hope and pray that those powers do not have to be initiated, but I do not want to be in the situation of finding that something needs to be done yet there is no legal power to do it. It is better to be in a situation in which, to use an expression, we have all the clubs in our bag to be able to use when necessary than to find that we are short of clubs that we need to be able to do something. Such powers will be requested in very extreme circumstances. Indeed, any action taken will be taken on the basis of a coordinated Executive response.

Wearing my hat from an hour ago, I will say that there will be questions for the Department for the Economy about further and higher education colleges. The Executive as a whole will ensure that the legislation as it applies to Northern Ireland is in place. Legislative consent may need to be granted by us or some other action taken. The Health Minister will be speaking soon to outline some of those things.

We will make sure that we have all the powers to be able to deal with whatever situation emerges. In many ways, we are trying to hold back a tide. As I understand it, the UK is still in a containment phase, but that might change, and our responses in individual circumstances may then have to meet the circumstances of that moment.

Mr Gildernew: I thank the Minister for work that I know he did in conjunction with the PHA last week on schools. Will he commit to his Department, along with the Public Health Agency, assisting boards of governors and school leaders in dealing with concerns that will arise when schools run into difficulties?

Mr Weir: There may well be specific actions. I acknowledge what has been said. The clarity and speed of advice are critical, but, depending on individual circumstances, the PHA may give specific advice to a particular school. That might be around points of temporary closure or contacting people, for example. I hope that there will be that level of cooperation; in fact, I am sure that there will. The PHA may have to be involved in interventions, such as the deep clean of a school. It is important that whatever is there is measured and that we do not create undue panic for people. We must ensure that there is not an overreaction or an under-reaction.

Mr McNulty: Extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures. The measured advice does not cut it. School principals are pulling their hair out with the worry of having to make the decision about whether they should travel to Italy. Directing them to the Public Health Agency website or the Foreign and Commonwealth Office website is not sufficient. They need robust, definitive guidance on whether they should travel to Italy. In the context of 7,375 live cases of coronavirus in Italy and 366 deaths, and if we are in the containment phase, surely it would be prudent not to send school trips to Italy and for the Minister to give robust guidance to our school leaders now.

Mr Weir: Frankly, it is time for robust guidance. That is what has been given, in line with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The Member mentioned a measured response. This is a time for calm heads and for people not to grandstand or create undue panic or problems. Consequently, we need to follow the professional health advice, which, in respect of travel, comes from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Maybe the Member was not listening earlier: the advice of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office changed last night. Before lunchtime today, we made sure that all schools had been notified of that change of advice about not going to northern Italy and, specifically, the identified regions comprising the 16 million people who have been quarantined, unless it is absolutely essential for people to be there. That is clear-cut advice. Showboating or grandstanding from anyone —

Mr McNulty: It is not showboating.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Weir: — is not helpful to the situation. We have got to do this in a calm, measured way to try to ensure that the most accurate and professional advice is given, and to urge people to follow that.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for his statement on this serious issue. What powers does a school principal have if there are concerns of a danger of an outbreak in their school?

Mr Weir: School principals have the opportunity to make operational decisions in line with whatever advice they get from the PHA, for example. That may be for the temporary closure of a school. School principals will want to liaise with school governors, but I cannot imagine any

set of school governors standing in the way of a school principal taking a view, in line with PHA advice, that action needs to be taken. School principals, therefore, have that opportunity. Wider powers will be looked at from the point of view of the Department of Education and the Department of Health as the legislation moves through, and they should address those circumstances.

Ms S Bradley: I appreciate that most patients who are unfortunate enough to contract COVID-19 will suffer only a mild illness. Unfortunately, however, there is a vulnerable group of people who will be fearful of contracting something much more sinister. Given that that cohort exists in the school environment, be it children who are more vulnerable or staff, will the Minister acknowledge that the PHA advice is quite generic? I appreciate that he does not have a clinician's voice to add to the situation, but those people will look to him, as the Minister of Education, to be heard.

In addition, will he also give an assurance that there is enough soap in schools for children and staff to wash their hands at regular intervals and that the schools are resourced?

Mr Weir: In answer to the latter question, I have asked the Department to contact the EA today to make sure that that is the case. It has not been helpful, as we have seen, that a number of people have been panic buying. In some cases, there have been thefts of soap. We will make sure that there are sufficient resources to ensure that hygiene is maintained, and that will be a key priority.

It is important that the PHA takes individual circumstances into account, where that can be done, and give that level of advice. Again, it is not my role to second-guess that advice, but that is certainly something that the PHA will be cognisant of. We may be in a moving situation, again, as the weeks develop.

Mr Durkan: I appreciate, as the Minister has outlined and underlined, that the role to advise lies with the PHA. However, as a supplementary to my colleague's question, we have heard a lot from schools and principals about the difficulties that they have had with resources over a number of years — sometimes, they cannot afford soap. What practical and financial support can the Minister's Department provide to schools? Buying materials is one thing, but if teachers are going to take time off, bringing in substitutes eats into school budgets too.

Mr Weir: We will look to develop whatever level of support is needed as time moves on, and I will want to look at the detail of that. Ensuring hygiene in schools is a key priority and I will liaise with officials to see whether further action needs to be taken and what assurances can be directly given. As I said, it is not my position to second-guess health advice.

There are challenging positions in the overall budget situation. The change in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's advice and, allied to that, as I understand it, the decision that was taken over the weekend in Italy to close access to a number of ski resorts will, in many cases, make some trips, even if there was a desire to go ahead with them, null and void because people cannot physically go there and use the resort. Under those circumstances, the level of insurance that can be provided will give a very strong route for schools to be able to claim that. We should remember that the cost of most trips will be borne by parents. Again, however, there will be an opportunity to do that. People have to follow the expert health advice as we move ahead.

Ministerial Statement

Response to the Emergence of Coronavirus

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Health that he wishes to make a statement.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing me to make this urgent oral statement. I apologise to Members for the late notice and delivery of the statement. I wanted to make sure that it contained the most up-to-date advice that we have.

Further to my oral statement on Monday 2 March on COVID-19, I wish to give Members a further update on recent local developments. First, I can confirm that, as of 9:00 am today, 9 March, 222 tests have been completed in Northern Ireland. While the vast majority have been negative, we now have 12 positive cases in Northern Ireland.

I can update the House and the general public regarding the five presumptive positive cases that were announced yesterday evening. The Public Health Agency advises that two of those cases were travel-related, involving individuals who had recently been in northern Italy.

The remaining three cases can be traced to previously reported cases that involved recent travel to northern Italy.

4.00 pm

One of the three is a young person who attends a school that is co-located with a primary school. Both schools have been given advice by Public Health Agency health protection consultants. The PHA is content that there is no public health risk to anyone attending either school. However, it understands that, as a precautionary measure, both schools will close today to undertake an enhanced clean.

I reassure the House that contact tracing for all five cases is at an advanced stage. All individuals who tested positive are receiving appropriate specialist healthcare in keeping with expert advice and agreed procedures. The Public Health Agency has put in place robust infection control measures to help to prevent further spread. Contact tracing of those who had come into close contact with the individuals was undertaken immediately. Those requiring appropriate advice will be provided with it.

In light of the increasing number of cases, and wanting to keep the House and the public fully informed of what is an evolving situation, the Department will move to daily reporting of cases, as happens in England. The intention is to release the figures each afternoon.

As I outlined previously, the increase in positive cases is not unexpected, and I advise the public not to be unduly alarmed by these developments. I cannot discuss individual cases, but I am fully aware of press reports linking one case to football teams. I assure Members and everyone listening that all appropriate actions are being taken in relation to all confirmed cases.

The overall risk to individuals in Northern Ireland has not changed at this stage. That is based on the advice of the UK Chief Medical Officers. The risk to the UK remains at moderate, but that will be kept under review. I echo the call of the Prime Minister and advise people against any panic buying of food or other products from supermarkets.

At this point, we remain focused on the containment phase, which is aimed at preventing the disease from taking hold in the United Kingdom. We have been clear that we will communicate any move to the delay phase. However, I remind Members that it will not be a sharp transition, and we will continue with many of the actions in the containment phase.

This morning, the First Minister, deputy First Minister and I were in discussion with our counterparts across the UK at a COBRA ministerial meeting to consider the scientific evidence that will guide us to flatten the peak of the outbreak in the UK; to delay and spread the impact on our health service; to push the peak away from this time of year; and to protect those most at risk.

Members will be aware of the rise in cases in the Republic of Ireland. The number stands at 21 and includes two cases of community transmission. Urgent contact tracing for the latest cases is under way. There are no known implications for Northern Ireland at this stage. The relevant public health bodies remain in close contact.

Although the situation is serious, I reassure Members that detailed plans are in place in the event of an outbreak with sustained community transmission spreading across the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland. Our health service is used to managing infections, and we are well prepared to deal with this.

I reassure members of the public that we are taking all necessary measures to minimise the risk to them. We continue to plan and will be ready for all eventualities. Extensive work has been undertaken to ensure that all trusts have COVID-19 pods in place. These will enable patients suspected of having COVID-19 to be assessed and treated away from the routine hospital work. We continue to review the best use of testing and clinical pathways so that individuals receive the appropriate care, recognising that many patients will have a mild illness.

My Department has established a new directorate dedicated to surge planning. At operational level, a regional surge planning subgroup has been established by the Public Health Agency and the Health and Social Care Board to ensure that there is an appropriate and proportionate level of health and social care preparedness across the sector. Twice-weekly meetings are held. A COVID-19 surge planning workshop was held on 5 March to consider trust surge plans and self-assessment checklists in order to share actions and ensure regional consistency, where possible.

Across the Northern Ireland Civil Service, planning has been stepped up to ensure a coordinated response from all sectors of government. The Executive Office is leading the work on assessing essential services and key sectors' readiness and has convened weekly C3 meetings. C3 means command, control and coordination. The Executive Office led a workshop on 6 March to discuss departmental risks and priorities. I remain in close contact on all recent developments with the other UK Health Ministers, as well as Executive colleagues at the Executive meeting. Twice-weekly COBRA ministerial meetings are now planned to ensure that our joined-up approach to tackling this disease continues. These will be more frequent as required. My Department will continue to work closely with the relevant Departments across the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland to ensure that Northern Ireland is

well-prepared to deal with the situation as events unfold, while the Health and Social Care Board will continue to liaise with its counterparts in the Health Service Executive in the Republic of Ireland to ensure that, where possible, both jurisdictions can make the best use of our collective resources when responding to COVID-19.

As the situation develops, my Department and the Public Health Agency will continue to provide updated guidance to healthcare professionals and other Departments and their authorities, including schools, as and when necessary. There were differences in advice on travel to Italy provided by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department of Foreign Affairs in the Republic of Ireland. Following discussion with the First Minister and deputy First Minister and their representation to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and in light of decisions taken by the authorities in Italy, I am advised that that variation has now been addressed.

My advice to the public remains the same. I urge members of the public who have symptoms and are concerned that they may have COVID-19 not to turn up at GP clinics or hospital emergency departments. They should instead contact their GP or GP out of hours, from whom they will get advice on next steps, including testing if required. Northern Ireland now has full access to the 111 COVID-19 helpline, which is available 24/7 to provide advice. More general advice about COVID-19 is available at the Public Health Agency website and NI Direct. Those who have been advised to self-isolate at home have a responsibility to follow that advice. We all have a responsibility to take steps to protect each other. In the time ahead, we will also need to consider how best to protect those at most risk. In all this, we will be guided by the evidence of what is most effective.

I remind Members and the public that good personal hygiene is key to helping stop the spread of flu and similar infectious viruses. As such, everyone can help to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and other viruses by ensuring that we all take sensible precautions, such as washing our hands thoroughly and often, and to heed the standard advice recommended for similar illnesses, such as cold and flu, by ensuring that, when we sneeze, we catch it, bin it and kill it.

Over the years, my Department, including the health and social care system, has planned extensively for an event like this. Therefore, it is well-prepared to respond in a way that offers substantial protection to the public. As Members will be aware, the UK-wide 'Coronavirus: action plan', which was published on 3 March, sets out what the UK as a whole has already done and plans to do to tackle the coronavirus outbreak.

Internationally and in the UK and the Republic of Ireland, we remain in the containment phase of our response as we seek to prevent sustained community transmission. My priority, as Minister, is to ensure that all effective measures continue to be put in place in Northern Ireland. It is vital that we keep taking a balanced, proportionate approach at all times, with our actions based on the best scientific advice. Our primary focus remains on containment, and then on delay and mitigation.

Let me underline some key points that should offer a level of reassurance. We need to walk a fine line and be alert but not alarmed. The current evidence is that the vast majority of cases appear to be mild and that those affected

make a speedy recovery. That is a crucial point that we have to keep reminding people of at every opportunity. Yes, some of our citizens are more vulnerable than others, and we have to work hard to ensure that they get the protection and support that they need not just from the health service but from across society. We are working intensively with public health colleagues in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland to do all that we conceivably can to protect our citizens. The challenges, problems and dilemmas that we are grappling with are mirrored right across these islands. Decisions will be based on the most up-to-date scientific and medical advice. It is at times like these that we really see the value of our National Health Service. It has been preparing for a pandemic. We have some of the top experts in the world advising us on what to do. We have staff across the system working night and day on this. No one who falls sick will have to worry about how much treatment is going to cost.

I also have to be frank with people: this is not going to get any easier any time soon. The indications are that it is likely to get much worse and more challenging before we are through the worst of the situation. We can expect significant ongoing increases in the numbers of people testing positive for COVID-19 in Northern Ireland, but the same will be said in England, Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland. Health systems across the globe are coming under increasing pressure as the virus spreads. Ours will be no different; it is bound to take its toll. Normal business in health and social care may not be possible. Some activities may, unfortunately, have to be scaled back, but such decisions will not be lightly taken.

Let us not sit back passively and wait for the worst to happen. As I have said, guided by the evidence, we will act to delay and push back the peak to lessen the pressures on our health service. We can all make a difference. Washing our hands properly is not a well-meaning or trivial piece of advice; it can really help us to slow the spread of COVID-19. It can help us to even out as much as possible the impact on our health service and push us into a period where flu and other winter illnesses are not around to add to our burdens. That is why containment is so important. It will not have been a failure if or when we move into the delay phase.

Let us recognise and appreciate the work that our Public Health Agency has been doing. Let us understand the vital importance of the self-isolation and contact-tracing that has been done so far. Without that work, our total today would be much higher. I assure Members that we are in no way being passive or defeatist. It is by no means inevitable that the surge in positive cases in other parts of the world will be replicated here. We all need to rise to the challenge. That includes every single one of us following the simple advice on washing our hands. That is not an optional add-on. We owe it to ourselves and our families to keep doing the right things. We owe it to the sick, the elderly and the vulnerable in our society. We cannot let them down.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): I thank the Minister for the urgent briefing that he has given to the Assembly today on an issue that is very fluid and, at times, fast-moving. I also endorse his recognition of the work that is being done, and will be done in the time ahead, by the PHA, medical clinicians and front-line health staff.

A concern that I share with many people is that the North's public services must be given the flexibility to respond to the unique circumstances that we have here on the island. Those circumstances are of benefit in some ways but can bring additional challenges. Will the Minister outline what consideration he has given to how services may move from containment to delay and mitigation, including whether that will be done in consultation with the Southern healthcare authorities?

Mr Swann: I thank the Chair of the Committee for his support for the work of the professionals in the health and social care system while we get ready for the next move. We are in containment phase because it is working for us here in Northern Ireland, but there is no doubt that, at some point, we will have to move to the delay sequence. That will be advised by the science that we receive at a COBRA level across the United Kingdom.

I am in near-daily contact with Simon Harris, the Health Minister from the Republic of Ireland. Our interactions are guided by what we are both doing. We are in different jurisdictions and we will take different approaches at different times, but you can be assured that the coordination between us in the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland is something that I take very seriously, and it has worked to date.

The five Chief Medical Officers from across the jurisdictions will soon hold a conference call to make sure that we have a consistent approach. Our Public Health Agency and the Health Service Executive (HSE) in the South have already been working hand in hand on contact tracing. We are taking a coordinated response across these islands that will help us in how we tackle COVID-19.

4.15 pm

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his statement on this important and challenging issue and for all his efforts to date. You certainly have been in the deep end since you came into post, Minister.

Like many MLAs, I have been contacted by constituents and business owners who are concerned about this ever-increasing situation. Has the Department had any discussions with our local airports and ports about travellers coming into Northern Ireland, particularly from hotspot areas such as northern Italy and other highly affected countries? What is being done to reduce the risk from those people coming into Northern Ireland?

Mr Swann: The Member's question is well made, because we have people coming into Northern Ireland all the time. We are fortunate that we have never had direct flights from some of the areas that were high on the agenda at the start. The guidance given to our ports and airports is coordinated through Westminster so that we have central advice going to all ports and airports across the United Kingdom. The Public Health Agency has also produced information posters that you will see if you come through City Airport or the International Airport. They are a guide for arriving travellers as to what they should do and the actions that they should take. That guidance is no different from the advice that you or I receive, however. If you think that you have symptoms or are developing symptoms of COVID-19, call the GP or the GP out-of-hours service to see whether tests or further steps are necessary. Do not attend the ED or the GP, but take the appropriate advice.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for his statement and for his efforts to date to stem the spread of coronavirus. I pay tribute to our overburdened and undervalued healthcare workers who will be placed under enormous pressure in the coming days and weeks, and I wish them well in that challenge.

We have heard today that St Patrick's Day parades have been cancelled in Dublin and in Cork, and there are sporting events being played behind closed doors. What actions does the Minister envisage being necessary here in relation to St Patrick's Day parades and sporting events in the days and weeks ahead?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his comments, but there is one that I want to address: our health service is not undervalued. It is definitely not undervalued by me as Minister, because I realise what it does 365 days of the year, irrespective of COVID-19 or anything else. Our health service is widely valued, and I think that it is valued by everybody else in the House.

On the cancellation of large sporting events or public gatherings, I will be led by the science at this minute in time. The Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), which is a UK committee of experts, is advising us and those across the United Kingdom that cancelling any large events or sporting activities would not have a serious impact on delaying or containing the spread of COVID-19. I have no intention of giving out advice to my ministerial colleague in the Department for Communities or to sporting coordinators or organisations that they should look to cancel events. I am aware of the steps that have been taken in Dublin and Cork. I also say to the Member that the Republic of Ireland has seen community transfer of COVID-19, which we have not seen in Northern Ireland at this minute in time. It is reassuring that we are possibly not at the same stage as the Republic of Ireland, but we will be guided by the science when it comes to taking such decisions.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for his leadership so far on COVID-19. I also put on record my thanks to the PHA and to the Chief Medical Officer, in particular, who, I know, is burning the midnight oil. Like the rest of the Members here, I thank emergency staff and, indeed, the other emergency services that may be called on in the near future. I also thank the Minister for the nature of his response because, having worked for 20 years in the emergency services, I understand how vital it is to keep a cool head when giving leadership in instances like this. It is the appropriate response.

Does the Minister agree that it is essential that people who have the virus or fear that they may have it are not hit in the pocket for doing the right thing? By staying at home, they will not only help themselves but help us all by preventing the spread of the virus?

Mr Swann: I fully agree with the Member; he is talking about self-isolation. When I made the statement last week, Gerry Carroll, I think, raised the issue of ensuring that people were not hit from that point of view. That issue has been raised, I think, in the House of Commons, and the Prime Minister has made a statement that the Department for Work and Pensions will put something in place to ensure that people are not adversely affected financially by following good and science-based medical advice. The Department for Work and Pensions, I am aware, should be in contact with our Department for Communities on how

that social welfare change needs to be made, because it is a devolved issue. If that is the guidance that is coming out of the UK and Westminster, I encourage our Executive and Ministers to replicate it.

Ms Bradshaw: I thank the Minister for his statement and for all the work that he is doing along with his departmental officials and staff across the health and social care sector. Before I ask my question, I want to raise a slight concern. The Education Minister was speaking in the House a few minutes ago and said that legislation may be required to exclude children from places of assembly to prevent the spread of infectious disease. On 27 February, the Health Committee amended the Public Health Act (Northern Ireland) 1967 to bring forward those powers, so I ask the Minister to ensure that his Executive colleagues are aware that coronavirus and COVID-19 have been added to the list of notifiable diseases.

Given that the process of referral to the drive-through testing facility in Antrim has been working well, will the Minister outline his plans to extend that provision to other trust areas?

Mr Swann: I am not exactly sure what the Member's first comment is based on, but I will speak to my ministerial colleague in Education. I provide weekly updates to all Executive Ministers, and anyone who has needed additional information has been in contact with the Chief Medical Officer and the Public Health Agency.

The testing pod that we have in place at Antrim Area Hospital has been and is being replicated across a number of our major hospitals. Unfortunately, we will not put them at every hospital because of the speciality involved and the number of staff whom we would expose by doing so. However, I use the opportunity to say to members of the public, "Don't just turn up at them. It is not a bit of fun to go and see whether you have COVID-19; only go when you have been referred by a GP". Unfortunately, some members of the public have turned up at Antrim just to get tested to see whether they have it. There is a GP referral system, so I thank the Member for drawing attention to the issue. We are putting the pods in place across as many hospitals as possible.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Minister for his statement and pay tribute to his Department and the many health workers who are dealing with the issue. We know that they are doing so in already difficult circumstances, given the pressures on our emergency services and emergency departments.

I congratulate the Minister for presenting clear, calm and consistent advice. That is essential, not only from politicians but from health professionals. One of the confirmed cases that the Minister talked about affects my constituency, and he made reference to it in part. While not talking about the specifics of that case, I have fielded a lot of calls from businesses and sports clubs that have voiced their confusion: with the Public Health Agency and the 111 helpline, some are receiving different advice from others. While I do not know the individual case, they find that concerning, given that they both may have had contact with the individual or individuals, but one is saying to self-isolate and the other is saying not to do so. Will the Minister give some clarity on that or follow it up with the Public Health Agency?

Mr Speaker: I call Emma Rogan.

Ms Rogan: Thank you. Sorry, there is interference from a phone.

Mr Speaker: It is my fault; I was distracted there momentarily. *[Inaudible owing to mobile phone interference.]*

Mr Swann: I am more than happy to take them in groups of three if you want, Mr Speaker *[Laughter.]* They are much easier to answer that way.

I would be surprised if there was differing advice coming from the Public Health Agency and NHS 111, because they work from the same script and the same scientific advice. I will take it on board and raise it with both bodies, but I would be very surprised, because I have found that — I said this last week as well — since coronavirus first raised its head in Northern Ireland from across the world, the level of professionalism in our health service has been second to none at all levels. I would be surprised, but I will take the Member's point on board.

Ms Rogan: I thank the Minister for his urgent briefing to the Assembly today. In particular, it can be challenging for our front-line healthcare staff, who work tirelessly to continue to deliver the services. Can the Minister detail what discussions he has had to date with healthcare trade unions on the ever-moving situation?

Mr Swann: Work has gone on behind the scenes in preparing for and keeping up to date with the ever-evolving situation that is COVID-19 and coronavirus. My Chief Medical Officer is in regular contact with the trusts and the trade unions, and we will move out to contact faith-based groups and voluntary and community groups to make sure that we have a holistic approach in how we respond to this. Our health unions are a crucial part of our workforce, as is every section of our workforce. They are valued and are a part that I have engaged with often and will continue to engage with, because, without them working with us, the system does not work.

Mr M Bradley: Thanks very much to the Minister for his detailed and excellent statement. It was very informative. COVID-19 — the coronavirus — is with us now: there are 319 cases across the UK and 12 in Northern Ireland. The Government are still in containment phase, but the virus is expected to spread. You mentioned a young footballer who tested positive at the weekend but did not know until after the game was over, and both clubs have cooperated fully to try to contain that. What plans are in place for large gatherings like sporting events and events in churches and community halls? I am not being alarmist in any way, but I am a believer in planning, and pre-planning and pre-discussions on what may happen when the time comes is better than saying, "We need to do this". Has the Minister already prepared that?

Mr Swann: I point out to the Member that, as I said, I will not comment on any specific case. I assure him that the health service has been planning for situations like this and does so year in, year out. For this specific one, the work that has been put in in the last six to eight weeks is second to none. I do not think that there is an eventuality that should take us by surprise.

Large-scale events were discussed this morning not just in Northern Ireland as preparation for planning but also at a COBRA meeting. We are discussing how we approach large gatherings at a UK level so that the message will be

consistent across the United Kingdom and there is not a differential in message that confuses our people when they see something different happening in England, Scotland or Wales. The Member should be reassured about the level of planning. I hope that we never have to use some of the detail that we have prepared for, but the work that is being done is impressive, and I assure him that the work is being done.

Ms S Bradley: I, too, thank the Minister and all those who are charged with trying to realise containment on this issue. What safeguarding or protection for the supply of and the health of domiciliary care workers is taking place in the Department? As he rightly pointed out, we owe it to the sick, the elderly and the vulnerable in society, and those workers are often the lifeline to those people. What protections are in place for them?

Mr Swann: The Member has touched on the fact that the critical point of our health service is how we support our domiciliary care workers, who will support the most vulnerable in our society, if we have to go to that further stage of self-isolation or further containment. Often, those vulnerable people will be the ones who will be asked to stay in their home and self-isolate.

The support that we give to the domiciliary care worker is as important as that which we give to any other front-line health professional in the system.

The surety that may come from the use of certain protective clothing may not be as scientifically based as it is presentational, as people may come to perceive. We will give those workers the same guidance as we give other health and social care workers: ensure that you wash your hands and take appropriate precautions when you go into people's homes. Those are measures that they should take already when going into a home where someone has flu or any other viral infection. Domiciliary care workers are skilled professionals. Sometimes, what they do is underrated, but they are a valued part of the health and social care system.

4.30 pm

Mr Beggs: I, like the Minister, am thankful that, in the UK's National Health Service, we have access to some of the world's experts. We must be really appreciative of that, of all those involved in the planning and preparation of the response, and, indeed, those already working on the front line against coronavirus.

What is the Minister's advice for employers on their responsibilities to their employees, their employees' families and, indeed, the wider community if they employ contractors who come from northern Italy or other hot spots — bearing in mind that, on many occasions, the virus has been linked to northern Italy — so that, ultimately, the community is not endangered? Do the same issues as apply to travellers apply to employees who may come to Northern Ireland to work in essential roles?

Mr Swann: The Member almost answered his own question. Anyone who comes into Northern Ireland should treat the virus in the same way. It will not be cognisant of whether you have come from Italy, Iran, Portadown or Portaferry. It will have the same influence and same lack of respect for the healthcare system. If individuals or subcontractors come from elsewhere in the world, they should take the advice of the Public Health Agency: if they think that they have the symptoms of coronavirus,

they should contact their GP or out-of-hours service. One message that should be put out there and strengthened is that, because of COVID-19's being a notifiable disease and the structure of our National Health Service in Northern Ireland, they should not be charged for that advice or the support that may also be necessary.

Employers have a duty of care to look after their employees. It is up to them to ensure that all provisions are in place to support their employees in the workplace.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for his statement. In light of panic buying by a small section of the public, which is unfortunate and not required, can the Minister assure the House that there will be enough hand sanitisers for health staff, especially for those who provide care in the community?

Mr Swann: The Member makes a valid point about the panic buying that took place over the weekend. Those who do it may think that they are doing it for the right purpose, but it puts a financial burden on those who cannot afford to bulk-buy — people who live week to week — when doing their daily shop. There is a duty and an onus on members of the public not to panic and look for an oversupply — should it be toilet roll, hand sanitiser, soap, tins of beans or whatever. It might give them reassurance, but it puts somebody else under further pressure. Today, that message has also been laid out by the Retail Consortium.

On supplies for the health service, I assure the Member that we are not looking to any of the large supermarkets to buy hand sanitiser or soap: the National Health Service is supplied with the stocks that it needs of those products.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his statement. I acknowledge that he said that healthcare staff are not undervalued. That is great. However, he cannot deny that they are overstretched. We know that there is a shortage of a couple of thousand nurses. Is the Minister confident that there is enough capacity in the health workforce to deal with what could come? Are there contingency plans in place for when healthcare staff inevitably have to take time off?

Mr Swann: The Member makes a valid point. I refer him back to what I said in my statement. Normal business in health and social care may not be possible. Some activities may, unfortunately, have to be scaled back, but those are decisions that will not be taken lightly. That applies to the support that we need to give to our staff as well so that they can provide the first-class healthcare that they expect to give and that we expect them to give. There are plans in place, although we have not enacted them yet, to look at how we can bring back retired professionals into the health and social care sector while not putting them in a place where they become vulnerable or open to contagion, because it is the older age group that may be particularly at risk. It is about where we can best place them and best utilise their skills. The Department has already been contacted by GPs and nurses who want to step up because they have been part of that caring profession that we know and recognise. They have a skill, and they have a desire to give, and they know that we will utilise those skills if the point comes where have to do so.

Mr Robinson: I thank the Health Minister for his very important statement. Can he give an assurance that all hospital staff and other health staff who are treating and in contact with patients with the virus are all supplied with the

appropriate clothing? He may have answered that before, but I will ask it again. I commend all the health staff for the terrific work that they do for us all.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member and every Member for their support for our health and social care staff. I say this to all Members: do not underestimate the value that our words of support and encouragement in here have on a workforce that is under pressure and feeling that pressure. The staff who are coming into face-to-face contact with people who are already positive with COVID-19 have all the appropriate protective clothing that they need, and we, as a health service, ensure that they do.

Mr Catney: I am sure that the whole House will agree that the Minister carries a heavy weight on his shoulders, and we would like to be able to give him whatever support possible. I am thinking of the homeless, and that is a cross-cutting issue with the Minister for Communities, who was here earlier. Has the Minister been able to consider the report from the HSE that said that the number of people who could become infected with COVID-19 could conservatively be put at 1.9 million following an outbreak? Does he believe that our health service will be adequately equipped? I do not say that as a form of scaremongering; I am saying that we should plan for the worst and hope for the best.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. I think that he is right. We do plan for the worst and hope for the best, and I think that that is what we have been doing. I am not aware of the report that the Member mentioned, but the figure does not sound right to me, simply because the population of Northern Ireland is between 1.8 million and 1.9 million, so the indication —

Mr Catney: The figure is for across the island, Minister. Sorry.

Mr Swann: I have not had sight of that report. The scientific advice that we are getting is that we can expect anything from 50% to 80% of the population to be infected by COVID-19. That is for different levels of infection, and it moves to the very worst-case scenario. The Member can do the sums himself: 80% of 1.8 million is quite a bit. I will not get into the mental maths exercises today again.

Mr Speaker: I call Sinead McLaughlin

Ms McLaughlin: I am sorry, I did not ask to speak.

Mr Speaker: We will move on.

Ms Bailey: I thank the Minister for the statement. It is greatly appreciated, and I put on record my respect and admiration for all healthcare workers, who are taking on extra duties. They must be commended given that we all know that they are working in extremely stressed and under-resourced circumstances. I am interested to hear the Minister's views on the fact that we are hearing reports that Dublin is going to cancel its St Patrick's Day festivities, yet an announcement on that has not been made here. While it is good to hear that you are working well with your counterparts across the UK and in the Republic of Ireland, I want to look at that disparity. We are in a period of containment now, but if we have to move to a delay sequence, how will that be calculated? Who makes that call? Will that be an island-wide response? Will that be a UK-wide response? Will that be a Northern Ireland response? How will we join up the dots if we are talking

about 50% to 80% of the population facing contamination here?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her point. The response will be science-based. We will take advice from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies, which is based in the United Kingdom, and we will take advice from our Chief Medical Officer. As I said in an earlier response, the reason why the Member may see a difference between our reaction to the St Patrick's Day parade in Northern Ireland and the St Patrick's Day parade in Dublin is that we do not have any evidence of community transmission, so there is no scientific value in cancelling events at this minute in time.

When we move to the delay phase, it may be necessary to cancel public events, but our concern is that if we move too early in taking that step, the public will become used to it, and they will not take it seriously when we actually have to do it. When I mentioned flattening out the curve in my statement, it is about the curve of infection in Northern Ireland. That is about making the right call at the right time. Up until now, I have been guided by the science, and I will continue to do that. That is the guidance that I will take.

Mr Allister: The Minister said that the National Health Service is preparing for a pandemic. Of course, all of us hope that that will not happen, but, if it does, do we have enough ventilators at our service in Northern Ireland for the most serious cases? Secondly, I do not want to at all trivialise this, but, as an Assembly, is it not important that we set an example on these public health issues? Therefore, is it a good example that, in this House, we have open trays of unwrapped mints that Members, with hands washed or unwashed, can handle as they help themselves, or should we set an example and optimise the public health standards that we live to?

Mr Swann: I will take the Member's first point. The purchase of additional ventilators, should it be necessary, has been discussed in other places. However, it is not just about going out to buy ventilators. It is about making sure that we have the trained staff to utilise them. We are still in containment phase, and it is important that we stay in that phase as long as possible to make sure that we do not get to the stage where the ventilation of large numbers of patients is necessary.

In regard to your second question — I know that the Member was not being facetious when he asked that question — it is a valid point that maybe the House should look at. If there is anyone to set an example to the general public, it is us in this place. This is where they are looking to for advice and guidance on how to behave. Again, I thank all Members for the support that they have given to those people who work in our National Health Service and for the mature and responsible manner in how they are approaching COVID-19. We have not got to the stage where people are trying to make political gain or outworkings on what is a very serious issue.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for his statement. Does he have any plans to ensure that hand sanitisers are installed in all public buildings and spaces to prevent person-to-person transmission? Will he look specifically at public buildings that are more likely to contain people with immunodeficiency disorders, such as personal independence payment assessment centres, including Capita buildings?

Mr Swann: It is a relatively new issue that was brought to my attention earlier this morning. It is something that we could potentially look at. Equally disappointing is the number of hand sanitisers that are being stolen from GP surgeries, hospitals and all the rest of it. Not only are we seeing the effect of panic buying, but we are seeing people who are abusing a provision that is put in for those people who are the most vulnerable, and that is the people who are in GP surgeries and hospitals.

I say to those who think that they need hand sanitiser so badly that they are stealing it from our hospitals to catch themselves on. They are putting somebody's life in danger. As for supplying a greater number of hand sanitisers, hot water and soap is just as effective. If sinks are available in those agencies, they should be made available to the general public to use.

4.45 pm

Mr McCrossan: Minister, thank you for your address to the House. I also put on record my sincere thanks to and recognition of our hard-working healthcare staff who are on the front line, as well as their families, who, in the context of what we are facing, will be extremely worried about their family members helping those most in need.

Minister, I note that in your statement you said that there is a UK-wide action plan to deal with coronavirus, but we are on one island, and people traverse the island daily. You mentioned that you are also in conversation with Minister Harris in the South. Are there any plans for an all-Ireland action plan to tackle coronavirus? Moreover, flights between Dublin Airport and northern Italy continue. Given that a significant number of people here have contracted the virus from people who have been in northern Italy, have there been any conversations between your respective Departments about stopping those flights?

Mr Swann: We need to be careful. I know that the Member is not trying to make this a political issue and is looking at it in the wider sphere.

The interactions that we have had with our counterparts in the Republic of Ireland at a Chief Medical Officer level and those between the Public Health Agency and the Health Service Executive have been second to none over the past few months to prepare us for how we react to the situation, which is as people. It is not about us being politicians or looking at political borders but about how we respond to ensure that we provide the best healthcare and support to those who need it.

It is not within my remit to call for flights that come into Dublin to be cancelled. I am, however, aware that some of the airlines that have been flying from Milan to Dublin have cancelled flights in recent weeks.

As to our cooperation on either side of the border, I was in contact with Minister Harris after 10 o'clock last night. Contact and interactions are happening at all levels. We also work at a UK-wide level with COBRA, but the information that we get there is shared and utilised in the interactions between us and the Republic of Ireland to make sure that a consistent approach is taken. That is why I was able to say earlier that, because of the representations that were made to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the travel advice on ski trips and other travel has been brought into line with the advice given by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

There is a consistent approach. We are looking not at the situation from the position of different countries with political boundaries but at how we can address it as a people.

Mr Harvey: Minister, as a means of containment, will you consider the possibility of testing those who arrive from highly infectious areas?

Mr Swann: I think that the Member is referring to taking people's temperature as they come in. The unfortunate thing with COVID-19, compared with SARS, is that symptoms can take up to seven to 10 days to develop. You therefore do not get a temperature there and then, whereas with SARS the temperature spike was immediate. Taking people's temperatures as they arrive in airports means that people can be missed. Unfortunately, it is not an accurate way of pinpointing someone with the virus.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Minister for his statement and for taking questions. Like everyone else, I want to put on record my gratitude and respect for health service workers who have been working extremely hard and will be putting themselves through even more in the weeks and months ahead.

I want to follow up on the specific question of the all-island complexion. I respect what the Minister has said about how closely he is working with authorities in the Republic, but, given that the St Patrick's Day festivities have been cancelled in Dublin and Cork, there seems to be a clear public health emphasis on large numbers of people not being too proximate to one another, as within a metre or two. Given that he has said that it is too early to start cancelling large-scale sporting events or festivities in the North, will he give specific guidance to members of the public on their proximity to others at large-scale events, or is there no new advice from his Department?

Mr Swann: At the minute, there is no new advice on large-scale events or public gatherings. The scientific evidence and advice that we are getting from SAGE and the Chief Medical Officer is that cancelling those events will not delay or help us in delaying the spread of COVID-19. There may be a point where that is necessary, but if you use all the tools in the toolbox too early, they become ineffective.

Ms Flynn: I thank the Minister for his statement and answers thus far on a very fluid and complex situation. Members have asked similar questions, and there can be a lot of overlap. You have already addressed the issue of staffing and skills. Will the Minister outline what additional capacity that has or will be commissioned to address the rise in demand of assessment pods, bed space and ward space, as areas in the South of Ireland have commissioned some intensive care beds?

Mr Swann: The Member refers to the surge planning that we are undertaking across health trusts and the Health and Social Care Board. We will see the number of cases ramping up — there is no point in trying to deny it — and that work is already under way. It is being done by trusts and the Health and Social Care Board.

We will react at different levels and at different points, as the number of cases increases. At specific points, we will utilise members of the voluntary and community sector, engage with faith-based groups and supply the additional support to people who need it in the community, because family members are elsewhere, tied up or may be self-

isolating. All that work is being done. We are looking at how we use different facilities, and we may have to be proportionate between different areas and hospitals. This is how we will manage COVID-19.

Miss Woods: Thank you, Minister, for your statement, and thanks to those working at the front line, tackling COVID-19. Given that the advice from professionals is to self-isolate if required, how does this work for those who live in hostels, shelters or refuges — for instance, victims who have left a violent domestic situation — or who live in other shared accommodation or, indeed, in our prisons? Will the Minister ensure that consideration is given to those who cannot self-isolate due to the nature of where they live and, should that be required, will he ensure that shared accommodation, shelters and refuges are equipped to deal with this?

Mr Swann: The Member makes a valid point. This is about how we look after the most vulnerable in our society. When advice and guidance has to be given for people who find themselves in a situation where they have to self-isolate, help and support should be there and should be available to everybody. In our society, it should not be available for one and not for another. The Member's point is well made, and I take it on board.

Ms Dillon: Has the Minister had any conversations with the Minister for Communities on the point that Mr Carroll raised, that people with immunodeficiencies who have to go to assessment centres should possibly not have to attend those centres and either be assessed at home or have assessment delayed until the scare around coronavirus is over?

Mr Swann: It is not a conversation that I have had. I am sure that the Member's ministerial colleague will be listening in and maybe we will have the conversation. I am happy enough to have it to make sure that those who need that help and support are not put in a situation or in areas where the risk of infection may be greater because of the need to attend an assessment centre.

Ms C Kelly: What advice are health and social care workers being given on their return to work from affected areas, such as China and northern Italy? I am aware of one case where a health worker returned from northern Italy and was advised to return to work unless they were showing symptoms.

Mr Swann: I cannot comment on individual cases of those coming back from northern Italy. The advice that should have been taken comes from NHS 111 or the PHA. I am not sure of the date that the Member is referring to, so it may have been a date that preceded the advice being given.

If the Member has specific concerns that they want to share with me or the Public Health Agency, it is something that I will take on outside this Chamber.

Mrs D Kelly: Minister, thank you for your statement. You have been very clear in telling people to be sensible and not alarmist. You will be aware that the Chief Constable called for powers to be introduced here, similar to those being looked at by Westminster, for detaining people who are unwilling to go into quarantine. Are you considering, with the Public Health Agency, to add COVID-19 as one of those infectious diseases that would give the police additional powers following medical assessment?

Mr Swann: Paula Bradshaw referred to it earlier, and the Chair can back me up on the date, but on 27 February the Health Committee actually made COVID-19 a notifiable disease, and that order came into effect on 29 February. That important mechanism was requested by my Department and supported by the Health Committee, and the additional powers are in place.

Matter of the Day

Flybe: Administration

Mr Speaker: Mr Andrew Muir has been given leave to make a statement on the collapse of Flybe that fulfils the criteria as set out in Standing Order 24. If other Members wish to be called, they should indicate that by rising in their places and continuing to do so. All Members called will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject. I remind Members that, as normal, I will not take any points of order on this, or any other matter, until the item of business has been finished.

Mr Muir: You will all now be aware that Flybe went into administration last Thursday, 5 March, resulting in the redundancy of staff and leaving many travellers struggling to make it back home.

Starting as Jersey European Airways on 1 November 1979, Flybe came to Northern Ireland in July 1985. Since then, it has grown to account for 25% of Northern Ireland's air connectivity and 80% of Belfast City Airport's scheduled flights.

The focus, following the closure of Flybe, must, first and foremost, be with the staff and providing appropriate support as they seek alternative employment. It is incumbent upon government, especially the Department for the Economy, to deploy the full range of support measures available. Staff have already been in contact with me, as they have been struggling to obtain assistance in the hunt for jobs and benefits. More must be done.

The unique circumstances of Northern Ireland must also be addressed by the UK Government as we seek to re-establish our air connectivity to the level prior to Flybe's collapse. A one-size-fits-all approach across the entire UK does not work. Northern Ireland does not have the road and rail links to the rest of the UK in the same way that Great Britain has, and thus needs good air connectivity to maintain external links, particularly in a post-Brexit world.

Last week, I spoke to the management of Belfast City Airport. I know that they are confident that replacement providers will be secured to cover many of the routes, such was the demand that was previously experienced and the quality experience that is on offer at George Best Belfast City Airport. However, I am aware that the staff are very conscious of the risk of redundancies, and that is an ever-present worry for them.

The issue of air passenger duty for internal domestic flights between Northern Ireland and Great Britain must be addressed by the Chancellor on Wednesday. The status quo cannot pertain. In the context of the downturn being experienced as a result of the coronavirus, more action must be taken in the wake of Flybe's collapse.

Dr Archibald (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Matter of the Day, raised by Andrew Muir, on the collapse of Flybe. First and foremost my thoughts, as I am sure are the thoughts of other Members, are with the Flybe staff and their families, who now face uncertainty about their futures.

The majority of flights in and out of Belfast City Airport, as we know, were operated by Flybe, and were used daily for business travel as well as by students and families for travel to Britain and beyond. Therefore, the airline's entry

into administration is a real blow to the local economy. It will also be a big inconvenience to those who have booked flights and who may now face a loss of money as well as inconvenience. The Consumer Council has issued advice, and I encourage people to check the advice and seek further information if required.

5.00 pm

It is important to stress that the Flybe routes were profitable and busy and will be attractive to other airline operators. Certainly, Belfast City Airport is working to secure other providers for those routes, with a provider already having been secured for some of them.

Last Thursday, I spoke to the Economy Minister, Diane Dodds, about the immediate response. I also received a briefing from Department for the Economy officials on its role. I hope to meet the chief executive of Belfast City Airport later this week. The primary responsibilities for civil aviation are reserved and sit mostly with the British Treasury and Department for Transport (DfT). When the bailout for Flybe was put forward in January, it was agreed that there would be reviews of air passenger duty (APD) by the Treasury and of regional air connectivity by DfT in Britain. Those reviews have yet to be carried out, but the Department for the Economy is liaising with the Department for Transport in Britain on the terms of reference for the regional air connectivity review.

Over the weekend, I was contacted by businesses that relied on Flybe routes and are keen that they be secured into the future. It is important that we now demonstrate that we continue to be open for business and that we support industry partners in their attempts to secure alternative providers. I understand that the Finance Minister discussed APD with the Scottish and Welsh Finance Ministers last week. Together, they agreed to put it on the agenda for discussion with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury tomorrow morning. As already outlined, it was due to be reviewed by the Treasury. In the context of the climate emergency, it is important that strategic policies are in place, including the statutory duty, primarily on big polluters, to reduce their omissions, as well as it being the responsibility of individuals. However, for environmental purposes, APD is a badly designed tax, and we need to look at alternative, more effective measures. In the time ahead, the Economy Committee, my party and I will continue to support the work of our Executive Ministers and local businesses as they recover from the collapse of Flybe and try to secure other providers.

Mr Newton: I am grateful to the Member who tabled this Matter of the Day. We all know the value of George Best Belfast City Airport to the economy of east Belfast, Belfast and, indeed, Northern Ireland — it is that crucial. It is a sad day when the collapse of budget airline Flybe causes not exactly a crisis but, certainly, a serious situation. Belfast City Airport, at this stage in the process, deserves and needs the support of the business community, the wider community and the political community so that it can work through the project of securing airlines to fill the gaps in routes. It was mentioned that Flybe had 80% of flights going out of George Best Belfast City Airport. It is a hammer blow to the business community, the travelling community and to the tourism community, given that Northern Ireland has, in the past number of years, upped its game to become a place attractive to tourists.

I was more than impressed by the actions of Mr Brian Ambrose, the chief executive, and his staff. In a difficult situation, he took a very positive attitude. He was able to announce, first, additional flights to Scotland and, now, additional flights to Teesside International Airport with Eastern Airways. He was upfront with the TV crews and the media, portraying what could only be described as steely determination to get the airport up and running again. Politicians and representatives of all shades not only from east Belfast but from all of Northern Ireland need to step up to the plate. We need to support the efforts that the staff have been making in Belfast City Airport and encourage them in the difficult task that they have ahead. Politicians have a role to play in the issue of air passenger duty.

Ms McLaughlin: Flybe entering administration is a huge blow to our local economy. Flybe's flights were critical to regional connectivity and for people studying and working in GB. They also provided critical routes for our tourism industry and for people visiting Northern Ireland.

I call on the UK Government to end air passenger duty on flights between Northern Ireland and Great Britain to ensure the viability of Belfast City Airport and the continuation of links from Northern Ireland to regional airports in Great Britain in the wake of the Flybe collapse. The principle of air passenger duty on internal flights in Great Britain makes absolute sense to encourage passengers to travel by train and to reduce carbon emissions, but the logic does not apply in Northern Ireland. We are reliant on air links to get to Great Britain. For us, APD is an extra tax that makes it more expensive to fly and puts strain on our regional airports, both Belfast City Airport and the City of Derry Airport.

To protect our regional connectivity, we need APD to end on flights between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. The Highlands and islands of Scotland are recognised as being reliant on air connections, so APD is not levied on their flights. Exactly the same situation applies to Northern Ireland, yet we are treated differently. That is discriminatory against Northern Ireland and demonstrates that the UK Government are less concerned about us than they are about the north of Scotland. That discrimination has to end. We want to protect Belfast City Airport and the City of Derry Airport.

One risk is that a new airline or new airlines brought in for regional connections between Belfast City Airport and GB regional airports will offer fewer destinations than Flybe provided. Removing APD from those flights would be likely to make more routes more attractive to more airlines and keep Northern Ireland's vital regional connectivity open. We need to be open for business. Our industries — our tourism industry in particular — are under immense pressure and challenges. This is another challenge to add to the long list.

Mr Stewart: I thank the Member for North Down for bringing this forward and you, Mr Speaker, for accepting it. This is a body blow to the economy of Northern Ireland. My thoughts, as are those of so many who have spoken, are with the staff affected directly and indirectly by this. My sister was cabin crew for seven years. She found out, at half past midnight on the night that the company went bust that she had lost her job, along with 3,000 others. It came as a body blow to them all. They were being called into work that week and that day not knowing that

anything was wrong. They had been going above and beyond the call of duty in recent years, knowing that there were financial difficulties; in fact, staff were being brought on to the company as recently as last week, so it came as a real shock. As an Assembly working with local government through the Executive, we need to do all that we can to support the staff in seeking retraining and job opportunities, especially as so many of them came from Thomas Cook and had already been through the process. That is very concerning.

Members touched on air passenger duty. I echo what has been said. The Conservative Party manifesto pledged to put UK connectivity at its centre. As we are an integral part of the UK, it flies in the face of that pledge to see APD in place. It needs to be abolished. We need to incentivise people to be able to fly freely throughout the United Kingdom.

Some 80% of the flights that went out of Belfast City Airport were provided by Flybe. They went to places that were not always profitable but provided key links for tourism, students and business in parts of the UK and Europe that maybe were not normally appealing.

I am pleased to hear from the Chairperson of the Economy Committee that the Finance Minister is working on the call for APD to be abolished. We also need to look at an air route development fund in order to try to incentivise some of the less profitable routes and try to keep that connectivity. I know that Reg Empey raised that with the Minister for Transport at Westminster last week.

Like Robin Newton, I commend Brian Ambrose, who has done a fantastic job in the past few days trying to replace some of the routes.

However, it is my fear that the most profitable routes will be snapped up and those that provide essential and additional connectivity will be lost.

It is incumbent on all of us to support the Flybe staff and try to give as much opportunity to new airlines to come in.

Mr Allister: The quite disturbing news about Flybe came off the back of other airport-related news that also has the potential to have an adverse effect on Northern Ireland. Last week's ruling that put the Heathrow extension in doubt increases the possibility of a severe loss of potential jobs to Northern Ireland. We were very hopeful, particularly in my constituency, of gaining considerable advancement through the Heathrow hub, and I trust that something there can be still be salvaged.

Off that, then, we had the loss of Flybe, which is a huge economic blow because of the connectivity that it provided, which, of course, is fundamental to any prospect that we have of economic success. The connectivity throughout the world, which starts in regional airports and advances through different hubs, is key to a place like Northern Ireland.

It is quite clear that one of the issues that finally brought down Flybe — not the only issue, but a key one — was air passenger duty. I remind the House that air passenger duty was one of those green taxes that was introduced by those who were hysterical about issues like CO2 emissions, telling us that it had to be done if we were going to save the planet. Of course, we have seen that one of the outworkings of that hysteria around that duty is the collapse of connectivity for Northern Ireland. In

future, those who jump on the green bandwagon need to think twice about the ultimate negative effect that they are imposing on the economy.

Belfast City Airport still has a future, as Robin Newton said. Mr Ambrose has been out very quickly, showing positivity, and I am sure that others will be glad to take up many of the routes. At some point, perhaps, Northern Ireland, which is a small country, seeking to sustain three airports, maybe needs to look at where the future growth for our economy is its capability to do that. We know that the airport at Eglinton already costs a substantial amount of public money, and now we have Belfast City Airport in trouble. An overview is needed at some point — maybe it should have happened before now — as to the future of our airport strategy. I see a vital role for Belfast City Airport, and I wish Mr Ambrose and his colleagues well in retrieving a bad situation.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Member who brought this important matter of the day to the Chamber this afternoon. First and foremost, like others, I want to put on record my thoughts for the Flybe staff and all the staff at George Best Belfast City Airport. No doubt the news will have come as a shock to them, and they will be deeply concerned. We need to reach out and ensure that they have the necessary support.

Thousands of jobs across the UK and 80% of the flights in and out of Belfast City Airport were affected. I agree with my colleague that, while this is a big issue for east Belfast and, indeed, Belfast, it affects Northern Ireland as a whole. It affects businesses, students and tourism, and it is something that will no doubt alarm many people across the country.

I recognise, however, that aviation is not a devolved matter, but I know from conversations that we have had with our colleague, the Economy Minister, that it is being taken very seriously indeed. As stated recently by my colleague Gavin Robinson, the MP for East Belfast, the UK Government have large ambitions for improving regional connectivity. However, to date, those have been very light on detail. The affected flights are vital, particularly for our business community. As has been mentioned, the airport in Londonderry is in a similar position where some of the routes, whilst they may not be the most profitable, are vital in their impact on our local economy. The routes are vital to Northern Ireland's access to its GB markets and for tourists.

5.15 pm

I urge the UK Government to take steps in several areas. We need support for the routes that are without an operator. I thank Loganair for stepping in to take on some of them. We need to see action taken on the others as soon as possible. We need delivery on improving regional connectivity. We have committed to that, as have the Governments in New Decade, New Approach. We need further support for public service obligations. Those are vital for our airports, particularly the City of Derry Airport in my constituency. There is also the issue of air passenger duty. For years, our tourism and business leaders have raised concerns about what they see as the very damaging impact of that tax. The Government need to address APD as soon as possible.

All of us recognise the serious concerns and issues that have arisen from Flybe's collapse. We need to do all that we can to address them.

Mr O'Toole: I echo what many colleagues have said about the seriousness of the situation. Like Robin Newton, I am a Member for a Belfast constituency. I am deeply concerned about its impact on the whole of Northern Ireland, yes, but I am also concerned for our city.

Belfast City Airport is a key gateway, particularly for business and tourist travellers. Nearly 60% of tourists come through Belfast City Airport. We know the quality of the service there and the importance of the connectivity to our business community. Being someone who, not that long ago, returned to Northern Ireland after a long time on the island immediately to our east, I can testify to the efficiency of the service at Belfast City Airport and the importance of the Flybe routes. This is bad news, and it has come at a bad time, given the relative vulnerability of our economy and the coronavirus.

That having been said, there a couple of specific points that I want to make. First, Flybe has been in financial difficulty for some time. Although it is a tragedy, particularly for members of staff — John Stewart spoke about his sister and the other diligent, talented and able members of staff who worked for Flybe — there were, unfortunately, issues with the airline. Like others, however, I share the optimism about the future of the airport. Its management has got out in front of this and have been marketing the airport and its terrific offer, and Belfast's terrific offer. Hopefully, that will lead to the announcement of new routes and to airlines replacing Flybe.

Furthermore, any response to the situation has to involve a long-term look at Northern Ireland's economy and connectivity. It is all well and good talking about NI/GB air connectivity, which is vital, and I will talk a little about that presently, but we also have to think about our medium- to long-term economic strategy for Northern Ireland. The 'New Decade, New Approach' document said that the Assembly would be delivering an economic strategy. That is vital, and we await it with interest.

We are on an island. We are also next to a bigger economy and a key market for us, and that is Great Britain. We need to be connected to both. Whatever your constitutional preference, our economy needs to grow in an ambidextrous way. We need to be completely joined up across this island, and we need connectivity to reflect that.

We know that we do not have the all-island public transport infrastructure to help our economy grow or to deal with the climate emergency. We have to grow, so our long-term transport infrastructure thinking has to reflect that. We also know that the internal UK market is going to be critical for Northern Ireland. We cannot pretend otherwise, so we need air connectivity to reflect that. We therefore need a joined-up, long-term, strategic look at that to be taken by the Executive. It cannot just be about protecting individual routes, important though those routes are.

That brings me on to air passenger duty. My colleague spoke passionately and correctly about how we need to look at Northern Ireland's unique position and at how that tax is levied. When we bring forward our proposals, it is important that we do so in as targeted a way as possible. I gently say that, when we ask the Treasury for action on air passenger duty, it will have an ask from the block grant, so

we need to consider that. In the first part of this decade, we had long-haul APD reduced to protect long-haul flights out of Belfast International. We do not have any long-haul flights out of Belfast International at the minute. We need to think about exactly how we target that help, although I agree that we do need action on APD.

The key point is to reiterate what everyone said about the importance of Belfast City Airport and the quality of the staff and the routes there. We also need to think seriously about the long-term connectivity that we need both across this island and with Britain.

Mr Dunne: I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak on this important issue. I thank my North Down colleague, Andrew Muir, for securing it. Belfast City Airport is a key asset for Northern Ireland's connectivity. It is crucial for our economy and tourism sector. Flybe has been a central part of the airport's success for many years. It has been the anchor airline, carrying over 1.6 million passengers every year and providing 80% of the flights to and from the airport.

The airport is very convenient with direct and quick access to Belfast city centre and, of course, important areas like north Down. That makes it a very attractive service for all involved. As was mentioned, the airport is also a very valuable employer of hundreds of local staff, from airline staff, ground staff and fire service crew right through to those in the airport hospitality services. I noticed when driving past last night that there were about eight taxis there when, usually on a Sunday night, there would be about 28. This is already having an impact on employment.

We all rightly commend the work of the chief executive, Mr Brian Ambrose, who has overseen the airport's success, including the £15 million upgrade to the facility that was opened in late 2018 and made it a very modern, convenient and quick service airport for us all. I have been in contact with the chief executive, and I know that he is making every effort to attract new routes to carry passengers in future. He has two carriers announced already, which is a positive development.

Air passenger duty was mentioned. It is one area in which action must be taken to ensure that connectivity is maintained and enhanced. I know that our Minister, Diane Dodds, is continuing to work on that, as are DUP MPs at Westminster. We must continue to focus on this important issue in order to support our economy and to develop our connectivity with the rest of the UK and beyond. We must ensure that Flybe is replaced with new airlines and new routes to and from Belfast City Airport.

Adjourned at 5.23 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 10 March 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Matter of the Day

Barney Eastwood

Mr Speaker: Mr Patsy McGlone has been given leave to make a statement on the death of Barney Eastwood that fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. If other Members wish to be called to speak, they should rise in their place and continue to do so. All Members called will have up to three minutes in which to speak on the subject. I remind Members that I will not take points of order on this or any other matter until the business has concluded.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, as a ligean do an rud seo a thógáil inniu. Thanks very much, Mr Speaker, for allowing me the opportunity to raise the matter of the sad departure of Barney Eastwood. Born in Cookstown in 1932, Barney was known principally for boxing, as you will know, Mr Speaker, but Gaelic football was also his passion. He was an All-Ireland winner with Tyrone minors in 1948, when he scored four points in the Croke Park final.

As we know, he was a very successful businessman. At one time, he employed 400 people in Northern Ireland. However, his biggest achievement, and what he is best remembered for, was reviving boxing in Belfast during the worst years of the Troubles. When the city closed down early at night and very few people even ventured out, he managed to ignite an interest in people right across the communities in Belfast. Of course, that culminated with the success of Barry McGuigan becoming world champion in June 1985. That success was a symbol of hope through the darkness and bad days of the Troubles. It did not end there: he managed four other world champions, all from a small gym on Castle Street.

Not so well known were his generous, charitable deeds that were carried out, as would be expected, with discretion. He is survived by his wife, Frances; his sons Brian, Peter, Adrian, Stephen and Fearghal; his daughter, Fiona; 23 grandchildren; and 15 great-grandchildren. I extend our sincere sympathy to them all. He is a cousin of my mother's, so my entire family will be sympathising with the Eastwood family at this time.

Barney contributed hugely to sport, to business and to society in Northern Ireland. At the right hand of God may he be. Ar dheis Dé go raibh sé.

Ms Ennis: It is indeed a very sad time for Irish boxing and for boxing fans across the world to hear the sad news of Barney Eastwood's passing. He was a unique character, and his passion for sport and business was unquestionable. He loved sport. He was a sportsman in

the true sense of the word, but he was also a very proud Tyrone man. On behalf of the Sinn Féin team in the Assembly, I extend our sincere condolences to Barney's wife, Frances, and to his entire extended family at this very sad time.

Mr Muir: My thoughts and prayers at this time go to the wider Eastwood family, whom I know a number of, including one of my political colleagues, Sorcha Eastwood. Barney was one of my constituents when I served as a councillor in Ards and North Down. The one thing that I will always remember for the rest of my days is that he came along to my late grandfather's funeral. My great-grandfather and my grandfather really liked a flutter, and to see Barney there really lifted us up in those very difficult times. At this time, we have to think of the entire family in very difficult circumstances. He has left a powerful legacy. He was a great man, and we in the House should remember that.

Mr Weir: I join colleagues from across the Chamber in noting and mourning the passing of Barney Eastwood. For a long time in a previous existence, like Andrew Muir, Barney Eastwood was a constituent of mine, just outside the Holywood area. For all of us, particularly sports fans who grew up in the 1980s, Barry McGuigan and Barney Eastwood were synonymous with one another. During particularly dark days for this country, some of our sporting heroes gave us a ray of hope. Barney Eastwood was instrumental in that in the boxing stable. We can probably pay no better tribute than what Barry McGuigan quite often said at the end of his fights, "Thank you, Mr Eastwood".

Mr McNulty: Barney Eastwood became a world-renowned figure in boxing, but his sporting roots were in the GAA. He never forgot his roots. Just a few years back, he bought Owen Mulligan's boots — the famous boots that scored the goal against Dublin in 2005 — for £32,000 and supported the development of the Father Rocks club facilities. Like, I guess, a lot of Members in the Chamber, my fondest memory is of Barry McGuigan's huge success against Eusebio Pedroza at Loftus Road and the infamous song, 'Thank You Very Much, Mr Eastwood'. My sympathies to Barney's family, friends and community. I measc na naomh go raibh sé.

Mr Nesbitt: First, Mr Speaker, I am sorry that I am late to the Chamber.

I think that I have lived a rather charmed life. I have certainly been a very lucky person professionally, not least in my first career as a sports reporter. I landed at the BBC in 1979, and, over the next few years, we had a

really golden period: the international rugby team won a couple of Triple Crowns; the football team made back-to-back World Cups; Dennis Taylor won perhaps the greatest World Snooker Championship final of all time; and then there was Barry McGuigan winning the featherweight title at Loftus Road in London in 1985.

I lived in Bangor at the time, and Barry used to stay in a boarding house just round the corner. One night ahead of the fight, I remember Barry and Barney sitting in my front room — Barry with a cup of tea, Barney with a Black Bush whiskey — and just listening to the wisdom of the man was incredible. His gym was the most prestigious in the United Kingdom, and it was possibly in the top three in the world. That did wonders for Northern Ireland's reputation at a time when, frankly, we were known for all things bad.

Of course, he was not just a boxing promoter; he was a successful sportsman at all-Ireland level with Tyrone GAA, and he built a business empire from scratch, which he sold for over £100 million. So, he was quite some fella, Barney Eastwood. I have very fond memories of him.

I remember a story that he used to tell, which I never tired of hearing. When he started promoting boxing in Belfast in the 1960s, he booked the Ulster Hall and appointed a particular member of staff to look after ticket sales. On the night, Barney arrived, looked around the Ulster Hall and was very pleased to see very few empty seats. The next day, he called that guy in and said, "How did we do?" The guy said, "Oh, we did great, Barney; we only lost £300." Barney said, "We lost money?", and the reply was, "Yeah, boss. We lost £300." So, a couple of months later, he again booked the Ulster Hall and called in the same member of staff and said, "Look, I want you to look after ticket sales, and, because you did such a great job last time, I'm putting you on profit share." Barney turned up on the night, and there was the same crowd as the last time. The next day, he called the boy in and said, "How did we do?" The reply was, "Great, Barney. We made £500".

It was always a pleasure to work with Barney Eastwood, particularly in those good days with Barry. I remember a news conference when Barry was praising Barney to the sky. He said, "That man has taught me everything I know". Barney smiled a knowing smile and said, "Yeah, but I haven't taught him everything I know". What he knew instinctively was how to be a gentleman, be a great human being and be compassionate and empathetic. He goes down in history as one of our finest, and may he rest in peace.

Mr Catney: I want to go back to when I first moved to Belfast in early 1974. I first got to know Barney Eastwood then, along with Alfie McClean, who also ran bookies' shops. Those were very dark times in Belfast, but I looked forward to their help and visits. They came into the bar, and no doubt they were talking business. Back then, the boxing was not as big a factor, but the boxing then started up, and that gave us great hope. Those of us who are of a certain vintage know where Belfast was at those times, and it meant a lot to be able to go to the Ulster Hall for some of those memorable nights and watch the boxers progress onto the world stage as they developed. I also think of his gym in Castle Street in Belfast.

I bought a small piece of an old factory called Ferguson's pie factory; I do not know if anyone here remembers it. I did up an extension to a lounge. Remember, all of that was happening behind our ring of steel. Anything that

progressed Belfast and made change, Barney was there. I asked Barney to open that small lounge in The Kitchen Bar, and he turned up at the opening with all of his top boxers.

Just three weeks ago, at the funeral of my mother, the Eastwood family was represented at the church out in Lisburn. I extend my sympathies and those of all of the House to the family and the children. Barney lost a boy — a young man — and I do not want to bring that up to be sad. It caused him and the family great distress. I want to share my empathy and understanding of that grief and pass that on to all of the Eastwood family and all of his friends. I share in their grief.

Mr Speaker: If other Members wish to speak, they should rise in their place.

10.45 am

Mr McAleer: On learning of the passing of Barney Eastwood last night, the Tyrone GAA posted, "Anocht is uaigneach Tír Eoghain", "Tyrone is lonely tonight". The remark was on the passing of a GAA legend who won an All-Ireland medal in 1948 with Tyrone against Dublin and who was a stalwart of the GAA in Tyrone and, indeed, throughout Ulster during some lean and difficult years. As I said, he won an All-Ireland medal against Dublin for the Tyrone Minors in 1948, and, according to his family, it was one of the most treasured possessions that he had. No doubt, he would have been very proud of how the team has progressed in recent decades, winning the All-Ireland Senior Football Championships in 2003, 2005 and 2008. He would also have been proud at the weekend, when the county won: the under-16s, under-17s and under-20s, who were successful against Donegal and are now going through to the All-Ireland semi-final on St Patrick's Day at Croke Park against Dublin, just like he did in 1948.

I will conclude by expressing my condolences to his family, and I will just give a wee final quote. In an 'Irish News' interview in 2000, he said:

"I'm a Tyrone man, I was born a Tyrone man and I'll always be a Tyrone man. I love Tyrone people and I always loved the football."

May he rest in peace.

Mr Speaker: As there are no other Members wishing to speak, I will just add a couple of remarks. I would not profess to have been an intimate friend of Barney Eastwood, but, like many in our community, I knew him. Many people knew Barney, and Barney knew many people. I thank Patsy McGlone for tabling the matter this morning for our discussion. I follow other Members and express my personal condolences to Barney's wide family circle and his many, many friends.

Justin McNulty made it clear that Barney's roots were, of course, in the GAA, but he was obviously a boxing stalwart. That is how I would have known him, more so in recent years. Certainly, in his heyday, he brought a renaissance to boxing in Belfast, in particular. His reach in that sport was worldwide, as we all know, and Members have given testimony to that this morning. In acknowledging the great contribution and the legacy that Barney Eastwood has left to our wider community, I also acknowledge people like Eddie Shaw, who is now deceased, John Breen and all his coaches. When Barney

Eastwood was giving leadership locally, worldwide and in our community, he also had an array of talent around him who brought on and nurtured the boxers, brought them to world titles and world-class standards.

On that note, I want to share with all the Members who have expressed their condolences and expressed their tributes to Barney Eastwood's family. The last time I spoke to him was at a family funeral two or three years ago. Again, my condolences to Barney's wife, Frances, and their wider family circle.

Executive Committee Business

Pension Schemes Act 2015 (Transitional Provisions and Appropriate Independent Advice) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): I beg to move

That the Pension Schemes Act 2015 (Transitional Provisions and Appropriate Independent Advice) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 be approved.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate. I call the Minister to open the debate on the motion.

Ms Hargey: The rule that we are discussing today is somewhat technical. The Taxation of Pensions Act 2014 gave savers greater flexibility in how they access their money purchase pension pots known as "pension flexibilities". The Pension Schemes Act 2015 includes provision to support the pension flexibilities and creates a new term — "flexible benefit" — that covers the types of benefits to which the pension flexibility applies. It introduces the concept of "appropriate independent advice" and stipulates that that advice is given by a Financial Conduct Authority-authorised adviser.

Section 51 of the Act provides for regulations to prescribe how the new advice safeguard operates in practice. The Pension Schemes Act 2015 (Transitional Provisions and Appropriate Independent Advice) Regulations (NI) 2015 set out what trustees and managers must do to check that members with safeguarded benefits — benefits that are not money purchase or cash balance — have taken appropriate independent advice before transferring or converting safeguarded rights to provide benefits that can be accessed flexibly. They also provide for when an employer must pay for that advice.

The regulations to be approved today form part of a package of regulations that amend the 2015 regulations. They provide for a simpler process for trustees or managers to value members' pension savings classified as "safeguarded benefits" when determining whether the requirement to take financial advice applies. That reduces burdens on schemes and confusion for some members.

As I said at the outset, this is somewhat technical, but I hope that Members appreciate why the regulations are necessary.

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): As the Minister stated, the regulations have the aim of simplifying the process of valuing members' pension savings classified as "safeguarded benefits" when determining whether the requirement to take financial advice applies. The regulations also aim to address potential information failures such as lack of full information, which is essential, given the complexity of pension arrangements. That will make it easier for people to make informed decisions about benefits with guaranteed annuity rates (GARs). People with safeguarded benefits of over £30,000 are required to get Financial Conduct Authority-regulated advice. On the other hand, people with guaranteed annuity rates of less than £30,000 are

exempt from seeking FCA-regulated advice, as it would be disproportionate for those with small pension pots to have to seek and pay for such advice. However, intervention is still required to ensure that those people understand the value of their GAR and can make an informed decision. It is also important that the providers issue personalised risk warnings to all members with GARs.

Issue relating to pensions are often complex, and I have tried to distil the information received by the Committee into the broad policy objectives that the regulations will implement. The Committee is content to recommend that the Assembly approve the regulations.

Ms Hargey: I thank the Chair, the Committee and Members in the Chamber today. These are the latest in a series of regulations to replace the originals, which were made in 2018, before they cease to have effect. At that time, it was not possible for the rules to be approved in the absence of the Assembly. In normal circumstances, the Department would have sought to remake regulations subject to confirmatory procedure on a rolling basis. The regulations simplify the process for trustees and managers to value members' safeguarded benefits. Pension schemes are able to use the same valuation method to determine when advice is required as for calculating the cash equivalent of the benefits for transfer purposes. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Pension Schemes Act 2015 (Transitional Provisions and Appropriate Independent Advice) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 be approved.

Private Members' Business

Independent Review of Education

Mr Speaker: I call Chris Lyttle to move the motion.

Mr Lyttle: I move the motion and seek confirmation of cross-party support for a long-standing Alliance Party proposal that the Executive and the Assembly urgently —.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member just stop?

Mr Lyttle: Sorry. Excuse me.

Mr Speaker: I thought that you had been round here long enough to know that. Thank you, Mr Lyttle.

Mr Lyttle: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Education to implement urgently the New Decade, New Approach commitment to establish an external, independent review of education provision, with a focus on greater efficiency in delivery costs, raising standards, access to the curriculum for all pupils, and an inclusive single education system.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. As two amendments have been selected and published on the Marshalled List, an additional 15 minutes have been added to the total time. You will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. Please open the debate, Mr Lyttle.

Mr Lyttle: I seek confirmation of cross-party support for a long-standing Alliance Party proposal that the Executive and the Assembly implement a Bengoa-style, independent, root-and-branch review of our education system to bring forward recommendations for action that will deliver a more integrated education system that is organised and resourced to provide a quality educational opportunity for all children and young people to enable them to develop their unique personality, talent, ability and potential.

Education is the engine room for individual, social and economic development and well-being, yet our education system is in deep financial crisis. It is broke and broken. That should shock no one in the Assembly. The former Education Authority chief executive warned over two years ago that the education system in Northern Ireland would be unaffordable, socially immobile and unfit for the 21st century without radical investment and reform. The mission of the Education Authority in Northern Ireland is to provide a high-quality education for every child, yet we now know that, at least in special education provision, it is failing in that mission. It must be a priority of the Executive and Assembly to take decisive action and implement an independent review. Whilst there have been a number of reviews of aspects of education in Northern Ireland, the Alliance Party believes that an urgent independent review of previous recommendations and our entire education system is needed to inform specific actions for radical investment and reform. We have given a commitment to take the politics and vested interests out of health: it is time to do the same for education.

We have given our commitment, of course, to support the many skilled and innovative teaching and non-teaching staff in Northern Ireland, who are passionate about their

vocation and dedicated to children and young people. They deserve urgent delivery of the commitment to implement the fair pay and improved conditions agreed with the Department of Education in 2019. The implementation of that agreement needs no review. It needs to be financed and delivered. As part of that delivery, I welcome the commitment given by the Education Minister at the recent Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) conference to deliver radical change to the school inspection and improvement process, but the Assembly Education Committee made recommendations for school inspection and improvement reform in 2014.

The education system achieves positive outcomes for children and young people, particularly at primary level, according to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), but more average system-wide performance is found at post-primary level, according to international trends in maths and science study. Evidence-based research, like investigating links in attainment and deprivation, has found our education system to be high on quality and low on equity, with significant gaps in attainment that it links to a wide range of factors, including the current flawed and exclusionary approach to post-primary transfer.

The segregation and separation of our children and young people on the basis of community background at age 5 and performance in a non-resit, unregulated and unnecessary high-stakes test at the age of 10 or 11 are two great scandals of education in Northern Ireland. The human cost is significant, and the financial cost of that division and duplication in education has been estimated by the Ulster University's Economic Policy Centre to be up to almost £100 million per year, contributing to a financial crisis that has reached tipping point for our schools, around half of which are in budget deficit and many of which are over capacity, under-resourced and in an unfit state.

An internal audit has confirmed long-standing, widely held serious concern that the special educational needs framework also fails to support children with special educational needs and teachers. It has uncovered undue and unnecessary delay to Education Authority assessment and support, which are central to delivering early intervention, and raises serious questions about the governance and accountability of our education system for the Minister of Education, the Department of Education and the Education Authority board. Those findings follow attempts by the Education Authority to cut special education nursery hours to part-time and poorly handled proposals for Belfast's special schools that were opposed by thousands of parents across our community. Non-verbal children have been left unattended for hours on special educational needs transport provision, and inadequate access to educational psychology and classroom assistant support is becoming the norm. As Chairperson of the Education Committee, I will work with colleagues to deliver accountability and support for children with special educational needs.

Area planning has been sectoral rather than innovative. The good relations indicators suggest that up to 20% of first-choice applications to integrated schools cannot be facilitated due to a lack of available places.

I therefore welcome my colleague Kellie Armstrong's proposals for an integrated education Bill and look forward to working with her to progress the legislation.

11.00 am

There are other first actions that the Executive could take to promote a more integrated and fit-for-purpose education system, such as repealing the exemption of teachers from the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, widening access to the certificate in religious education and giving more measured and substantive consideration to the recommendations of the initial teacher training review.

About 90% of pupils in Northern Ireland are educated in schools that identify with a single tradition or denomination. We have two planning authorities; nine sectoral support organisations, funded publicly; approximately 1,153 primary and post-primary schools; and about 36% of primary schools with fewer than 105 pupils. We pay over £100 million a year to transport pupils many times past local schools to schools in a different sector. The Department of Education has a budget of about £2 billion a year, which is second only to the Department of Health, yet papers recently submitted to the Education Committee by Department of Education officials suggest resource and capital pressures of almost £1 billion a year for our education system in the financial year 2022-23.

Years of underfunding and a lack of radical investment and reform have contributed to the scale of the financial challenge. The independent root-and-branch review of our education system must therefore be urgently implemented and report in a timely manner. Its building blocks should be giving children the best start in life, as well as bringing about student attainment, inclusion, increased investment in teaching and classrooms, and reconciliation.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyttle: I will give way briefly.

Mr Allister: I have listened carefully to the Member, and I do not want to want to misrepresent his vision. The 'New Decade, New Approach' document talks about the "diversity of school types" being "not sustainable", so is it his vision that we simply have a controlled integrated sector, no maintained sector and no Irish-medium sector and that there be one state system that will be integrated in the sense that it will be for everyone?

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for his intervention. I am sure that a man of his learned opinion will realise that that would be to pre-empt a root-and-branch independent review, the like of which we are calling for.

The review should refer to radical reform for law, policy and practice; governance and administration; employment and recruitment; integrated, effective and efficient delivery; area planning; and co-design and co-production with the community.

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

It is shocking that political parties abdicated executive authority to respond to those matters for over three years, but we must now grasp the opportunity to work together to deliver better. The people of Northern Ireland demand better. They demand better than the broke and broken education system that we have inherited. They demand better on early education and childcare; parental involvement in education; post-primary transfer; curriculum access; parity of esteem for vocational pathways;

collaboration with further education; quality careers advice and work experience; and effective parental, community and business partnerships to raise aspiration and attainment. The focus must be on delivering an integrated education system, organised and resourced to provide quality educational opportunity for all children. The educational, social and financial need for a different approach and a child-centred education system fit for the 21st century is clear. I ask the Assembly to support the motion.

Ms Mullan: I beg to move amendment No 1:

Leave out all after "calls on" and insert:

"the Executive to implement urgently the New Decade, New Approach commitment 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."

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member will have 10 minutes in which to propose the amendment and a further five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech.

Ms Mullan: The 'New Decade, New Approach' document provided the basis for the restoration of these institutions. Sinn Féin, along with others, placed an emphasis on education throughout the negotiation process, and that, thankfully, was reflected in the final agreement. Amendment No 1 is about bringing the motion back into line with the commitments made in the New Decade, New Approach deal. That commitment, as outlined in the amendment, had a level of buy-in from all parties, so we should work to progress it. Agreements have been made before and often only partially implemented. I hope that this agreement really does signify a new approach to how we do politics and governance in this part of Ireland.

As part of my work, like many others in the Chamber, I visit schools right across the North every week. Ever-shrinking school budgets, teacher pay stagnation, crumbling school infrastructure and the rising diagnosis of special education needs have put our front-line services under massive pressure. It is my firm view that the way in which we deliver on our obligations to our children and young people, to our families and to our teachers requires fundamental reform. We must seek to ensure greater efficiency in the system where resources are used to maximise the educational benefits for children and young people.

Without predetermining the outcome of any review, there are obvious and practical changes that could be made. We must look to a more cost-effective approach to procurement and trust schools to make decisions that best suit them when it comes to accessing minor works and supplies. There must be greater progress and political leadership in area planning and the realisation of a truly sustainable network of schools with a high-quality education provision and greater educational outcomes.

The education system as we know it is at crisis point. There is no avoiding the need for reform. To shy away from tough decisions now will have devastating consequences for the system, for our children and young people and for our society in years to come.

While reform is crucial, we cannot escape the fact that the system requires a significant and urgent injection of cash.

In real terms, there is well over £200 million less in the system now than there was 10 years ago.

The austerity programme pursued by the Tory Government has cruelly left its mark on our public services here, particularly on our education system. In spite of that, teachers and school leaders have delivered a high quality of education to our children and young people, many of whom have achieved great outcomes. However, that should not mask the serious tail of underachievement still experienced by many children, particularly children from working-class and disadvantaged backgrounds. Addressing that issue is also a commitment in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. I hope to see the Executive advance that area of work alongside any independent review.

Our education system boasts a diversity of school types, each with its own distinctive ethos and values. Parents choose the schools to which they want to send their children for a multitude of reasons. Acknowledging that diversity must be part of the conversation as we explore the prospects of what a single education system might look like. Open and frank conversations about curriculum and ethos will be crucial over the next number of years if we are to realise a truly open and inclusive education system.

I look forward to seeing the Executive take the review forward as a priority, and I encourage the widest possible engagement and participation in the process by all stakeholders involved in the provision of education here.

Sinn Féin also supports amendment No 2 in the spirit in which it is intended, but I must point out that in no way does that include the current teachers' industrial action, which should and will be sorted in the coming weeks.

Mr Carroll: I beg to move amendment No 2:

Leave out all between "greater" and "raising" and insert:

"expansion of public funding to support the delivery costs identified within the review, addressing pay disputes with teaching unions,"

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Assembly should note that amendment No 1 and amendment No 2 are mutually exclusive, so, if amendment No 1 is made, the Question will not be put on amendment No 2. The Member will have 10 minutes in which to propose amendment No 2 and a further five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Carroll: I welcome the debate and thank the Members for tabling it. I also thank the Member who spoke previously for her support of amendment No 2.

The future of our education system seems to be on everyone's lips at the minute, and for good reason. It is clear that changes could be made to ensure that we are providing the best education service possible, not only for our young people and their educational needs but to ensure that our teachers can enjoy a decent quality of life, being paid properly for the invaluable work that they do and not being relied on to fill gaps caused by budget cuts or dealing with unmanageable workloads.

Clearly, the sector is under massive pressure, whether because of larger class sizes, fewer classroom assistants, children unable to get statemented or teachers telling us that they simply cannot take on any more. The impact is felt by students and staff alike. There can be no doubt that

cuts and budget restrictions have played a fundamental role in those issues.

I hope that we can all agree that it is unacceptable that children are going without the special assistance that they require. It is unacceptable that dedicated teachers have been forced to take industrial action for the pay rises that their colleagues across the water have received. It is also unacceptable — although I expect that not everybody in the House will agree — that young people are being educated separately, based on their religion. Integrated education represents one of the best ways that we can move beyond the communalism that we should leave in the past. It is unacceptable that schools and teachers are relying on donations for everything from basic stationery to toilet paper. It is also unacceptable that we have situations in which special needs schools have to self-fundraise to cover the cost of essential equipment for pupil support.

The situation in which our education system has been chronically underfunded and does not meet the required needs has existed for far too long. For example, while pupil numbers have risen across the board by some 2.5% since 2011, spending per head has decreased. In addition, budgets have been slashed year-on-year. Unless that is tackled, we will jump from one crisis to the next, not least with the outstanding issues of pay for teachers and other education workers. In that sense, while I welcome the motion, I have provided an amendment that I hope the proposers of the motion will accept.

At a government level, it is very clear that if we are to have any hope of creating efficiency in the sector, we have to see an injection of funding into our education system. I am not the only one saying such a thing. For example, I note that the NI Affairs Committee at Westminster pressed for an injection of funding to tackle the underspend in our education system, and I agree with that. I hope that other parties will agree to make that a key priority going forward. That is why I have tabled an amendment. Too often, the strategy for dealing with educational underfunding by the Assembly has very much been inside the austerity, neo-liberal framework of economics. Too often, discussions about solving the problem in our education system push for a reduction in schools or services. Indeed, as has been mentioned, one recent consultation on our special needs schools proposed that the majority of them should be closed through a process of amalgamation. That was a shocking proposal that was met by mass opposition from parents, pupils, activists and trade unionists. I was proud to play a leading role in that campaign and to show how it shone a light on how the language of efficiency can often be used to push through cuts and closures to schools.

The term “efficiency costs” immediately rings alarm bells with me. While no one would disagree with the idea of more-efficient spending, we want to make sure that it is not code for cuts. I want to ensure that, if the Assembly agrees the motion today about running our schools efficiently, inclusively and with higher standards, it is because we are investing in the sector properly and where it is needed, rather than making harmful and dangerous cuts. To that end, I have tabled an amendment that argues for an expansion of public funding to support the delivery costs identified by the review and to address pay disputes in teaching unions and other education sectors.

Mr Humphrey: At the outset, I declare an interest as a governor in two schools. Without question, Northern

Ireland has a world-class education system that we should be proud of, but one that we should, nevertheless, seek to reform, improve and develop as we build on that success. An independent review must be the way forward, but resources are key in managing expectations.

A widespread consultation is needed, but it is important that, in that consultation, the views of young people must be taken into account.

11.15 am

As I have said, we have a world-class education system and one that we should be proud of. Any review will start from a good base. We must pay tribute, at this stage, to the school principals, teachers, governors and staff who work in all roles in schools across the education systems in Northern Ireland for the tremendous work that they have done, particularly over the last three years, when there has been some uncertainty around the issues of funding and resource. Those people have shown how dedicated and committed they are, and they are exemplary in their motivation. They are well trained to deliver for our young people.

I would also very much welcome any expert panel that the Minister might set up around a number of issues, including underachievement in education. However, a panel must not simply look at education in terms of those who populate it. It is important that we have community role models who the young people might look up to, such as people who have been a success in industry, commerce and the professions. Again, young people, or their representatives, must be part of that panel. That is hugely important.

Future investment in our young people is also hugely important. A joined-upness across government is absolutely needed to deal with inefficiency and duplication in funding, if that exists. Any review must take into consideration work across the Departments here at Stormont, and also with universities in terms of the estate, sports facilities and provision, local government and, of course, neighbourhood partnerships.

I commend and pay tribute to Derek Baker, the permanent secretary in the Department of Education, for the role he has played over the last couple of years, along with Tommy O'Reilly, who, as deputy permanent secretary, did a tremendous job of work with Members ensuring that there was stability, and even initiative, during the time when no Ministers were in place.

As I have said, it is important to get economies of scale and reduce wastage. We must ensure that all funding goes to front-line services and, as a governor of a secondary school, I can assure you that too often money is used to provide professional counselling, for example, which is taken out of the front-line budget of a school principal and reduces the money that can be spent on education. That is simply not acceptable. Greater working across government may well improve and develop that work. We can no longer have a silo approach to those issues.

The agreement of the House around those issues is important but, nonetheless, implementation is the key. We cannot create false hope and unrealistic expectations. We need to address key issues in underfunding and resource of special educational needs. Only a number of weeks ago, some of us in the Education Committee met the leadership team of the special educational needs sector in Northern

Ireland. What we heard was stark and frankly it was, in some cases, disgraceful.

Mr McCrossan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Humphrey: I am happy to give way.

Mr McCrossan: In the context of the Member's contribution in relation to the presentation received, particularly that received from the EA and the failings found in their internal report — an audit, as they called it, but not carried out by auditors — does the Member agree that, given what we have heard, it is time for a full independent review of the EA?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Humphrey: Actually, I am grateful to the Member for agreeing with me, because he knows that I called for that at the Committee last week.

Narrowing the gap in educational underachievement, free school meals and access to good-quality education is important for all our young people. Having known the Minister for many years, I have no doubt in my mind that he will listen to the assertions, the presentations and the information that will come through any process, and will act in the best interests of our young people.

It is important that we seek to introduce meaningful, deliverable proposals — they must be deliverable — that will make a positive impact and change lives for many. Every child is entitled to the best start in life. We must not create expectations, but we must deliver. It is important that the House unites around education as we go forward. We can no longer simply criticise about money not being provided. The Minister set out very clearly at the Committee, a number of weeks ago, the money that he needs to ensure that education moves forward and delivers. We must deliver for all the people, including many in the constituency that I represent, who come from working-class, hard-to-reach communities — in particular, young Protestant boys, but also a number of young Catholic boys.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Humphrey: If this continues, it is simply not an education system that is fair. We will support the Alliance motion.

Mr McCrossan: At the outset, I put firmly on record my sincere appreciation to Derek Baker and Tommy O'Reilly, and to the principals, teachers and classroom assistants who have kept the lights on in our schools over the past three years in the absence of these institutions. The work that our principals and teachers have done is fantastic. They continued, in the face of many challenges, to ensure that our children were looked after in the circumstances that we faced.

I speak as the SDLP's education spokesperson, and I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the important debate. I thank Chris Lyttle and his colleague Kellie Armstrong for tabling the motion. We can all agree that our current education system is unsustainable. It is haemorrhaging money on a significant scale, and it is unsustainable in its current form. Our public services face inescapable pressures, and education is not immune from those. If we do not take action, our schools and the many

dedicated principals and teaching staff across the North will continue to suffer — and suffer they have. Members made clear some of the resource challenges that our schools have faced and how, as put on record in recent weeks, they have been largely ignored and isolated by the Education Authority.

We need more money, but we also need to look at how our education system delivers for each child in Northern Ireland. In that context, the SDLP supports an independent review of education. Mr Humphrey claimed that his party does, too. We support a review that will look at how we can best provide top-quality, top-class education for all. We need an education system that will provide the building blocks for our children and give them the best possible future.

Our education system is in need of reform that moves towards the development of a single education system and the development of the integrated sector, while still operating a system where parental choice continues to play an important role in ensuring that our schools deliver efficiently and effectively, with improved access to the curriculum and ever higher standards. The review must not be a slash-and-burn exercise that is conducted with the typical haphazard and inconsistent approach that we have become accustomed to in our public services.

Change cannot happen overnight, and there is no one-size-fits-all fix to the situation. Our priority should be the quality of the education provided and how that can be done sustainably without the need for unnecessary school closures or any decision having a hugely disproportionate impact on certain parts of society. The complete abandonment of faith-based schools or Irish-medium schools is not the way forward. We should consider the future prospect of joint-faith schools supporting the education of our children and young people of different backgrounds together.

Another issue on which we can all agree is that we need to invest more in integrated education. Despite coming a considerable way on provision — we now have 65 fully integrated schools and another nine in the pipeline, in response to parental choice — we have not come far enough. I have seen great work undertaken in the integrated sector, as have many Members. Drumragh Integrated College, which the Minister will know well, in my West Tyrone constituency is possibly one of the best examples of how integrated education works so well. I put on record my appreciation to the retired principal, Nigel Firth, for his fantastic work in ensuring that the integrated movement has a footprint in west Tyrone.

Currently, we have no ministerial target for the percentage of integrated schools; we have no action plan from the independent review of integrated education that took place three years ago; and we have used only 14% of the available funding for integrated education from the Fresh Start Agreement. Those issues need immediate and tangible action, which we have not seen to date. Clear targets need to be set, and proper capital and resource investment in the sector is needed, with buy-in from each political party. That has to be a starting point. I do not believe that this Minister or the previous Education Minister were totally committed to increasing integration in our school system. That has to change, because the benefits of integration are clearly apparent.

We have had three years of inaction, with no Government here. That has had an impact on growing a single education system. In that context, and in coming to the Sinn Féin amendment, I believe that, given the crisis in education, we are in need of an independent review of education and of how we can better utilise our resources and public finances.

In keeping with the declarations in 'New Decade, New Approach', we must ensure that every school has a sustainable core budget to facilitate the delivery of quality education.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr McCrossan: We also need to look at how educational outcomes can be improved in the system; improvements that could be, where possible, cost neutral to the public purse. We add our support to Mr Carroll's amendment as well.

Mr Butler: On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party and as the party's spokesperson on education, I welcome the motion and reservedly support amendment No 1. It is, I think, unanimously agreed across the Assembly that improvement, sustainability, good governance and inclusivity for all our children should be a focus for not only the Minister of Education but all Executive Ministers. Given that education accounts for the second-largest allocation of money per annum from the Budget, that is only part of the story why we need a fundamental review of the provision, efficiency, measurability and appropriateness of education and the curriculum. All that will be underpinned by the absolute goal of seeing education and educating together as a significant factor in learning together and living together to thrive together.

Over the past few weeks, having taken my position on the Education Committee, I have been astounded by the complexity of our current system. We have two planning authorities underpinned by seven sectoral organisations, but that only fractionally indicates some of the complex, overtly administrative and analytically cumbersome systems that are in place. Recent reports and surveys have indicated that the vast majority of parents would like to see an end to segregated-style education. Ending that could take many forms. One might agree with that ideal, and some might even think that it is a modern and progressive ideal.

However, back as far as 1923, a certain Charles Vane-Tempest-Stewart, or Lord Londonderry for short, tried to introduce the Education Act 1923 but got short shrift from just about every quarter. In 2020, a lot has changed, but much has stayed the same. Predominantly, we see our children segregated from age four on, with most controlled schools in particular making some headway in moves to change that. But let us be clear about this: segregation does not end there. Due to the draconian exemption of teachers from fair employment legislation, segregation and discrimination are maintained. How can that be right?

We need to be brave and visionary, and we need to be outcomes-focused about a review and any recommendations. Parents and pupils' voices, along with those of our teachers, must be equally heard, but it will be incumbent on all of us to consider the societal shifts that have happened since 1923 and to entwine them into an education system that is not only fit for 2020 but projected

to continually support, improve and champion our young people.

There are many aspects that we can major on today, but I will finish on one. Our young people are under more pressure than they or we ever were. They are burdened by increasing demands educationally, socially, financially and aspirationally. Is it any wonder in this fast-paced world that we see a growing issue with mental ill health in our school-age population?

I believe that we must look at our curriculum by taking a Province-wide approach to well-being and resilience. We must ensure that a partnership approach is designed with schools, parents, carers, statutory agencies and the voluntary and community sector that makes sure that every child is central to that journey, valued and nurtured in what they are good at, inspired to be the best that they can be and convinced that this Government value their education highly. That will require us to get the building blocks right. Early intervention, parental support, tackling disadvantage, partnership and community response will be vital in transforming education into the jewel that it could and should be.

It would be remiss of us all here to not recognise the excellent work done by our teachers. Rising attainment standards across our schools pay testament to the hard work and value placed on our pupils by our teachers. In my constituency, it has been my delight to watch Lisnagarvey High School, my old school, improve year on year and transform its fortunes and that of its pupils. The next steps by the Minister and the Executive need not be hard if we can agree on the principle of not only the whole school, whole child mantra but add, importantly, every child.

Mr Newton: I am pleased to support the motion, which is a direct lift from the 'New Decade, New Approach' document.

It would be remiss of me not to pay tribute to Mr Derek Baker, who, to a large extent, held the fort while elected representatives absented themselves from the Chamber. I also pay tribute to the dedication of the principals, teachers, admin and school support staff who operated in a vacuum for three years.

I am a bit nervous about some of the words that I have heard around the Chamber and about what might be regarded as a root-and-branch approach. We have much to be proud of in our education system and a strong foundation on which to build. That is not to say that we should not address issues — of course, we should — but we have much to be proud of. Our education system is a jewel in the crown of Northern Ireland, and it just needs to be polished continually to make it that much better.

11.30 am

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Member for giving way. I will be brief. He says that our education system is the jewel in the crown of Northern Ireland. Does he not think it is worth qualifying that a little by pointing to the extremely poor educational outcomes in Northern Ireland for people from underprivileged backgrounds — indeed, his colleague from North Belfast drew attention to that in respect of Protestant boys — and the legacy of intense and constant division in our education system? It is hard to describe it as a "jewel in the crown" without mentioning those two things.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Newton: I accept that there are problems and issues. I hope that we will make progress on addressing them in the next two years of this Assembly term.

Let me point out, however, that, when universities in Scotland are looking to attract students, Northern Ireland is one of the areas that they search. England's academic results fall far below those of Northern Ireland, so there is much to be proud of.

It was disappointing that, when the proposer was asked by Mr Allister not to quantify the motion but to define his vision, he was not able to answer in any meaningful way.

There can be no doubt that our schools face challenges. I accept that. Many aspects of our system need to be challenged. I do not like the term "underachievement", but we need to support pupils and give them a pathway to success. There is not any doubt that we need to make changes. We may even need to make cultural changes in our schools, but there are many aspects that we should remember. We must remember that we are investing in our children, our young people, our society and our economy. We do not have the natural resources of some countries. Our only natural resource for the future of our economy is our people.

We need to look forward with confidence and build on the success of schools. We need consensus on a way forward, as has already been said. Some have complained about area planning, but I hope that, when we come to make the hard decisions, there will be around the Chamber the unanimity that is reflected today.

The words "external" and "independent" in the motion are lifted straight from the agreement. When that was mooted in the Long Gallery a couple of Fridays ago, the reaction among about 80 headmasters was, "Not another report". We are calling for another report, but, if we are to have another report, we need to involve the skills and knowledge of existing principals. We need to take notice of what they say. We cannot have an independent coming from wherever and attempting to impose. We have much experience that needs to be enhanced, taken cognisance of and attended to.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Newton: If you were looking for what might make up the essentials of —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member's time is up.

Mr Newton: We will support the motion.

Mr O'Dowd: I support the Sinn Féin amendment and the amendment in Mr Carroll's name.

I note that Mr Newton, in his closing remarks, referred to a group of principals saying, "Not another report". I have to say that that is my reaction when I see proposals for a review, a working group or whatever it may be, but there is the space and opportunity for an independent review of the education sector that will challenge us all on what we believe an education system should look like. However, in looking to the future, it is worthwhile to look to the past. Mr Butler referred to 1923, when provision was made for a single education system. That was rejected

for a variety of reasons. The Catholic Church was acting in a selfish manner at that time, but — it is an important "but" — without Catholic education, Irishness would have been educated out of the system. Our young people who wanted to learn about their culture, their language, their sport, their history and their nation would not have been given that opportunity. I am no defender of the Catholic Church, but, in this instance, it has given great service to the community who wished to hold on to their Irish identity in this state.

Let us see what we will do to move forward. Change is a huge challenge for politicians. I often tell the story that, when I was appointed Education Minister in 2011, I was in post for only 15 minutes and was going through those doors for a vote when a Member from the Benches opposite, who is no longer a Member of the House, stopped me and said, "Minister, you have to deal with this school. It has to close". I was aware of the school. The school went through the process, and it had to close, and I signed off on that. I then opened the media pack that Ministers get, and there was a photograph of the same Member standing with a placard that said, 'Save This School'. I said to him a few days later, "I thought you told me to close that school", and he said, "Minister, all politics is local". I accept that analogy, but, for us to make change in our education system, we will have to set that one aside. Health is another area in which we will have to set it aside.

Over the Assembly's last three terms, it has created change in the education system. We brought about the Education Authority, which was a huge compromise on all sides of the House. It is not the vision that I wanted, that those on the Benches opposite wanted or even that those on the Benches to my left wanted; it was a compromise. This is the question: has the vision that was proposed in the Education Authority been delivered? When you look at the SEN report and the audit of how children with special educational needs have been treated, you see that that vision has not been delivered. There is an onus on the Education Authority, its executive branch and its board to deliver that vision because this is not what the Assembly voted for or asked for. There are challenges there.

When I hear calls for a single Education Authority from certain quarters of the Chamber, it concerns me that there are certain sections of our education system that they are looking to set aside. The Irish-medium sector always comes in for a poke in these debates, even though it provides a high-quality education system under the parental preference procedure. Parents have chosen to educate their children through the Irish-medium sector, and they should be allowed to continue to do so.

I also have concerns that we could reach a stage where our Irishness is no longer taught to our young people. That cannot be allowed to be the case, any more than it can be allowed that people's Britishness is not taught to them in their schools. People's identity is important to them. It is important that they learn about it in a way that is not exclusive but inclusive and in a way that means that we do not believe that we are superior to anyone else who lives in this part of the island or anywhere else.

I am all for an inclusive education system, but we have to recognise our history, our future and where we are going. Most of all, we have to deliver a high-quality education system to those who most need it. One Member talked about Protestant working-class boys: working-class —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr O'Dowd: — Catholics are not doing too well either. Let us ensure that education for the working class is good, regardless of religious belief.

Mr M Bradley: I support the motion. I recognise the significant financial strain that the Department of Education is under. An expected overspend for 2019-2020 of approximately £25 million to £30 million is not a good backdrop against which to commence an independent review of education under the New Decade, New Approach. A root-and-branch review is timely and necessary. It will result in some hard decisions to be taken by the Executive. The Department faces many challenges. Special educational needs have risen by some 20% in the past five years. There is a SEN backlog that will require significant resources to rectify. Salaries take up 80% to 90% of school funding allocation. An increase in the rateable value of the school estate and a great many schools now operating in deficit paints a bleak picture.

The motion is timely. Our education system needs a fundamental overhaul. However, I stress that our teaching staff, classroom assistants and pupils perform to a very high standard with inadequate resources. Many pupils attain excellent examination results. As many Members have done, I pay tribute to our head teachers, teachers and boards of governors. Any independent review will need to set realistic parameters to highlight and eradicate duplication and lack of sustainability.

If our education system is to evolve to meet the challenges that lie ahead and provide every child with the opportunity to be the best that they can be, the Executive will have to recognise that a significant additional budget allocation could be needed to enact any recommendations that may emerge from such a fundamental review, thereby leading to greater efficiency and accountability.

Mr McNulty: I support the motion as amended.

We all recognise that there is much room for improvement in our education system. I welcome the external review as outlined in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document. It is only right that we allow that review to take its course, hearing from parents and professionals alike, making its independent recommendations and bringing them to fruition.

Our education system has evolved from a system that was available only to those who were well off to a system that is now, hopefully, universal. Our system can and must do better. I have visited schools across the sector in recent weeks. Whilst there is no doubt that there is a need for fundamental reform, it is important that we listen to the views of those on the front line, both teachers and parents. Our system recognises parental choice, and it gives us a mix of options that include faith-based, integrated and Irish-medium education. Where our system has flaws is in its burdensome bureaucracy, red tape and management inefficiency. I recognise that duplication exists and that efficiencies must be made. I recognise the shortcomings in provision for those with special educational needs, in school maintenance, in school transport and much more. However, that does not mean that we should offer a one-size-fits-all view of education.

Ms S Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr McNulty: Of course.

Ms S Bradley: Does the Member accept that educational establishments, like others, should not just respect but celebrate our difference? We should aim to have a society that can acknowledge difference, celebrate it, support it and recognise it. You said that a one-size-fits-all approach does not work. I agree, but will the Member go further and say that we should aim to have a mature society that celebrates difference and is not threatened by it?

11.45 am

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I remind Members that, when they give way, they should take their seat and only resume standing once they have taken the Floor again. The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McNulty: Apologies, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

The Member took the words right out of my mouth. We need to protect parental choice and to celebrate diversity.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McNulty: Of course.

Mr Storey: I appreciate the comments of the two Members who have spoken. Can he explain to the House how celebrating difference is reflected in the Catholic certificate, which excludes certain other people from applying for jobs in certain schools in Northern Ireland?

Mr McNulty: I am not aware of the specific conditions that you speak of, but I know how I was educated. I was educated as a Catholic and I know that diversity was celebrated, so I am not aware of what you are specifically referring to.

We need to protect parental choice and to celebrate diversity, but that does not mean that the management structures at the centre cannot change. It does not mean that we cannot drive more efficiencies. We need better governance. We need a joined-up system that better delivers. We need a system that allows and celebrates a school's ethos and encourages cross-community work, not just when at school but in work, sport and the wider world.

Our schools are the bedrock of our communities and I would like the review to embrace not just what is in the classroom but the world around us. I am going to go a little bit off-piste. I think education must allow and empower children to make the most of their talents. It is time to think outside the box. Our curriculum is currently geared towards manufacturing and the professions. Our focus should be on a curriculum that delivers for a new economy that this place should be building towards. The curriculum should encompass coding, environmental awareness, IT, public health, a focus on the impact of lifestyle choices, empathy and developing and building relationships, celebrating diversity, resilience, a focus on positive mental health, and virtual learning. The hidden benefits of virtual learning are enhanced by early adoption, and it promotes self-directed learning and innovative, individualistic thinking.

We recognise that perseverance and the sheer amount of time that you dedicate to your learning are more important than intelligence. We need to recognise that, given the right set of circumstances, any student can learn and excel in their education. I strongly believe that every child can learn, regardless of their innate level of intelligence, and that gaps in achievement can be mitigated through research and by understanding the differences in

individual backgrounds and opportunity. I support the motion and the amendment.

Miss Woods: "Northern Ireland has a complex educational structure with a range of bodies involved in its management and administration."

That is a very simple sentence in the opening of a House of Commons briefing paper on the school system here. It just about touches on the complexity of how we educate our children. The report of a 2019 inquiry by a House of Commons Select Committee stated:

"there is a clear need to reduce duplication across the education sector and for consolidation of the school estate ... there is growing concern across the sector that current funding levels are not sufficient to deliver the quality of education that pupils deserve and parents expect."

According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), Northern Ireland has experienced the largest cut in education spend since 2009-2010 — 11% in real terms — compared with other parts of the UK. Due to the complicated structure of education in Northern Ireland, it has long been argued that money is not being spent in the most efficient way. Whilst it is important to consider the ongoing demand for the way in which education is currently delivered, it is of equal relevance to look at what would best benefit our children. The stark reality of our system and the quality of our education need to be reviewed, root and branch.

It was good news to read in the 'NDNA' document that the five parties committed to:

"establish an external, independent review of education provision".

That included the prospect of moving towards a single education system. It is good news that we are able to debate this motion here today, but we must kick-start the commitments in the 'NDNA' document and start a review of education provision as promised, and that must be done quickly. I am honoured to be standing beside one of the first 28 pupils to attend Lagan College, but she had to attend that integrated school surrounded by armed RUC guards, so we have much to do.

An ambitious, single, publicly funded and secular education system for Northern Ireland is required. Academic testing should not be used to determine admissions to post-primary schools, and the well-being of the students who have to take those tests to conform to the system, and that of their parents, must be addressed. Ideally, students should attend local, community-based schools and receive outstanding levels of education. In our segregated society, the integration of students and children is vital to making it more peaceful, cooperative, progressive and safe. How can we expect to move on from our past and from the divide if we continue to separate our children from the age of four?

We have 65 integrated schools in Northern Ireland. According to Integrate My School, the Ulster University estimated that the additional cost of a divided education system is between £16 million and £95 million a year. That money should be spent where it is needed — for example, on improving SEN provision — not on continuing separation. However, if a financial argument alone will not change our system, perhaps a more qualitative one will.

Integrated education facilitates societal change, unites people and encourages a more positive social attitude of tolerance, understanding and mutual respect. A recent study showed that two thirds of respondents would not want to send their children to a school that is based on their religion. Further research shows that a majority of parents want their school to become integrated. Therefore, we must ask: what or who is stopping them?

The education system continues to fail children and young people from lower-income backgrounds. In 2017-18, 54% of girls who were entitled to free school meals obtained five GCSEs at grades A* to C, compared with 83% of girls who were not. The figures for boys are also stark, with less than half — 44% — of those from lower-income backgrounds getting that level of post-primary qualification, compared with 75% of their peers who are better off. It is not possible for wider socio-economic inequalities to be addressed through a single education system, but early intervention makes a big difference, and that must be considered in any review.

It is not just the set-up of the system that we need to look at, though; it is what our children are being taught or, in many cases, not taught in our schools, and we need to reform the curriculum. There are many examples, but I will briefly address the shortcomings of the educational experiences of those who identify as LGBTQ. The Department of Education's research, published in 2017, raised serious concerns about the inadequacy of relationships and sexuality education (RSE) in our schools and how that puts young people at risk. The report noted that half of respondents were bullied because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, and 92% said that there was insufficient information available on LGBTQ issues in their post-primary school. Two thirds of those who identify as LGBTQ do not feel welcome or valued in their post-primary school. Some decided not to come out because of the negative attitudes of others. Such attitudes, it appears, are based on a lack of understanding. That, in turn, can lead to stereotypes and, in some cases, intolerance. Some 88.6% of LGBTQ people have heard homophobic or transphobic language in school.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member bring her remarks to a close?

Miss Woods: Research for the 'Through our Minds' report found that 61.2% of LGBT people had been called hurtful names that related to their sexuality. Such experiences in our schools are not totally down to the inadequacy of RSE, but that is a start, and it opens up the wider issue of the equality and quantity of RSE in general.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member's time is up.

Mr Catney: I support the motion and amendment. I thank our teachers, our headmasters, all the classroom assistants and even the lollipop ladies, although, because I have stopped running my grandchildren to school, I do not know whether they still exist. I thank all of them.

I put on record my thanks to Mr Baker, the permanent secretary, for the contribution that he made over the three years that the Assembly was not working. I remember that, as soon as we got it up and going, the Minister went out with me to visit a local school, where a school enhancement project was granted. I acknowledge and agree that change is needed. I remember that, until the 1980s, my parents and grandparents supported schools.

I want to put across a point on efficiencies across education. The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) receives about £3 million, with which it supports 450 schools. To me, that looks and sounds like value for money. It is an inclusive education enshrined in the Catholic maintained schools sector. There is a high quality of education and standards in Catholic schools along with excellent leadership.

I really am up for the debate about change, and I know change has to happen. I recognise the positive contributions made by integrated education, and I stand here to state that a review is needed. In fact, one of the early things that I got when I came here was on the Programme for Government, and there was an agreement right across all parties that we needed this Bengoa-type report in order to look into our education. Do not always be trying to throw out the baby with the bathwater. There are good things. Let us all look at the good. As I said at the start, I support the motion as amended.

Mr Allister: It is pretty clear to me that, although all the Executive parties said they bought into New Decade, New Approach, they have not at all bought into this issue. The first two sentences of the education section of appendix 2 state:

"The education system has a diversity of school types, each with its own distinctive ethos and values. However it is not sustainable."

The target of those two sentences is that you cannot go on with the current diversity in school types, yet barely at all in the debate have we heard any addressing of the problem of the sheer diversity of school types. Indeed, we have had defence, particularly from the SDLP, of maintaining the current school types.

Mr Catney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes, I will.

Mr Catney: I did not defend that sector at all. I stood here to inform the House of the good work that that sector does, and I stand here to state that I am up for change, that I am sure they are up for change and that I know that change is needed. Change will come about.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Allister: It was not actually the Member I had in mind; it was the first Member from the SDLP to speak that I had in mind. *[Laughter.]* But if the cap fits, wear it, I suppose.

Mr Catney: Will the Member give way for a very small point?

Mr Allister: OK.

Mr Catney: It is just to let you know that, when you attack one of us, you attack us all. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Allister: I will say the same. *[Laughter.]* We have had this running away from diversity in school types. Indeed, it is notable that the Sinn Féin amendment takes out a critical word. The motion ends by calling for "an inclusive single education system." The Sinn Féin amendment removes the word "inclusive", because it is quite clear that Sinn Féin — indeed, it was clear from Mr O'Dowd's contribution — is not prepared to address the diversity of types because there are sacred cows, and, for Sinn Féin, of course, the greatest sacred cow is the Irish-medium

sector. We have this situation where Irish medium cannot be touched and the maintained sector cannot be touched, so who will be the victim in all this? Will it be the controlled sector? Is that where the fire and the focus are? I fear it is.

New Decade, New Approach talks about equity. Well, let us talk about equity. I recently asked a series of questions of the Minister. I asked about the per pupil spend across the four sectors, and here are the figures. The controlled sector gets the least money at £3,531 per pupil. Next comes the maintained sector, which gets £3,611. Next comes the integrated controlled sector, which gets £3,669, and away out ahead is the Irish-medium sector on £3,821. The Irish-medium sector already gets 8% more than the controlled sector.

Mr McCrossan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: It gets 6% more than the maintained sector. If we are going to talk about equity, let us talk about it, but let us recognise that we cannot have these sacred cows. If we are looking for efficiencies, if we are looking for equity, if we are looking for diversity and tackling it and reducing the number of sectors, surely, on any of those approaches, the most obvious candidate is the Irish-medium sector.

It is the most feted financially in the system. It is the one that is incapable of integration, because it wants to teach in a different language.

12.00 noon

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Member for giving way. Surely the Member must realise that the Irish-medium sector has been deprived of the necessary funding from the House for many years and is now playing catch-up. It provides an invaluable contribution to communities such as mine and to towns such as Strabane and Omagh. I would like the Member to acknowledge that an Irish-medium education has a positive impact on the lives of many children.

Mr Allister: Is it playing catch-up when an Irish-medium school can now be created with 12 pupils? How is that playing catch-up? That is favouritism in the system. I would like the Minister to assure the House that if there is any independent review, its terms of reference will address the diversity of the system; whether all sectors can be sustained; whether equity will address the overfunding of some sectors to the detriment of others; and whether we are not just interested in creating a system in which the sacred cows of the Irish-medium sector and the maintained sector are protected and the controlled sector is sacrificed, because it sounds very much to me as if that is the direction of travel.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call the Minister of Education, Mr Peter Weir, to respond to the debate. Minister, you have up to 15 minutes in which to speak.

Mr Weir: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. First, I thank Mr Lyttle and Ms Armstrong for tabling the motion. It is particularly good to note that much of the debate was witnessed by some young pupils who were here. I welcome their presence. I also welcome the tone of the debate and much of its content. I want to move forward on the basis that the review will have wide terms of reference; that there will be wide opportunities for the panel to look at everything; and that the review will deliver something that is fair for all pupils.

I join others in paying tribute to the work that various public servants have done to deliver education, particularly during the hiatus in which the Assembly was prevented from meeting for three years, and the ongoing work of education staff in particular. At the outset, I put on record that I support the motion and state that I also support the commitment in New Decade, New Approach to undertake an independent review of education. Within the next few weeks, I hope to bring to the Executive a paper with terms of reference and an outline of the way forward.

The other commitment, to set up an expert working group or panel on underachievement, as Mr Humphrey mentioned, will be brought forward at the same time so that we can move on the two commitments together. A number of Members also made the point that if we are looking for the best expertise, it should not simply be drawn from the world of academia. On both panels, there needs to be a broad range of people who can reflect the wider needs of society. Critical to that will be a high level of stakeholder engagement, both at an individual level and with various sectoral organisations. The major bodies in education need to have a role to ensure that there is the opportunity to have input from them.

Having said that I am content with the motion, I will turn to the two amendments. First, I am happy to support amendment No 1, which stands in the names of Ms Mullan and Ms Kelly. To be fair, its wording reflects entirely accurately the exactly wording in 'New Decade, New Approach'. It is therefore entirely appropriate that the Assembly adopt that amendment.

I have sympathy for some of Mr Carroll's remarks. In particular, I too want to see a resolution of the industrial action on teachers' pay. I also agree with him that there has been under-resourcing of education, and I want to lever in as much resource as I can. However, I cannot support his amendment, because it removes any reference to efficiency in the system. I appreciate that that may be a moot point, because his amendment and amendment No 1 are mutually exclusive. I appreciate that the Member takes a certain approach to how he interprets the word "efficiency". He looks at it not so much with rose-tinted glasses as red-tinted glasses. The reality is that we have to realise that there needs to be some reform in order to achieve efficiency. Indeed, I note that the Member for North Down Miss Woods said that part of the problem with our system is that there are inefficiencies in it. We cannot simply delete efficiency from any review, because that would mean that we are not necessarily spending the maximum amount of money on front-line services for our children. While I am sure that Mr Carroll's intentions are well meant, I will support amendment No 1 rather than amendment No 2.

All Members who spoke are in agreement that our education system faces significant challenges, and, if we are to continue to deliver world-class education, we need to reform, modernise and transform. We should always be looking to strive to improve services and deliver better outcomes for our children and young people. Even if we were entirely content with everything in the current system, we should always be looking for better. All good systems continually look at how they can improve that quality of provision and at good schools to bring that about.

We should not underestimate the task ahead, nor should we think that this review will be a panacea to the woes,

real or perceived. The only way that we can bring about true reform is through building consensus, and that will be a critical aspect as we move ahead in delivering a managed programme of transformation. Education in Northern Ireland and elsewhere is sometimes a contested space, and change is inevitably a highly emotive issue. The former Minister referred to one Member who was, on the one hand, urging the closure of a school but, on the other hand, lobbying to save it. That is just one example, but a non-political, non-sectoral and wholly independent review may be a good starting point, although expectations need to be managed. As I said, it is my intention to bring that to the Executive in the near future.

It is important that although we have highlighted a lot of the problems, we do not lose sight of the strengths of our education system, which we should promote and build on. We can be very proud of our school leaders, our teachers and our pupils. I know from my school visits that we have a well-trained and highly committed workforce, and our children and young people continue to achieve high levels of attainment. While we cannot and should not measure performance in education solely on exam results — valuable points were made about us looking for different vocational and non-academic pathways — we can be proud of the results that our young people achieve. International experience and evidence suggests that our primary and post-primary schools are performing well and demonstrate many of the features that underpin high attainment and equity. The attainment of pupils entitled to free school meals has continued to improve, and evidence from PISA 2018 points to the success of this approach in tackling educational underachievement.

Over the last number of years, we have seen a steady rise and improvement in our school performances, and while there is still a major issue around underachievement, we have seen the gap closing. There is a reduction in the gap between those who are on free school meals and those who are not. However, more needs to be done in closing that gap, hence the commitment in New Decade, New Approach for an expert panel for underachievement. Almost all our school-leavers progress into education, employment or training, and I acknowledge the hard work of the pupils and their teachers and school leaders for the positive outcomes being achieved across the system. Furthermore, the OECD identified the coherence of our school improvement policies as a key strength.

The education system faces many challenges, and issues around reform are well known and well understood, and the arguments are well rehearsed — for example, our schools and teachers are often being asked to deliver more and more but with fewer resources. It has been referenced that, from what is probably the high point of educational funding in 2010 and taking into account inflation and various pressures, there is probably £245 million less in spending powers. More schools are in deficit, and more schools are in surplus. I concur with Mr Carroll that the statistics for 2010-11 compared with today mean that, albeit we now have a slightly larger school population, the actual spend per pupil is less than it was nine years ago. There have been fewer inflationary factors in education than elsewhere, but education has been hit by a range of national changes, particularly around pension changes and National Insurance.

Mr Stalford: I am very grateful to the Minister for giving way. He mentioned the pressing need on school budgets — and I declare an interest, as I am on the board of governors of Braniel Primary School, which my children attend — but will he agree that one of the ways in which we can help to tackle that is to devolve additional powers over school budgets to head teachers, away from the centre?

Mr Weir: I agree with the Member. I will come to that in a minute or two. It is also important that we utilise our funding effectively and efficiently to build a system that is sustainable, particularly around the school estate through area planning. There needs to be changes, and some of those will be painful. Linked to the —

Mr Storey: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Weir: I am a little pressed for time, so, unfortunately, I have to decline the wise words of intervention from the honourable Member for North Antrim.

Linked to the funding position is our network of schools. When we look at the network of schools, it is not simply about a cost-saving exercise; it is an educational policy that has had cross-party support down the years, which seeks to deliver the best education to all our children in highly sustainable schools.

In addition, our teachers have to deal with a wide range of increasingly complex needs. The pressures on young people are greater now than perhaps they have ever been. We have mentioned the increasing numbers of SEN issues.

Mr McCrossan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Weir: I am sorry; I am a little pressed for time.

Mention has been made, which I will come back to in much greater detail at the Education Committee in a week's time, of the particular problems that have been shown by the audit of the Education Authority.

The review will wish to consider all those challenges and, more importantly, make recommendations on potential solutions. It is important that Members realise that we have not been simply operating against a blank page. The Department has taken a proactive approach to addressing some of these challenges, even in the absence of devolution, through the establishment of a transformation programme. It is to be commended for commencing the work in the absence of an Assembly and Executive. The programme involves a series of projects, each tasked with developing options that transform an aspect of education. Those include school funding, school transport, statutory assessment, area planning, delivery of pupil support services and 14-19 pathways, as well as a number of other issues.

While that does not go as far as some would wish, it does present an opportunity for meaningful action to be taken. Mention of procurement was made by the Member for South Belfast. I want to see greater devolution of that to school principals. Issues around employment of teachers and around pathways are all critical, and, in seeing that work progress, we should not use the panel or, indeed, the review as some opportunity simply to kick that can of issues down the road. Where positive changes can be made, we need to embrace those simultaneously with the review.

With regard to the design of the review, we would need to agree what the review will consider, how it is undertaken

and by whom. Mr O'Dowd referred to a number of reports on the local education system, so considerable work has already been done. We need to recognise that the problem is not just that the education system has not been reviewed; the problem is that, sometimes, we fail to agree implementation. So, it is important that the review builds on previous work. There is little value in simply replicating what was there before.

It is also important that we take into account the teacher, parent, child and stakeholder. They are central to the process. Ultimately, it is my preference that the review focuses on identifying evidence-based solutions that can be supported, rather than spending time stating problems that we already understand. It is also important that we have practical solutions and do not simply disappear down rabbit holes, which will involve years of disagreement.

Let me reiterate that I fully intend to deliver on the commitments of New Decade, New Approach and will bring forward proposals to the Executive shortly. However, we need to be realistic, first of all, about timescale. While there will be an urgency, it will take a short period at least to establish those panels, but if this job is to be done thoroughly, we are probably talking about a review that will take a year from its establishment to when it reports. It will be completed within this term, but it cannot simply be bounced through in a very short time. It is also important that much-needed work on transformation reform is not stalled. The review is unlikely to be the silver bullet for all the challenges that we face, and we must make sure that time is not wasted simply regurgitating what has been there before.

I would highlight that there are two potential traps that I sometimes see people falling into. One is seeing money as the solution to everything. Yes, there is a need for additional money, but anyone who says that and does not say that there is a need for change and reform deludes themselves. Also, those who see the review as the solution to everything and feel that it will deliver change without significant additional resources being brought into education similarly delude themselves. From that point of view, the remarks of the previous chief executive of the EA that it will require substantial investment and reform are correct. The two go together.

We have to focus on finding solutions to the challenges that we face, building consensus on the delivery of those actions and securing the necessary resources and commitment for education transformation. Our goal should be that every child has the absolute best start in life and that the education system is efficient, effective, sustainable and designed to deliver positive outcomes for every pupil. I look forward to hearing from Members from across the House, the Committee, educational stakeholders and children and young people as we deliver on that commitment.

12.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Gerry Carroll to make the winding-up speech on amendment No 2. The Member has up to five minutes.

Mr Carroll: It was a pretty wide-ranging debate on our education system, and lots of important points and issues were raised. I will try to refer to as many of them as I can in respect to my amendment.

There seemed to be some unanimity in recognising the important work done by our teachers and education staff. I welcome that and am sure that many teachers, education workers, their unions and so forth will also welcome that. I suppose that many of them will also ask why it has taken so long to resolve their pay disputes — so many years now. I very much doubt that many teachers or education workers pay close attention to the detail of amendments in Stormont, but would it not send a strong message to them if an amendment was accepted that stated that we support them in resolving their pay dispute? It would send out a strong message if we could do that today. For that reason, I appeal to Members to accept amendment No 2 in my name and not amendment No 1. A clear message should go out that we recognise the important work done by our teachers and education workers. Their contribution to society is invaluable. In recognising that, we should support a fair pay resolution for them.

The main reason that I tabled my amendment was to remove the part of the motion that mentioned “efficiency”. The Minister referred to people having different definitions of efficiency, but some of the comments made by Members reaffirmed my suspicions, fears and worries and my reason for tabling the amendment. We heard talk of the need to take tough and hard decisions and reduce wastage. For me and our party, that is worrying, and, to many outside this Building, it is code for a reduction in services, cutbacks and closures and no increase in funding. Again, the reason I tabled the amendment was to challenge those points.

The Minister recognised the lack of spending and the decrease in spending per head of population. He gave a figure of several hundred million pounds as the real-term reduction in education funding over the last few years.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Carroll: Briefly, yes.

Mr Weir: Again, I think that there is a bit of confusion over the word “efficiency”, which can be both economic and educational. For instance, if you have a very small primary school in which pupils from a number of year groups are taught by one teacher, the efficiency of that school might be questioned. Also, when you have such multi-year education, the educational outcomes can be questioned. It is generally not so bad when there is no particular difference and there is a composite class of two years; it is once you move beyond that. That is an example where you can see efficiency with an educational driver.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for his intervention. That may be the case, but there is no disputing the fact that efficiency has been used for 10 years to reduce budgets and the money that goes to education. That is something that he made a passing reference to.

There was some discussion about the future design and make-up of our education system, particularly integrated education. We in People Before Profit support and welcome an integrated education system. Ultimately, it should be secular.

Ms Dillon: Will the Member give way?

Mr Carroll: I will not, sorry. I only have a few minutes. Sorry, who was that? Ms Mullan?

Ms Dillon: It was me.

Mr Carroll: Sorry, I will continue. It is deeply troubling that people are educated separately on the basis of their religion. There was discussion about the Irish language sector during the debate. The point has to be made that Irish language education is important in our society. It contributes a lot and has an important role to play. My constituency is the fastest growing urban Gaeltacht. Those schools should be supported and, if they so wish, expanded. Irish-medium education is not the bogeyman or the reason why our schools are underfunded, not to mention the wealth of research that backs up the benefits of dual or multilingual education.

I support Rachel Woods’s comments about the need to move away from an education system based on academic selection and exams generally. Our young people are under massive pressure to study, work hard and go through exam after exam. It has a massive impact on their mental health. Surely, we can move towards a different kind of education system, one that does not see education simply through the prism of how many A or A* grades young people get but supports their nurturing and development.

I encourage Members to support my amendment.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Catherine Kelly to make a winding-up speech on amendment No 1. You have five minutes.

Ms C Kelly: Our education system is obviously broken. That has been evident recently in the treatment of children with special educational needs. The amendment is simply about bringing the motion back into line with the New Decade, New Approach agreement. I acknowledge the consensus in the Chamber among all Members who have spoken. They all referred to the crisis in finance, special educational needs and area planning, to name but a few issues. That highlights the need for the Assembly and Executive to bring about a radical review of our education system.

The education of our children and young people is too important to mess with. Reform of education provision is too important for us to undermine progress by even the appearance of messing about. The agreement tasked the Executive to “establish an external, independent review” and set a goal:

“of moving towards a single education system.”

That remains the best way forward. It is based on agreement and on recognition of how challenging reform is likely to be.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. In the event of a report that said that a single education system would include Irish-medium, integrated, maintained, controlled and whatever other system, would the Member and the party opposite accept that as a single education system for Northern Ireland?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Ms C Kelly: We have to be conscious that a lot of discussion must take place. We have heard from many

Members about the importance of the maintained, controlled and Irish-medium sectors. The review would be based on a determination to overcome difficulties by ensuring that there was full confidence in that review and by safeguarding the pieces that we have got right.

I welcome the fact that the Minister is soon to set up an expert panel on underachievement and a review of education. I agree wholeheartedly that we need investment alongside the review. As John said, our future education system should be inclusive, not exclusive.

I urge Members to support amendment Nos 1 and 2.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Kellie Armstrong to wind up the debate on the substantive motion. You have up to 10 minutes.

Ms Armstrong: I hope that I will not take the full time. The reason why the Alliance Party tabled the motion was frustration. Today is 10 March. The 'New Decade, New Approach' document was published on 10 January, and it made it clear that a Programme for Government should be published within two weeks of the restoration of the institutions. That has not happened. Page 43 of that document, as Mr Allister pointed out, states:

"The education system has a diversity of school types, each with its own distinctive ethos and values."

We know that, and we thank those who work in those systems. I pay tribute to them not just for their excellence in their work but the fact that they struggle to get by with what they have.

It is also stated on page 43 that the system is not sustainable. I remind Members that:

"The parties acknowledge the progress made in developing new models of sharing, cooperation and integration. There is a desire to build on this as a basis for delivering long term improvements in the quality, equity and sustainability of the system."

Ms Dillon: Thank you for giving way. On a fact-checking point, Mr Allister stated that Irish-medium education prevented integration: Irish-medium education can be non-denominational. I know that from experience, because my daughter is taught through the medium of Irish and there are children from a Protestant background at her school.

Ms Armstrong: I do not argue with the Member on that.

Page 43 of the document continues:

"The parties agree that the Executive will commission and oversee an independent fundamental review with a focus on quality and sustainability. The educational experience and outcomes for children and young people are the most important factors."

When we were discussing that in the talks period, a number of people said to me, "You're never going to get this in, Kellie. This will never work. There are too many vested interests". I have to say that there are. We have some excellent school systems, but we simply cannot afford them any more. We cannot afford them for two reasons: it is not just the financial aspect but the damage that it does to our children. While Mr Newton and others have said that we have a fantastic school system, we do, but only for some. We have special educational needs provision that, the Education Authority has already

admitted, has been failing. We have children being left on school buses. We have other children, as Mr Allister pointed out, receiving different levels of funding depending on which type of school they go to.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. She comes to the heart of the issue. There is no segregation in special schools. We do not have maintained special schools, controlled special schools or Irish-medium special schools: we have special schools. Of course, there are reasons why some sectors do not want to have to pay the burden for special schools. Does the Member accept that 50% of the schools in the integrated movement, which is now a sector the same as the rest, are not integrated? The majority of those who go are from one community, and, of course, they get round the tables by getting people to tick the "Other" box. There is a lot of very inventive accounting going on, and it needs to come to an end.

Ms Armstrong: The Member makes an important point.

Ms Bailey: Will the Member give way?

Ms Armstrong: Let me make this argument, and then I will come back to you.

The Member brings me back to my point: nowhere in the Alliance motion will you see the words "integrated education". The Alliance Party and I are more interested in integrating education for the benefit of our young people and the staff who work in those schools. Why are we, as adults, pushing our segregation down the throats of children? If CCMS offers a fantastic education system, let us get the best parts of it and bring it into the system. The same applies to the controlled sector, the integrated sector or any sector. It is time that we stopped spending so much money propping up organisations in order to maintain segregation and looked back at what there should be: an education system that is fit for all.

We have already agreed some of the terms, Minister. The reason we pointed you out in the motion as opposed to the Executive is that the Executive, for two months, have not moved on this. When you are bringing forward terms and conditions, I will remind you to look at the footnote on page 43, which defines what "education" means. It is the full gamut of education; it is not just the schools. It looks at nursery provision and further education. It also looks at teachers, sectoral bodies and the curriculum — the whole gamut.

Can we please now have some bravery in the House? Bengoa was tough. I put it to each and every one of you that this will be the toughest thing that the Assembly will ever face, because there are a massive number of vested interests in education across Northern Ireland. One of the Members to my left — I apologise; I am not sure who it was — said that the head teachers were not pleased: that is a vested interest. Everyone should have their say in the consultation. It needs to be independent so that the independent person can make sure that all those voices are brought forward.

12.30 pm

I say to every Member in the House that we are failing some of our children in society by not having an education system that is fit for all. I ask every one of you to stop for a moment and consider the fact that we have already agreed to have such a system in 'New Decade, New Approach'. Are we already saying that that document is a failure?

No, we are not. We are saying that we are going to take forward reform. We are simply asking the Minister to bring terms of reference to the Executive. He indicated in his response that he will be doing that, for which I thank him. We look forward to seeing the terms of reference very soon, because a review of education is not something that we can wait on. As you rightly say, Minister, it will take a substantial amount of time to create the report. It may then take 15 to 20 years to change our education system to meet its recommendations. As well as time, it will take the belief of everyone in the House to support an education system that will be fit for the future.

We have children who are coming out of education at the moment. Some go to university. Some are lucky enough to go into jobs. Some go on to further education. However, many of our children come out without qualifications. What is happening to them? They are being left behind, and many of those young people have special educational needs. That is a poor measurement of our society. Why are we not protecting those people who need us the most, to ensure that they have a lifelong pathway whenever the options that we take for granted are not available to them?

Segregation and separation of children is something that I absolutely believe is wrong. Justin McNulty said that he is a Catholic who went through the Catholic education system and that he understands diversity. I am sorry, but I have to disagree. I am a Catholic who went through the Catholic education system, and, other than for the fact that I had a mixed family, I never came across diversity through my school. It talked to me about it but did not include me with it. I completely respect the Member when he says that the Catholic education system is a good system. I am a product of it, so I have to agree. However, we must take the best of that system and the best of everything else and bring it all together to create a system that is so much better.

I say this to all as well: it needs to be an inclusive system. I will remind Members that, in building an inclusive society, we need to think about LGBT, Catholic/Protestant, all faiths and those of no faith.

Miss Woods: Will the Member give way?

Ms Armstrong: I will indeed.

Miss Woods: Does the Member agree that the Executive's failure to amend legislation to ensure that schools take account of section 75 has contributed to the negative stereotyping of LGBTQ students and has had some negative effects on their well-being?

Ms Armstrong: I have to agree with Miss Woods, but we have even more problems than that, given that the Fair Employment (Monitoring) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999 define community by binary means and do not take into account any section 75 obligations.

We have to think that an inclusive system is one that includes disabilities, and a way of doing that is through our school system. We cannot do that while our school estate is no longer fit for purpose, so the review is critically needed. We included the word "inclusive" in the motion. The Cambridge Dictionary definition gives this example:

"An inclusive group or organization tries to include many different types of people and treat them all fairly and equally."

By comparison, the Cambridge Dictionary definition of the word "single" is, "one only".

Our school system comprises wonderful young people who are taught by wonderful teachers, and we are letting them down by taking £100 million a year out of the system to maintain segregation.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I remind Members that if amendment No 1 is made, I will not put the Question on amendment No 2.

Question, That amendment No 1 be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to implement urgently the New Decade, New Approach commitment 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.

Childcare Strategy

Mr Newton: I beg to move

That this Assembly believes that access to good quality and affordable childcare can help empower those parents who want to stay and progress in paid work; accepts that this, in turn, will contribute to the local economy; recognises the transformative role that good childcare can play in supporting the educational, social and physical development of a child; supports the aim of providing 30 hours of free childcare for 38 weeks a year for three- to four-year-olds, in line with the rest of the United Kingdom; further recognises that there are significant pressures already on the budget of the Department of Education; and calls upon the Executive to implement a childcare strategy and any legislation required to enable this to proceed.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask Members to desist from conversations, which prevent other Members from hearing what is being said. If you wish to have conversations that are going to distract, please leave the Chamber.

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

Mr Newton: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I greatly appreciate those words.

I hope that the motion can be accepted across the Chamber. It is a positive motion, drawn up to support parents, children and the economy. It is, therefore, holistic in its approach.

The motion has a number of key phrases that I draw to Members' attention. It calls for:

"access to good quality and affordable childcare".

It seeks to empower parents by allowing them to continue to work, and, therefore, to progress in their work. It:

"recognises the transformative role that good childcare can play in supporting the educational, social and physical development of a child [and] supports the aim of providing 30 hours of free childcare for 38 weeks a year for three- to four-year-olds".

I do not like the phrase the "cost of education". I like the phrase "investment in education". We are seeking, through the motion, investment in our children, families and wider society. The motion encapsulates the thinking of the Programme for Government in the New Decade, New Approach agreement's childcare strategy.

I want to make comparisons between Northern Ireland and other parts of the UK. In England, all three- to four-year-olds are entitled to 570 hours of free provision per year. That is typically taken as 15 hours per week over 38 weeks. In England, that is referred to as the universal entitlement. In addition, since September 2017, three- and four-year-olds with working parents are entitled to a free nursery place equivalent to 30 hours per week over 38 weeks. That is referred to as the extended entitlement.

In Scotland, the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 introduced the term "early learning and childcare" for

provision for children up to school age. Beyond childcare, this recognises a child's preschool period as early education, where a child acquires the skills and knowledge required to succeed in primary school and beyond. It is, therefore, a building block. The Act increased the flexibility and amount of free early learning and childcare from 475 to 600 hours per year for all three- to four-year-olds. It also extended the entitlement to two-year-olds who are looked after under what is referred to as the kinship order or whose parents qualify for certain benefits. These children are entitled to free early learning and childcare from the first term after their second birthday.

The Scottish Government have since committed to almost doubling the number of funded early learning childcare (ELC) hours. From August 2020, all three- and four-year-olds and eligible two-year-olds will receive 1,140 hours of funded early learning childcare. Prior to August 2020, some children, especially those living in disadvantaged areas, will be able to access those extended hours as local authorities phase in the delivery of the 1,140 hours. They have recognised, through their work, that children living in disadvantaged areas need that level of support.

The Welsh Government have set targets to expand and develop government-funded early years education in childcare in recent years. As a result, all three- and four-year-olds are now entitled to a free part-time place, which is available for a minimum of 10 hours per week for 38 weeks of the year. The Welsh Government also plan to extend this offer so that, by September 2020, the entitlement for working parents will be 30 hours per week over 48 weeks, and parents can choose to pay for additional provision on top of the free part-time provision that they receive.

Back in 2015, the then First Minister, Peter Robinson, and deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness, announced their 10-year strategy for affordable and integrated childcare. That strategy had seven key objectives. The then First Minister and deputy First Minister indicated that they wanted to support:

"• Childcare services that are available to all children, regardless of where they live, their needs or circumstances with a registered and appropriate childcare place for every child that requires one".

They wanted:

"• Childcare services that are affordable—no longer taking a disproportionate share of average household incomes".

They also had objectives to see:

"• Childcare settings that aim to become sustainable, able, eventually, to cover their costs from the fees they charge;

• Childcare settings that foster lifelong respect for diversity, thereby laying the foundations for a more tolerant and inclusive future;

• Childcare services that are of high quality, meeting or bettering the current minimum standards and with all staff and managers trained to the appropriate level;

• Detailed and up to date information on the childcare sector that is readily available to parents, allowing

them to make informed choices regarding the childcare services they use; and

• Childcare services that are integrated with, and complementary to, educational and youth services.”

Too often in the past, we have been guilty of recognising the importance of childcare and the building block that it can be for the future of the child, the family and society, yet, at the same time, trying to address the issue through short-term project-funding.

We have tried to address it through community initiatives that rely on funding and have a set finish time. We have relied on schemes that can bring on board only limited numbers. We cannot continue in that vein if we believe that childcare is an important aspect of the development of the child and, indeed, society.

12.45 pm

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Newton: I will give way to the Member.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for bringing forward the motion and his comments thus far. He referred to the appropriate level. Wild statements about our education system being broken were made in the previous debate. Everything has to be the extreme in this place. Does he accept that integral to ensuring the best outcome for our pupils and young people is that the education process, rather than what is the case in some places, where it does not start until six or seven, starts at the earliest possible age? Childcare provision and early learning is all integral to ensuring the best outcome for our young people.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I remind Members to address the Chair —

Mr Storey: Apologies.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): — and to make sure that their microphone is pointing towards them rather than away from them, because it can create some difficulties in picking up what is being said.

Mr Newton: I concur with what the Member said. What we have in this motion indicates that that holistic, joined-up and complete approach is necessary if we are to succeed.

We need to look at why change is needed. I go back to what was said about the other parts of the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland has the lowest proportion of households receiving free childcare across the whole of the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland has the second-lowest public spending on childcare provision in the United Kingdom.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Newton: It has fallen behind Wales. We need to at least play catch-up and, hopefully, take a stride forward and even become the best in the United Kingdom.

Ms C Kelly: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all between “help” and “accepts” and insert:

“tackle disadvantage and poverty by closing the educational gap between the most and least advantaged children, can empower parents who want

to stay and progress in paid work, and those who want to return to education or training;”

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): You will have 10 minutes to propose the amendment and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Ms C Kelly: The provision of affordable and appropriate childcare is fundamental to our social infrastructure. It is as important for our economy as investment in the construction of our roads. It can be a pathway to early learning. It can close the educational gap between our most- and least-advantaged children. The development of skills and acquisition of education by our children and young people now will grow our economy in the future.

Access to childcare can also create a pathway for parents to enter the workforce. It can increase their participation in employment or help them acquire additional qualifications, skills or training to progress their career. It can increase the involvement of women in employment, giving them financial independence and the status that paid participation in the workforce can secure. It can help single parents who are struggling to rear and provide for their children at the same time or provide additional help for parents of children with disabilities. It can support other less-advantaged groups in our community, such as minority ethnic or migrant families. Access to affordable and appropriate childcare can mitigate the poverty that is currently experienced by many hard-pressed working families who are struggling to make ends meet.

Given the obvious benefits, it is hard to understand why it is taking so long for all of us here to develop and implement a childcare strategy. Tyrone and Fermanagh are two largely rural and border counties with little to no childcare provision. I live in west Tyrone, and I hear from mummies and daddies every day about how difficult it is to find a registered childminder or a preschool place. Grannies and grandas are using their retirement to provide informal childcare for their grandchildren, stepping into the breach of our collective policy failure.

I worked previously in Naíscoil na gCrann in Omagh, and felt and witnessed at first hand the immense pressure on our childcare practitioners. Reliance on the dedication, rather than the rewarding, of any workforce is unsustainable. Substantial investment in childcare would have a domino effect and shape the future of the sector. It would empower childcare providers and allow the workforce to grow.

Across the North, many people, mostly women, have given up the profession for which they were trained because of the proscriptive cost of childcare. As we all face the challenge of coronavirus, it is worth noting that many of those parents are trained health professionals, nurses and social care workers who, if childcare was affordable and accessible, could return to work and increase the capacity in our health service. I urge Members to support the amendment to the motion.

Ms Mullan (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I will begin with a few remarks on behalf of the Committee for Education. The childcare strategy was one of the first, and one of the most important, policy areas that the Committee considered since it was formed in January. The Department of Education has had responsibility for early years educational provision for some time. However, childcare was added

to the Department's portfolio only after the Fresh Start Agreement.

I do not think that anyone will disagree with the sentiments of the motion. We can all assert that good childcare has a transformative role:

"in supporting the educational, social and physical development of a child".

It also complements early intervention strategies such as Sure Start and measures such as extended schools and nurture groups.

When officials came before the Committee a few weeks ago, they talked about up-to-date research and the practices in other jurisdictions. The options appear to include a new childcare offer of 15 hours or 30 hours for all or some three- and four-year-olds. Two-year-olds, it seemed, might also be included. Indeed, there has even been consideration of the wider ambition to extend care to children in other age groups. Some work on that has been taken forward through Bright Start and other funding streams.

The Department has asked for £15 million in 2020-21 for childcare. However, it explained that, depending on the options selected, it might need anywhere between £1 million and £50 million in the next financial year. As we await the Budget for the next year, I encourage the Executive to view the childcare strategy as a priority and allocate resources accordingly. When that happens, it will be important for the Department to set out and explain the options to the Committee and to stakeholders. It will also be important to assure ourselves that educational and development objectives for children are being met, as well as the employment benefits for parents.

I hope that, at the end of the debate, the Education Minister will provide information on the Department's views on the relative value of part-time versus full-time provision, as well as updating us on the interim evaluation and future funding position of Bright Start. Finally, I ask the Minister to tell us about the nature and timing of the legislation that he will need to introduce in order to give effect to the childcare strategy.

Speaking as a Sinn Féin MLA, I will now add a few words in support of the amendment. Childcare must be more affordable and accessible. Sinn Féin's aspiration is to have a universal, high-quality system of childcare. Childcare is crucial for parents who wish to remain in employment and to those who want to enter employment, education or training. A few weeks back, at the Committee, I raised concerns with Education Authority and departmental officials about the lack of support for community preschool facilities and the removal of funding. I know of at least two facilities in my constituency that, despite operating for 30 or 40 years, now face closure. Minister, I ask that you relook at that practice immediately. Otherwise, when we finally get a strategy in place, we will not have the childcare facilities to provide this vital service.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Members, the Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm today. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time. The debate on the motion will resume after Question Time, when the next contribution will be from Sinead McLaughlin.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.55 pm.

2.00 pm

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

Oral Answers to Questions

Education

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Topical question 7, in the name of Mr Gerry Kelly, has been withdrawn. There are no grouped questions in this session.

SEN Statements: Waiting List

1. **Mr Allen** asked the Minister of Education how many children are awaiting a statement of special educational needs (SEN). (AQO 309/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): I am interpreting this as a question about the number of referrals to the Education Authority (EA) for a statutory assessment, where a statutory assessment may result in a statement or a note in lieu of a statement. The latest figures that we have, as of 28 February 2020, are that 2,081 children are undergoing a statutory assessment.

Mr Allen: I thank the Minister for his answer. I declare an interest, as I have a relative who is going through the process. From the engagement that I have had with parents whose children are involved in the special educational needs assessment process, it has been indicated to me that communication between them and the Education Authority has been abysmal. Will the Minister undertake to review how the Education Authority communicates with parents to keep them updated on assessments?

Mr Weir: As the Member is probably aware, a wider review was done by way of an internal audit of the Education Authority. That produced an internal audit report, which was, by common parlance, fairly damning and resulted in a range of recommendations.

Obviously, first of all, as a Department, we will ensure that there is proper delivery of those recommendations, and there will need to be a clear-cut role for the Department, although it is up to the EA to provide that delivery. At the heart of that, there have been considerable problems in communication — that is one of the areas that we need to improve on — and prior to being in post I, too, experienced difficulties with communications on SEN with the EA. This is a subject that I will be going into greater detail on at the Education Committee; I think I am due to appear in front of it on Wednesday week.

Mr Lyttle: Does the Minister agree that the findings of the audit of the EA's assessment and support process for children with special educational needs demonstrates a systemic failure of those children? Does he also agree that nothing less than an independent review of the EA is now necessary?

Mr Weir: I want to consider the best way to go forward. The review's report was, as I said, very damning. The Member mentioned a full independent assessment.

Understandably, when the EA launched its internal audit, there was suspicion that it would be some sort of whitewash and there would not be a proper investigation. It is fairly clear from reading the full report that the audit team went into this thoroughly and with a critical eye. What is particularly important is that the recommendations are put in place. The report also lists a range of immediate actions. While, ultimately, it is for the EA to implement those, I will be looking at ways in which the Department can have a direct role in ensuring that the EA is held to account on them. We will have to monitor the situation as time goes on, but I think the EA has to be given some opportunity to correct many of the mistakes that have been made and show that there has been clear improvement.

Ms Mullan: Further to your answer, Minister, to the Chairperson of the Education Committee and given the EA's internal audit report, which was presented to the Committee last week, what action will your Department take to ensure that there is no repeat of the failings identified into special educational needs practices?

Mr Weir: We will work alongside the Education Authority. The EA should be given an opportunity to implement the report's recommendations, but it cannot simply be left to its own devices. There is a duty of care on all of us to ensure that the most vulnerable in our society, particularly children with special educational needs, are properly served. The report showed a catalogue of problems and mistakes. There are direct recommendations that arise from the report, so the issue is about ensuring that they are brought to fruition. There is a key role for the Department to make sure that, working alongside the EA, those are put into effect. Again, I am sure that that will be dealt with in greater depth next week.

Shared Education: Funding

2. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister of Education to outline the current available funding for cross-border shared education projects. (AQO 310/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Peace IV Programme currently provides funding for shared education partnerships in Northern Ireland, in the border counties of the Republic of Ireland and on a cross-border basis. Two projects are funded. The first is the collaboration through sharing in education project and is for primary, post-primary and special schools. The project has a budget of €28.9 million, plus up to a further €2 million to provide for additional support for shared education partnerships. The second is the sharing from the start project and is for early-years settings. It has a budget from the EU of €4.26 million.

The funding will continue until the end of the 2021-22 academic year, so it is guaranteed up until June 2022. The programme does not stipulate amounts of funding to be spent on partnerships in each jurisdiction and cross-border. Funding is allocated annually to successful applicant partnerships over each of the five years of the programme. Partnerships can include arrangements between schools that are in Northern Ireland, between schools that are in the Republic of Ireland — provided that they are in border counties — and between schools in the North and schools in the South.

Mr Lynch: The Minister will no doubt agree that the cross-border shared education projects and the relationships that

they create are highly valuable. Does he intend to maintain that level of funding after exiting the EU?

Mr Weir: We are waiting to see precisely what the arrangements will be post-Brexit. There have already been indications from the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) that it would like to see such projects continuing. To some extent, the question is this: how will they be funded after the Peace IV programme concludes? As I indicated, it will be ending in 2022. However, a new cross-border Peace Plus programme has been announced for 2021-27. It is the successor to Peace IV and INTERREG and will be funded jointly. I think that there has been acceptance of that by both the EU and the UK Government. The SEUPB is leading on the development of that programme with input from the Governments, North and South, and other stakeholders.

We are in the process of co-designing a programme, and Department of Education officials are engaging with their opposite numbers in the Department of Education and Skills as part of the process. A range of proposals is under consideration for possible inclusion in the programme, including shared education for schools, early years and youth. The programme will also have a cross-border element.

Ms Armstrong: I ask the Minister to go further and tell us how much is being spent from the Fresh Start budget on shared education and integrated education, how much is planned to be spent and how much will be left over.

Mr Weir: There will not be any money left over. It is indicated in New Decade, New Approach that flexibility is guaranteed, so we need to tease that out with Treasury. The aim is to spend all of the £500 million. We have projects that are designed to ensure that the money is fully realised. Part of the complication with the spend to date arose out of the initial parameters that Treasury placed on the programme, whereby projects had to come entirely from a fresh call. Any projects previously announced were not able to be funded. Projects had to consist of a full capital programme, and the money could be spent only at the time in which it was allowed to be spent. That is the case with any major capital programme. For example, for a full school build, almost none of the money will be available in the first year. It will probably take a few years.

That led to a level of frustration. Under the confidence-and-supply arrangement, that was successfully renegotiated, because end-year flexibility created the danger of money being lost, particularly for early-years provision. There is still a little bit of work to do to tie down what is in 'New Decade, New Approach'. The document gives indications that there is still a commitment from the Government to ensure that flexibility. We are still scoping out all the details and working with our colleagues in the Department of Finance, because the nature of capital builds, whenever finance for particular projects is ring-fenced, will at times result in an uneven spread.

In the first few years, there will be years in which the full £50 million will not be able to be spent. Indeed, initially, very little was able to be spent, but, in some subsequent years, much more than £50 million will be needed. We want to make sure that every penny of that is delivered, which is why, with a range of projects going ahead, we believe that we have enough projects to fill that. There is always the opportunity for an additional call if there is a need to absorb any additional money, but we believe from

the profiling that there will not be anything particular to spend. We have probably slightly overcommitted to ensure that, if there are any problems, that can at least mean that the full amount will be spent.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I gently remind the Minister of the two-minute rule. You can have an additional one if you ask for it.

Mr Weir: I am suitably chastised.

Coronavirus: Schools

3. **Mr Robinson** asked the Minister of Education what powers a school principal has if there are concerns about an outbreak of coronavirus in their school.
(AQO 311/17-22)

Mr Weir: In exceptional circumstances that 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; that is known as exceptional closure. Guidance for schools is contained in the Department's circular 2019/13, including details of the online application process developed by Departments to assist schools in this process. On receipt of an application, the Department will decide on a case-by-case basis whether an exceptional closure should be granted. I should emphasise that, whilst the situation regarding coronavirus is changing very quickly, current Public Health Agency (PHA) advice is that schools should remain open unless there is direction to close. However, as time moves on, we are living in a fairly exceptional circumstance, and cognisance will be taken of that in any decision. We will look at each individual case, and it might well be that events move on in such a way that there will be a change in approach to exceptional closures.

Mr Robinson: I thank the Minister. Will he outline what steps he is taking to keep schools and parents informed of developments?

Mr Weir: Part of that is to ensure that people get the correct advice and get it from a single source. On 27 September, I wrote out to all principals and education sector partners enclosing the link to the PHA website, because it is important that school hygiene advice and health advice comes directly from the PHA. That is being updated as the situation develops, and we have emphasised the importance of monitoring the website regularly.

For travel advice, the source is largely the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and, once there has been a change, we have notified schools as soon as it was practicable. On Sunday evening, for instance, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office took a different approach to northern Italy. People were notified of that before lunchtime yesterday. Again, last night, the position changed for Italy as a whole, and people have been notified about that.

The updated Chief Medical Officer advice was included in the email to schools, and I know that a number of schools have taken advantage of the opportunity of a conference call with the Chief Medical Officer and the Public Health Agency. My Department continues to communicate with our education sector by issuing communications, issuing the links and providing the self-isolation advice leaflet to the education sector. I have also made sure that the

PHA website link is prominently displayed on the DE website. Given the health implications, there is close cooperation between my Department and the Department of Health, and there are also liaisons with other Education Departments throughout these jurisdictions.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Several Members have indicated that they wish to ask a supplementary question. Mindful of Mr Speaker's ruling at the start of the week, I will not be able to get to everyone, so please bear with me and forgive me if I do not get to you. Mr Colm Gildernew was the first on his feet.

Mr Gildernew: I thank the Minister for the work that he has been doing, and I appreciate the work that his Department, teachers, schools and staff have been doing at this difficult time. What are the circumstances of this outbreak that would require school closures?

Mr Weir: We will be very much driven by the medical advice, and sometimes that will be because of the potential threat to students. In the case where it has happened on a temporary basis, there is no indication of community transmission. Indeed, at the moment, the health advice is that none of the cases in Northern Ireland has come by way of community transmission. I want to reassure parents in that case that there is no direct threat to their children; it is important to state that.

An exceptional closure can take place, for example, when it is felt that, on the advice of the Public Health Agency, it is important to have a deep clean of the school. In the Newtownhamilton case, the advice of the Public Health Agency was to close both the school affected and the adjoining school — the high school and the primary school — until the end of this week to allow a deep clean to be done. None of the pupils is being tested. We will follow that exceptional closure advice or, indeed, any other advice that comes from the Public Health Agency. It is important that there is a health driver. However, I suspect that, as things move on, circumstances will move on as well.

2.15 pm

Ms S Bradley: I appreciate the Minister's words of reassurance. That is important.

As the Minister is aware, the Education Authority has access to a rich bank of good supply teachers. Are there any backup systems in place, however, to ensure that schools can continue to operate in the event that non-teaching staff are unable to work?

Mr Weir: The Member makes a couple of points. There is a bank of supply teachers. We will look to see whether any flexibility with regard to non-teaching staff is required and provide support for that. It will reach a point where we need to look at that, depending on how far and wide the virus has spread. There are also opportunities through the EA and C2k for remote learning. We want to have a full gamut of opportunities. That is why it is particularly significant that the Government are putting through legislation centrally that will give Departments a range of powers. Those are powers that, I am sure, a lot of us hope do not have to be exercised. Certainly, the Department of Education and other Departments in Northern Ireland have asked for maximum powers so that we are not caught on the hop or put in a situation where we have to react to particular circumstances and then find that we do not have

the powers to do so. We will adapt our actions depending on circumstances and, again, following that expert advice.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Ms Paula Bradshaw.

Ms Bradshaw: My question has been answered, thank you.

Mrs Cameron: Does the Minister agree that it is vital that, if teachers, pupils or parents have concerns about the coronavirus, their first port of call should be the 111 number, selecting option 1 when they get through for the Northern Ireland helpline, and, indeed, if they are symptomatic, they should ring their GP or out-of-hours GP for advice? If need be, that GP can then refer them to the pod for testing.

Mr Weir: In the light of the earlier remonstrance from the Principal Deputy Speaker, I am tempted to say that the answer is, "Yes", but, to elaborate, it is important that people follow the correct advice; that they go through the NHS helpline, which is there to provide that information; and that they behave responsibly. There is particular advice for anybody who suspects that they are infected, which is to self-isolate and contact their GP. If somebody has a concern, it will not help if they suddenly rush to a hospital A&E department, because that risks community transfer.

At the moment, we are still in the containment phase. At some point, we may move to the delay phase. All the experts say that the more it is contained and delayed, the better the opportunities that gives for hospitals to deal with it and for people to find solutions to the problem. That is the responsible route for everyone, irrespective of whether they are a pupil, a teacher or a parent.

Carrickfergus Academy: Investment

4. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Education, following his visit to Carrickfergus Academy in February 2020, for his assessment of the requirement for significant investment to provide modern facilities for the school. (AQO 312/17-22)

Mr Weir: During my visit to Carrickfergus Academy, I was able to hear at first hand about some of the difficulties that the school has encountered as a result of having to operate on a split site following the amalgamation of Carrickfergus College and Downshire Community School. I can confirm that an application was submitted by the Education Authority on behalf of Carrickfergus Academy under the recent call for major capital projects, which closed on 31 October 2019. As that is still a live process, it would not be appropriate for me to comment further on a new build for Carrickfergus Academy at this time. I do hope, however, to be in a position to make a major capital announcement of schemes to advance in planning in the next couple of months.

In the meantime, the school continues to avail itself of minor improvement works, which is another strand of the capital investment strategy. In the last three years, in the region of £74,000 has been spent on minor works across the junior and senior campus sites. Sixteen minor works applications were submitted by the school under the last minor works call in October 2017, and eight of those applications are currently being assessed. If approved, that would bring an additional investment for the school.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for his answer and, indeed, for coming to Carrickfergus Academy. Will he accept that there is a need for an early concept layout for a new school and a new plan in the area, given that potential investments are needed for road safety improvements that are required to the entrance and, indeed, other investments such as a 2G pitch, so that there is a good layout that will stand not only for the short term but for any long-term investment in the site?

Mr Weir: Obviously, there are restrictions on what I can say. The Member has made his point well. Clearly, there are schools throughout Northern Ireland that are very deserving of that level of capital investment, and that will be part of the process. At the meeting, I was also struck by the fact that this will need to be examined in a broader sense. While this was focusing on the capital requirements, I appreciate very much that schools that operate on split sites face particular additional resource difficulties. As we move ahead in any examination of the common funding formula, it is important to see whether those are being properly addressed, notwithstanding the overall problem that there is not enough money in the system as a whole. The problems and some of the pressures that are faced by Carrickfergus Academy are not unique to that school; we have seen it happen with other amalgamated sites. We need to bear that in mind when considering what resources can be put in place, and everyone will need to be cognisant of that as we look into area planning and split-site solutions. Generally speaking, they can only really be a short- to medium-term solution, not a long-term solution.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for his visit to Carrick Academy in recent weeks. I acknowledge the money that has been made available to keep the school ticking over in the meantime through minor works. When does the Minister intend to make an announcement on Carrick Academy?

Mr Weir: As I said, I suspect it will be in the next — we are expecting a major capital assessment and announcement within the next two months or so, so the successful schools will learn of that then. Obviously, that process was started pre-devolution. In the meantime, there is an opportunity, as was mentioned. Although Carrick is in the major works programme and, if it were successful, would not be eligible for the school enhancement programme, that does not preclude minor works. A number of those are on track. As indicated, some of those have taken place, and others will happen. Particularly where there is a health and safety issue, that will always try to be addressed in the immediacy, even if a school ends up being successful in a major capital works programme.

Mr Boylan: Will the Minister consider prioritising investment in some of the schools that operate out of temporary Portakabins?

Mr Weir: With both the school enhancement programme and the major capital works programme, there is an independent scoring mechanism that scores the applications. That considers the state of the buildings, whether it is a split site, whether it is helping area planning and the levels of temporary accommodation. All those, amongst others, are factors on which the scores are based. As the Member will appreciate, to take the school enhancement programme as an example, around 60 of those applications have been successful out of 165

initial applications. There has to be something that is fair between schools, because, in many ways, schools compete with each other for limited resources.

It is not the ideal situation to have temporary classrooms. I know that schools have been facilitated at times with temporary classrooms, but the old Portakabins from my time at school and maybe even from the distant days when Mr Boylan was at school are very different from the temporary classrooms that we have today. All those factors are taken into account in any assessment of the relative needs of schools.

Irish-medium Workforce Strategy

5. **Mr McGuigan** asked the Minister of Education to outline his plans for a workforce strategy for the Irish-medium sector in order to increase the number of specialist subject teachers. (AQO 313/17-22)

Mr Weir: I should clarify that it is the responsibility of each employing authority to monitor and manage its workforce. That includes the Irish-medium sector. An employing authority can be the Education Authority, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) or the board of governors of a school, depending on its management type.

In February, I met the Irish-medium representative body, CnaG, which my Department funds. Therefore, I am aware of the sector's concerns about teacher supply, particularly at post-primary level, where subject specialists with appropriate Irish language ability and pedagogical skills in immersion education are being sought. My officials have been conducting a series of meetings with initial teacher education providers in the Irish-medium sector to understand the issues and the range of potential solutions. Teacher education goes beyond the Department of Education. Discussions have been taking place with the Department for the Economy on initial teacher education provision, because it would fund that.

I expect a series of options reflecting potential short-term and longer-term solutions to be developed for consideration. At this stage, I cannot pre-empt what the outcomes will be, not least given the potential resource implications that will need to be factored in.

Mr McGuigan: The Minister will be aware of the growth in Irish-medium education, with more and more pupils across the North accessing education through Irish. Given the growth and the increasing demand in the sector, particularly the growing number of children accessing their primary education through Irish, does the Minister agree that significant increased investment is required for Irish-medium post-primary education, including a workforce strategy?

Mr Weir: We will engage with CnaG on the workforce strategy to see what is fit for purpose. Part of the issue relates to longer-term solutions versus shorter-term solutions. Even if there were a change in the mix of teachers coming through initial teacher education, somebody starting in St Mary's, for instance, in September would not be a fully qualified teacher for a number of years. There will be other demands in different sectors. That will not necessarily meet the demand quickly, so we need to look at what other measures can be taken. The language upskilling of existing teachers is one route. The skills that exist in the broader workforce at present could be examined. It is about trying to make sure that

every child gets what is needed for their education. As I said, options are being developed. That has to be done in conjunction with the sector to make sure that what is put forward is fit for purpose.

Mr Allister: The Minister said that, if and when options come before him, he will consider them in the context of the resource implications. In considering those resource implications, will he reflect on the figures that I quoted this morning in the debate, which he supplied in answer to questions? Those figures indicate that the Irish-medium sector already receives 8% more per child than the allocation in the controlled sector and 6% more than the allocation in the maintained sector. That sector already has preference in the level of funding per child.

Mr Weir: I will take all issues into account. The resource implications for initial teacher education will be most acute for the Department for the Economy. While the Department of Education has a role in setting the numbers, it is, effectively, the Department for the Economy that picks up the tab.

There will be variations between sectors. In part, the figures will vary to a large extent from school to school. A higher proportion of Irish-medium schools are small, so they tend to be more expensive per pupil than other schools. That applies, I think, throughout the sectors.

While the figures that show the difference are there, it is not an even picture from school to school. We have to try to ensure that all our children are catered for in an equitable manner so that we can provide them with the best education that we possibly can.

2.30 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I have about 30 seconds. If Ms Kelly would like to ask her question, the Minister will answer, but there will be no time for a supplementary question.

Strule Shared Education Campus

6. **Ms C Kelly** asked the Minister of Education for a time frame for work to begin on Strule Shared Education Campus. (AQO 314/17-22)

Mr Weir: I remain fully committed to delivering this educationally and strategically significant programme. It represents a major capital investment in the west of Northern Ireland that will stimulate further development and regeneration of the region. The next stage of construction has been delayed due to tendering issues and the need for business case reapproval. My Department has completed a fundamental review of the construction programme, and I am giving that urgent consideration.

At this stage, the provisional opening of the campus is planned for September 2024 at the earliest. That is dependent on works commencing by May 2021. The investment to date has delivered the design, construction and fit-out of Arvalee School and Resource Centre, the Strathroy Link Road to improve traffic flow to and from the campus, and extensive site preparation works. It has also delivered the designs for the core schools.

In terms of non-construction projects, work continues on the delivery of a range of shared education initiatives that are being developed and led by the schools. That will

ensure that today's pupils have the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of sharing and to play an important role in shaping future education delivery locally and regionally. While the procurement competition is currently suspended, it remains live, and, as a result, it would be inappropriate to comment further on the procurement process at this time.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I think that that is called speed-reading. Well done. We now move to topical questions.

Area Planning: SEN Schools

T1. **Mr Allen** asked the Minister of Education for an update on area planning, specifically the proposals for the restructuring of special educational needs (SEN) schools in Belfast. (AQT 221/17-22)

Mr Weir: At this stage, area planning is continuing. There is a concern that, across the board, the overall speed and pace of area planning has not, perhaps, moved as quickly as it should have. I know that there is a wider situation. Broadly speaking, the aim of area planning, which can sometimes create a little delay, is to try to get all the sectors moving by taking a more coherent and joined-up approach. Getting them aligned is not always easy, and I know that that is a particular issue in Belfast.

The Member will be aware that the EA created proposals to deal with the special needs situation in Belfast. There was a considerable level of public representation on that and a feeling that what was put forward was not fit for purpose, and, effectively, the proposals were withdrawn. At this stage, nothing further has come forward from the EA, so as the managing authority it is up to it to consider where things stand. Obviously, we want to ensure that we have something that is absolutely fit for purpose, particularly for our special needs pupils. In Belfast, the configuration grew over a number of years in a slightly haphazard way. We need to recognise the sensitivities and ensure that people are not detached from schools that they have had very strong connections with.

Mr Allen: I thank the Minister for his answer. I am glad to hear your commitment to special educational needs schools being fit for purpose. On the back of that, a number of parents have contacted me about the lack of communication from the EA. Will the Minister give a commitment or guarantee that the EA will directly communicate with parents of children who are attending special educational needs schools, in order to listen further to their concerns and engage them in the wider process?

Mr Weir: That is critical. I am a little restricted in what I can say, because, ultimately, this may lead to development proposals to which I would have to give a sort of legal verdict. While a lot of the thinking on previous proposals was very well-intended and virtuous, there was a clear problem with communication and a level of disengagement. While nobody is ever keen to see particular schools closed, notwithstanding the remarks of Mr O'Dowd earlier, it is clear that the more that the EA or anybody else who puts forward proposals can bring consensus and bring parents alongside, the better. Early communication before we reach the stage of a formal development proposal is critical, particularly for special educational needs.

Schools: Medical Interventions

T2. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister of Education to outline the process in schools to deal with complex medical interventions, similar to the pathway that is in place for diabetes, given that, as he will be aware, more and more children with complex medical conditions are attending mainstream schools. (AQT 222/17-22)

Mr Weir: I know that that is an issue. The joint Department of Health and Department of Education policy document, 'Supporting Pupils with Medication Needs', provides a robust framework for enabling all children with medication needs to access the necessary support. All schools have access to that guidance, and funding was allocated to the EA to provide training to all school principals on how to meet pupils' medication needs. Principals are responsible for determining the training needs of their teachers and school staff, and they can avail themselves of the wide range of courses offered by the EA on all aspects of special educational needs, including one on diabetes. Training on dealing with health conditions, including complex medical conditions, will also be provided by the relevant health and social care trust. Training will be in line with the pupil's individual healthcare plan and be subject to an ongoing review.

I am aware of the issues raised about mainstream schools. Having visited a special needs school last week, I am also acutely aware that there are concerns at times in those schools over whether the appropriate medical backup is there, particularly for children with complex needs. Given the importance of special educational needs, I have given a direction that at least one of the five training days should be directly allocated to special educational needs training. Obviously, what you have asked goes beyond that into a more specialist position.

Ms P Bradley: I know that that is not always how things work out in our mainstream schools. We are seeing an increase in medical interventions being required. Referrals have to be made, and I want the Minister to assure us that schools will get the assistance that they require so as not to disenfranchise children with complex medical needs.

Mr Weir: That is important. There has been a problem, particularly over the definition of special educational needs. Medical needs have in some ways been lumped in with them. That can sometimes mean that the person with medical needs has significant educational needs and is the most obvious person to be given assistance and stated. In other cases, a person can have a strong medical need that does not lead to an educational need.

To be fair, this is the first year in which this has happened. In the categorisation in the school census, there has been a separation of those with specific special educational needs and those with direct medical needs. That will help identification. Support will be given by a diabetic or epileptic nurse specialist, but advice and guidance is available from both from the Education Authority and the school health service. As a result of the Children's Services Co-operation Act 2015, good work has gone on at departmental level and at a higher level. We must ensure that the practice then permeates the system so that practitioners at the lowest levels are also involved in that joined-up approach to ensure that pupils' medical needs are fully taken into account.

School Trips: DE Ban

T3. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Education whether he will take a personal decision to ban all overseas trips by schools. (AQT 223/17-22)

Mr Weir: The short answer is no. It should not be my opinion or that of the Department of Education that decides that. We may reach a point at which going five miles down the road may be more dangerous than going to a foreign country. We do not know how the situation will develop. I will be entirely driven by the expert advice from, on the one hand, the health authorities on what actions need to be taken in schools and, on the other hand, from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on travel. It has the expertise to give that advice. My advice to schools is to follow the Foreign and Commonwealth Office advice. That is the safest way.

If I were to say what I personally think or what the Department thinks, which might be a reinterpretation of that expert advice or, worse still, differing advice, I would be in danger of sending mixed messages to schools and of giving out the wrong information. That would be highly irresponsible and dangerous.

Mr McGlone: Is the Minister aware of research by Professor Mark Handley of University College London, who compared the rates of coronavirus infection in Italy, which is in crisis, with those in the UK, Germany, France, Spain, the US and Switzerland, and found that they are growing at the same rate? What advice is the Minister guided by? Is he aware of that specialist research? Is it wise for people to send their kids to hotspots of coronavirus outbreak?

Mr Weir: Yes, I have seen different advice and views publicised. It is important that we do not get a range or gamut of advice, because those who are compiling elements of research are not always on the same page; they do not always come to the same conclusion. It is important and responsible to remember that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is the single source of information for travel. That office gathers all the advice, and advises. The Executive will be working closely with the Public Health Agency on local health. That will mean the potential escalation of advice and information on action that needs to be taken. To pick and choose what academic research I base my views and advice on is the wrong approach. We need something that is focused on a single, clear piece of unambiguous advice, and we need to have a single source of advice. That is not only the best way forward but the only sensible approach that can be taken.

Battlefields Project

T4. **Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister of Education whether his Department has a process to encourage or obtain a regional balance in the schools that are selected for the battlefields project. (AQT 224/17-22)

Mr Weir: The battlefields project has been ongoing in parts of the UK for a number of years. In Northern Ireland, it is administered by the Education Authority on behalf of the Department. Each post-primary school in Northern Ireland is invited to nominate two year 10 pupils and one teacher to take part in a study visit. Each study visit is made up of pupils and teachers from a wide cross section of post-primary schools. Where possible, priority

is given to students who would not normally be able to avail themselves of such an opportunity. Schools from across Northern Ireland and all sectors and school types have participated in the visits. It is gratifying to note that one of the by-products of the project is not only a shared understanding of our shared history but a deepening of good relations and promotion of mutual understanding, which have been cited as positive outcomes for participants.

The EA will liaise with schools, but, given current events, I suspect that people will want to see how things develop before there is any commitment to a time frame for visits.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that youth projects that focus on our shared history, such as the schools' battlefields scheme, can be of great benefit in helping to grow understanding, respect and tolerance among young people from all sides of the community in Northern Ireland?

Mr Weir: All school sectors, and a wide range of schools, have taken part in this project. Such projects have an educational impact, and, while budgets are tight, they are of relatively low cost. The project has been an invaluable educational experience but, according to a lot of the feedback, it has been valued by the pupils and teachers who have taken part for the way in which it creates a level of mutual understanding and a greater level of respect, tolerance and friendship between the schools and pupils. Those are some of the intangibles that flow from such a project.

Exams: Coronavirus Contingency Plans

T5. **Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Education, given that exam time is not too far away, and in the event of the inevitable spread of coronavirus, what contingency plans are in place to allow our students to sit their GCSEs and A levels. (AQT 225/17-22)

Mr Weir: We are working on getting detailed advice from CCEA, which is working with the exam regulators. I should point out that, while CCEA is the regulator of exams, it is also the supplier of the bulk of the exams. The market in Northern Ireland is also open to exam bodies from outside Northern Ireland, so it is important that we get a consistent approach. That approach will, then, be worked through by CCEA with the exam regulators that look after exams across the United Kingdom. CCEA is working with the exam regulators to scope out precisely the contingency plans that, potentially, could be put in place.

2.45 pm

At present, there are no plans to cancel exams, and we are working on an initial assumption that they will simply go ahead. However, that may be overtaken by events, and we will have contingency plans put in place. However, some of the detail of that is still to be worked out by CCEA because the matter does not lie entirely in CCEA's or, indeed, the Department's hands.

Ms McLaughlin: Has the Minister considered setting exams remotely, and is he investing further in C2k to make that possible?

Mr Weir: My understanding is that what EA has in place for C2k at present would enable remote learning and therefore, potentially, the opportunity for remote

examinations to happen. I am not sure whether some additional resources would be required. That can be looked at and prioritised. There is a basis there for remote learning and, therefore, remote exams. We will scope out with CCEA and the exam regulators the best way to take that forward.

Where we are today, in March, may not be the position that we are in at the beginning of April, the beginning of May or the beginning of June. To some extent, a range of scenarios may have to be worked through by the Department. CCEA will be at the table for any discussions that the Department may have on contingency plans so that that aspect can be front and centre. Along with potential school closures, that is probably the most obvious area that might be affected by the coronavirus.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister of Education. I invite Members to take their ease for a moment.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Finance

Mr Speaker: Topical question 3 has been withdrawn, and there are no grouped questions.

Corporation Tax

1. **Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Finance under what economic and political circumstances he would recommend the reduction of corporation tax. (AQO 324/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): A cut in corporation tax would only be possible were it affordable, which it is not at this time, given the very constrained budgetary position that we face. In addition, the political and economic landscape has changed significantly since that commitment was included in the Stormont House Agreement in 2014. Since then, we have had Brexit, the headline British rate has been reduced and we have had successive years of austerity, which has further affected our ability to fund essential public services. Therefore, cutting corporation tax is not something that I am considering at this time.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for his answer. His party has championed tax harmonisation across the island for a number of years now. Given that he has abandoned plans to reduce corporation tax in the North, does he now support an increase in corporation tax in the South in order to harmonise the rate North and South?

Mr Murphy: The Member will know that we are dealing with different economic circumstances, different availability of public finances and a different ability to raise our own revenues North and South. We are not comparing apples with oranges here. The reality is that that proposition was envisaged at a time when the rate in Britain was 21%. It was envisaged before Brexit and before the full cumulative impact of austerity made it, in my opinion as Finance Minister, unaffordable to the Executive. That remains my position.

Ms McLaughlin: Will the Minister confirm that the new fiscal powers for Northern Ireland are needed but must be made in the context of a properly thought-through

economic strategy that seeks to deepen the all-island economy while also protecting trade with Britain?

Mr Murphy: Yes, I agree with the Member about that. Economic policy needs to be carefully thought through, and we need to have sufficient data to make sure that economic policy is based on fact and evidence. I had a discussion with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury this morning about our access to data.

Of course, I have signalled that I want to consider the creation of a fiscal commission that will look at the idea of additional economic and revenue-raising powers for the Executive. I intend to bring forward work on that in the near future.

Mr McCann: Has the Minister had any engagement with the British Treasury regarding air passenger duty?

Mr Murphy: I had engagement this morning, actually. I am just back from London. Along with the Scottish and Welsh Finance Ministers, we raised a range of issues, primarily around EU funding but also in relation to the Budget in Britain tomorrow. I raised with the Treasury the issue of air passenger duty and the impact it has on connectivity here. I ensured that the Treasury was aware of the particular challenges for regions like this with air passenger duty in relation to connectivity.

Civil Service: Mental Health Screening

2. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Finance what provision exists in the Civil Service to ensure that mental health screening takes place at the point of recruitment, during reviews of performance and when an employee leaves their post. (AQO 325/17-22)

Mr Murphy: While not limited to mental health, the Civil Service recruitment process provides the opportunity to request adjustments due to disability at the application, selection and appointment stages. Fitness-for-post assessments may also be carried out where a special level of fitness is required to carry out the duties of the post — for example, all prison grades.

In cases where mental health issues constitute a disability, line managers consider reasonable adjustments when dealing with underperformance or unsatisfactory performance. Staff moving to a new role may require a fitness-for-post assessment, depending on the duties of their new post.

Mr Storey: Given the concerns in many parts of the public sector about mental health, will the Minister ensure that the issue is given priority? The Minister mentioned reasonable adjustment: will that be centred on the needs of the individual rather than the needs of the organisation?

Mr Murphy: The Civil Service recognises that it has a duty of care to all its employees. Where a member of staff raises an issue with their manager about mental health or a manager notices an issue that may be related to mental health, the Civil Service policy and procedures are clear. Referral to the occupational health service, welfare or other support services such as Inspire Workplaces, the charity for civil servants, or the mediation service should be offered as appropriate. In cases where mental health issues constitute a disability, line managers consider reasonable adjustments. I agree with the Member that, given that there is a growing focus on mental health

issues, the Civil Service, as a responsible employer, needs to ensure that it has all appropriate support in place.

Mr O'Toole: I pay tribute to the hard work done by civil servants in Northern Ireland and elsewhere.

I want to ask about the age profile of the Northern Ireland Civil Service. In 2018, just 0.5% of the Northern Ireland Civil Service was under the age of 25. We face a crisis in the age profile of our Civil Service. Will the Minister urgently prioritise lowering the age profile of the Civil Service, not because they are not hard-working but in order to deal with the challenges that face us, not least Brexit but also the climate emergency and a variety of other things? We need to have a younger age profile in our Civil Service.

Mr Murphy: It is certainly desirable for the Civil Service to have a balance in the gender and age profile of its workforce. The Member has to take into account the impact of nine years of austerity and the ability to recruit additional people, which may have slowed staff turnover and the recruitment of younger members. Of course, that is something we would like to see, but we cannot just push people out the other end to create a more balanced age profile in the workforce. Nonetheless, I hope that, if the situation improves, we will continue to recruit into the Civil Service and that there is a drive to ensure that the workforce reflects the age balance of the population generally.

Mr Lynch: Will the Minister give an update on the review of the Civil Service provided in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document?

Mr Murphy: The Member will know that there are a number of areas of work as a consequence of that. I brought a paper to the Executive on the issue of special advisers. A paper has been drafted and sent to the Executive on improvements to the ministerial code. All of that is work that flows from the workshops that took place last summer among the five parties that are entitled to be in the Executive. The Civil Service code is being developed. As with all of these codes and for the development of greater transparency, accountability and scrutiny, we will want to take account of what this Friday's report recommends and make sure that that is factored in to any development.

NDNA: Finances

3. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Finance what discussions he has had with Her Majesty's Government in relation to finances for New Decade, New Approach. (AQO 326/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I have had a number of meetings with the Treasury over the last few weeks, including as recently as this morning. I had made the previous Chief Secretary to the Treasury — the now Chancellor, Rishi Sunak — aware that the costs of delivering the priorities set out in 'New Decade, New Approach' far outweigh the funding package set out by the British Government. This conversation has continued with the new Chief Secretary to the Treasury. I also continue to seek the reinstatement of the outstanding £240 million of confidence-and-supply funding.

Mr Clarke: Given that we have heard you cite so many times the pressures on budgets, how will you, as Finance Minister, decide what in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document takes priority and what just drops off?

Mr Murphy: It will be for the Executive to decide the priorities. I am sure that the Member is aware that the commitments given in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document were not part of a wish list that the parties just threw into the mix. They were carefully worked through by all the parties, senior civil servants from the Northern Ireland Office and senior civil servants from the Departments here, including the head of the Civil Service. Those approaches focused primarily on reform in health, education and justice and on trying to ensure that we had adequate support to take forward those programmes. This was not just grasped out of the air. The Executive agreed those priorities.

I have not given up trying to secure the funding, and I will continue to engage with the British Treasury on that. However, if we continue to fall short, the priorities that attach to the available funding package will be decided by the Executive as a whole.

Mr O'Dowd: In response to Mr Clarke's question, the Minister referred to the £240 million outstanding from the confidence-and-supply deal. Can the Minister tell the House whether that money has been withdrawn by the British Government?

Mr Murphy: A previous British Secretary of State reported verbally that the money no longer existed, even though there had been agreement with his Government to reprofile some of it, particularly for broadband funding. An element of it relates to mental health issues, another to deprivation. Those are key projects that would attract widespread support across the House. We had that verbal report. We have not managed to have it confirmed by the Treasury. The NIO has been singularly unhelpful in trying to ensure that we secure the money or, indeed, the money that it committed to in 'New Decade, New Approach'. Nonetheless, we continue to pursue that case with the Treasury.

Mr Allister: Have the Minister's officials costed everything that is in 'New Decade, New Approach'? If so, what is that total figure? Does the extra money still stand at only £760 million?

Mr Murphy: The Secretary of State outlined that what he declared in the package was £2 billion. As the Member will know, £1 billion of that is Barnett consequential that would have come to us anyway. Of the other £1 billion that was declared to be new money, about £240,000 would have to compensate for the money removed from confidence-and-supply. That leaves about £750 million. The work undertaken in Departments identified resource DEL costs relating to New Decade, New Approach in 2020-21 amounting to £1.2 billion resource and £0.6 billion capital. Departments have estimated the total cost of time-bound interventions to be £1.5 billion resource and £7.5 billion capital, with the annual cost of continued intervention estimated at £1.2 billion resource and £0.3 billion capital DEL. Clearly, that is significantly above the financial package set out by the previous Secretary of State.

Mr Blair: Is the Minister seeking the additional funding from Treasury on the basis of a package of agreed reforms?

3.00 pm

Mr Murphy: As I said, at the end of the negotiations to re-establish these institutions, all the parties were very clear, as were the senior civil servants we talked to, about the money that was required and the purpose of it. The

core purpose was for reform. We had that costed, and we presented it to the Treasury in relation to the commitments that the British Government made at that time and that they have not lived up to since.

Mr McGlone: Following the UK Budget this coming Wednesday, when will the Minister have an opportunity to update the Assembly on its consequences?

Mr Murphy: As I said in response to earlier questions, I had a meeting with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury this morning in London, along with the Scottish and Welsh Finance Ministers. A range of issues were put to him. There will be contact between me and the Treasury tomorrow when the Budget is announced to get a sense of what consequences might flow from it to us. As the Member will know, we delayed the Budget until we were sure of what may emerge from tomorrow's Budget in Britain. I will then bring propositions around that to the Executive to try to agree a Budget. The intention is to bring that back to the House for debate and approval on 30 March.

Landbanking

4. **Mr Stalford** asked the Minister of Finance what plans he has to address landbanking. (AQO 327/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My understanding of landbanking is that it is the practice of a speculator acquiring land and then holding onto it without taking any action to develop it or make use of it. I am sure that many Members will be aware of that practice acting as a blockage to much-needed development in their constituency. The reasons for developers acquiring and holding land are varied. It is important to point out that site assembly is an important and legitimate part of the development process; for example, social housing providers assemble land for new housing development. I do not wish to do anything that would discourage the assembly of sites for socially beneficial development. However, there are cases of landbanking that do not deliver any benefits, such as when a developer buys land simply to speculate on capital gains and does not have any genuine intention of bringing forward a development. I want to look at the options available to address damaging forms of landbanking and encourage development to be brought forward quickly.

Mr Stalford: I am very grateful to the Minister for his answer because it addresses precisely the concern that I have, particularly for inner-city areas of Belfast, where there is a dire need for increased social housing building but where we have a situation of private developers engaging in exactly the sort of practice that the Minister outlined. Has the Department considered, or is it in the process of considering, some sort of levy on holding land like that in order to encourage private developers to release it for public use?

Mr Murphy: I am aware, as the Member outlined, of one site in the Donegall Pass area that has been acquired by a nominated housing association with funding provided through the Executive Office's Urban Villages initiative. The transfer is anticipated to be completed this year.

On the broader question, of course, there is genuine acquiring and pooling of land for intended development. There is also an issue that very largely affects urban areas, particularly inner-city areas, where land is

speculated on, acquired and sat on in order to see the conditions of the market.

There are a couple of ways that this can be approached. One is through the rating review of that land and what rates are applied to it and, indeed, to derelict properties and sites. As I said in answer to a previous question, if we were to acquire additional fiscal powers, would there be an opportunity to put a tax on properties such as that, which, clearly, are not intended for any immediate use or development? There are a couple of ways to approach this, and I intend to consider them in the time ahead to see which is the most appropriate.

Mr McAleer: The Minister partially answered my question. Has he given active consideration to introducing a derelict land tax that would perhaps discourage speculative landbanking?

Mr Murphy: As I said in a previous answer, we need to be certain that that is actually what is happening. We have a need for social housing and a need to ensure development, particularly in our urban areas, for housing, and we need to make sure that land is not sat on and does not become a blight to the communities in which it is located. Of course, derelict land tax may be one option. We have to bring forward a fiscal commission to look at the additional revenue-raising powers that the Executive might have. As I said, the other way to address it may be as part of the broader rates review to see how that land can be brought in under that.

Reval2020: Hospitality Sector

5. **Ms Bunting** asked the Minister of Finance whether he will put in place mitigation measures to assist businesses in the hospitality sector facing potential closure as a result of Reval2020. (AQO 328/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The hospitality sector is very important to the economy here, and we as an Executive want to do all that we can to support it. However, it needs to be recognised that it pays 3% of all business rates and that 60% of pubs currently benefit from rate relief through the small business rate relief scheme.

I will consider the options for all relief provisions for 2020-21 and beyond in the context of the business rates consultation and the wider Budget issues that face us as an Executive. If they have not already done so, I encourage hospitality proprietors who are unhappy with the proposed revaluation assessment to raise the matter with Land and Property Services in my Department.

Ms Bunting: I thank the Minister for his answer, although I am still not clear as to whether his Department has given consideration to mitigation measures. If it has done so, I would be grateful if he would outline what those mitigation measures are and indicate whether he is willing to meet representatives from the sector to address the problem directly.

Mr Murphy: As I said, 60% of pubs benefit from the small business rate relief scheme already. I have met representatives from the hospitality sector — from hotels and pubs — and I think that I have an arrangement to meet them again in the near future to discuss the issues.

Not a bill has been issued yet, so there are opportunities for people who are unhappy with the revaluation exercise

and consider the assessment to be too high to challenge it by providing additional information on the premises' turnover. I know that that has happened on a number of occasions, with the effect being that there was a change in the assessment. I therefore encourage people to do that in the first instance. There is a fairly tight time frame for rates this year, but, beyond this year, we will be into a full-scale review of the entire rating system.

Mr McNulty: Last night, the SDLP brought a motion to Belfast City Council that called for support to be provided to businesses that may face challenges as a result of coronavirus. The Irish Government have provided €200 million in liquidity funds to support businesses that face such challenges. Is the Minister considering putting in place mitigation measures to assist businesses in the hospitality sector, and businesses in general, that may face closure as a result of coronavirus?

Mr Murphy: I listened to some of the questions to the Education Minister, so the response to that is clearly unfolding. There is increasing concern, and rightly so, not only about the impact on our health service and healthcare system, and on people's health generally, but about the economic damage.

Along with the Scottish and the Welsh Finance Ministers, I had a discussion this morning with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury about ensuring that there is an appropriate level of support from the Treasury to deal with whatever difficulties we may face as a consequence of this. I intend to continue that conversation with him to ensure, as this unfolds — none of us, as yet, knows what the full impact may be — that we can continue to access levels of support. The Executive have the ability to access some resource, but we want to ensure that, if the Treasury steps up its approach, we get the associated support.

Ms Rogan: The Minister answered my question about the small business rate relief scheme in his previous answer.

Ms Armstrong: The revaluation occurred on 1 April 2018, but there are pubs and hotels that have seen significant changes since then. If they submit evidence of the impact of those changes to their business after 1 April 2018, will that be taken into consideration in a revaluation?

Mr Murphy: I know from speaking to officials in the Department that they are encouraging people to submit evidence right up to that point. I therefore presume from that that any evidence, right up to the point that it is submitted, is valid.

Of course, we are conscious, as I said in my previous answer, that if there is an economic impact from coronavirus, that will probably be felt primarily in the hospitality sector, because we may see a restriction on travel and tourism. Of course we want to look at what support we can provide. As I said in response to the initial question, we encourage people who consider the revaluation exercise to be damaging to them to submit additional information. I am aware that, where that has already been done, it has resulted in a change in the assessment.

Derry and Strabane City Deal

6. **Mr M Bradley** asked the Minister of Finance, in light of his support for, and recent comments concerning, the

Derry and Strabane city deal, what assurances he can give that any money spent on a new medical school will be based on a business case. (AQO 329/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The 'New Decade, New Approach' document identified support for city deal packages and for the expansion of Magee, including a graduate entry medical school, as priorities for an incoming Executive.

Of course, all expenditure requires approval, which usually takes the form of a business case. Ulster University is developing a business case for the medical school at Magee. On completion, the business case must be formally submitted to a Department for expenditure appraisal. It is for the responsible accounting officer to provide the necessary assurances to the Department of Finance, usually through the business case process, that the project represents value for money, is affordable and meets the requirements in respect of propriety and regularity.

Mr M Bradley: It is important to remember that Magee is a campus of Ulster University, and I ask that its sister campus at Coleraine be included as the project is vital to the regeneration of the whole north-west region, including Coleraine and Limavady. In collaboration, we can achieve much more than we can in isolation.

Mr Murphy: I congratulate the Member for getting his constituency interest in. The business case is for a graduate entry medical school at Magee. I have no doubt that any investment in the north-west, including in Coleraine, benefits the entire north-west. There is a commitment from the Executive, which is matched by a commitment from the British Government, and the Irish Government have indicated that they also support the development of Magee. We want to see that. I have no doubt that a successful business case and a successful development and expansion of Magee will be of benefit to the much broader north-west region, including Coleraine.

Ms Mullan: I welcome the Minister's ongoing commitment to Derry. Does he intend to provide financial support for the north-west city deal and the Inclusive Future Fund, in line with the commitments in New Decade, New Approach?

Mr Murphy: As part of the New Decade, New Approach financial package, as I said, the Government in Britain committed to providing £45 million of capital funding through the Inclusive Future Fund. The Executive can choose to contribute through their own funds, and, as I said, the Irish Government have expressed a commitment to exploring opportunities for investment to bring greater economic prosperity.

The financial package also provided an additional £15 million of resource funding to meet some of the recurrent costs of the project. At this time, the period over which the resource funding is available is not clear. Of course, we have to bring a paper to the Executive on support for the city deal and the Inclusive Future Fund. I intend to do that in the near future, and my support for the project is well on the record.

Mr Durkan: I welcome the fact that the paper will be brought to the Executive soon; it was always anticipated that the Executive would need to match fund what was announced by the UK Government last May. Will the Minister give a commitment that he will work with

Executive colleagues collaboratively to help to address the economic and infrastructural deficit in the north-west?

Mr Murphy: Yes, I certainly can give that commitment. I had the opportunity to visit Derry last week, and I met council representatives, people from the Chamber of Commerce, people in the Museum of Free Derry and representatives of some of the local social enterprise and community projects. A wide range of interventions will be required in Derry to assist it in growing economically and in being, as its potential allows it to be, the centre of economic development in the north-west region.

I also had an opportunity to engage with the vice chancellor of Ulster University when I was in Derry and to discuss the centrality of the Magee project to all of that development. That was a consistent message from everybody whom I met in Derry. Of course, there is a range of interventions, and I am more than happy to talk to Executive colleagues about what assistance they can provide, because it is not simply a matter of one Department going up and doing one thing; a broad Executive approach is required to support the north-west.

Barnett Consequentials: Infrastructure

7. **Mr Catney** asked the Minister of Finance what representations he has made to the Treasury in relation to Barnett consequentials resulting from infrastructure spend in the forthcoming Westminster Budget. (AQO 330/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I have just returned from a meeting with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and my Scottish and Welsh counterparts this morning, where the Budget was discussed.

The Member might be aware that Barnett consequentials are received when new funding is announced by the British Government. That is an established process so there is no need to make representations on the specifics of Barnett consequentials to the Treasury. Obviously, we will be watching with interest tomorrow to see what announcements are in the Budget and working to assess the consequences for our own Budget.

The Member, being a member of the Finance Committee, will be aware that we took a decision to delay our own Budget beyond tomorrow to see what the consequentials may be.

3.15 pm

Mr Speaker: Pat Catney for a supplementary; there is one minute left.

Mr Catney: Minister, you are working on your Budget and trying to finalise it. We keep hearing about the shortfall in money that we have at the moment. Will that be bridged going forward?

Mr Murphy: It is up the Executive to decide what to do. Barnett consequentials do not come ring-fenced. The signals from the British Treasury are that there will be quite a substantial increase in spend on infrastructure. Obviously, that comes as capital and would have to be spent on capital projects. Every Department has capital ambitions in some of the bids that they have submitted to the Department of Finance. It will be up to the Executive to decide, in line with their priorities, how to spend that money as it arrives.

Mr Speaker: We will now move on to topical questions.

COVID-19: Available Finance

T1. **Mr M Bradley** asked the Minister of Finance, in the light of yesterday's COVID-19 statement from the Minister of Health, whether finance will be available to the Department of Finance and the Department of Education in the event that Northern Ireland needs to move from containment to the sustained transmission stage. (AQT 231/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As I said, I discussed the issue this morning with the Treasury and with the Scottish and Welsh Finance Ministers. We collectively made the case. The Executive will receive a share of any additional funding provided by the Treasury in response to the coronavirus. However, it will be possible to make representations for further funding, should that be necessary. The Executive are also able to access the reserve, in the same way as Whitehall Departments and the other devolved Administrations can, for any exceptional and unforeseen circumstances that cannot be easily absorbed without a major dislocation of existing services.

As I said in response to other questions, this is an unfolding situation, and the experience in other countries rightly leads us to be increasingly concerned about the impact on public health, the strain on the health service and the effect on other public services and the economy generally. We have had that discussion. As money is made available by London to deal with that, we should have our share of it. If we have additional issues above and beyond that, we have the right to go and make the case for that.

Mr M Bradley: I thank the Minister for his response. I am an optimist by nature and am hopeful that that situation will not arise, but it is vital to have forward planning in place in case it does.

Mr Murphy: As the Education Minister said, we had advice from the Chief Medical Officer at the last Executive meeting. The Health Minister is updating us regularly on the latest medical advice, and that continues to inform where we are. As you can see in the South and in Britain, that advice is continuing to evolve over time. We have to be very conscious of that and very conscious of the public alarm in relation to what is developing, and we have to make sure that we are equipped to deal with all that as best we can but based on sound medical advice.

Translink: Meeting

T2. **Dr Archibald** asked the Minister of Finance, given that the chief executive of Translink said last week that he had written to him to seek a meeting about the organisation's funding, whether that meeting has taken place. (AQT 232/17-22)

Mr Murphy: No, it has not. As part of my budgetary discussions, I met the Minister for Infrastructure, and she updated me on the entirety of the pressures in her Department, including in Translink, which is a component part of her Department. As part of those preparations, I met all Ministers to discuss the financial pressures in their Departments. It will then be for the Executive as a whole to agree the departmental allocations as part of the Budget, and it is my preference that the financial pressures that all Departments are subject to are discussed and

addressed in a collegiate and collective way. I have not undertaken the practice of meeting component parts of any Department. It is up to the Minister responsible for that to make the case for her area.

Dr Archibald: Minister, you said that you have discussed the financial pressures with the various Departments. Could you outline the scale of the collective financial pressure facing the Executive?

Mr Murphy: Assessment of all the inescapable pressures that have been presented by all Departments shows that there is a shortfall of £600 million. That is before the commitments under New Decade, New Approach, which have yet to be accepted and delivered upon by the British Government, are factored in.

New Decade, New Approach: PSNI Officers

T4. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Finance, given that he referred to the fact that he met with Treasury officials earlier today and that we hear a lot from Members about their commitment to Patten, albeit that it referred to peace times and we have those who remain prepared to murder on our streets, what conversations he has had with Treasury about the New Decade, New Approach commitment to increase the number of PSNI officers to 7,500. (AQT 234/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The job that I have been tasked with by the Executive is to go and secure the commitments that were made by the British Government as part of New Decade, New Approach. That is what I have tried to do. That is across a whole range of pressures. As I said, those proposals were carefully worked through and were encouraged to be brought forward by the NIO at the time, with a very strong indication that they would be delivered upon if agreement were possible. All parties acted on that in good faith. In our sense, we have lived up to the political commitments that we made with regard to New Decade, New Approach. If we were to have the same blasé approach to living up to commitments as the British Government do, we would not be sitting here in this institution, discussing these matters. Parties lived up to their commitments: it is up to the Government to live up to their own commitments. Those are across a range of areas, as I indicated earlier; health transformation, education transformation, and also justice transformation. There is a specific reference to an additional 700 police officers, I think. Of course, I am trying to secure the commitments that were made so that we can deliver across all those areas.

Mr Storey: The Minister will be aware that, today, the Audit Office referred to an additional pressure of £500 million for injury-on-duty payments in relation to pensions. That comes on the back of the Scofield report, which was in the hands of the then Justice Minister, David Ford. Unfortunately, it seems as though its recommendations have not been enacted in the way that they should have been. Therefore, there is still a pressure of £500 million. When all that is put together with the existing pressures that are faced by the Police Service of Northern Ireland, how does the Minister see the Executive prioritising that, given the fact that the 'New Decade, New Approach' document actually states that we "will" — it is not aspirational or less than woolly, as some other parts of the document are — increase the number to 7,500?

Mr Murphy: I remind the Member, although I probably do not need to, that the document was written by both Governments. It was not written by the political parties of the Executive; it was written by both Governments. So the we "will" was a commitment from both Governments, and, primarily, in the case of the additional police personnel, a commitment from the British Government. That is why it is important that they live up to those commitments. It is not acceptable for five parties and two Governments to come to an agreement, and one Government to decide that they do not need to honour the commitments that they made in it.

Housing Executive

T5. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister of Finance for an update in the future funding of the Housing Executive, given that, during yesterday's Question Time with the Minister for Communities, the future of the Housing Executive was discussed, with the Minister mentioning that she has had conversations with him, the fact that he has mentioned conversations with Treasury and the fact that we know how important it is that the Housing Executive be able to borrow going forward, especially with the debt that it is in. (AQT 235/17-22)

Mr Murphy: It has been an ambition to get the Housing Executive back to a position where it could build houses again, to ensure that best use is made of the housing resource and in order to raise more capital. That has been brought into acute relief over the past year by the inability to access financial transactions capital, which had to be surrendered back to the Treasury. I am working closely with the Minister for Communities. She has indicated that she wants to bring forward propositions to deal with that, so that the Housing Executive is in a position to access that capital. I have undertaken to do all in my Department's power to support and assist her in doing that, because it is important, not only for those who are on the housing list and in dire need of housing, but for the economy generally, that we are able to access that and start to stimulate economic growth as well as build houses for those in need.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his detailed answer. Minister, you talk about the Department for Communities, but you have a strong part to play in moving this forward. So many people are in housing need and housing stress in all constituencies. This issue needs to be addressed as a priority. Will you give that commitment?

Mr Murphy: I agree with the Member, and that is why the Minister for Communities and I have set up a joint working arrangement between the two of us and between senior people in the two Departments to make sure that, whatever processes are needed to be moved forward, there is no disconnect between the Departments. We have a shared ambition, which, I think, is shared across the Executive, to make sure that we provide housing to those most in need and that we use that to stimulate economic growth. There is a firm commitment from the Minister for Communities and me to work together on these issues.

Corporation Tax Loopholes

T6. **Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Finance to detail the discussions he has initiated, if any, with his counterparts in Westminster about closing corporation tax loopholes that allow for evasion and avoidance to the tune of billions of pounds every year. (AQT 236/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As I said to the Member in response to a previous question, I have not initiated any action on corporation tax. The power was not devolved. The circumstances, I believe, do not merit that it be devolved in this instance. If people are using company law and various taxation loopholes to evade the making of proper contributions from their business, that would be a crossover issue between the Economy Department and the Finance Department. If the Member has evidence that he wishes to bring forward, I would certainly be happy to take it up with Treasury officials.

Mr Carroll: The Minister will probably be aware of tax evasion and avoidance to the tune of at least tens of billions of pounds every year. Does he agree that closing the loophole and tackling tax evasion and avoidance would, potentially, allow more money to be invested in our public services?

Mr Murphy: It would. However, tax is paid primarily to the British Treasury. Therefore, if the loopholes allowing avoidance were closed, any money secured would go to the Treasury. On the basis that it would have more money to distribute, we might get a proportion of that.

Of course, people are accused of benefit fraud and other things that are at the lower end of the scale. I hope that those involved in tax evasion will be pursued with similar enthusiasm and that the money is returned so that it can be distributed across public services. I share that ambition, but, unfortunately, it is not a responsibility of this institution, it is London's responsibility.

Destined: Arson Attack

T7. **Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Finance, after thanking him for his visit last week to Derry, whether he can provide Destined, an organisation that he met with that helps vulnerable adults, with some advice as to how it can get a temporary kitchen while it waits for repairs to take place following an appalling arson attack. (AQT 237/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I was delighted to get the opportunity to visit that organisation. I am a great admirer of a range of social enterprise projects, particularly those that help very vulnerable people, as the Destined project does. You could not help but be inspired by visiting that project, talking to people and seeing their determination to overcome the setback caused by that thoughtless and cruel attack on the building. The response of the community in providing support to that project shows its value. I raised the issue with officials when I got back to the Department to try to ensure that, if it were possible to give any assistance to a project that provides such a valuable community service, they would do so. I know that they intended to speak to people in the Department for Communities to ensure that assistance is provided.

Ms Anderson: Minister, can that information be relayed to Destined so that it has a contact point in your office and in the Department for Communities?

Mr Murphy: I am sure that we can do that. As I said, I asked my officials to speak to people in the Department for Communities to ensure that they reach out to Destined. It provides a valuable community service and was the unfortunate victim of a criminal attack. We want to ensure that it continues to provide support. We will, of course, be in contact.

3.30 pm

Mr Speaker: I call Roy Beggs. I advise the Member that there is no time for a supplementary question.

Budget Process

T8. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Finance when a new Budget process will be introduced that will be much more encompassing, will include the public in a more substantial way and will provide for healthier politics. (AQT 238/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As the Member reminded me in an earlier debate, that suggestion was brought forward by the Finance Committee when I was the Chair. The initiative involved getting a much more transparent, and I do not mean on things that are hidden, more understandable and accessible Budget process so that members of the public as well as Members of this institution can engage with it.

I will undertake to talk to officials in the Department to see where those propositions landed and how they have been dealt with over time. It is in our interests to get to a much more manageable process, because, in the last couple of weeks, we ended up having a Budget debate, in effect, on an issue that was about retrospective spend. It was not about future spend at all, but many people, particularly in the Chamber, got a false impression about how the Budget process actually works and what we were debating at that particular time.

I think that it is in all our interests to get a much more accessible, understandable, clear process going forward, and I will engage with officials in the Finance Department to see how that can be done.

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

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

Private Members' Business

Childcare Strategy

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly believes that access to good quality and affordable childcare can help empower those parents who want to stay and progress in paid work; accepts that this, in turn, will contribute to the local economy; recognises the transformative role that good childcare can play in supporting the educational, social and physical development of a child; supports the aim of providing 30 hours of free childcare for 38 weeks a year for three- to four-year-olds, in line with the rest of the United Kingdom; further recognises that there are significant pressures already on the budget of the Department of Education; and calls upon the Executive to implement a childcare strategy and any legislation required to enable this to proceed. — [Mr Newton.]

Which amendment was:

Leave out all between "help" and "accepts" and insert:

"tackle disadvantage and poverty by closing the educational gap between the most and least advantaged children, can empower parents who want to stay and progress in paid work, and those who want to return to education or training;" — [Ms C Kelly.]

Ms McLaughlin: The SDLP has consistently called for affordable childcare. We very clearly prioritised the issue and were instrumental in ensuring that it was placed in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document. Therefore, I welcome this opportunity to build much-needed momentum on the issue, and we will support the amendment.

The proposed measures are long overdue. Their implementation would bring long-reaching economic and social benefits, enabling parents to balance their careers with family commitments more easily and helping to alleviate the financial burdens that are often placed on new parents. We already know that women are disproportionately affected by the lack of affordable childcare, especially those on low incomes. That is an issue of inequality.

Entrenched societal norms mean that childcare duties still largely fall to women. Consequently, many are forced to make decisions regarding whether to enter or return to work and whether to work full or part-time, as well as trying to predict the impact that those decisions will have on their career progression. That is on top of all the other challenges that motherhood brings.

For many women, working is not financially viable except to allow them to retain skills and their foothold in the labour market. It is appalling that they should be forced into financial hardship as a result of their desire to maintain and grow their skill set. A skilled workforce is vital to the growth of a strong and balanced local economy. Additionally, increasing investment in childcare provision will lead to much-needed job creation. Many women take on part-time work in an attempt to balance competing

commitments. NISRA statistics released in December 2018 show that 82% of part-time employees in Northern Ireland are female. That has a knock-on effect, increasing the gender pay gap and threatening women's long-term economic security. Also, many part-time workers report being overlooked for promotion, which stalls career advancement.

The same report found that a third of working-age women are not in the labour force, compared with 23% of men, and the most cited reason was that they were looking after the family and the home.

In contrast, that was the lowest-ranked reason for economic inactivity among males. Moreover, female economic inactivity rates are highest for mothers whose youngest child is of preschool age. That exposes the harsh reality that the cost of childcare forces women in Northern Ireland out of the workplace. The provision of free childcare would dismantle barriers preventing women's full and equal access to the labour market and increase economic participation, which, in turn, would increase family income. Following a pilot of 30 hours of free childcare in four local authorities in England in 2017, research carried out by Frontier Economics found that the vast majority of parents reported improved finances. That created more disposable income that could be put towards a wide range of activities that supported the social and emotional well-being of the child: anything from creative hobbies through to visiting museums and spending more time on education and in youth clubs.

Crucially, the proposed free childcare provision must be geographically accessible and sufficiently flexible. Anything less would not be truly transformative. Rural communities would be hit particularly hard, and, as we know, they already face many other economic and social disadvantages. The SDLP supports the motion and the amendment.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you. I remind Members that the debate is scheduled to end at 4.30 pm. I have 15 names on my list of Members who wish to speak. In the spirit of being generous across the Chamber, I encourage all Members to be generous and not use up their full time allocation. In that way, more Members will be able to speak.

Mr Butler: I will try to speak faster, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker; usually, I try to slow down. I am now filling the time with nonsense.

I support the motion. The availability of quality childcare not only prepares children for the best start in life through early years development but enables parents of young children to play a full role in the workforce, promoting prosperity and economic opportunity. Furthermore, it encourages a more equal workforce by affording parents a greater opportunity to work full-time.

For many people, the duality of being a working parent can often limit their full potential in the workplace. The return to work after any maternity or paternity period is often phased as a result of childcare needs, and that can leave people at a disadvantage in the workplace. It is a particular concern for working women, owing to a greater impact on their career from maternity breaks. Having recently celebrated International Women's Day, I believe that the Assembly should support the motion on that point alone. Many women pause or abandon their career ambitions because

of parental obligations, and any scheme that encourages them to maximise their potential should be supported.

As a parent and occasional foster parent, I understand the obligations of parenthood and its challenges and complexities. I have witnessed how early years development of children is vital to giving them the best start and increased opportunities in life. I recognise and note that responsive and interactive environments are also necessary for early years development and that quality childcare environments are designed to help a child's development through communication and social engagement and through encouraging young children to express themselves and understand their surroundings. That being the case, while the majority of responsibility lies with parents, there is a responsibility on employers to create family-friendly work environments. At one stage, my former employer, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, launched a new, family-friendly shift pattern. The establishment of a model that maintained emergency response resilience and a shift pattern that saw the full-time cohort of which I was part working from 11.00 am to 11.00 pm enabled me to prepare breakfast and take my two young children to school every day. They were both at school at the time. That valuable move enabled my wife to return to work as a nurse and to support her team in the care setting, and it benefited me by allowing me to spend more time with my kids. Therefore, in many cases, the full 30 hours of childcare may not be required to facilitate parents playing a full role in the workplace. Increased flexibility from employers might have a desirable effect in that regard. The availability of childcare voucher schemes should also be promoted in the workplace to assist parents.

I appreciate that there will be a cost associated with any implementation of the proposal, especially at this time of budget tightening, and it is our duty as custodians and stewards of public money to ensure that it is spent in the most cost-effective manner. I welcome the calls for the implementation of a full childcare strategy across Northern Ireland, a strategy that ensures, in the first instance, that childcare is available to everyone who needs it across every region of Northern Ireland and delivers high-quality childcare. The strategy should also support our children's early years development, encourage a more diverse workplace and promote the opportunities of economic freedom and prosperity for all of Northern Ireland's hard-working parents.

Mr Robinson: The debate is about an essential way in which parents can continue to get access to the workplace, including promotion opportunities. It is, therefore, an essential part of workforce and personal development. For many parents, especially mothers, childcare is the only way in which they can continue to work or to seek employment. Those parents have gained their education and must be aided to use it to the maximum. I have stated in previous debates that I want everyone to reach their maximum educational attainment. However, there should be ways to ensure that their ability to use their education are maximised.

One way to ensure that is for affordable childcare to be made available to help them to obtain employment. Good childcare is beneficial not only to parents but to the child. Good socialisation aids the child in social interactions. Childcare also ensures a level of movement that helps

children with their physical development and benefits their overall educational achievement.

All this can be achieved via childcare, as well as giving parents the opportunity to return to work or education and seek promotion in their current employment. It also helps in lowering levels of child poverty and in increasing economic activity. There is a lot to be gained from a childcare scheme.

In *New Decade, New Approach*, there is a commitment to affordable childcare, which I want to be brought to fruition. In a written answer to our DUP colleague Ms Bradley, the Education Minister stated that he would be:

“developing arrangements to deliver extended, affordable”

childcare.

I welcome the Minister's commitment to a childcare strategy and will support him fully in all his efforts. Members, I stress again how much can be achieved from a childcare strategy for children, parents and the economy in general in Northern Ireland.

I urge the Executive and all Members to support the motion tabled by my DUP colleagues for the benefit of all in Northern Ireland. I support the motion.

Mr Lyttle: Equal access to affordable early education and childcare is absolutely essential for the vital stages of early childhood development; the support of all families, including those living with disabilities; and to help parents and guardians, particularly women, to access training and employment. Despite this, consecutive Northern Ireland Executive Ministers — initially the Health Minister, then the First Minister and deputy First Minister and, most recently, the Education Minister — have yet to produce a fully costed childcare strategy.

Thankfully — however belatedly — the penny appears to have well and truly dropped with regard to the significance of childcare costs and provision to families across Northern Ireland, and that is to be welcomed. The significance of that cost cannot be overestimated and, as Members across the House said today, the cost can be over £150 per week for many families and up to 40% of weekly household income.

We have organisations like Employers For Childcare, the Early Years organisation, the Northern Ireland Childminding Association (NICMA), PlayBoard NI, trade unions and all the organisations involved in the Childcare For All campaign, including private providers, to thank for this work and the realisation that the Executive and Assembly must make childcare access a priority.

I welcome the fact that childcare is now a priority for the Executive. That was demonstrated by the time that Executive parties dedicated to considering detailed options for a new model of childcare for Northern Ireland as part of the Programme for Government working group strand of the recent talks, and by the establishment of the all-party working group on early education and childcare, of which I am privileged to act as co-chair.

Access to affordable childcare is a long-standing priority for the Alliance Party, and we will, therefore, support the motion. However, I will be clear: the detail of this provision needs urgent and further work, including co-production

and co-design with everyone involved with the all-party working group on early education and childcare, without prejudice to the number of hours and weeks, the days in which those hours can be taken, the quality, affordability, flexibility and eligibility, the setting and duration, which will meet the appropriate needs of families in Northern Ireland.

3.45 pm

Mr Middleton: Those of us who have been blessed with a child know that they bring unbelievable joy to our lives. There is no greater honour for me than being a parent. My son is two and a half years old, and every day is a learning day. My wife, Julie, and I continue to work full-time, trying to do our best to raise David in the best possible way.

For many parents, there are challenges when it comes to finances, whether that is returning to work or, of course, access to childcare. Many parents have to weigh the cost of childcare against the income that they receive on returning to work. Some of us rely heavily on grandparents and relatives to provide support to help us as parents to return to work so that we can provide for the family. It is vital that, as an Assembly, we do all we can to empower parents who want to stay and progress in paid work.

There should be no doubt around the transformative role that good childcare provides in supporting the educational, social and physical development of our children. I fully support the aim of providing 30 hours of free childcare for 38 weeks a year for three-to-four-year-olds. I also recognise, however, that childcare is not an issue for just three-to-four-year-olds; we know that many parents struggle most when their children are in the zero-to-two age bracket, especially where mums are trying to get back into work. Evidence shows that the first 1,000 days are the most important for child development.

I welcome the commitment in 'New Decade, New Approach' regarding the childcare strategy and its commitment to:

"give immediate priority to developing arrangements to deliver extended, affordable, responsive, high quality provision of early education and care initiatives for families".

We need the Executive to implement a childcare strategy and any legislation required to enable that to proceed as soon as possible.

I thank Employers For Childcare for sharing their research and the useful comparative information that they provided. My colleague Robin Newton alluded to some of the differences across the jurisdictions. Those comparisons are useful in trying to draw up a solution that is unique to Northern Ireland.

All of our children deserve the best start in life. Childcare services should be available to all children, regardless of where they live, their needs or their circumstances. Childcare should be affordable and sustainable and no longer take a disproportionate share of average household incomes. The economic benefits of free childcare in supporting parents back into work are self-evident, but we have to ensure that the balance of family life and work is right. We have many outstanding childcare facilities in our constituencies, and it is important that, in the short term, we do all that we can to ensure that facilities that struggle

financially or face closure get the support that they need. I support the motion.

Ms Dolan: "In today's economy, when having both parents in the work force is an economic necessity for many families, we need affordable, high-quality child care more than ever. It's not a nice-to-have; it's a must-have. So it's time we stop treating child care as a side issue, or a women's issue, and treat it like the national economic priority that it is for all of us."

Those were the words of President Obama in his State of the Union address at the start of 2015. His words are also applicable to our society today, especially for those of us who live in rural communities.

I am only too aware of the benefits that good, affordable and reliable childcare brings to rural communities. It is no less important to rural parents and children than it is to those in urban areas. Childcare has an important role to play in helping to sustain rural communities. Parents need access to childcare so that they can make the most of the opportunities for employment, training or helping to support voluntary or community activities. Employers need childcare so that they can attract and retain a skilled and committed workforce. Children need facilities that help them to develop and integrate in a pleasant and safe environment. Childcare provision has positive effects on all of society. The provision of first-class childcare helps parents into work and helps move families out of poverty, while helping break the cycle of intergenerational deprivation.

Access to high-quality childcare and early education not only promotes a child's development but gives much-needed support to parents who struggle to balance work and family obligations. A safe, nurturing environment that enriches children's development is critical to families and is one of the best investments that we can make in our economy. Parents who work in low-wage jobs face real difficulties in affording quality childcare. Without help, many families can face the untenable choice of not working or leaving their children in unsafe, unstable or poor-quality arrangements. Affordable, quality childcare can help parents so that they can go to work to support their family. Higher household spending on childcare means that workers here have less disposable income and are more likely to fall into in-work poverty as their wages are absorbed by childcare costs.

Speaking of wages, let me talk about childcare workers' pay. The childcare sector employs an estimated 10,000 paid workers in the North. Childcare workers are employed in a wide range of settings from private day nurseries to nursery nurses and preschool assistants. All workers should be paid the real living wage in order for them to have a decent standard of living, yet 48% of workers in the childcare sector are more likely to be paid below the real living wage, in comparison with 30% of workers in other sectors. What does that look like? The median hourly rate for childcare workers is £8.90, which is well below the median rate for workers in other sectors, which could be up to £11 an hour. In addition to that, the overall childcare workforce is overwhelmingly female — 99% — compared with other occupations, in which it is around 47%. Childcare workers are young relative to workers in other occupations, with an average age of 36 compared with 41 in other occupations.

Childcare provision is more than having your child minded. It has numerous additional benefits for the child, such as improved school readiness and combating social exclusion. The wages and conditions of childcare staff need to reflect that. Childcare workers need to have decent progression routes to be able to upskill in their field of work, and their progression needs to be rewarded with better wages. While I acknowledge that accessibility and affordability are two key issues, I conclude my remarks by stressing the need to recognise and reward the invaluable contribution that the childcare workforce makes in nurturing the generations coming behind us at one of the most crucial times of their lives. I urge Members to support the amendment.

Mr McNulty: I support the motion and thank the Members who brought the issue to the House. Childcare is one of the biggest burdens and overheads that face young families — working families in particular — across the region and across the island. By investing in childcare, we invest in children and their parents.

Like many other Members, I have heard stories from young families, many of whom have seen one parent give up work until their children are of school age, as the cost of childcare is just too much. Whilst cost is a deciding factor for many parents, we must think of the positives for children engaging from a young age with other children of the same vintage as themselves. The provision of funded childcare can and would give a boost to working families. It would help to bolster the economy and show the squeezed middle that this place listens and cares for them as well. Provision must be more than just a token gesture. It must be tangible and must be put on a statutory footing. It must be universal and accessible locally to parents. I also believe that a robust and meaningful consultation with the sector and with schools and parents would be helpful in shaping provision.

I cannot return to my seat without paying tribute to those who work in the childcare sector and, indeed, the many grandparents and extended family members who already step in to provide childcare where the state does not at present. Many parents tell me that, only for their extended — often retired — family members, they could not continue to work. I support the motion and the creation of a childcare strategy.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr McCrossan does not appear to be in the Chamber. We have a feast of SDLP representatives. I call Mr Pat Catney.

Mr Catney: I will have a word with that fella McCrossan when I see him *[Laughter.]*

Mrs D Kelly: There will be more than you.

Mr Catney: Ah, the Chief Whip.

I welcome the motion, which recognises the vital role that childcare plays in child development and in empowering parents who want to get into work, remain in work and progress in work. I have heard many young women Members speaking here today. When the first man has a baby, it will be the end of the world. We could not cope. It just stretches everything that we have. I speak as the father of four children. I found it nearly impossible trying to juggle having children and being in a working environment. My wife was a civil servant. Rosemary had to give up her job to raise our four children. I do not want that to happen

to others. I want to empower young men and women who have a family so that they are able to hold on to their career.

When we were at the talks to get Stormont up and going, this was a major ask. I welcome the motion that has come from across the Floor, but the SDLP tried everything and brought the issue to every stage of those talks. I was delighted to be there and part of that.

I want to be as quick as I can, but I want to highlight that, in Lisburn, we have an excellent social enterprise, Employers For Childcare, who do an excellent job. I welcome the recognition that access to good, affordable childcare is important to the local economy and what flows out of that when young parents are able to work. I agree that childcare plays a vital role in supporting children's development. We support the call for a childcare strategy and agree that it should be supported by legislation. We support the motion.

Mr Newton: I thank the Member for giving way. I strongly agree with the tenor of his speech. Does the Member agree that a failure to invest in childcare, children and young adults means that we store up greater costs down the line?

Mr Catney: I agree with my fellow Member about those future problems. To add to that, we have taken the pension at 60 away from the women who were those childcarers. We now make them work until the age of 66. They were the carers in our society. They took up the slack and filled in. That was one reason why the SDLP pushed to have this included. Hopefully, the motion will pass and there will be a new legislative power.

Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker — thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: You are grand. Thank you.

Ms Bailey: I support the motion, but it is with regret. The motion would provide only for three- and four-year-olds. I have to agree with Employers For Childcare — it contacted us all, I think — when they point out that childcare is not an issue only for three- and four-year-olds. Parents struggle most when their children are in the 0 to two age bracket, especially when mums are trying to get back into work. The first 1,000 days are the most important for child development. If we are serious about creating a childcare strategy, we need to focus on the lack of accessible, affordable and flexible childcare as one of the fundamental inequalities facing us. If we are to tackle that inequality, how we treat our youngest members of society, along with tackling inequality for working women, are two good places to start.

Universal child-centred childcare that meets the needs of children, families and childcare workers and providers benefits society. We have plenty of European examples of that to draw on.

4.00 pm

I note that the Minister of Education replied to a question on the childcare strategy by stating:

"The revised Strategy will take account of ... advances in childcare across other jurisdictions and the policy priorities for supporting families reaffirmed in 'New Decade, New Approach'. This includes developing

arrangements to deliver extended, affordable, responsive and high quality early education and care provision for families with children aged 3-4."

It is, therefore, no surprise that the motion has come from his party colleagues.

I suggest that we look at how the Danes, Swedes and Norwegians, for example, do childcare to see how beneficial it is to the labour market, to tackling child poverty and to building the emotional, physical and psychological well-being of our children. What we need in Northern Ireland is a childcare system that is affordable, accessible, high-quality and flexible and that supports children's education and development. Childcare should be available and suitable for all children of all ages, including those with disabilities and those living in rural locations. Childcare provision should enable parents to access and stay in paid work, education and training. It is also essential that childcare work is recognised with decent pay and terms and conditions so that we can attract and retain the best workers to sustain and grow that industry. Childcare is not a luxury but a necessity for most parents, because most families require two wages to get by financially. Childcare is essential for single parents in order for them to hold down a job at the same time as caring for their family.

In 2018, I was delighted to host the launch of the Childcare For All campaign and the Children's Charter here at Stormont. That initiative was supported by some of the biggest children's charities and unions in Northern Ireland, including Save the Children, Barnardo's and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU). In 2018, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation poverty report data showed that 370,000 people in Northern Ireland live in poverty. That figure consisted of 110,000 children, with over half of those children living in households where at least one parent was working. That means that almost one in four children here live in a family that struggles to provide their basic needs for a warm, adequate home, nutritious food and appropriate clothing in order to pay for childcare. Looking to the future, it is essential that the childcare infrastructure in Northern Ireland supports parents to access and stay in work or training and, once they are there, helps to ensure that that work pays for families and childcare workers and helps to lift us all out of poverty.

In Scandinavia, access to childcare for young children is considered a formal right, with restrictions on the maximum fee that parents have to pay set by government. As a result, in 2016 98% of children aged under three in Denmark were in nursery, with the majority of them spending more than 30 hours a week there. Families pay up to 25% of the cost of day care. Those on low incomes and single parents pay between nothing and 25% of the cost, and there are discounts for siblings — imagine. The Government make up the difference. Why is that the case? It is because the Scandinavians see childcare as a long-term investment in children, in families and in their economy. Those countries have embraced universal childcare as the right of every child and a responsibility of the state to provide. Nordic countries like Sweden and Denmark have some of the highest maternal employment rates in the world, as well as the lowest child poverty rates. Quality childcare is delivered —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Could the Member conclude her remarks?

Ms Bailey: — by a highly qualified, well-paid workforce. Unpaid childcare alone here is worth nearly £350 billion to the UK economy each year — three times more than the total value of the financial services sector — yet it is not counted towards GDP.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member is now nearly 30 seconds over. Could you please resume your seat?

Ms Bailey: I seek a call from the House —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am afraid that I will have to cut the Member's mic, because she refuses to abide by rulings from the Chair.

Ms Bailey: — that we need to go much further than what the motion calls for if we are to get serious about childcare.

Mr Carroll: I am glad to have the opportunity to speak about such an important issue. The issues associated with childcare, from lack of access to cost, present a huge barrier in society for parents, predominantly women and particularly those in poverty or those who come from a minority background.

It is worth highlighting the fact that 91% of single parents with dependent children are mothers. Although women make up much more of the workforce than ever before, childcare remains a barrier for far too many. It is primarily women who work as childcare providers, as we have heard.

The theme is not isolated to childcare. Unpaid domestic work is carried out predominantly by women to the benefit of the state, which does not have to pay for it, whether that is caring for children, sick relatives or the elderly. It is very important that we treat the issue as not simply an educational or economic one but a gendered one. That means ensuring that we do not add to the systemic barriers that keep mothers out of work, education or training. For that reason, we support the immediate provision of 30 hours of free childcare, as the motion calls for, but we recognise, as others do, that that does not go far enough. The provision of free childcare only when a child reaches the age of three and for only 38 weeks is restrictive at best. It does not address the impact on parents of children aged two and under, which, as we know, is when the motherhood gap begins. With some of the highest childcare costs in the world and very restrictive paternity leave, it is women who are often forced to stay at home here.

Childcare should be offered not only in circumstances in which parents want to stay in work but in circumstances in which they want to return to education or training. We hear a lot in the Chamber about the need for a skilled workforce, and we should recognise that childcare costs actively keep parents out of education. Ultimately, we in People Before Profit want to see a national childcare agency that provides free childcare to parents who need it so that they can fully participate in society. As has been highlighted by the Childcare for All campaign, childcare should be child-centred and meet the needs of not just parents but childcare workers and providers. That means the provision of free childcare that is of a high quality and that meets educational and development needs in a safe, nurturing environment. It must guarantee that no child experiences poverty as a result of their parents' inability to access the workforce or cover the high costs of childcare. It means giving childcare workers a living wage, proper terms and

conditions, and access to training. It means provision not being restricted to a very limited child age range.

We need to see flexible childcare that suits the needs of workers on all kinds of contracts. It needs to be moved into the public sphere so that it can work hand in hand with our Education Department and gender strategies. The benefits of that kind of universal childcare system — free at the point of access — would not just be economic benefits, allowing many more parents to get upskilled and into the workforce, or educational benefits for children. It would also tackle gender employment inequality and wider societal issues by removing the double burden on women and ensuring that the state take on a responsibility that it has shirked for far too long, which is to provide care for those who need it, at the earliest, the latest and the more difficult points of their life.

I support the motion today to implement 30 hours of childcare, but it is too restrictive. It will not alleviate the wider societal issues around childcare. For us, it is very much an intermediary step towards the establishment of a national childcare agency to provide childcare for all who need it. I urge those Executive members responsible for childcare to reach out and work closely with groups such as the Women's Resource and Development Agency and Employers For Childcare, which are leading the Childcare for All campaign.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: There are four minutes remaining until the Minister is called. I thank almost everyone for being generous.

Ms Sugden: I support the motion generally, which has enabled a debate to take place on childcare provision and the need for the Northern Ireland Executive to develop and implement a childcare strategy. I thank the Members who tabled the motion.

Many who have spoken before me outlined the benefits of developing and implementing a childcare strategy. In a nutshell, we work, we spend and we improve the economy. Childcare is also important for children's development. The motion broadly reflects the five-party Government's agreed commitment in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document:

"The Executive will publish a Childcare Strategy and identify resources to deliver extended, affordable and high quality provision of early education and care initiatives for families with children aged 3-4."

I had hoped, when the Government parties subsequently tabled a motion on childcare, that they would have expanded on that commitment. It is limited in that it focuses on the particular age group of three- and four-year-olds. Children under three years old also need to be considered.

That age group is where significant disparity between here and other regions of the UK exist.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Member give way?

Ms Sugden: Yes.

Mr Lyttle: I will be brief. The motion and the amendment were tabled by the DUP and Sinn Féin, not all the Government parties; indeed, one of the Government parties endeavoured to amend the motion to increase its scope, but that amendment was not selected.

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his intervention, but he is part of that Government all the same.

The commitment in NDNA does not change that because it still limits provision to three- to four-year-olds. We have an opportunity to develop a new childcare strategy that considers practice across the UK and Ireland and then develops a new policy that is right for Northern Ireland and improves on experiences elsewhere. That commitment and the motion very much feel like a copy and paste, and, if that is the case, we will not see the tangible improvements that many Members have outlined.

I really hope that a Programme for Government is coming forward, because, given that we are three months into a two-and-a-half-year working mandate, it is unacceptable that we have not yet seen a programme for delivery. Let us not forget that 'New Decade, New Approach' is not a Programme for Government; it is a political agreement. In order to right the wrongs of the past three years, we need something to work from, but it is not forthcoming. When the Minister tables the commitment in the Programme for Government — I hope that he does so — I ask that he considers extending what was in the agreement.

I raise those concerns because I see how high childcare costs affect families. In 2020, parents still choose between their children and having a job, choosing between their family and a quality of life. If fortunate, there are grandparents or other family members who are able to support childcare. My parents are grandparents of seven children, and I know that they love taking care of their grandchildren, as it keeps them young, apparently — my father is 70 tomorrow — but I worry about the physical, emotional and financial burden that we are passing on to their generation. I do not think that parents have a choice under the current system, and it needs a radical change, more like what exists in other parts of the United Kingdom.

I appreciate the Minister of Education responding, and I am keen to hear his thoughts regarding childcare not just through early years education but through breakfast clubs and after-school clubs for children of school age after the age of four. Schools provide a fantastic service, but are they adding to their growing financial and other burdens, and will the Minister be able and willing to support those?

While the Minister of Education is responding, I have no doubt that the Minister for the Economy could also respond today on what it means for employers and businesses. I have no doubt that businesses will support the changes, if they are supported too.

I very much welcome the motion; indeed, I welcome the amendment, because it adds value to a good motion. We should all be coming from a position where we provide access to all people from all backgrounds in Northern Ireland. However, this requires more thinking, and it needs to go further than the political agreement when it gets to the Programme for Government.

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): I will try not to stray over the time, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I do not want you to cut off my microphone.

I thank my Assembly colleagues for tabling the motion and everybody who has contributed today. I am very content with the amendment, so I do not think that we should divide on the issue.

It was particularly valuable in today's debate that we were able to get in so many Members and that quite a number of them were able to draw on personal experience or that of family or friends to illustrate the issue, albeit that the vision of Pat Catney giving birth may give me nightmares tonight. I will have to deal with that.

The motion rightly highlights the dual aims proposed in the draft childcare strategy that was consulted on in 2015: child development and parental employment. Those are the twin tracks of this approach. I agree with the proposers that high-quality and affordable childcare can help to support parents to stay and progress in work — that point was made by a number of Members — while, for children, high-quality childcare can help to support their physical, cognitive, social and emotional development.

Childcare, when delivered in safe and stimulating environments, can be transformative for children and their families and can help to deliver a range of shared societal outcomes, address disadvantage and drive economic growth. At the point where families need childcare services, there should be a range of timely and clear information available to help them to make that important choice not just about provision but about the support available to help to offset the cost of childcare, which, as we know, can be a significant outlay for families.

4.15 pm

The availability of affordable and accessible childcare that is responsive to the needs of children and families is a key objective of the strategy. The aims and objectives of the strategy apply to all children up to the age of 12, and, in some cases, older children.

Ms Dillon: I appreciate the Minister taking the intervention. The issue is not only the availability of affordable childcare; in circumstances where parents have children with profound and severe disabilities, the availability of any suitable childcare is the issue. Does the Minister agree?

Mr Weir: I appreciate that. We need to take a look, in particular, at families who are in those circumstances in order to deal with that issue.

I will come back to the wider context in a minute or two. I want to assure Members that in taking a finalised strategy to the Executive, I am not solely focused on children aged three to four. The principal focus, because of the offer that is potentially being made, is on children aged three to four, but we are not looking only at that cohort. There will be issues on affordability beyond that, which I will come to shortly. So, we are looking at the under-3s and school-age children, and there are levels of provision for them.

I will deal with a few of the points that have been raised. Claire Sugden raised the issue of breakfast clubs and a range of other facilities that are provided. Although there is a level of funding that is directly for childcare, because breakfast clubs and a number of those initiatives happen through schools, they are funded through the extended-schools programme. That initiative has worked very well and provided additional support, and it is something that I am keen to see continuing. As we look at the mix of funding that exists — for instance, the common funding formula — we will consider whether it can be mainstreamed or whether it needs to be ring-fenced.

I am trying to deal with specific requests to the Department, and we will be looking through the Hansard report to see whether there is anything else to address. The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee, Karen Mullan, raised Bright Start intervention. The Bright Start school-age-children scheme was launched as a pilot in 2014, and an interim evaluation was completed and agreed in 2017. I plan to publish the evaluation, and I want to reassure Members that the findings from that evaluation and the subsequent reviews that were carried out by the managing agent — the Health and Social Care Board — will help to inform my consideration of the objectives of any future revised scheme, subject to Executive colleagues' consideration.

I recognise the need for childcare services and not just for those aged three to four. The Bright Start scheme has been an important step in making childcare more affordable for school-age children, particularly in rural areas and for disadvantaged families. So, in considering next steps, I will take into consideration the range of lessons learned from that review. Of course, I will also reflect on the 2015 consultation on the draft strategy in relation to the Bright Start scheme.

In response to the motion, I will say that, in 'New Decade, New Approach' document, there is a key commitment on the Executive to:

"publish a Childcare Strategy and will give immediate priority to developing arrangements to deliver extended, affordable, responsive, high-quality provision of early education and care initiatives for families with children aged 3-4."

Members may recall that a similar proposal was consulted on as part of the draft 2016 Programme for Government, and, whilst the hours per week are not stated in the commitment — we have a number of working assumptions based on the offers available elsewhere — mention has been made by a number of Members on what is available in another jurisdiction.

England and Wales have introduced extended offers to provide the equivalent of 30 hours per week of funded early learning and care provision for three- and five-year-olds. However, those additional hours are, generally speaking, only for working families. In England, for instance, 15 hours is provided universally, as, I think, Mr Newton mentioned, but qualification for the additional 15 hours is restricted to working families. In practical terms, that has meant that roughly half of the families have been able to avail themselves of that; there is an upper and lower limit. The eligibility might be questioned because it depends on whether there is full uptake.

Later this year, Scotland will introduce 30 hours of funded provision for all families with children aged three. The offers elsewhere in the UK vary, but what they all have in common is that they involve an element of universal preschool education as part of the offer.

In Northern Ireland, the preschool programme provides one year of funded early education to children in their immediate preschool years — aged three to four. While funded education is universally available, there is a mixed picture. The offers will vary between 12.5 hours and 22.5 hours for the 38 weeks. It was referred to by the Deputy Chair as essentially a part-time and full-time situation. The breakdown of that is, roughly speaking, a little over 60% is

provided to children on a part-time basis of 12.5 hours and the remaining 38-40% will be on the full-time basis. The development of an extended early education and childcare offer must take account of the existing pattern of preschool education. How we develop that extended offer in a way that maximises the opportunities to improve the outcomes for children and families is a key issue. Therefore, we need to consider the exact options that are put forward to standardise that, because universality is critical.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for giving way briefly. Has he costed the budget that would be necessary to standardise that preschool provision?

Mr Weir: There is a range of options that can be pursued. If we are talking about the most likely scenario — moving up to, for instance, a full 22.5 hours, with a wrap-around of perhaps 7.5 hours to bring it up to 30 hours — it would be in the region of about £45 million extra. There could be variations on that and there could be a range of scenarios, but we are talking about a considerable amount of money. Obviously, in considering this, I am conscious of the need to ensure that we can make an offer that allows us to deliver on the strategy's dual aims: parental employment and child development. There is an existing infrastructure that has taken 20 years to reach. If the Executive are going to embrace that change, it will require time to build up the physical infrastructure and the capacity of the workforce.

Picking up on another issue that the Deputy Chair raised, which was the nature and timing of legislation, there is an argument as to whether legislation is strictly legally needed. That may be questionable but, from the point of view of good practice, in other jurisdictions, this has been underpinned by legislation. As part of that process, it would have to be full legislation going through the Assembly, and we may be talking at least a year before that can happen. It depends on how that is scheduled.

Crucially, the barrier to any of this will not be whether legislation is in place but whether the funding is there. Obviously, an important element for the Executive will be the level of investment required. As Robin Newton said, investment can reduce the reliance on later interventions, and I know that can be something of great importance. Along with the work that is ongoing on nurture units and the nurture support, all these things can be an investment to save. However, as the motion acknowledges, there are significant pressures on the Education budget. I want to make it absolutely clear that, from the existing Education budget, I am not in a position to commit any funding to the childcare strategy. This will be a question for the Executive as a whole. If the Executive and the Assembly want to embrace a childcare strategy — I am hearing universal voices — it will have to be paid in addition to what is going into the Education budget.

I appreciate that a number of Members made a very valid point, which is that there is a particular focus on three- to four-year-olds and should we not be looking at a much more extended offer. I do not have a problem with that but, again, I make the point that this will need to be additional money to what is in the Education budget. As an Assembly and as an Executive, we can have as much childcare as the Assembly is prepared to pay for. That will also be challenging in how we build up to that point but there is no limit on that side of things.

Ms Bailey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: No. I only have another few minutes.

I want to highlight to Members the budget required to implement a childcare strategy. The answer that I gave to the Chair of the Committee was a rough figure, focused only on three- to four-year-olds. If we are going to have a much more extensive offer, we are talking about a much greater level of expenditure. As I said, it is a question of how much resource the Assembly is ultimately prepared to commit.

This is a long-term commitment. It cannot be provided with a cliff edge that does not secure funding for future years. It will take time to roll out the provision. If a childcare strategy were put before the Executive next week, it could not be immediately delivered. Pilot legislation will need to be put in place, and, in particular, we will need to build up the capacity of the sector through physical infrastructure and training. If providers are, for example, to expand from 12.5 hours to 22.5 hours, they will, in many cases, have split days. In that situation, it is not a question of them simply providing something in the afternoon because they do that already.

The needs of children must be central to the childcare strategy, as stakeholders, parents and children highlighted during the first phase of the consultation process. A wide range of evidence shows that early years education and care that are of sufficient quality have strong developmental benefits. We will need to bear that in mind as well.

The transfer of policy responsibility to my Department in May 2016 created opportunities for enhancing child development in a holistic way — educating children in the broadest sense. In many ways, simply dividing children between two Departments did not make sense objectively. I am all too aware of the need to bring forward a coherent set of actions within a strategic framework to help to address a range of long-standing issues. The revised strategy will take account of those responses and of the policy priorities in New Decade, New Approach. Although not consulted on the draft childcare strategy, a number of respondents called for the provision for three- to four-year-olds to be increased to 30 hours, which would be similar to the increase in entitlement in England. I should make it clear that, when they said that, I suspect that they were looking very much at universality. Also, there must be wider aspirations for children aged between nought and 14. All of this is predicated on securing the resources, which, I repeat, will be critical.

I welcome the motion. In closing, I thank all Members for their contribution to discussions and their support for the motion. Progress on publication of an updated Executive childcare strategy is predicated on securing additional resources. I hope to be in a position to set out a definitive timescale for publication after the Executive's consultation on the Budget and the resources available to deliver those dual aims, including any legislation required to give effect to the agreed strategic actions.

Ms Kimmins: I welcome the opportunity to speak in this important debate. As a mother of a 13-month-old wee boy, I know only too well the difficulties that parents have. Like many others in the Assembly who have young children and require childcare, we are very fortunate that we can probably afford it. Some are not fortunate enough to have that luxury. I have good family support, which is not always the case.

However, the financial burden on parents is not the only reason why we need a radical childcare strategy. It would also allow parents, particularly mothers, to re-enter the

workplace and progress their career. That has positive benefits for the economy. Moreover, as the motion states, good childcare can have a transformative role in supporting the educational, social and physical development of a child. Importantly, wider societal benefits accrue from early intervention, and I will expand on that shortly.

An old Irish saying — *Mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí* — means, praise the young and they will flourish. However, the young can flourish only in the right environment. There is a clear correlation between poverty and educational underachievement. The evidence is clear that children who fall behind in school often do not catch up and end up leaving school without qualifications. The evidence also tells us that those children are more likely to end up with chronic ill health, physical or mental, which has repercussions for our health and social care system. Children without qualifications are also more likely to come to the attention of the police and the criminal justice system, with all the negative implications that that has for wider society.

The conclusion that we need to draw from that is that early intervention is not just desirable but an absolute necessity.

4.30 pm

We need to look elsewhere for best practice in childcare. I know that the systems and operations in Scotland and Wales were mentioned in the debate, but we should look further afield at the Nordic countries, particularly Finland. Finland is regularly held up as having the best education system in the world, so it should come as no surprise that it also has one of the best childcare systems. Free universal childcare is available from the age of eight months until the start of formal education at seven. Generally, Finnish children are raised to be independent from an early age, and it is quite usual for children to walk to and from school from the age of seven without adults. Of course, it helps that urban planners have been mindful for many decades of the need to provide safe infrastructure for pedestrians and cyclists. The lessons that we need to learn from the likes of Finland are that, as well as having the best possible model of childcare, we need to ensure that all our Departments work together to design that model and eradicate obstacles such as poverty and disability, which may prevent children from reaching their full potential. That is what a comprehensive and radical childcare strategy will look like. I urge Members to support the amendment.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Maurice Bradley to conclude and wind up the debate on the substantive motion. Mr Bradley, you will have 10 minutes in which to speak.

Mr M Bradley: Thank you very much, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I support the motion and the commitment to a childcare strategy in New Decade, New Approach. In Northern Ireland, our childcare strategy is falling further behind those of other devolved Administrations, offering, at present, 12.5 hours per week based on 38 weeks per year, compared with 22.5 hours in other areas. A survey of childcare costs in 2018 identified support from parents in Northern Ireland for a similar scheme to be rolled out here. Employers For Childcare is keen to explore how that may be extended, subject to appropriate funding being made available to childcare providers to deliver a sustainable childcare strategy that is targeted where it is most needed. If the hours that are available are to be increased, funding

needs to be in place to ensure that increased running costs can be met.

An innovative childcare strategy that is available to the most vulnerable and that perhaps allows them to commence or continue work while providing a pathway to education, makes it vital to invest in quality education and infrastructure in order to secure the best educational outcomes, meet the needs of families and allow them to remain in employment.

I would welcome a properly funded childcare strategy in Northern Ireland and one that would enable working parents to have access to additional hours of funded preschool education, which is, in effect, childcare, and the flexibility to allow parents the opportunity to access and stay in work. It is not good enough just to match some of the schemes in other devolved regions. The Executive should strive to improve, enhance and be better, if possible; to give support to working parents and the preschool educational needs of three- and four-year-olds. However, there would be a cost. The Minister has given a broad costing of £45 million, which would be higher if the age range is extended.

During the debate, several Members made some very valid points. Mervyn Storey said that the appropriate level of childcare and early learning should commence at an early age. Catherine Kelly said that it is a pathway to education for the most vulnerable, including parents, particularly single parents, of working-class families who struggle to make ends meet. Karen Mullan referred to inequality and said that the possible funding that would be required would be between £1 million and £50 million depending on the model that is chosen. Sinead McLaughlin said that the strategy was overdue, and that the financial benefit to families and opportunities that would be presented could not be measured. Robbie Butler said that it would enable parents to continue their career. Chris Lyttle, Chairperson of the Education Committee, said that equal access and affordable childcare are essential and that the benefits to a child's development cannot be measured. Other Members spoke in the debate, but, by and large, I sense that there is support for the motion and the amendment. I am happy to support both.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly believes that access to good quality and affordable childcare can help tackle disadvantage and poverty by closing the educational gap between the most and least advantaged children, can empower parents who want to stay and progress in paid work, and those who want to return to education or training; accepts that this, in turn, will contribute to the local economy; recognises the transformative role that good childcare can play in supporting the educational, social and physical development of a child; supports the aim of providing 30 hours of free childcare for 38 weeks a year for three- to four-year-olds, in line with the rest of the United Kingdom; further recognises that there are significant pressures already on the budget of the Department of Education; and calls upon the Executive to implement a childcare strategy and any legislation required to enable this to proceed.

Mental Health in the Workplace

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly recognises that mental health problems affect one in six workers each year, and that poor mental health is the leading cause of sickness absence; further recognises that Northern Ireland records the highest instance of mental ill health across the UK and has an ongoing mental health crisis; welcomes warmly the partnership between the Northern Ireland Retail Consortium, Time to Change and the Retail Trust to address mental health in the retail industry; notes the important role that the retail industry plays as Northern Ireland's largest private-sector employer; supports the initiatives being progressed, including a mental health toolkit and mental health first aid training; and recommends that other industries follow this lead.

Mr Butler: I will not be moving the motion at this time. With the indulgence of other Members, I will return to it when we have a Minister to respond.

Motion not moved.

Adjourned at 4.36 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 16 March 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Buckley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I would appreciate it if you could consider the disgraceful comments from the Member for Upper Bann Mr O'Dowd on social media at the weekend, where he referred not only to the British Government but, indeed, to Chief Medical Officers in the United Kingdom as a shower of bs. I ask that you rule on whether those comments are in keeping with the code of conduct for Members and whether they should be referred to the Standards and Privileges Committee. In the midst of a global crisis, people look to Stormont for leadership, not political grandstanding.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Speaker: The Member will be aware that the matter that he raised is not a matter of procedure in the House, and it is therefore not in my gift to make a ruling on it. I will say this: the Member has put his point on the record. I have repeatedly urged Members to be very mindful of how they gain public confidence and respect by the use of their language, in whatever form of public discourse they wish to engage, and I repeat that call this afternoon. I urge Members to be respectful at all times in any of their public utterances.

Mr Storey: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, given that the Member in question is the Chief Whip of a political party in the House, will you take the matter to the group responsible for meetings of the Assembly, which you chair on and on which the Chief Whips sit? He is more than a Member of the House. He is someone who gives leadership through the structures of the House. Therefore, it is imperative that his conduct and his words be taken into account.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for his point of order. As I said earlier, it is not, strictly speaking, a genuine, valid point of order. The Member has put his remarks on the record. I reassert what I said about respect and the conduct that I expect from Members. I again say that it is outside the jurisdiction of the Speaker, as the Member will be well aware, but the point has been put well on the record.

COVID-19

Mr Speaker: Before we start today's business, I acknowledge that a number of Members have made contact with my office and the officials in relation to the current public-health situation. I know that it very much reflects the concerns being raised with Members in their constituencies. First, in relation to business in the time ahead, I know that there is a need to have opportunities to discuss the COVID-19 virus. In addition to Health questions today, I have selected a number of questions for urgent oral answer. Members can expect that to be a regular item of business. The Health Minister has indicated to me that he recognises the importance of regular statements to the Assembly each week during this period.

Secondly, in relation to arrangements in this Building and for our business, Members will be aware that a COVID-19 response group of officials has been established and is considering various scenarios that may arise as a result of the coronavirus. That group is meeting very frequently — almost daily — to look at a range of issues to provide all Building users with practical advice in line with official advice and to plan for potential options as the situation develops.

The Assembly Commission will meet on the issue this evening for an update on the work so far and in the time ahead. It is important for me to emphasise that it will be for the Assembly Commission to take decisions relating to the use of this Building and arrangements in the Building. I will also have discussions with the Business Committee this evening, and any decisions around how we manage plenary business in the coming days and weeks will be for the Business Committee to take.

I anticipate that further discussions will be required with both bodies in the time ahead. As Chair of the Commission and the Business Committee, I assure Members that officials and I are mindful of the importance of these issues, and that they and I will engage regularly on our response. There is a need for us in this Building to ensure that the Assembly can continue to take whatever decisions are required on legislation and other matters, and, indeed, to scrutinise and reflect the views of the community on how these matters are dealt with. However, I also know that the advice being given to the community is that it is not going to be business as usual, and the Assembly will have to reflect that as well.

Audit Committee: Deputy Chairperson

Mr Speaker: I have received notification of the resignation of Mr Andrew Muir as Deputy Chairperson of the Audit Committee, with effect from 10 March 2020.

Question Time

Mr Speaker: I have received a request from the Minister of Health to switch his Question Time with that of the Minister for Infrastructure today. In light of the current circumstances, I have agreed to the change to allow him to attend an urgent COBRA meeting. The Business Office has advised parties and Members of the change. Questions for the Minister of Health will now be at 2.00 pm, with questions for the Minister for Infrastructure at 2.45 pm.

Committee Membership

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

Resolved:

That Mr Pat Sheehan replace Ms Jemma Dolan as a member of the Committee for Health; and that Ms Jemma Dolan replace Mr Pat Sheehan as a member of the Committee for Justice. — [Ms Ennis.]

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

Mr K Buchanan: I beg to move

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 16 March 2020.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 16 March 2020.

Mr Speaker: I am satisfied that cross-community support has been demonstrated.

Assembly Commission Budget 2020-21

Mr K Buchanan: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the report of the Audit Committee [NIA 10/17-22] on the scrutiny of the Assembly Commission's budget for 2020-21, as laid before the Assembly on 6 March 2020; and agrees the Assembly Commission's budget for 2020-21.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allocate one hour to this debate, with 10 minutes to move, 10 minutes to wind up and five minutes for all other Members who wish to speak. Please open the debate on the motion.

Mr K Buchanan: Thank you, Mr Speaker. In proposing this motion, I would like to record the fact that this debate follows on from the scrutiny of the Commission's budget that was carried out by the Audit Committee. The Committee's report on the Commission's budget was laid in the Business Office on 6 March. The Commission is indebted to the Committee for carrying out that important role.

With regard to the budget figure for next year, the total amount presented for resource departmental expenditure limit, or resource DEL, is £44·847 million. That figure is split between non-ring-fenced resource DEL of £41·147 million and £3·7 million for ring-fenced resource DEL. There is also a budget proposal of £1·093 million for capital expenditure.

The first category in the Commission's budget is income. Next year, the Commission will receive anticipated income of £739,000, with just over £580,000 relating to the recovery of ministerial salaries from Executive Departments. The remaining income relates to the recoupment of salaries for a small number of staff who are seconded to other public-sector roles and minor income from events held in the Building and other sundry income.

The second category covers salaries and expenses paid to Members. This category of expenditure is made up of Members' salaries; constituency office running costs, including staffing costs; Members' travel costs; and other costs associated with Members. The level of salary that will be paid to Members, Ministers, Committee Chairs and members of the Assembly Commission is set for the year and is forecast to cost £6·676 million. This forecast includes an increase in the basic salary paid to Members from 1 April 2020, as the current determination prescribes that the increase should happen. I know that some Members chose to donate the increase made to their salaries when the Assembly got back up and running on 11 January to a charity of their choice or to make a payment to the Consolidated Fund.

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

As well as salary payments for Members, there is also the amount that Members can recover to meet the cost of running a constituency office. This includes the cost of Members' support staff, office rent and rates, office utilities and other office running costs. This subcategory is expected to total £6·018 million and covers payments to Members in respect of the travel allowances set out in the 2016 determination, which are forecast to be £293,000 in 2020-21.

The final element covers what are referred to as other costs. These costs include winding-up expenses where a

Member leaves the Assembly and an estimate of costs for any ill-health retirements that might occur. These costs are estimated at £118,000.

The third major category in the Commission's budget is the largest, and it covers the salary payments for secretariat staff — the administrative costs that are incurred to deliver the full range of services needed by the Assembly. The first of these, secretariat staff salary costs, is forecast to be £21·88 million for next year. This is the largest single item in the budget, so I will try to set out what the Commission expects to be delivered with that salary budget.

When the Assembly got back up and running, we had almost 50 vacancies. We have already filled 30 of those on a temporary basis, so there are still a further 20 posts to be filled. We will continue to fill vacancies on a temporary basis, but we will need to permanently fill them by open recruitment.

Next year, additional staffing support is needed to deliver on the political arrangements set out in 'New Decade, New Approach'. For example, 13 additional posts are needed to provide support for the new Assembly Committees, namely a scrutiny Committee on the Executive Sub-Committee on Brexit, an Ad Hoc Committee to consider the creation of a bill of rights, and a Committee to monitor progress against the Programme for Government. This support will include the normal Committee teams, as well as research and legal support.

The Commission also requires five new posts in the Bill Office to increase the support for Members seeking to take forward private Member's Bills through the establishment of a non-Executive Bill team. An additional eight ICT posts will be needed in 2020-21 across a range of services including cybersecurity, increased capacity for software development and enhancing our service and help desk provision. Members will also be interested to note that the Commission has been developing plans to make progress on the formation of a youth assembly, and additional staff resources are included to take that forward. Delivery of Member development, including support for the Assembly Women's Caucus and training for Members' support staff, has been an important focus for the Commission over the last number of years. Given the significant number of relatively new Members, this work is more important than ever, and dedicated staffing resource is envisaged to do this.

Permanently filling the existing 50 vacancies, along with the new posts that have been outlined, will require an extensive and sustained programme of open recruitment. Five additional new posts will be required to support this, but they are time-limited and will not last beyond the end of the recruitment programme. In all, we expect that approximately 35 posts will be needed over and above what was previously in place.

12.15 pm

I should point out to Members that the staffing resources envisaged for next year, and their associated budget, take no account of any changes in working practices within the Assembly that might come about as a result of any aspect of the RHI inquiry report. This category also includes the Commission's administrative costs, and these are forecast to be £6·131 million next year. Administrative costs cover a wide range of expenditure items, including: Committee travel and expenses; building rates, utility costs, including

electricity and gas; repairs and maintenance costs; third-party support for the business-critical IT systems that we use; and the costs for recurrent contracts for things like broadcasting, catering and research subscriptions. Included in this is the cost of drafting Bills, and naturally that includes a number of anticipated private Member's Bills that Members will seek support for. Another area where the Commission wants to invest next year is in Member development. This direct investment is in addition to the staffing support that I have already mentioned.

The next category is payments to parties under the Financial Assistance for Political Parties Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, or FAPP, as it is universally known. These costs are forecast to be £725,000 next year. The category is slightly more technical as it covers depreciation, impairment charges and the cost of notional charges to the Commission. For next year, depreciation charges are forecast to be £3·7 million. This is mostly made up of the depreciation charge on the value of Parliament Buildings. We also have depreciation charges for things like PCs and printers, but they are very small compared to the depreciation charge for Parliament Buildings. That makes up the total resource expenditure for next year.

The Commission anticipates that it will incur capital expenditure of £1·093 million in the next financial year. There is planned investment to replace the antiquated analogue telephone system, and also the ancient TV screens, in use across the Building. The capital plan also includes a number of necessary back-office or unseen improvements, ranging from Building security systems to investment in basic things like furniture. Where appropriate, the Commission has considered and agreed the business cases for these as part of its normal corporate governance arrangements.

Members, there is one final important point that I would like to bring to the Assembly's attention, and it relates to the reference in 'New Decade, New Approach' to a simultaneous translation service for the Assembly. As the Assembly has not yet considered the level of the simultaneous translation provision that might be required, no estimates of costs have been included in the budget for next year. The Commission can only assess the likely costs of providing this service once the Assembly has decided on an agreed approach.

Before I close, I want to put on record my thanks to the staff of the Assembly secretariat for their dedication and commitment to the Assembly over the past three years, and for their tremendous work in getting us back up and running again so quickly and efficiently in spite of the large number of staff vacancies. Every plenary session has been facilitated and every Committee meeting has taken place. That has involved a lot of effort behind the scenes that Members might not see, but the Commission certainly appreciates the professionalism and expertise that our staff have shown again. Members, I commend the Commission's budget proposals for 2020-21 to the House.

Mr Chambers: I speak today on behalf of the Chairperson of the Audit Committee, Daniel McCrossan, who could not be present today. At the outset, I should explain that in scrutinising the draft budget of the Assembly Commission, the Committee has followed the approach of the previous Audit Committee. In order to reflect the constitutional independence of the Assembly from the Executive, a methodology, or protocol, was introduced in

2016 setting out an approach similar to that adopted by the Audit Committee for agreeing the annual estimates for the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman. There will also be a need to codify formally this additional Committee function.

At its meeting on 4 March 2020, the Committee took evidence from the Assembly Commission officials on the draft budget 2020-21. As the evidence was appended to the published Committee report, I will highlight just a few of the key areas today. First, I should reiterate that the Commission has a legal requirement to meet all costs associated with Members by way of salaries, allowances, expenses, Members' staffing costs and pension contributions etc.

These elements of the Commission's budget are determination-driven and not under the control of the Commission.

The Committee noted that the Commission's budget includes additional provision resulting from the New Decade, New Approach agreement, including increased staffing as a result of the establishment of new Committees. However, we acknowledge that some financial outworkings of the agreement have yet to be quantified, including the provision of simultaneous translation services, which may result in the Commission requesting additional funding in the future. Similarly, the Committee noted that the budget makes provision for the development of private Member's Bills, Assembly staff recruitment, a youth assembly and increased ICT staff.

The Committee, as a result of its scrutiny, received a number of important assurances from the Commission, including on elements of its capital plan and on the Assembly's business continuity plans in light of COVID-19. Given the budgetary pressures across the public sector, the Committee emphasised the importance of maximising all appropriate opportunities to generate income and recover costs.

Before concluding, I should also flag up issues raised during the Committee's deliberations on pay disparity for Members' staff and necessary security measures in constituency offices, particularly for lone workers. More generally, the Committee encourages the Commission to expedite the consultation process with MLAs and parties on the options for future arrangements for the provision of financial support to Members.

The Committee pointed out that the time constraints of the Executive Budget process meant that, on this occasion, it had only one opportunity to take oral evidence from the Commission. The Committee will follow up on a number of issues, including as part of its subsequent scrutiny of the Estimates, but it is keen to see a multi-year process put in place, which will provide for a more strategic approach.

As set out in the report, the Committee agreed that, arising from the scrutiny of the Assembly Commission's budget plan for 2020-21, and having due regard to the evidence provided by the Department of Finance, the Executive's draft Budget document should make provision for the Assembly Commission to have a resource budget of £44.8 million and a capital budget of £1.093 million for 2020-21. This resource budget amount is the total resource departmental expenditure limit (DEL) and includes both ring-fenced and non-ring-fenced departmental expenditure.

I will now speak in my capacity as the Ulster Unionist Party member of the Audit Committee. I place on record our appreciation of the work of Mrs Lesley Hogg, the chief executive, and her staff in producing a budget. It cannot have been an easy task, given the recent publication of the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, with all the uncertainties around aspects of it. Indeed, paragraph 7 of the briefing paper to the Committee stated:

"The Corporate Strategy and Corporate Plan do not yet reflect recent political developments particularly those arising from NDNA."

Paragraph 18 of that paper set out that the 2020-21 budget:

"sets out the expenditure plans for the next financial year including the estimated financial implications of NDNA other than translation services which, as noted above, will be dependent on the outcome of the Committee on Procedures' deliberations."

We are concerned about what those figures will be and want to see them as soon as possible

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member's time is up.

Mr Chambers: The Ulster Unionist Party will support the budget.

Mr Blair: As the Alliance member of the Commission, I support the budget as presented and the statement made by the Member who moved the motion.

I support the budget, for a number of reasons. However, before giving some of those reasons, I place on record my thanks and that of my party colleagues to the Assembly secretariat for the work undertaken by them in speedily getting the Assembly up and running and servicing our needs, as best they could, in the early days of the recent restoration.

I fully accept that the budget reflects the need for a full complement of staff in the restored Assembly. It also looks, quite properly, at considerations that will have to be made for additional measures in relation to legislation and commitments made in the New Decade, New Approach agreement.

I particularly want to take this opportunity to welcome the provision made to progress the establishment of a youth assembly. I, for one, like other Members, I am sure, appreciate that that engagement with youth across Northern Ireland is a vital component of progress for the Assembly to make.

I am satisfied that there is provision and scope within the budget to make further considerations, if required, that might entail additional provision in relation to the staffing of constituency offices, the advancement of the IFRP review, and that we may be given an opportunity to consider lone working arrangements for our staff and any outstanding pay disparity issues.

I look forward to playing a full part, with Commission colleagues, in considering those issues. Apart from those issues, I am happy to support the budget on behalf of the party.

Ms Armstrong: I rise as a concerned Member of the legislature. While I accept that the budget is there, is

well considered and has been brought forward by our excellent team, there are certain things that I would love the Commission to consider, namely the savings that can be made. Certain issues within the budget are not being considered. The amount of paper that is used in this place is one example. We have an antiquated system: we should be using Account NI as opposed to any other process. Our financial system relies on copious amounts of paper and what is called “wet signatures”. That is not in keeping with such a modern establishment as we should be bringing forward.

I hope that the recommendations of the RHI report are brought forward when we are considering Member development. Certain issues within those recommendations are new and have not been spoken about, probably because the Commission has not had a chance to meet.

There are also issues to do with the safety of our staff. I have CCTV and protection at the doorway to stop people barging into my constituency office. That is something that is not taken seriously by the Assembly, and has not been thus far. We had the opportunity to bring that forward during the hiatus, when we were not here, but it needs to be considered. I do not wish to have a female or male member of staff sitting in my constituency office, when I am here, worried for their safety. Staff in this Building get such protection — you all know about the amount of security here — but it is not considered for our constituency staff. They are the people who, by themselves, are faced with vulnerable people coming into the office — people with mental health issues, who are angry at the current situation, and perhaps left with doubts about benefits — especially in these days when coronavirus is rampant.

There are opportunities to make real savings, and for those savings to be invested in the items that are missing from the IFRP. I look forward to the Commission publishing the report on that review later this year.

Mr Carroll: Many people are faced with a situation in which they will have to self-isolate to stop the spread of the dangerous coronavirus. They are doing so to ensure that the virus does not affect or immunocompromise friends and family and that our elderly loved ones are not impacted or killed by this virus, as has been the case in other countries.

Over the weekend, many workers contacted me. They are unsure of how they are going to fare with being isolated for weeks, or longer. They are asking me to clarify whether they will be able to pay their mortgage and have a job at the end of all this. Yet here, today, we are being asked to agree a £1,000 pay increase for MLAs — a pay bump that People Before Profit rejected from the outset, and that every other party eventually agreed should not be accepted, when the media came knocking with public outrage. Imagine that: no emergency fund for workers on zero-hours contracts or small business owners, but approval to give MLAs an extra £1,000.

Ms S Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Carroll: I will not, because there is plenty of time.

People will, rightly, be furious, especially when, not two months ago, half of the Chamber was tweeting that they would be donating their surplus to charity. What they

may not have realised is that many will take the extra pay increase year after year.

As I said before, the MLA salary is double the average wage for workers here. People Before Profit believes that elected representatives should be on the average workers' wage and that approving this pay rise increases the financial cushion that MLAs have over the rest of the public. For that reason, I will not be supporting this budget, and I call on those who have said they would reject the pay bump to do the same.

12.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Mrs Dolores Kelly to conclude and make a winding-up speech on the motion.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank Members who contributed to the debate. This is the first time that the Assembly has considered the Commission's budget at a plenary sitting. That is important, because the resources that are made available to the Commission will be used to provide services to the Assembly and its Members. When the Commission met to consider its budget proposals, it was mindful of the need to ensure that any expenditure that we incur achieves value for money. We were also mindful of the need to provide the Assembly and every elected Member with all the services that are required to carry out the Assembly's legislative, scrutiny and representative functions.

The Commission does not view the budget as excessive. Similarly, the Commission does not consider it to be cautious to the extent of not being sufficient to provide Members with the required services in Parliament Buildings. It represents a balanced budget for the fourth year of the mandate and the anticipated heavy legislative workload. The budget should enable the Commission to manage those pressures while, at the same time, to seek improvements to and innovation in the services that it provides to Members.

I will now try to cover some of the points raised by other Members. I turn first to those made by Mr Alan Chambers. There were recurring themes in all contributions, some of which were around security and lone working. In my office, we have had to put in place particular measures to protect lone workers. There is also the issue of pay disparity between constituency office staff and staff in the rest of the Assembly and the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS). As you may be aware, a working group has been established to look at that disparity over the next few weeks. We want to see better equality and better security for our staff who are on the front line.

There were also issues around the import of the RHI inquiry report and its recommendations. The Assembly Commission is meeting later today, and, as the Speaker addressed in his opening remarks, a number of things will be added to the agenda, including, no doubt, the response to COVID-19, as other Members raised. I look forward to hearing what our Executive colleagues instruct us to do later today.

On modern working practices, the Speaker and others want to look at how we can do our business more efficiently and reduce our carbon footprint. We are very mindful of that, and I hope that, over the next few weeks and months, you will hear more about that. Ms Armstrong raised that particular point for the benefit of the Commission.

Mr Carroll raised the issue of Members' salaries. The rise in salary applies from 1 April 2020. An increase of £500 will be paid, totalling approximately £60,000. That increase is mandated, as he well knows, under the 2016 determination issued by the Independent Financial Review Panel and was outwith the control of Assembly Members, although the Commission and individual Assembly Members are making their own decisions about donating the increase to charity.

Ms S Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: Yes, I will give way.

Ms S Bradley: To follow on from Mr Carroll's comment, does the Member agree with me that a lot of Members in the House followed their conscience and not the media on the issue?

Mrs D Kelly: Yes. These are very personal matters, but some Members have indicated that they will return the money to the central pot. Other Members have particular charities that they want to support and therefore want to direct the money to those themselves. It is very much an individual choice for Members.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: Yes, I will give way.

Mr Allister: On the issue of how many Members chose to do privately what they said publicly they would do and allocate money through the Assembly scheme to a charity, does she not think that it is unfortunate for building public confidence that the Assembly Commission has refused in answer to Assembly questions not to identify but to state the number of Members who are availing themselves of the scheme? After the publicity, all and sundry said that they would do it, but the public have been left not knowing how many, in fact, did so.

Mrs D Kelly: I have confidence in the integrity of many of my fellow Assembly Members to make the decision for themselves. It is an evolving issue. It took some time to put in place the mechanisms to enable Members to do that. I think that it is very much an issue of individual choice and circumstances.

I think that I have replied to the majority of points that were raised. On behalf of the SDLP, and like other contributors, I want to place on record our thanks to Lesley Hogg and her team, who put the budget together. Others have raised particular issues, and, indeed, my colleague Keith Buchanan set out in his opening remarks issues about 'New Decade, New Approach' and its financial implications. We are unable to account for that yet because no decision has been made by the Executive. No doubt, that is a work stream that will require our attention later as decisions are made.

The Commission has considered its requirements for 2020-21 in a realistic and measured manner. The amount has been affirmed by the Audit Committee as reasonable. I commend the amounts of £44.847 million for resource DEL and £1.093 for capital expenditure to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the report of the Audit Committee [NIA 10/17-22] on the scrutiny of the Assembly Commission's budget for 2020-21, as laid before the Assembly on 6 March 2020; and agrees the Assembly Commission's budget for 2020-21.

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

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Executive Committee Business

Renewable Heat Incentive Inquiry Report

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

That this Assembly takes note of the publication of the renewable heat incentive inquiry report.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allocate three hours to the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to move the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes. I call the Minister of Finance to open the debate on the motion.

Mr Murphy: On Friday 13 March 2020, the renewable heat incentive inquiry, which was commissioned by my predecessor Máirtín Ó Muilleoir, published its report. I want to thank the Members of the panel: Sir Patrick Coghlin, the chairperson, and Dame Una O'Brien and Dr Keith MacLean, the technical assessor to the panel. I also thank David Scoffield QC, Joseph Aiken and Donal Lunny, counsel to the inquiry; Patrick Butler, solicitor to the inquiry; Andrew Browne and Paula Dawson, successive secretaries to the inquiry; and the whole inquiry team for the very comprehensive report that they produced.

This morning, the Executive agreed to accept the findings and move immediately to consider how the recommendations can best be taken forward. That is essential if a similar scandal is never to happen again. All Ministers will have a contribution to the overall response. As sponsor of the inquiry, I will lead that response.

Before we discuss solutions, it is important to diagnose the problems that were identified by the inquiry. The report found that the vast majority of what went wrong was due to an accumulation and compounding of errors and omissions over time. Those errors were due to both individual shortcomings and systemic failures in governance, management and communication. Without change, that could happen again. That shows the scale of the task that we face and the importance of real change.

The report's recommendations require sustained, system-wide change and will take time to implement. We have already made a start. I had intended to issue a written statement to Members this morning on my behalf and that of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, under urgent procedure following the Executive meeting, setting out a strengthened ministerial code of conduct, new guidance for Ministers, a new Assembly protocol for private secretaries, and new enforcement arrangements. That was not possible within the appropriate timescales, due to the length of the Executive meeting. I apologise to the House. My officials will ensure that the statement is issued as soon as practically possible. However, with your permission, Mr Speaker, I will set it out for Members now.

The revised versions of the ministerial code of conduct and guidance for Ministers are to be read in conjunction with each other. Together, they set out the high standards that are expected of Ministers and detail the way in which those standards will be met. For instance, they set out the accountability of Ministers to the Assembly and the need for Assembly Committees to be provided with the

information that they require to discharge their role. They strengthen the requirements for the declaration of interests by Ministers and require the avoidance of conflict of interest. They set out that Ministers are responsible for the management, conduct and discipline of their special advisers. They make clear the need to record ministerial meetings and decisions, and they require the regular publication of declarations of relevant interests, details of meetings with external organisations, and gifts and hospitality received.

In order to ensure that the ministerial code of conduct and the guidance for Ministers are effective in guiding ministerial behaviour, a new mechanism for the enforcement of ministerial standards is to be introduced. Alleged breaches of the ministerial code, the guidance for Ministers or the conduct of Executive business will be referred to a panel for ministerial standards, one of whose members will be the Assembly Commissioner for Standards. The panel members will investigate and publish findings in respect of alleged breaches. They will complete their investigations quickly, within a recommended 15 working days of the receipt of a complaint. Their findings will include whether or not a Minister has breached the terms of the ministerial standards documents, and they may make a judgement as to the relative seriousness of that breach. The panel will publish its findings and report to the Assembly and the Executive, and that report will provide the grounds on which sanctions can be imposed by the Assembly or the Minister's party.

These new arrangements go well beyond what is required of Ministers in other jurisdictions. In particular, we have agreed that the independent investigation of allegations against a Minister shall be a matter for the panel for ministerial standards itself, and not at the discretion of the First Minister or deputy First Minister. We will start the appointment process within days.

The revised ministerial code of conduct builds on the strengthened special adviser code that was published in January. Special advisers are a critical part of the team that supports a Minister. They should be subject to, and should adhere to, the high standards that are expected of those who are in public life. Given the public's legitimate concerns in that regard, I moved quickly in January to produce and agree strengthened rules. Together, these codes set out the high standards that are expected of those in public office and reaffirm the Executive's commitment to rebuilding public confidence in the institutions.

As Minister Dodds set out on Friday in relation to the Department for the Economy, the Department has strengthened its system of internal control and assurance. It has significantly improved its process around business planning and performance measurement and reporting, resource and people management, risk management, whistle-blowing disclosures, casework reviewing and oversight.

Encouraged by the chair of the inquiry, who made clear that improvements should not wait for his report, the Civil Service, led by the Department of Finance, has also been reviewing many of its systems and processes that are relevant to the inquiry. That has included major reviews of the expenditure approval and business-case process, project management requirements and other areas such as managing risk, record-keeping, expertise in the Civil

Service, responding to those who raise concerns and how people are placed in different roles. All of those areas will now be reviewed again in light of the inquiry report and, in turn, will provide the blueprint for Civil Service reform. I will lead that programme of work and will soon bring proposals to my Executive colleagues.

We must take the inquiry's findings and turn them into real, positive change and reform so that our devolved institutions provide effective and efficient government for everyone. The 'New Decade, New Approach' document includes a commitment to establish a subcommittee of the Executive to consider the findings of the RHI inquiry and to propose further reforms in addition to those in the 'NDNA' document to deliver the changes that are necessary to rebuild public confidence. The Executive have now established that group. I shall chair the subcommittee, and all Executive parties will be represented. The subcommittee will publish an action plan for implementing the recommendations. The action plan will be considered by the Executive and the Assembly.

The inquiry examined the role of the civil servants who were involved in the RHI scheme and whether or not their actions and/or advice met professional standards. The report identified instances of unacceptable behaviour. Following those findings, there will now be a disciplinary process for civil servants. Given the exceptional nature and circumstances of the inquiry, any potential disciplinary matters relating to civil servants will be managed through an independent external process. In the first instance, the content of the report will be considered by an external independent panel, which will establish whether there have been any breaches of standards of conduct and/or disciplinary policy. It is aiming to do that within weeks. The panel will then prepare a report outlining any disciplinary charges that should be considered in line with the standards of conduct set out in the Civil Service handbook, which incorporates the code of ethics.

12.45 pm

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Murphy: If the Member does not mind, he will have an opportunity to respond to the debate. I will pick up whatever questions he has at the end.

For staff below permanent secretary level, the report will be provided to an internal panel of three permanent secretaries who do not have a conflict of interest in the RHI scheme. The report for staff members at permanent secretary level and above will be provided to the Cabinet Secretary to consider. On the basis of the advice from the external independent panel, the permanent secretaries and Cabinet Secretary will decide whether there should be any further action, hold disciplinary hearings and take decisions on disciplinary outcomes.

The inquiry team has completed its programme of work. The onus is now on us to turn the recommendations into real action and reform. We need effective governance. We need public money to be managed in the public interest. We need to ensure that this does not happen again. I look forward to hearing Members' contributions.

Mrs Foster: Mr Speaker, thank you for calling me so early in the debate. Unfortunately, given the pressures outside the Chamber, I will not be able to stay for most of the contributions. I have already explained to you the reasons

for that, Mr Speaker, and I trust that the Minister and other Members will appreciate the circumstances.

First, I thank the inquiry team, who worked so forensically to examine this very complex issue. We should all agree that the inquiry was carried out in a professional manner under the chairmanship and leadership of Sir Patrick Coghlin. A lot has been written about the RHI scheme, but this is a definitive account based on the facts rather than the headlines, and I welcome the publication of the report. However, as the Minister pointed out, the report does not mark the end; rather, it is a critical staging post. We must now look carefully at the problems identified in the report, learn from what has happened and use the report as a road map to fix the broken systems.

I came into politics not for position or personal gain but to try to advance the values that are important to me and to help make people's lives better in Northern Ireland. I want Northern Ireland to thrive. I want to heal the divisions. I want better opportunities for the next generation. That is what motivates me. That is why I have such deep and personal regret about the mistakes that were made in the scheme, particularly the opportunities that I had or could have taken to address some of the issues that subsequently emerged. Having the right motivation does not prevent mistakes, oversights or omissions, and I must learn from what has been pointed out by the inquiry. However, when I look back, it is the allegations of corruption that were of the utmost concern. To allege that someone is corrupt is amongst the most damaging accusations that can be levelled against anyone. I therefore welcome Sir Patrick's clear and categorical finding that corruption played no role in the failure of the scheme. Those who made such claims should now publicly accept that finding as a lesson for everyone on these Benches and on the Benches opposite for the future: before questioning anyone's integrity, wait for the facts; look at the subject not as a political rival but as a father, mother, son or daughter who, at least, deserves a fair hearing. None of us is perfect — we will make mistakes — and I apologise for the errors. I will learn the lessons for my role as First Minister, and all those who have been criticised must act and do better.

The report identifies a catalogue of errors and opportunities missed by many people at many different times. No Minister will be an expert on every policy area in their Department; they depend on accurate, diligent and comprehensive advice. Sir Patrick Coghlin concluded that that was not received on many occasions in the Department. I want to ensure that this can never happen again. We need better systems and people with the right expertise to be involved in the policy design of complex issues. Scrutiny functions must be improved, and professional project management must be implemented. We must rebuild trust across all levels.

As we now see in the report, there was no good reason to bring the institutions down and keep them down for so many years. However, the report demands action, particularly to tackle and address the structural and systematic failings. I welcome the fact that some of that action has already taken place, particularly in relation to the new special adviser code. Yet, there is much more that could be done, and we should be open to that.

Colleagues, this is not a day for recrimination; it is a day for learning. I acknowledge my role in damaging public

trust, but I am determined to play a full part in rebuilding that trust and doing all that I can to ensure a better way of working as we move forward.

Finally, I acknowledge what carried me through some very dark moments over the last couple of years. First, I acknowledge my faith in almighty God and acknowledge that his grace is sufficient in all things; the love and support of my friends and colleagues inside and outside this great party; and my precious family, who had to listen to so many people speak of their wife, daughter, sister and mother in such a disparaging way but who never stopped believing in me as a person of integrity. Thank you to those who, with my family, never stopped believing in me as a person of integrity. I will reward their faith by learning the lessons, by fixing the problems and by making Northern Ireland a place that the next generation can be proud of.

Ms Dolan: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the RHI scheme. I also welcome the publication of the long-awaited public inquiry report. We are here to deliver for all the people of the North. Our constituents want good public services, quality jobs and stability. Any wasting of public money, such as the RHI scheme resulted in, puts all of that under pressure. Public confidence has to be earned and trust rebuilt, if the institutions are to have any credibility.

As a party, Sinn Féin is committed to these political institutions, but they must operate with a new kind of politics that is representative of all of society and is progressive and respectful. Scandals like RHI, on which Sir Patrick Coghlin reported, should never have been adopted in the first place and must never be allowed to happen again. However, we cannot tar all RHI claimants with the same brush. I know businesses in my constituency — hoteliers, in particular — that installed boilers for genuine reasons and are being punished because others abused the system.

The RHI scandal was formed in a DUP Ministry, and the DUP's actions have caused significant damage to the renewables industry. It will have a lasting and detrimental impact on the uptake of future schemes. The public have lost confidence in government-run schemes, and it is vital that the recommendations are implemented and fundamental lessons are learned from these failings.

On taking up office, the Finance Minister immediately brought in a code of conduct for special advisers. It is swift action like that that will help us to get things right for the people we represent and for future generations. The onus is now on us to work together to turn the rest of the recommendations into action.

Mr O'Toole: As with Members who spoke before, I am pleased to speak in this debate on the Coghlin report. We debate this at a time of extraordinary circumstances, with people outside rightly concerned about the public health emergency that we face. Nevertheless, that does not diminish the importance of the Coghlin report. It does, however, mean that my remarks will be relatively brief, and I submit that we should come back to the report in order to discuss and debate it in more detail.

Sir Patrick Coghlin delivered his report to the Assembly on Friday afternoon that was not just before St Patrick's weekend but while we were digesting the full scale of the coronavirus crisis that we face. He lays out in detail what are, frankly, a huge number of systemic failings around government in this place. It is important that we consider

this enormous report in enormous detail. I have it in front of me, and, including annexes, it runs to nearly 1,000 pages. It is entirely unrealistic that, over the past weekend, when we were all dealing with constituency issues and questions about the public health crisis, we would have had any realistic opportunity to digest the report in any significant detail.

Nevertheless, what does he say? He says that there was no evidence of real corruption. I accept that. However, the report indicates systemic failings at official and political level. We need to address those robustly. I welcome the fact that the First Minister has committed to addressing them, and I welcome the fact that the Finance Minister has indicated that, in addition to the revised spad code, there will be a serious approach to the Executive subcommittee. Nevertheless, there are serious issues isolated in the report. It highlights severe problems with Civil Service capability. The first finding that Sir Patrick notes is that RHI was, he says, a project too far for the Civil Service. In a sense, that was the original sin of the renewable heat incentive scheme, certainly the non-domestic variety. The Civil Service was not capable of delivering the project, and it certainly was not capable of delivering such a novel and complex project outwith the support of the UK Government. That error was compounded by several other errors, including the failure to put in even the most rudimentary cost controls and then the failure to spot those problems as they became ever more apparent. There was a failure in briefing the Minister, a failure of proper engagement with the Treasury and a failure in engaging with Ofgem, the arm's-length body charged with overseeing and regulating the scheme from London.

We had a range of systemic failings. We know that we need to do things better and have a long, hard look at how we in the Assembly scrutinise what the Executive do. In reality, we will not be able to do that today, because this debate is for a few hours the day before a bank holiday when everyone is preoccupied by a public health crisis. Therefore, while it is important that we debate that, we should come back to the Coghlin report at a later date for a slightly more considered deliberation.

Mr Beattie: I am mindful of the tone that we should take today, when we are all dealing with other things. The RHI is a complex issue, and I have tried to distil that into just one thing to help us to move along. Albert Einstein reportedly said that, if he had only one hour to save the world, he would spend 55 minutes defining the problem and only five minutes finding the solution. We could use that with COVID-19, I have to say. However, with RHI, if we had spent more time defining the problem, we would not have spent so much time picking up the pieces of where we got it wrong.

Sir Patrick Coghlin said that the renewable heat incentive scheme should not have been adopted. He went on to say that junior civil servants responsible for the scheme were under-resourced and not adequately supported; in fact, the person who was responsible for the scheme had absolutely no experience of setting up a scheme similar to this and had only 1.5 staff to deliver it. That is a failure in leadership. For me, no matter which way you distil the whole thing, it distils down to a failure in leadership. Of course, we will try to pass the buck as far down the ladder as we can so that the people at the bottom will get all the disciplinary issues and those at the top of the ladder will get away with saying, "I'm sorry. I made a mistake".

As the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Minister, Arlene Foster was responsible for the leadership of her Department, so it was Arlene Foster's failure. It was not just her failure — there were many other failures — but it was her failure. The inquiry considered that the Minister, in presenting the regulations to the Assembly and asking for its approval, should have read them herself, not least because, in the inquiry's view, to do so was a core part of the Minister's job. It was in her competency, and, within her competency, it was failure.

Leadership was the issue here. We are all leaders of some shape or form and are responsible people in some shape or form. Therefore, we must take responsibility for when it goes wrong, not just step to the side and pass it to somebody else. Maybe we need to look at John Adair's action-centred leadership model, which includes task needs; setting objectives and planning tasks; allocating responsibilities and setting performance standards; the group needs of communication, motivation and discipline or the individual needs of coaching, counselling, developing and motivating. Those are all key elements.

I can look to the DUP, and I am not trying to score points but making a genuine point. I can look to Sinn Féin and say exactly the same because they failed also. Michelle O'Neill, as Agriculture and Rural Development Minister, promoted the scheme and not once did she scrutinise it. It is not enough to say, "It's not my Department": we have to scrutinise what we put forward to the people, regardless of which Department it is.

We have already said that we should work cross-departmentally. We are working cross-departmentally on COVID-19; we should have done so with RHI.

1.00 pm

The issue with Máirtín Ó Muilleoir is, I have to say, truly scandalous. He did not just go out and give a running commentary to somebody who is unaccountable and unelected but asked him for permission to act. That is what he did: he asked for permission to act. That was shameless. It is shameless to do that when you are in a position of authority.

The issue with spads is well known and affects us all. We need to work on that. Mr Allister will bring forward something later, and we need to get behind it, because we need to fix the issue with spads. There are also issues in our Civil Service, but I do not think that it is right or fair that, whatever comes out of the report, we at the very top of the ladder fire it down to the people at the bottom and say, "We will take disciplinary action against you". That is grossly unfair. The standard that you walk past is the standard that you accept, and we walked past it. The DUP walked past it, and Sinn Féin walked past it. Do I accept the First Minister's genuine apology? Yes, I do. It was gracious, and it was humbling. Do I trust that this will not happen again?

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

Mr Beattie: No, I do not. Therefore, the leadership of our Executive and the Assembly remains in question.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for his statement, but, as Matthew O'Toole outlined, in the context of the public health emergency that is COVID-19, giving the RHI inquiry report due and proper consideration requires the business

to be addressed at a later date. The business had already been tabled, however, so I will address it alongside the clear message that was delivered by you, Mr Speaker, that it is not "business as usual" at the Assembly.

The revelations that emerged in 2016 relating to the non-domestic renewable heat incentive scheme and the actions of certain Ministers, special advisers and some civil servants damaged public trust in these institutions, with legitimate public outrage and anger at reported comments such as "Fill our boots". Action was demanded. Sir Patrick Coghlin, Dame Una O'Brien and Dr Keith MacLean undertook a comprehensive inquiry, the results of which were announced last Friday. I thank the inquiry team for the report. I am hopeful that it will act as a watershed moment for those mentioned in it, who should not walk away thinking that they have been somehow vindicated for past misconduct and that what they did was somehow acceptable.

Nobody mentioned in the report has emerged smelling of roses; instead, there is a long and extensive report cataloguing a series of failures and incompetence, and the failure to follow rules and procedures is reported, with those rules and procedures often being viewed as optional and discretionary. None of those issues is, however, new. Whether it was by the whistle-blowers and investigative journalists who brought many of the matters to light, the inquiry's public hearings, the extensive inquiry documentation published online or Sam McBride's book 'Burned', the public have been made fully aware of the RHI scandal. I am particularly grateful to the whistle-blowers and journalists who brought the issues to light. Much more should be done to ensure that whistle-blowers' allegations are properly considered and investigated, whilst journalists should never have to face a barrage of criticism and attempts to exclude them just because they were reporting awkward allegations. Investigative journalism —

Mr Chambers: Will the Member give way?

Mr Muir: Yes.

Mr Chambers: Does the Member agree that the actions taken against the whistle-blower would certainly not encourage whistle-blowers to come forward in future?

Mr Muir: That is why we need to have a complete —

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Muir: — culture change in the Assembly and in these institutions to embrace whistle-blowers.

Investigative journalism has an important role to play in modern democracy and should be embraced.

In considering the report, it is important to note that the vast majority of civil servants whom we are lucky to have working for us are dedicated, capable individuals, providing us with great service. We should be thankful to them, whilst acknowledging the investigation that has been outlined by the Minister and the need for improvement to ensure a fit-for-purpose Civil Service that is capable of dealing with specialist, complex matters.

Now that the inquiry is over and the report has been published, we must ensure that the report and its recommendations are not allowed to gather dust. It is incumbent on the Executive, the Assembly and the Civil Service to ensure that all of the recommendations are implemented as part of a complete culture change

towards a new culture that ends silo departmental working; upholds openness, transparency and the highest ethics; and understands the importance that effective scrutiny can bring. Scrutiny should not be feared; it should be embraced and encouraged. Those are issues that the Alliance Party has long been campaigning on, and we are glad to see the report providing yet another evidence base for change.

Costing, potentially, up to £14 million, the RHI report will be an expensive waste of money if the recommendations are not implemented. We, therefore, owe it to everyone, including, most importantly, the taxpayer, to make sure that the publication of the report ensures that the mistakes that were made, which resulted in a scandalous misuse of public funds, are never repeated.

Mr Stalford: This is probably the most important discussion that we have had since the restoration of devolution because this issue was the pretext for collapsing the institutions and keeping the people of Northern Ireland without a devolved Government for three years. It is important, therefore, that we have this discussion.

“Corrupt or malicious activity on the part of officials, Ministers or Special Advisers was not the cause of what went wrong with the NI RHI scheme.”

Those are the words of the inquiry chairman, Sir Patrick Coghlin: no evidence of corruption or malice. That discredits the wild and spurious claims that were made by current and former Members in the Assembly as devolution was teetering towards collapse. I reiterate the apology that has been made by the First Minister for mistakes and misjudgments, but they were mistakes and misjudgments, not corruption or maliciousness, as was implied and inferred for the last three years.

The systemic inaccuracies in the Civil Service documents and submissions to the Minister provide grounds for a full and detailed appraisal of how the Civil Service in Northern Ireland functions. This is now a core issue in relation to the governance of this country. Sir Patrick’s report sets out a clear road map of recommendations that will need to be implemented and will require careful planning and sufficient resource to ensure that they are fully implemented. The Assembly will need to have a strong oversight role in ensuring that the recommendations are faithfully and fully implemented, with a clear timetable produced by the Executive for doing so.

The recommendations made by Sir Patrick deal with serious failings on the part of the Northern Ireland Civil Service. Recommendation 3 states:

“Northern Ireland Civil Service teams working on policies ... should be trained and supported so that they have the skills to do the job.”

Recommendation 4 states:

“action is needed to raise and sustain the quality of advice to Ministers.”

Recommendation 8 states:

“A fundamental shift is needed in the approach used within the Northern Ireland Civil Service with regard to recruitment and selection for government jobs.”

Recommendation 9 states:

“Commercial and business awareness amongst policy officials ... must be improved.”

Recommendation 10 states:

“The ... Civil Service should consider what changes are needed to its ... practices on the use of external consultants”.

Recommendation 17 states:

“The ... Civil Service should take steps to draw on best practice from other jurisdictions”.

Recommendation 18 states:

“More generally, we recommend a Northern Ireland government-wide framework for information exchange”.

That is vital. It has been and remains a significant challenge for the Executive. Recommendation 19 states:

“The processes within a Department for approving new expenditure and business cases ... should be thoroughly re-designed”.

On and on it goes. Perhaps the most significant paragraph, however, is finding 313, which states, in relation to the predecessor Department to the Department for the Economy:

“DETI’s internal governance systems failed over four years as a conduit to deliver important information to senior management about the flaws and mounting risks of the NI RHI scheme. The systems were not fit for purpose where RHI was concerned. Responsibility for this must rest with DETI/DfE’s successive Permanent Secretaries/Accounting Officers: Mr Sterling and Dr McCormick.”

There it is in black and white. I want the independent panel that the Minister has announced to examine the behaviour and conduct of senior civil servants. The significant failings identified and the clear blame attached to those named individuals by the inquiry require swift and immediate action.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stalford: I am happy to.

Mr Allister: Is the Member concerned that, by the time the panel tasked with investigating Civil Service failures gets to grips with the issues, some of the key persons might have retired?

Mr Stalford: That is a legitimate concern.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Stalford: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

That is a perfectly legitimate concern, and that is why it is important that we hear a timetable for ensuring that that is not the case from the Executive and the Minister. It is essential not only that action is taken but that action is seen to be taken in a speedy and expeditious manner in order to restore public confidence.

Finally, the First Minister did the right thing in apologising for the mistakes that were made and saying that we, as a party, will learn from those mistakes to ensure that they do not happen in the future. All parties who were party to

the scheme and have responsibilities in that regard should have the courage to do likewise.

Mr McGuigan: It seems a bit surreal to talk about RHI in a context where that financial and governance scandal is piling into insignificance compared with what our community currently and potentially faces with coronavirus. I pay tribute to our healthcare workers for all that they have done, are doing and will be called on to do, and I hope that the decisions taken in the Chamber complement and support them in their work in the time ahead.

The RHI scheme was an unmitigated disaster, and, despite attempts at deflection, as my colleague John O'Dowd said on Friday, it was a scheme and a scandal designed, delivered and, unfortunately, not scrutinised by the DUP. It was a scandal that brought down the Government, and the abundance of evidence throughout the inquiry has vindicated the approach of the late Martin McGuinness. The scheme was fundamentally flawed from its inception and marked by systematic failures at ministerial, political, special adviser and Civil Service levels. It involved the misuse of public funding, and, while I accept that Justice Coghlin said that there was no systematic corruption, it created the opportunity for moral corruption by some who were involved.

Notwithstanding the plethora of faults in the scheme, as Sinn Féin's environment spokesperson, I am ultimately disappointed that a scheme with the worthy aspiration of reducing carbon emissions and dealing with the issue of climate change failed so miserably. Unfortunately, environmentally, this green energy scheme was ineffective in reducing carbon emissions. Before RHI was set up, a report commissioned by DETI showed that such a scheme was less effective in reducing carbon emissions and nearly £200 million more expensive than an alternative scheme. Despite that overwhelming evidence, the DUP Minister responsible, Arlene Foster, went for the less effective and more expensive option of RHI. That error was compounded by removing cost controls and introducing tariffs higher than the cost of the fuel. That meant that the more operators burned, the more profit was made. That flaw led to some operators heating empty sheds with multiple small boilers, abusing a scheme that was supposed to be about reducing carbon emissions and combating global warming.

I note, like my colleagues before me, that lots of the RHI applicants, including lots in my own constituency, are now suffering as a result of this scheme.

1.15 pm

Economically, environmentally and politically it was a disaster. RHI has now become a byword for everything that was wrong in the political system here in the North. The Assembly must now operate differently from what went before with a new kind of politics. Public confidence must be earned and trust rebuilt if the Assembly and Executive are to have any credibility. Never again can we see scandals like RHI happen in this place. As others have said, we need Civil Service reforms and proper checks and balances, and these serious reforms must be looked at. We need open government where decisions, and how they are taken and in whose interest, are laid bare and properly scrutinised, day and daily, with no hiding place for any

risk of malpractice or cronyism. That is what Sinn Féin is committed to do.

I support the recommendations contained in the report, and I support the actions of the Minister.

Mr Middleton: Like others, I very much welcome the publication of the report and want to thank the inquiry for its work over its duration. Our party leader has apologised personally and corporately for the mistakes made over the course of the RHI scheme. There are many others, individuals and parties, who also need to take their responsibility. It is clear that there are lessons to be learned. We would all do well by studying the report in detail and learning lessons from its findings.

Mr Speaker, I believe that it is important to reiterate a significant element of the conclusion of the inquiry's report. It states that:

“Corrupt or malicious activity on the part of officials, Ministers or Special Advisers was not the cause of what went wrong with the NI RHI scheme ... Rather, the vast majority of what went wrong was due to an accumulation and compounding of errors and omissions over time and a failure of attention, on the part of all those involved in their differing roles, to identify the existence, significance or implications of those errors and omissions.”

The report details the failures and missed opportunities of all involved in the scheme. It is clear that there is no evidence of corruption or malice. Therefore, the shameful claims and accusations made by some other political parties have been exposed for exactly what they are.

The report also details real systemic issues within the Civil Service. There were systemic inaccuracies in Civil Service documents and submissions to the Minister. I believe that this is one of the core issues that will need to be addressed. Given the seriousness and importance of such documents coming to a Minister, this cannot be repeated. However, the criticisms were not focused solely on documents: there were criticisms about misleading ministerial advice, skills mismatches between roles and staff, weakness in the continuity of staff and a lack of commercial awareness by officials. There is clearly a need for reform, and there is a string of recommendations to deal with the serious failings on the part of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, which cover a wide range of areas such as training, quality of advice, recruitment and selection for Government jobs, and expenditure processes to name a few.

There are many areas where reform is needed, which leads us to the belief that the conclusions of the inquiry report points to a strong case for a full appraisal of the functions of the Northern Ireland Civil Service. We must learn the lessons and reform must happen. The 44 recommendations in the report should be implemented to ensure that we have a robust process and procedure in place. That will require, of course, a total attitude and cultural change.

Mr Speaker, RHI has shone a spotlight on transparency and accountability. One area specifically is about special adviser appointments, their influence and discipline. We recognise that the breaches, in spirit, of previous codes by several parties, not just one, were not acceptable and were down to complacency and convenience rather

than corruption. We welcome the revisions made to the code in January by the Finance Minister and approved by the Executive, which pre-empted many of the report's recommendations, but further work can, and should, be done in light of the panel's recommendations. The Executive, and in particular the Department of Finance, should take a lead in this work.

I believe that the report makes a positive statement about the need for greater collective responsibility between Departments and Ministers in the future to avoid making similar mistakes to RHI. On the issue of collective responsibility, lessons must be learned. Finding 122 is an example of that:

"The Inquiry considers that the remarks of DARD Minister O'Neill ... that it was not for her to scrutinise the work of another Minister, do not seem to deal with the need for basic departmental cooperation".

The wash-our-hands attitude of Sinn Féin towards this period of government is decisively criticised by the inquiry. That party should reflect, as much as anyone else, and that attitude must change.

I will stick with the area of interventions, and it is clear that, as other Members stated, some individuals sought consent from their bosses in Dublin. That, too, is very much not acceptable. Sinn Féin Ministers must get away from the practice of seeking permission from the wider republican movement.

The inquiry decisively demonstrated that corruption or malice, whether for personal gain or that of others, was not the cause of the failure of RHI. We will work to regain public trust, and we accept the findings in full.

Dr Archibald: I, too, welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. I welcome the long-awaited publication of the report.

I want to cover a couple of things in my contribution: first, the role of Committees in scrutinising departmental policy and the actions of Ministers; and, secondly, the effectiveness of RHI in achieving its intended aims.

The role of Statutory Committees is laid out in the Good Friday Agreement:

"The Committees will have a scrutiny, policy development and consultation role with respect to the Department with which each is associated, and will have a role in initiation of legislation."

They have the power to:

"call for persons and papers ... consider and advise on matters brought to the Committee by its Minister".

The RHI inquiry report states that the ETI Committee:

"whose role ... included independent scrutiny of DETI, did not operate as an effective check against departmental error in the case of the RHI scheme. Aside from limitations inherent in its role, reasons for this included its own limited resources and its dependence on the Department for information and analysis to analyse to allow it to perform its challenge function robustly".

While the inquiry found that the ETI Committee was not provided with sufficient or adequate information — in fact,

it was provided with incomplete and inaccurate information — to permit it to discharge its scrutiny function, it also found that the Committee accepted the assurances of the Department on concerns that it raised, and it did not follow up or check that DETI was delivering what had been promised. This is a clear warning signal to all of us, given our scrutiny function in Committees and our duty to act on behalf of those we represent. We are supposed to ask the difficult questions, demand the information and ask again until we are clear and satisfied that the policy is good, that public funds are being properly spent and that outcomes to better citizens' lives will be delivered.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. She hit a note today that no one else did. Has she concerns that, even on this day, lessons have not been learnt in the Departments?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Member for his intervention. I will continue with what I was going to say, which is that we need to learn the lessons. The report recommends that the:

"Assembly should consider what steps are needed to strengthen its scrutiny role, particularly as conducted by Assembly Committees, in the light of lessons from the RHI. While it will be for the Assembly itself to decide, the Inquiry recommends that such a consideration might include significantly increasing the resources available to statutory committees and, generally, identifying what steps are needed to improve the effective scrutiny of Departments and their initiatives".

It is incumbent on us to heed this advice, and a subcommittee, which the Finance Minister will chair, is being set up to consider the report. I am sure that it will consider all the recommendations, but it is important that Committees can perform their role.

RHI was designed to increase the proportion of heat generated from renewable sources. Moving to renewable technology and away from fossil fuels should ensure a reduction in carbon dioxide emissions. However, evidence now shows that RHI for biomass technology may be not only ineffective in lowering carbon emissions but counterproductive. The carbon-neutral credentials of the wood pellets subsidised by RHI are now strongly contested in the scientific community. When wood is burned, it releases carbon into the atmosphere. The precise level of carbon dioxide emissions depends on a number of factors, including the efficiency of the boiler. According to one estimate, burning wood releases four times more carbon than natural gas and one and a half times more than coal. Despite that, wood is classified and accounted for by many official bodies as carbon-neutral. That is on the basis that the carbon released when wood is burned is equivalent to the carbon absorbed by the tree as it grew. Therefore, it is claimed, the two cancel each other out. It is also assumed that the trees that are cut down are to be replaced.

If we are going to spend public money on long-term programmes and schemes, we must ensure that they can be reviewed and adapted as evidence informs us. That is another important lesson from this whole affair. It is vital that we learn the lessons from the disastrous RHI scheme. We must implement the recommendations. As the Minister said, real positive change and reform is needed to rebuild public trust and confidence in these institutions.

Mr Frew: I welcome the statement from the First Minister, my party leader, in the House. We should consider these issues and how people were treated over the past number of years with a human face. I take this opportunity to thank the Right Honourable Sir Patrick Coghlin for his comprehensive inquiry and report into his findings.

When the report was published, the people who were most disappointed were the media, because there was no evidence of corruption and malice. I am glad that there was no such evidence. There is certainly evidence of wrongdoing and systemic failures across the board, but none of corruption or malice.

Throughout the reporting of the inquiry, there was much sensationalism. That led to recipients of the RHI scheme being treated as villains, criminals and fraudsters. A lot of those recipients are still suffering. That scheme needs to be fixed; those people need relief. One of the things that must come out of the inquiry is that we fix the RHI scheme for the duration that it has still to run so that people's welfare does not suffer and businesses do not crash.

Ms Sugden: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: Yes, I will.

Ms Sugden: Will the Member acknowledge that the RHI scheme was always intended to make money for farmers to help them to float their business, given that agriculture is one of the biggest industries in Northern Ireland, and that the consequences of farmers potentially losing their livelihood could have wider consequences for all of the Northern Ireland economy? Simply to remove the RHI scheme without putting in any replacement scheme could have devastating consequences for not only farmers but the whole economy.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Frew: I thank Claire Sugden for her intervention. She is absolutely right; she is spot on. That is something that the House must put its mind to in order to resolve this issue.

It is clear that there have been systemic failures across every aspect of government here. Along with fixing the RHI scheme, as we have talked about, a full appraisal and root-and-branch reform of the Northern Ireland Civil Service is now required, along with a clear determination of a healthier relationship between the Executive, the Civil Service, the scrutiny Committees and the Assembly itself. We are the people; we speak for the people.

The Chairperson of the Economy Committee has raised the issue of the scrutiny Committees. Finding 84 of the inquiry report states:

"In relation to briefings linked to the NI RHI SL1, the ETI Committee was provided by DETI Energy Division officials with incomplete and inaccurate information about the RHI scheme; among other omissions, information was not included about risks that DETI had been made aware of by Ofgem."

Finding 86 states:

"The Inquiry finds that the ETI Committee was not provided with sufficient/adequate information to permit the ETI Committee to effectively discharge its scrutiny function."

If we want to ensure that we have a robust, transparent and accountable form of government, it is vital that the scrutiny Committees do their job well.

1.30 pm

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. He will be aware of chapter 39 of the report. In December 2016, one of the main allegations that was being put to our party was that advisers or, indeed, the Minister had deliberately sought to keep the RHI scheme open. Would the Member like to put on record that Sir Patrick Coghlin found that there was not one shred of evidence to justify that claim?

Mr Frew: Yes.

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

Mr Frew: I am happy to put that on the record. I agree with him.

I will mention another issue, because there may well be more RHI-type failures in the system. I take you back to the summer of 2015 when the then Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment wished to push through a Northern Ireland renewable obligations certificate (ROC) scheme. It brought the scheme to the Committee three or four times. I, along with a number of other Committee members, blocked it. That was the right thing to do, but, at the time, DETI's energy branch misled the Committee. There should also be an investigation into that, because it would have been an even bigger disaster for this country if a Northern Ireland ROC had been pushed through. Businesses would have gone to the wall because their energy bills would have gone sky-high. That has never really been brought to the surface, but it should be. I hope that the root-and-branch review of the Civil Service, Departments and their staff will result in all those things coming out in the wash and that we can get a transparent system in which we can all work together.

We have to be mindful of the fact that a scrutiny Committee will work adequately only if its members take their role as scrutinisers seriously.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to conclude his remarks.

Mr Frew: We need to know our brief and learn the detail.

Ms Armstrong: After hearing what has been going on in here, the speech that I was going to make has changed. First, the criteria for the panel that will scrutinise Ministers have not been published. Who will be on the panel? Are we going to have a repeat of before? If it is your friends who are looking at you and examining what you are doing, you will not get a very clear examination. We need to see very clearly and soon exactly what the criteria for appointing the panel will be.

Before I came to the Assembly in 2016, I managed a charity. When there were problems in that organisation, the buck stopped with me. Problems may have arisen and mistakes may have been made along the way, but that was my fault. It was not just about my staff. I have seen in the report that things need to be changed in the Civil Service. There are also things that need to be changed in this House.

I want to consider something else that has not been dealt with at this stage. Paul Frew mentioned it and Philip McGuigan alluded to it: the human face of the disaster. I take a moment to give you some information from the Renewable Heat Association. It is one of its pieces, and I will read it to you:

“Imagine you have been a respectable, hard-working chicken farmer for the past twenty-five years.

Imagine the government encouraged you to partake in a renewable energy scheme which was ‘sold’ to you as guaranteed, reliable, long-term, certain and offering a good return on your investment ...

Imagine that you decided to invest your savings and seek out loans in order to join this government backed scheme.

Imagine the government subsequently had to admit that this ‘guaranteed’ scheme had been mismanaged through their own incompetence and ignorance.

Imagine if the same government then insinuated that you were in the wrong. To deflect from their own failings they decided to infer that you were abusing the scheme by publishing your name in the newspapers, listed your rebate payments for five years — and added the helpful note that you hadn’t done anything wrong. Wink-wink.

Imagine they revealed the income you had received via the scheme, but neglected to reveal the massive investment and continued running costs borne by you and hadn’t considered that you pay tax on that same rebate.

Imagine thinking that your family, friends, neighbours, church, pub and business acquaintances now looked at you as some type of fraudster involved in some type of dishonest dealings.

Imagine if it led to sleepless nights, constant worry, unfounded shame, anxiety, regular visits to the GP and the long-term use of anti-depressants; all because you decided to partake in a scheme which was endorsed by the government.

Imagine if, due to the failings of the government, it was decided that your guaranteed returns would be decimated — not once, but twice — on the advice of the Department that had created your nightmare. You would no longer receive your guaranteed payments, but instead, would receive barely enough to cover the additional electricity costs of running the system.

Imagine the Department, in calculating your rebate, used a different formula and different statistics to those used by scheme administrators elsewhere in the UK or, next door in the Republic of Ireland.

Imagine the anxiety you have, knowing that you will have to replace this vastly expensive, but no longer cost effective system with a Gas system that will pollute the atmosphere.

Imagine having to work out where this money is going to be found.”

Green projects are not the problem. The workings that were behind RHI were the right thing to do. The problem was that the jot and tittle was missed and people were left in dire circumstances. Yes, there were problems, but I do not want to stand up here and say that they were the fault of the DUP and Sinn Féin. To be honest, I do not want to hear them say that either. I want to look at the recommendations and for us to move forward with a better Government from that. There is no point in ripping lumps out of the Civil Service when the manager did not know what they were doing.

Ms S Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Ms Armstrong: I certainly will.

Ms S Bradley: I note that the motion asks us to note the report. That is worthy of doing, but is it not a live demonstration that we are actually repeating RHI now with COVID-19? Should all resource, time and energy in the House not be used to try to tackle that problem? Outside the House we hear the screaming voices of health workers, schools and others who are looking for leadership. I think that I am sitting in a parallel universe here.

Mr Speaker: The Member is departing from the subject matter. Ms Armstrong, you have an extra minute.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I agree that the health catastrophe that we face at present should be discussed in the House, but RHI also needs to be discussed.

Mr Stalford: I am very grateful to the Member for giving way. Does she agree that if, having had the report published on Friday, the House did not consider it on Monday, other parties would be screaming, “Government cover-up”, and claiming that we were trying to prevent scrutiny of the report’s content?

Ms Armstrong: I actually agree with the Member. However, I recognise that people out there did not know whether to send their children to school today.

There is a lot for us to learn from the RHI report. We need to be able to scrutinise better, but we also need to understand that there are human beings who have had their businesses all but ruined as an outcome of the scheme.

I absolutely welcome Mrs Foster’s emotional speech. She has been vilified. However, I must say again that when the manager does not know what they are doing, that is the outcome. It is time for us to do better. Let us see what the criteria are for the panel. Let us see what happens in the subcommittee that is brought forward. Let us do this better. Let us stop blaming each other and get on with good government.

Mr Kearney: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the renewable heat incentive scheme and the subsequent public inquiry. I want to place on record my and my party’s thanks to the chairman of the inquiry panel, Patrick Coghlin, and his team for fulfilling the terms of reference that were set for them.

The scheme’s purpose was to provide a financial incentive for businesses to move away from non-renewable sources of energy. It was to assist in ensuring compliance with the obligations that were imposed by European Union law. However, it was an utter failure. Tubaiste a bhí ann.

The fact that no cost controls were put in place and warnings were ignored led to the biggest financial and political scandal that the Assembly has ever faced. I can attest to that as result of my own participation in the Public Accounts Committee in autumn 2016. It involved totally unacceptable and unethical behaviour, with the Government collapsing over the head of it. Agus is mar gheall air sin a cuireadh cúrsaí airgeadais s'againne faoi bhrú. It led to the complete erosion of public trust and confidence in politics and in the political institutions. Agus ní ceart go mbeadh a leithéid ann arís — a choíche. Never again must that be allowed to happen. No one ever believed that it would take three years to get functioning government, the Assembly and the other institutions of the Good Friday Agreement back together again. Ach bíg cinnte de seo. Sinn Féin and the other political parties in the Executive are now there under new terms and conditions. Let us be very clear about that. Tháinig Sinn Féin isteach sa Choiste Feidhmiúcháin arís a fhad is go mbeidh sé ag feidmiú ar bhonn comhionannais, ionracais agus measa. Sinn Féin has re-entered the Executive on the basis of equality, integrity and respect. The arrogance that was displayed by the DUP previously will not be tolerated now, either towards Sinn Féin representatives in this institution or outside it, or against those whom we represent.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kearney: Yes, of course.

Mr Beggs: The Member talks about integrity and respect. Does he agree that his Chief Whip needs to look very closely at what he is saying and encouraging others to do and say, so that there can be integrity and respect for everyone?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Kearney: I thank the Member for the question. I will respond in Irish and then translate for him. Táimid réidh leis an díspeagadh agus leis an dímheas. We expect a new standard from all Members in the Assembly in how we conduct our business and articulate our politics and our vision for going forward.

The 'New Decade, New Approach' document removed the obstacles to power-sharing and began a new set of relationships at political, community and civic levels. We must succeed, Members; failure cannot and must not be an option. We will all be accountable for the stewardship of public funds. We must all, equally, discharge our duties in good faith. We must all, each and every single one of us, serve all of the people equally.

If people cannot live up to these newly defined norms, they should not be in this place. I want an Assembly that operates differently from what went before and to usher in a new kind of politics. Public confidence must be earned and trust rebuilt for the Assembly and the Executive in order for them and all of our other political institutions to have sustainable credibility. That also extends towards the equality, mutual respect and all-Ireland approaches enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement, to ensure that they are embraced and that we deliver on the promises of 1998 for a new generation of citizens and young people in our society.

We now have a basis on which to move forward in building a fair society and good government. I want to work with

ministerial colleagues to cooperate in every way possible to ensure that we rebuild public trust and confidence in, and engagement with, the Assembly and its Executive. Our mission, Members, must be to deliver on health, education and jobs for everyone across this entire community, regardless of which section of the community they come from.

Whatever the Civil Service's role has been in contributing to the RHI debacle, no one doubts that it has a critical role in ensuring that there is never a repeat of the same again. We will institute the necessary reforms across the board in order to get things done, but also to get things right in the new Administration, and that must extend to the operation and culture of the Civil Service. We need open government and maximum transparency and accountability. The Minister of Finance has already brought reforms to the Civil Service for agreement by the Executive.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close, please.

Mr Kearney: In conclusion, tá sé in am dúinn malairt slí agus ré úr a chruthú ar leas an phobail. Let this be a turning point, Members, for the Assembly and the Executive as we turn to the serious business of getting more work done —

Mr Speaker: The Member must finish his remarks.

Mr Kearney: — and particularly now, how we as a society face the new challenges before us and, in particular, with regard to tackling our global health crisis.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member resume his seat, please?

Mr Kearney: Mile buíochas duit, a Cheann Comhairle.

Ms Bailey: I would be surprised if any one of us here has been able to give due time and attention to this report over the weekend as we have been dealing with the emerging COVID-19 pandemic and the fear, panic and uncertainty that is being created.

The RHI scheme was a scandal that left us with no Executive for three and a half years and, in that void, brought so many of our vulnerable people to the brink.

There is a general agreement that the report gives us little more than we had already learned through the inquiry. It is disappointing that, when the inquiry was signed off, it was not done with the explicit intent to implement all recommendations. We have to wait and see what it leads to, other than another inquiry with another report.

1.45 pm

I am still contacted by constituents who are face financial disaster. They have been left in limbo to this day by the mismanagement and humiliation so clearly outlined by Ms Armstrong. It still needs to be addressed. RHI has not only damaged the reputation of this institution; it has damaged the reputation of renewable energy and renewable energy schemes when we so desperately need more of them to urgently address the climate emergency that we are in the midst of.

We can call for the full implementation of all recommendations, but only time will tell if that will be done. The public will judge us for it, and judge us they do. People know that little has changed with the functioning of this 'New Decade, New Approach' Executive. They watch

as the system that created this compounding of errors, with unacceptable behaviour by some officials, Ministers and special advisers, is now charged with navigating us through a dangerous pandemic. We have the opportunity to do right and to prove ourselves able and willing to work together and not apart. Let us not mess up again.

Mr Allister: What a telling commentary on what passed for government in the House that a report such as this, which pulls its punches in so many ways, nonetheless was driven to the basic recommendation that a Minister should always read the legislation that they bring to the House. How fundamental is that? That a Lord Justice of Appeal and two colleagues have to make such a recommendation is a damning indictment of what passed for government in the House. That they have to add to it the fact that minutes should be kept of meetings just tells us what a quagmire we were in in the governance in this place. The fact that the first recommendation arises from the actions of a Minister who is now the First Minister brings home to us just how dire things have been.

Of course, it did not all end with the DUP. One of the most startling revelations in the report is how the Finance Minister of the time, Mr Ó Muilleoir, conducted himself. When it came to looking at a business case from the Department for the Economy about the future of RHI, he was not able to make a decision — would not make a decision — until he had not just consulted but had got the consent of a shadowy figure, Mr Ted Howell. He sent him an email: “Would you be content? Would you, Mr Howell, be content if I signed off the business plan on Wednesday?”. That is how government was being conducted in this place. Is that still how it is being conducted? Does that explain the transformation from last Thursday, when Michelle O’Neill supported the First Minister, to Friday morning, when she repudiated what had been decided about schools? Was there another communication with another shadowy figure? Has anything changed? I listened today to the Finance Minister telling us, “Oh, we will have wonderful codes and new directions and new statements”. I have read such as have been published already. I do not see a word in what has been published by the current Finance Minister that would stop another Ó Muilleoir/Howell experience. Nothing in that rules it out. Are we really moving forward to change at all?

Then we consider other Ministers who were in office. We had Simon Hamilton, the Minister for the Economy, colluding with spads to leak emails to take the heat off his party. Then we had a Minister, Mr Bell: obviously, the panel barely believed a word that he said. Likewise with the DUP chief spad, Timothy Johnston. The panel did not find him credible on key issues. That is a reflection of the state of misgovernment that we are in. A report that pulls its punches, no doubt with some deference to the delicacy of these institutions, on all these matters cannot, of course, avoid those issues. The question going forward is this: will the House avoid them, or will it face up to them?

As already mentioned, there is one group of people we need to consider most today: the innocent victims of RHI, the farmers who put faith in Mrs Foster’s letter to the banks. They dug themselves into debt believing that the proposals were grandfathered, only to have the rug pulled from under them and to be given tariffs that are lower than the tariffs anywhere else in these islands.

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

Mr Allister: It is those farmers who now, dear help them, have to look to the House to remedy that debacle. Let us hope that we do.

Mr Carroll: Three years ago, most people were unfamiliar with the details of the RHI scheme, but we quickly realised that it was synonymous with cronyism. It was a slush fund whereby elements of the business community were invited to burn taxpayers’ money for profit. It is disappointing that, after three years and some £14 million spent, the report seems to have pulled its punches when it comes to laying the blame on the politicians in the Chamber and on Arlene Foster in particular. This is deeper than how the First Minister or her spads operated: the whole debacle exposes the cavalier attitude towards public spending that governs this place, as well as the close relationships with big businesses and corporations.

How many times have working people been told to tighten their belt? How often were healthcare workers told that pay parity could not be implemented because of funding limits? All the while, a few were encouraged to burn public money. RHI clearly illustrated the favoured approach that some in the Chamber offer to the likes of Moy Park, a hugely profitable company. One official even had the gall to admit about Moy Park that smaller firms were “not getting the same chance” — clear as day. Indeed, after getting a tip-off that the scheme was to close, private companies started to stockpile RHI boilers because the scheme was such a financial gold mine. Some shipped boilers in from Austria because they had vanished locally, and there were new applications aplenty.

The decision to keep the scheme open for a further two weeks saw a total of £91 million spent. Surely, that was one of the most expensive fortnights on this hill. Let us not forget that the current Finance Minister and the previous Finance Minister both publicly claimed credit for keeping the scheme open at massive cost to the taxpayer. Arlene Foster and her party, of course, were not the only ones responsible, as the inquiry exposed. Sinn Féin MLAs played their role in promoting and keeping the scheme open long after the damaging impact was known.

That brings me to the report itself. In my view, it wrongly rejects what Sam McBride deems “a culture of corruption” at Stormont. Whatever the intent of Patrick Coghlin, essentially, the conclusions and recommendations of the report whitewash the role of the Stormont elite in signing off on and lobbying to retain the scheme, which, by any standard, was an abuse of power and a colossal waste of public money at a time when many people were suffering. The report points to a multiplicity of errors and omissions as if they were random mistakes and not a clear pattern from day one that illustrated the abuse of power, patronage and the courting of big businesses by the DUP. What is certain is that the scheme was designed to financially benefit people who did not need it, and that has been the problem with Stormont for far too long. Policies have been designed and decisions made to benefit the most well off.

RHI was operating without a whimper whilst people were sent to food banks because welfare reform was leaving them with nothing to put on the table. That is what the scandal was about: the double standards and hypocrisy at the heart of the Executive. There appears to be no criminal charges or jail time for Arlene Foster, despite raking up a bill of £600 million to £700 million of public money. Others face jail time for not paying TV licences or for rent or

debt difficulties. If a public sector worker were found to be wasting a fraction of the money involved in this, they would lose their job. No doubt, the DUP would be banging the table, calling for tougher sentencing, yet Arlene Foster remains. It seems that their tough stance on law, order and wrongdoing does not apply to their party leader.

You should do the right thing, First Minister: hang your head and resign. Over the coming weeks, many will lose their income due to the coronavirus. What measures have the Executive put in place to protect them? Nowhere near enough to cover the costs of rent or bills. Those who, we were told, would not, any circumstances, be returned to office because of their role in RHI will feel no impact whatever. Lots of people, First Minister, have no faith in you in your current position, given what you were directly involved in. I join them today and call for you to step aside. You are in no position to lead through the public health crisis that the coronavirus presents to us. Step aside, and let someone else do the job.

Mr Speaker: As Question Time starts at 2.00 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until then. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Claire Sugden.

The debate stood suspended.

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Health

COVID-19: Cross-border Coordination

1. **Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Health to outline how his Department is working with the Department of Health in Dublin in response to COVID-19. (AQO 353/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. On Saturday 14 March, the First Minister, the deputy First Minister, my permanent secretary, the Chief Medical Officer and I met the Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar; the Minister for Health, Simon Harris; the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Simon Coveney; and the Chief Medical Officer, Dr Tony Holohan. The purpose of our meeting was to ensure that actions and messages in our two jurisdictions are coordinated as effectively as possible as we move into the next phase of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

My Department and the Public Health Agency (PHA) have been working with their counterparts in the Republic as well as with those in the rest of the UK since the emergence of COVID-19. The two Chief Medical Officers and the Deputy Chief Medical Officers are in frequent contact, and the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) and the Health Service Executive (HSE) are looking at areas of further cooperation.

Ms Anderson: Minister, I am sure that you are aware that there are lots of concerns across the North. There are concerns in my constituency and, I would say, every other constituency about the British Government's decision to test only the most seriously ill. My phone has been inundated with calls, as I am sure has been the case for other MLAs over the weekend. Will you clearly outline the criteria for providing testing for coronavirus for people in the North of Ireland?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. The next listed question is about the numbers tested, so I will keep that information until then, but we are working to the national advice. Owing to constraints on lab capacity, locally and nationally, testing is now being prioritised for a number of groups. The current order for priority testing during periods of significant demand is, first, a patient requiring critical care for the management of pneumonia, acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS), influenza or an influenza-like illness (ILI); and, secondly, a patient with an alternative indication of severe illness, such as severe pneumonia or ARDS. The next group is all other patients who require admission to hospital for the management of pneumonia, ARDS or an ILI. A further group is the cluster of disease in residential or care settings; for example, long-term care facilities and prisons. Symptomatic healthcare workers will be tested as well.

That is under active review, nationally and locally. Additional capability is being urgently worked up in the lab system, and that will ease some of the demand pressures on lab services. It is not that we have reduced testing but

that we are now prioritising the testing capability that we have available, and we are increasing that capability.

Mr Lyttle: What work is under way to ensure that health and social care trusts continue to deliver therapies for children with additional needs during school closures?

Mr Swann: One of the things that I am clear about is that the health service will not stop because of COVID-19. Our core work continues. As I said in the statement that I put out on Friday, we will look at reducing and scaling back a number of procedures and elective-care surgeries. The longer that this goes on — I need to be honest and frank with every Member in the House — the more that that core service will reduce, as we make how we tackle COVID-19 our priority. The virus will be with us for a period. What we are doing now, by reducing elective-care surgeries and other procedures, will allow us to re-profile our hospitals and wards and to train up our health service workers so that, when we get to the stage at which dedicated facilities and highly trained staff are needed, we are well placed to provide that.

Before the end of this week, I intend to make public the surge plans, which come under the designation of the piece of work that is being taken forward, so that everybody will realise that when the local hospital, a constituent or a relative rings and says, “My procedure has been cancelled”, that is to allow us to re-profile the health service to be able to meet the demand when it comes.

Mr Allister: The Minister referred to the North/South Ministerial Council get-together on Saturday. Before that, the Northern Ireland Executive had settled their view on medical advice, for example, about school closures. How helpful is it, at events such as that, if the deputy First Minister then repudiates the policy set by the Executive at a time when Northern Ireland is seeking, in the interests of all its people, to have rational discussions with its neighbour?

Mr Swann: I understand the Member’s point, but what I say, to everyone in this House and to anybody listening to or watching this, is this: folks, this is not the time for politics, North/South or east-west. This is a time when individuals from outside this House are looking to us for collective leadership.

The Executive met this morning and discussed in great detail where we are, where we are going as an Executive and how we tackle COVID-19. Everybody listening to this knows there are differences, but one thing that I want to assure anybody listening to or watching this is that I, as Health Minister, have one focus only, and that is to make sure that our National Health Service is fit to tackle COVID-19/coronavirus when it comes and when it gets to a stage where people truly realise what a pandemic is coming down the road at us.

Ms Bailey: I am mindful of the recent strike action that was taken by nurses to stress to us that they were working in unsafe conditions. Is the Minister content that we and our health service are capable of dealing with the fallout if Boris Johnson’s Government’s plan for herd immunity goes ahead?

Mr Swann: I will be clear to the Member: the herd immunity language, or the herd immunity principle or precept, is not supported or endorsed by my Department or by me, as Health Minister. We will work through the

phases that were clearly laid out in the COVID-19 action plan at the start. We worked strenuously to make sure that we were fit for purpose during the containment phase, and we have now moved into the delay phase. I can assure the Member that herd immunity is not a tool that I will utilise, in Northern Ireland, as a way to counteract this virus.

Ms McLaughlin: Minister, I realise the pressure that you and your Department are under, and I commend you for your work, given the seriousness of this situation.

Does the Minister accept that we share an all-island risk and, therefore, the assessment of the risk and the announcement of shifts and stages of that risk should be done in unison? This is not a North/South or east-west matter; we need to work collectively to minimise the risks to all our citizens.

Mr Swann: I can assure the Member that there is no reticence on my part about what we need to do to tackle COVID-19/coronavirus, in Northern Ireland. She mentioned the pressures on me, but those pressures are nothing in comparison with the pressures that are being put on our front-line health services and our front-line health workers, be that our nurses, our doctors, our GPs or our pharmacists.

I want to take this opportunity to say to people that, as you approach your doctor, your pharmacist or that front-line health worker — no matter where they are in our system — folks, give them patience and give them space to allow them to adapt to the ever-changing situation that we are in. The pressures that I am under do not reflect anything like the pressures that they are under, as professionals who want to do their best for our population and for the people who are presenting to them. I ask people to please be patient, please give these health professionals the respect that they deserve and give them a bit of space to allow them to make the adaptations and the changes that we need to make while we re-profile our health service to tackle COVID-19/ coronavirus.

Mr Speaker: Questions 7 and 12 for oral answer have been withdrawn.

COVID-19: Testing

2. **Mr Beattie** asked the Minister of Health for an update on the number of people tested for COVID-19. (AQO 354/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. Mr Speaker, normally questions of a like-minded subject would be grouped, but I did not do that with questions 1 and 2 because I want to give as many Members as possible an opportunity to ask a supplementary question.

As of 2.00 pm today, 1,171 individuals have been tested for COVID-19 in Northern Ireland, and there have been 52 confirmed positive cases. That is an increase of seven new positive cases from yesterday. For Members’ information, prior to 13 March, the total published tests included only those individuals who met the case definition — those who were connected to travel and who met the clinical criteria. However, I would like to assure the House that, during this time, wider testing was also being conducted across all trusts in Northern Ireland. So, for absolute clarity, those individuals are now included in the overall testing results. That would explain why we have seen an approximate jump of 400 tests overnight. We have now expanded the

definition of those tests that we actually declare, rather than just those tests that met the case definition.

Mr Beattie: I thank the Minister for his answer and I want to go on record to thank the Minister, his staff, scientists and healthcare professionals for all that they are doing in combating COVID-19 on our behalf. I will condemn, all day long, anyone who refers to them as “a shire of bastards”.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Beattie: Will the Minister give his assessment of the resilience of the local health service in facing what many agree will be the biggest health emergency in generations?

Mr Swann: While this situation is serious, I can advise Members that detailed plans are in place in the event of an outbreak spreading across the UK and the Republic of Ireland with sustained community transmission. Our health service is used to managing infections, and we are prepared. Health systems across the globe are coming under extreme and increasing pressure as this virus spreads. Ours will be no different, and it is bound to take its toll. As I have said, normal business within health and social care may not be possible. Some activities will be scaled back. We had been planning for the first positive case in Northern Ireland and we had robust infection control in place. My Department has established a new directorate for surge planning, as I mentioned earlier. The directorate will work with surge planners in the health and social care system to ensure preparedness across the sector in response to COVID-19. We all, however, have a part to play in helping the health service to cope with this disease by ensuring that we follow Public Health Agency advice and by practising good personal hygiene, which is very effective in preventing the spread of this virus.

Mrs Cameron: I commend the Minister and the Department of Health on dealing with the serious pressure that they are under at this time. We fully appreciate the time that you are giving to address these questions. Of course, I cannot go past all the health workers and professionals involved in helping us to deal with this very serious crisis.

Will the Minister give the House details of where our health professionals can get the most up-to-date information and guidance on how they should be behaving with regard to COVID-19 on a daily basis?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for what will be a very important piece of information. While we have been working through this, our Public Health Agency, working alongside the Health and Social Care Board, has been providing updated pieces of guidance and information, frequently asked questions and procedures to a number of health professionals and sectors. Those are available on the Public Health Agency’s website and also on the Health and Social Care Board’s website. I will say, to the health professionals and anybody else out there, that the reason why we are not sending those out in hard copy, posting them out or giving them as something that people can hold in their hand is that this situation changes so frequently and so often. I ask that those working in the health care system look at that up-to-date online advice, because this situation changes hour by hour, if not day by day.

Ms Bradshaw: I thank the Minister for his work over the last week and beyond. I want to come back to an issue that you talked about around symptomatic healthcare

workers. I was contacted by a constituent who is now self-isolating. He is very concerned about the number of healthcare workers that he came into contact with before his symptoms manifested themselves. As you know, front-line healthcare workers are given the flu vaccine to protect themselves, their colleagues and their patients. In the absence of a vaccine, do you think it would be beneficial that our front-line staff be tested, as a matter of course, at this stage in the pandemic?

2.15 pm

Mr Swann: As I said in an answer earlier, currently we do not have the capacity to provide that screening testing, which, I think, is what the Member refers to, to every member of our health and social care system. However, as I said, our Health and Social Care Board is one of the cohorts that we look at; if any member thinks that they have symptoms of COVID-19, we will make sure that they get a test as appropriate. The last thing that I can afford is for workers in our healthcare system to fall victim to COVID-19. If the Member has a specific name and wants to give me it offline, I will follow it up to see what trust they are in and what provision can be made to get them tested.

Ms Sheerin: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. Do we have an accurate figure for the number of people who are self-isolating but are yet to be tested?

Mr Swann: We do not, because, in the change of guidance that we provided, we encouraged people who feel that they have COVID-19-like symptoms to isolate themselves for seven days. We have no central database as to who is self-isolating at this minute in time. However, to those who are doing it, I say thank you. By taking that responsible first step, they are making sure that a member of their family or of the community or a loved one is not being put at risk by them giving them COVID-19 — if they have it. A number of people who are self-isolating at this minute in time may have symptoms that turn out to be flu or cold, but we cannot take that risk. If anybody presents with symptoms of coronavirus, self-isolation for seven days is what is being advised at this minute in time. If their condition worsens, they should certainly contact their GP and present, but, at this minute in time, we do not keep a central register. I am truly grateful to those who are taking the decision to start the social-isolation measures that we will have to adopt very soon.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Minister, and I commend him on his leadership thus far on what is a very serious and worrying issue for many. I also commend our front-line staff for the great work that they are doing and their families for supporting them in going out there very bravely to support each of us in their role of saving lives.

Minister, my question is focused on life-saving equipment, such as ventilators and hospital beds. Will you provide an insight to the House on the numbers of each of those in each trust area, please?

Mr Swann: The Member will forgive me if I do not have the numbers by trust area. I am surprised that he has not put that down as a question for written answer; he has asked quite a number along those lines. There has been a significant increase of attention on the issue mechanical ventilators following media reports in recent weeks. There are 88 adult ICU beds in Northern Ireland. The critical care network has plans to expand that to 126 adult beds if

necessary. There are 139 mechanical ventilators available across Northern Ireland health and social care trusts. To cope with the possible increase in beds, an extra 40 have been ordered — 30 adult units and 10 paediatric units — which will bring the total to 179 by the end of this month.

In regard to beds, we are, as I said, profiling across the National Health Service to ensure that there are cohorts in wards and different hospitals. When it comes to ventilation, we will come to a point, because we have turned down elective surgeries, where we will not use operating theatres, so we will be able to use those ventilation points and ventilators to ventilate patients. That is the detail of plan that we are making for when we get to that stage; we are planning for it now. Be no under no illusion about what is coming down the road at us.

Multi-disciplinary Teams

3. **Ms Dolan** asked the Minister of Health to outline the criteria used in prioritising local areas for the roll-out of multi-disciplinary teams. (AQO 355/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. The initial areas of implementation of the primary-care multidisciplinary team (MDT) model were selected through a competitive process. All health and social care trusts were invited to apply in partnership with their local GP federations, with seven applications subsequently being received from across Northern Ireland. Those were assessed against a range of criteria, including the commitment to multidisciplinary working and draft principles underpinning the MDT model; the reorganisation of services to support that new model and improve patient access; support from all GP federation members to address health and inequality, co-production and design with patients and service users; and synergy and coordination with existing reform initiatives. Following that assessment, the Down and Londonderry areas, in partnership with the South Eastern and Western Trusts respectively, were selected to be the first areas to implement the model, with the allocation of further funds in-year. It was decided that the third-placed applications — the West Belfast federation and the Belfast Trust — should commence the implementation of the first contact physiotherapy element of the model, proceeding to the full model as funds become available.

A further allocation from transformation funding during 2019-2020 was sufficient to support the introduction of the model in two new areas to ensure that patients across Northern Ireland could have access to the benefits of a primary care MDT. The Northern and Southern Trusts were each invited to submit an application in partnership with one of the GP federations in their area. As a result, implementation of the model is under way in the Causeway and Newry and district areas. It is anticipated that, by the end of March 2020, around 462,000 patients will have access to the services of a MDT in their local GP practice.

Ms Dolan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that the future roll-out of MDTs across the North should prioritise areas with GP shortages and recruitment and retention issues, such as my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone?

Mr Swann: I am aware of the pressures facing general practice in the south-west, and I reassure the Member that I am committed to implementing the model in all

areas of Northern Ireland. However, transformation of this scale cannot happen overnight. It must be balanced with the ongoing provision of all other services across the health and social care system. In the Londonderry area, the Western Trust still experiences ongoing challenges with recruitment to MDTs while progress is being made on the full roll-out of the model. Recruitment is ongoing for physios, social workers, additional health visitors and district nurses. Once appropriate funding is in place, further areas for the implementation of the multidisciplinary team model will be selected on the basis of readiness, the ability to deliver and the need of the location population.

In the meantime, my Department continues to make significant financial investment in general practice, with the focus on supporting GPs and the wider primary care team, and contributing to reducing GPs' workload. The number of GP training places has increased significantly, from 65 in 2015 to 111 in 2019. That, along with where we can go next with the funding of MDTs, will be crucial in how we develop the model, while always taking into consideration the pressures on the system in general from coronavirus/ COVID-19.

Mr Chambers: What is the Minister's assessment of the success of the pilot schemes of the multidisciplinary model?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. As I said earlier, it is important that we acknowledge that the work of the National Health Service goes on, although we will have to reduce it. The feedback is that the MDTs are working. In the past, GPs thought that they would never see the need for in-house pharmacy, physiotherapy or psychology services, but they now realise the value of a multidisciplinary team that is able to see patients when they come through the door, or as early as possible, and can direct them to the professional help, support and guidance that they need. There is also a change in the mindset of the user. Presenting patients realise that they do not always need to see a GP as their first point of call.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for all his efforts. We put on record our genuine thanks for all his work and commitment. He has done a good job on behalf of MLAs, the Executive and the people of Northern Ireland.

In relation to multidisciplinary teams, will cancer patients get the investigations and treatment that they require during the ongoing coronavirus crisis?

Mr Swann: As I said in response to an earlier question on the coronavirus, the core work of the National Health Service will continue. The red flag cases — those cancer patients and the trauma patients who present — will continue to receive support because that is the core work of the National Health Service.

We are working through the multidisciplinary teams, the transformation process and everything else that has been going on in the National Health Service, but coronavirus/ COVID-19 is now our day job. That is where our focus is. The rest of it will not be parked; it will not go to the wayside. The core principles and the supports that we need will continue, but our focus is being re-profiled to get us through the next period.

Mrs D Kelly: Minister, you spoke about the difficulty in recruiting for multidisciplinary teams. That will be even more difficult, setting aside the coronavirus and the

emergency across our hospitals. Have you given any consideration or had any discussion with Westminster about exemptions for the pensions of recently retired healthcare professionals and whether they will be brought back in or, indeed, those who are in their final years and almost qualified? Are there any discussions ongoing on how to complement the workforce?

Mr Swann: The Member makes a valid point. The issue of pensions was addressed by the Chancellor in the Budget. It does not come in this year and from my understanding will not be retrospective, but it will have an impact next year. Bringing forward registration of those about to pass their exams, that is being looked at along with the royal colleges, should it be nursing, midwifery, all the other primary care professions and domiciliary care staff to ensure we have a cohort of professionals and support staff. In regard to bringing back those who have recently retired, that is something we are looking at. In any change in legislation, we have to make sure that their registration is recognised and current.

Very shortly, we will be reaching out and asking for anyone who can help to please help, should that be in the voluntary and community sector, the sports sector or in faith-based organisations. As we move further into social distancing or shielding of our older population, we will become reliant on general and civic society to support those individuals while we go through that phase. That will be challenging for many.

Infant Mortality

4. **Ms Ni Chuilín** asked the Minister of Health how he plans to address the higher rates of infant mortality in areas of high deprivation. (AQO 356/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. Mr Speaker, may I indulge in extra time to answer an important question?

As demonstrated by the 'State of Child Health' 2020 report by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, of the four UK nations, Northern Ireland has the highest infant mortality rate at 4.2 per 1,000 live births. Whilst that rate has reduced from 4.8 per 1,000 live births, it remains a key challenge that we must address.

Like many health outcomes, there is a difference in the infant mortality rate between our least- and most-deprived communities. The most recent figures, for 2013-17, show that the most-deprived areas had an infant mortality rate 18% higher than the least-deprived areas. I understand that the main causes of infant mortality include premature birth, birth asphyxia, pneumonia, congenital conditions and term birth complications. In 2017, smoking during pregnancy has also been shown to contribute to increased infant mortality. In the most-deprived areas, the proportion of births where the mother smoked during pregnancy was almost five times the rate than in the least deprived.

A number of actions under way or being developed will seek to have a positive impact on infant mortality. Those include the tobacco control strategy, such as carbon monoxide testing in antenatal care; the 'Getting Ready for Baby' project, which provides group-based antenatal care and education through parenting classes for first-time parents along with training for midwives; the 'Saving Babies' Lives' care bundle that has been

implemented in Northern Ireland to reduce perinatal mortality; the social well-being antenatal clinic that has been established in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust for women with additional care needs; the Family Nurse Partnership Programme, which is a preventative early intervention programme for teenage mothers; the child health promotion programme 'Healthy Child, Healthy Future'; and implementation of a maternity strategy and work to address the recommendations of the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) reviews of that strategy.

We need to be conscious that healthcare outcomes are not just implicated by the clinical services we deliver. The evidence demonstrates that inequalities in health arise because of inequalities in the conditions into which people are born, and in which they grow up, live, work and age. To address health inequalities, we need to tackle the wider social detriments to health and address the inequalities.

That approach is at the heart of Making Life Better, which is the Executive's overarching strategic framework to improve health and to address health inequalities. Making Life Better is currently the subject of a comprehensive mid-term review.

2.30 pm

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We now move to topical questions. Questions 3, 8, 9 and 10 have been withdrawn.

COVID-19: GP Surgeries

T1. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Health, after thanking him and his Executive colleagues for the work that they have done, and thanking those people on the front line in the health service who are dealing with coronavirus on a daily basis, whether he is content that, given that high numbers of people will be self-isolating and will be tempted to contact their GPs, those GP practices have sufficient personal protection equipment to deal with the people who might turn up at surgeries. (AQT 251/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for that question. It gives me the opportunity to reinforce the message that we have been sending: if anyone has, or thinks that he or she has, symptoms of COVID-19, that person should not present to a GP or go to the emergency department but should instead telephone the GP to seek advice. That advice and guidance will then be given.

As far I am aware, GP and central pharmacy personal protective equipment (PPE) packs were issued last week. The packs include essential PPE items for GPs and pharmacists for use in circumstances in which a patient presents with symptoms. My Department is in daily contact with the Business Services Organisation (BSO) procurement and logistics service (PaLS), and a demand-management strategy is in place, whereby they are working closely with trusts and emergency planner leads over the allocation of PPE stocks in the trusts. The Department has released quantities of PPE items from the pandemic influenza preparedness programme stockpile to support the BSO business-as-usual stockpile. We therefore continue to issue and monitor equipment, and we have a stockpile of PPE centrally held.

The Westminster Secretary of State for Health yesterday called for anybody who could make ventilators to step up their production lines. Likewise, if there are people in Northern Ireland who feel that they can do that or provide PPE, I ask them to look to see whether they can re-profile and retool, because there will be a need for that equipment.

Mr Clarke: Have there been any conversations with companies in Northern Ireland about scaling up preparedness?

Mr Swann: A general call for ventilators was made yesterday by the Secretary of State for Health to anybody who can make them. JCB and Rolls-Royce are two of the companies that responded to say that they could re-profile and look at producing ventilators. If there are any companies in Northern Ireland that can do the same, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) is leading on that along with Central Procurement Directorate (CPD), and if companies want to scale up, they could do the same with PPE.

COVID-19: Routine GP Services

T2. **Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister of Health whether he can confirm what is happening with routine baby vaccinations and health visitor community contact, albeit it is the case that a number of GP surgeries are operating a telephone triage system, which is working very well in her local area. (AQT 252/17-22)

Mr Swann: Baby vaccines should proceed as normal. We have to make sure that the vaccination programme for all of the underlying health conditions that we have vaccines available for continues so that we have a resilient population.

GP telephone triaging is something that a number of GPs will be moving to. It is a change that patients may not be comfortable with, but, given the conditions that we are living in, it will become more the norm. If those who need to go to the GP are presented with that facility, I encourage them to make use of it. Do not get angry about it, because it is not GPs' fault. They are trying to manage the system.

Visits by health and social care workers will continue as normal, as we have to make sure that the service is there. I will check and get back to the Member, as there may be scaling back in certain areas or in the frequency of visits. Visits are not something that we can guarantee, but there is a value in what is being done.

Ms Armstrong: I reiterate what the Minister said about the front-line service staff who are getting all those phone calls. I am sure that they are getting it hard and heavy. When a childminder, childcare facility or organisation has been told that a child in their care has been identified as having COVID-19, what advice would you give to the organisation about what they should do to follow up, once the child is out and getting help? What happens to the organisation that usually looks after those vulnerable children?

Mr Swann: The procedure that they will follow will be the same as that for any other workplace or family. If someone does present, make sure that all the precautions that need to be taken are taken to make sure there has not been contact with other people who carry an underlying symptom. Follow the PHA guidance through for the specific location — that guidance has been changed and will update depending on the facility. If it is a childcare facility, that information should be online.

On GPs and the front-line telephone triage service, we are now moving to a situation where pharmacies will be doing the same, because we cannot expect them to take the brunt of the front-line service. I ask people to take their time to consider and appreciate the work that these people are doing in a very pressurised system.

Health Centre: Carrick and Larne

T4. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Health to comment on the fact that although previous mandates, Administrations and Ministers in this place outlined plans for a level 2 health centre in Carrick and Larne in east Antrim, it no longer seems to be progressing. (AQT 254/17-22)

Mr Swann: I do not have the detail of the specific location that the Member refers to. If he writes to me, I will get back to him with the specifics about it. If it has been raised elsewhere, we will get that answer back to the Member as well.

On a more general point about the questions that are coming forward, I will ask for Members' indulgence as well about the number of questions for written answer to our Department at this time, while we re-profile and try to cope with the pressures of COVID-19. On capital builds and other matters, if an answer has been provided before, we will refer the Member to that.

Mr Speaker: I call David Hilditch for a supplementary question.

Mr Hilditch: Mr Speaker, I do not require a supplementary question, thank you.

COVID-19: Communication and Information

T5. **Ms Bunting** asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of communication and information circulation around COVID-19. (AQT 255/17-22)

Mr Swann: It is a very generic question, but if people want communication, information and guidance about COVID-19 and how it is affecting the general population, they should look to the professional and reputable bodies. Do not rely on what you see on Twitter or Facebook or what you see from every self-proclaimed expert on this disease that has come up in the past few months as this disease has presented itself. Look to the bodies that you can rely on, such as the Health and Social Care Board and the Public Health Agency, for advice and guidance, because reliable, sustained, professional advice and guidance is there for those who want to look for it. For those who want to look for sensationalism, there are other methods and avenues to get that information. I say this to people: make sure your advice is current and is professional.

Ms Bunting: The difficulty is that the national Government appear to be playing it down and are firing out test balloons as to what they might do, and that is unhelpful. An element of the media seems to be going for hype and sensationalism, as the Minister has referred to. Therefore, it is very difficult for the public to know what the factual position is and exactly how to prepare. What can the Minister do to improve clarity for the public in this situation, where they are trying to find out what the actual factual position is and not degenerate into hysteria?

Mr Swann: The Member's point is very well made, because the information that is out there needs to be said clearly and professionally, and it needs to be heard coming from professionals. When we look to information that comes from other areas, what I have said before in this House is that we need to be alert, as COVID-19 will be a serious challenge to Northern Ireland, and it is across all factors, not just the health service. It will be there in the Department for the Economy, the Department of Education and the Department for Communities and our justice sector as well. Be aware of the professional guidance that comes out for how people should prepare. Do not panic.

The other point is that what we have seen recently is panic buying and stockpiling. That is a nonsense. It puts people who need those essential items and can only afford them week-by-week under even more pressure. If a mother cannot get baby formula or nappies because she can only afford them on a weekly basis, that does not help society in general. With regard to finding that middle ground, listen to the professionals and take heed of them.

I thank and congratulate the media in Northern Ireland for taking a professional, balanced approach to what is a challenging situation. They have played a responsible part. I encourage them to continue to do that.

COVID-19: Executive Response

T6. **Mr O'Toole** asked the Minister of Health, after stating his respect for the his hard work and the dedication and seriousness with which he is taking his responsibilities, to state whether the following characteristics of Northern Ireland — a relatively low population density; only one genuinely serious urban centre, with respect to colleagues from Derry, Newry and elsewhere; a relatively dispersed rural population, like the rest of the island; and lower than average use of public transport — factor in to the Executive's planning on how to deal with COVID-19. (AQT 256/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Executive's planning for COVID-19 is for Northern Ireland. Our focus and surge plans within the health service, and how we tackle it across all Departments, will be for how we serve Northern Ireland and nowhere else. The Northern Ireland Executive are focused on how we get through the COVID-19 crisis as an Executive collectively. That is a challenge. As I said earlier, there are differences of opinion, but one thing the general public expects from us is a united approach on how we come together and tackle this very serious issue. The Executive met this morning, there is a COBRA meeting this afternoon and there is another Executive meeting this afternoon. We are looking at this on a Northern Ireland basis across all Departments.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Minister for his answer. In addition to that, can I ask about the specific guidance given? Kellie Armstrong asked about health visitors. I beg your indulgence to ask about domiciliary care workers, who we know are vital. What guidance is given to them and to community psychiatric nurses, particularly those dealing probably with psychotic people in the community, and social workers? If the Minister could give an update on the guidance for those groups, it would be helpful.

Mr Swann: The Chief Medical Officer met a number of those groups and their representative bodies last week to bottom out exactly what specific guidance they need.

Looking at every sector across the Health and Social Care Board, there are specific nuances that need to be addressed. We are working on that piece of guidance with the relevant representative bodies to make sure that it is there. A lot of those organisations will already be aware that that guidance is either there, in generic terms, on the Public Health Agency or Health and Social Care Board websites. They should check the most up-to-date guidance that is relevant to their profession. If there is a lack, or a gap, I assure Members that it is being worked on.

Mr Speaker: We have a minute and a half left.

COVID-19: Bangor Minor Injuries Unit

T7. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health, after thanking him for all his work, to outline the rationale for closing the Bangor minor injuries unit during the coronavirus outbreak. (AQT 257/17-22)

Mr Swann: While we prepare our surge plans and look at how we best tackle COVID-19 across our entire health and social care system, a piece of work is being done to re-profile certain areas, wards and — it may come to this — certain hospitals. I say to Members clearly that there are no sacred cows in the National Health Service while we face the challenge of COVID-19. Specific areas have been protected in the past and looked after, but the surge planning will be challenging for the health and social care system and for us as public representatives who want to protect our local services, buildings or provision.

Tough decisions are being made centrally to make sure that, when the surge of COVID-19 hits us, we are best prepared to fight it.

Mr Speaker: Time for questions to the Minister of Health is up. We move now to questions to the Minister for Infrastructure.

2.45 pm

Infrastructure

Hightown Incinerator

1. **Mr Blair** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of the proposed Hightown incinerator. (AQO 338/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): The planning application for the Hightown incinerator is for the construction of a residual waste treatment facility at the former Hightown quarry in Mallusk. The facility is designed to deal with the residual waste from the six councils in the Arc21 waste management group. As my officials will be making a recommendation to me on the planning application, it is important that I consider carefully and take into account all views in reaching any decision that needs to be taken. In the interim, as, I hope, the Member appreciates, it would not be appropriate for me to comment on the individual planning merits or otherwise of the application.

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

Mr Blair: I appreciate the Minister's reasons for the lack of detail or prediction in the answer. Can the Minister commit to working with the Minister of Agriculture, Environment

and Rural Affairs, councils, environmental groups and others to ensure that such applications — current and future — on waste management are dealt with in the interests of the environment?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call Gerry Kelly [*Laughter.*] Excuse me: Minister.

Ms Mallon: Since taking up my post, one of my priorities — I have made it clear — has been tackling the climate emergency. I see that we should do more to promote recycling. I have already committed to working with the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs as, together, we try to advance the climate action agenda.

Mr G Kelly: I thank the Minister for answering that, instead of me.

I appreciate that the Minister has to take all the evidence into account, but when will the decision be forthcoming? Has the Minister some notion of when that might be? This has been an ongoing and very controversial issue over a series of months and, indeed, years. Will she take into consideration the reports that have been made already? The issue was in front of previous Ministers, so there is a volume of information, not just what might look like new information; some of the older information is very important.

Ms Mallon: Yes, I am aware of the nature of the application; I am aware of the considerable interest in it; and I am aware of the length of time that it has been ongoing. I assure the Member that I will take all the evidence that is presented to me and follow due process. I am not in a position to say when a decision will be reached. I have not received any information or submissions from officials, but I assure the Member and all those who are following the application with interest that I will be fair, robust and impartial in examining all the evidence in coming to the best possible decision.

Mrs Cameron: Does the Minister agree that much more can be done not only on recycling but on not creating waste that then needs to be dealt with? If and when somebody decides that incineration is the only way forward, will there be acknowledgement that there are options for incineration other than building a new white elephant that is not required and would need to be fed?

Ms Mallon: I am conscious that I do not want to step into the portfolio or brief of my colleague, Minister Edwin Poots, but I am clear that we should do more as a society to promote a circular economy. We should be reducing the packaging that we see in our shops and our supply chain, and, as individuals and consumers, we should be making better choices when it comes to purchasing products with less packaging and doing all that we can to recycle. We face a real and global challenge with regard to the climate emergency, and all of us across all Departments, across society and even in our homes, should be doing much more on that front.

Park and Ride: Whiteabbey/Yorkgate

2. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans are in place to extend the park-and-ride facilities at Yorkgate train station and Whiteabbey train station. (AQO 339/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The aim of park-and-ride at rail stations is to support a modal shift to public transport. It does that

by enabling those starting their journey by car from rural areas and smaller towns to access rail for the larger part of their journey. For that reason, particularly given the budgetary constraints, park-and-ride sites are located on the strategic rail network and are less prevalent at more central stations in close proximity to the city centre.

In line with that, 113 spaces are provided at Whiteabbey station. While there is growing demand, it is not possible to extend that facility. That is due to the park-and-ride being landlocked. However, plans are being advanced, subject to funding, to add up to 500 spaces at Mossley West and Trooperslane.

I am supportive of expanding our park-and-ride schemes. However, completing all the planned park-and-ride schemes would cost £39 million. This year's budget was £2 million, severely curtailing my Department's ability to make as much progress as we would like, given the multiple benefits derived from park-and-ride schemes.

As the Member will be aware, infrastructure is key to connecting our communities. It is the bedrock on which we should build our ambitions for delivery of radical change to improve lives. I assure the Member of my commitment to improving lives, connecting communities and challenging the climate emergency in the time ahead.

Ms P Bradley: I fully understand that Whiteabbey train station is landlocked, but there are severe problems there from Station Road, along Ypres, into Fernagh into King's Park, where the Busy Bus service often cannot get down the road. That service is there to help the most vulnerable. Something has to be done, whether that is getting traffic attendants out to ticket people or something else. We talk about the key to connecting communities, but the situation there means that we are not connecting communities. We are allowing people to park across driveways and roads and, on occasion, to block roads.

Ms Mallon: As the Member will know, the car-parking provision at Whiteabbey station is a Translink facility and therefore is not enforced by my Department's enforcement service provider's traffic attendants. There is no legislation in place that would permit that type of enforcement. I am aware of undisciplined parking on Old Station Road in the vicinity of Whiteabbey park-and-ride, and my Department is progressing "No waiting at any time" legislation that will allow two-way traffic to run at all times. The legislation has been advertised, and I hope that it will be implemented in the next few months.

Mr Boylan: The Minister knows the value of park-and-rides in addressing congestion and air pollution in many towns. Will the Minister prioritise park-and-ride schemes throughout the North? She knows the benefits. I bear in mind what she said about the budget, but, if we are serious about tackling the climate threat, there is an opportunity now. Will she explain her long-term plans for park-and-ride facilities across the North?

Ms Mallon: I assure the Member that I can see the multiple benefits that can be derived from our park-and-ride schemes. I have an ambitious programme. The Department has a number of park-and-ride scheme extensions and new schemes that we would like to deliver, but that would cost £39 million. This year, the budget for park-and-ride was £2 million, which severely curtailed the Department's ambition. I have had negotiations and discussions with the Finance Minister and other colleagues

because, if I were able to secure more money, given new and emerging pressures, I would absolutely do more. I will do more to deliver on park-and-ride, but, as with all these things, at times, we have to cut our cloth.

Mr O'Toole: Accepting that, for the next few weeks at least, we may see fewer people on all public transport infrastructure, has the Minister given any thought to whether phase 2 of the Glider programme might meet up with the park-and-ride system at Cairnshill in south Belfast and even whether it could, perhaps, go a little further out to Carryduff to encourage people driving in from the south to use that service?

Ms Mallon: The Glider project has been hugely successful. When looking at passenger numbers, we look particularly at usage by older citizens and people with disabilities. As the Member will be aware, there are proposals for phase 2 Glider that would extend it from the south of the city across to north Belfast. An interim outline business case is being prepared for consideration. I hope to be in a position to move to public consultation on the proposed routes later this year.

Ms Bradshaw: Will the Minister outline the plans to be implemented by Translink to deal with COVID-19 to protect the health and safety of the public and workers and ensure that services continue to operate?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for that important question. I am acutely aware of the concerns that many communities and people have regarding the COVID-19 virus and how best to tackle the outbreak. My Department is working with all Departments, agencies, operators and the Public Health Agency to respond to and plan for this evolving situation. No effort will be spared in our work to tackle the outbreak. My Department has received advice on the coronavirus epidemic from the Chief Medical Officer that has been shared with Translink. The organisation has implemented a range of measures in the light of that advice. They include enhanced weekly cleaning of buses and enhanced twice-weekly cleaning of trains. That is in addition to the regular daily cleaning that is undertaken on the public transport fleet. In addition, stations are being cleaned more frequently, and, when cleaners are on site, an enhanced cleaning of stations will take place.

Throughout all of this, we should underline the Public Health Agency's advice that personal hygiene is the appropriate method to protect all of us. As part of that, Translink will provide guidance on COVID-19 on its website to keep customers updated on the latest developments. I assure Members that Translink continues to review its guidance in the light of advice from the Public Health Agency and that the safety of the public and its staff will remain Translink's priority.

Mr Beggs: To go back to the original question, I am aware of the need to improve park-and-ride facilities at Whiteabbey station. However, does the Minister agree that, rather than improving park-and-ride facilities at more city centre sites, there would be many more advantages for the environment and communities if park-and-ride facilities further down railway lines were developed, addressing the issue of full car parks at Carrickfergus and Whitehead and developing further park-and-ride facilities on the Larne line or the fully subscribed park-and-ride facilities for Ulsterbus at Millbrook?

Ms Mallon: The fact that we have seen maximum capacity at a number of park-and-ride sites is testimony to the success of the scheme. All that has to be underpinned by our efforts to see a modal shift in the way in which people get around in their daily life. We should encourage more people to walk and cycle and factor that into our decision-making on the location of park-and-ride schemes. I assure the Member that I want to do what I can. Again, that is budget-dependent. When I have the money, I will try to do as much as I can, but I have to be honest and realistic about the severe constraints within which I must operate.

Waste Water System: Strangford

3. **Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what actions she is taking to ensure that the strains on the waste water system in the Strangford constituency do not impact on the building of new homes and new businesses. (AQO 340/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am aware of the increasing issues at waste water treatment works and in the sewerage system. I am concerned that that is having an impact on the environment and on planning decisions in respect of housing and business developments seeking connection to the sewerage network across the North. I have outlined to Executive colleagues the pressures facing my Department, including those of water and waste water. I have also made representations directly to the Finance Minister and impressed on him the need for investment to ensure that we can provide the critical infrastructure needed to ensure that we build the many more homes that we need and to drive economic growth, so that we can improve the lives of citizens right across Northern Ireland.

In the Strangford constituency, the following capital investment schemes are scheduled by Northern Ireland Water to start in its current price-control period: new waste water treatment works in Ballygowan, an investment of approximately £6 million; and new waste water treatment works at Ards North at a value of £18 million that will serve Ballywalter, Ballyhaskin and Carrowdore. Those works are scheduled to achieve their beneficial use early in the next price-control period, known as PC21, which starts in 2021. In PC21, investment of around £143 million has been identified to address waste water system capacity issues affecting development in the Strangford constituency.

However, all PC21 projects are subject to prioritisation and the availability of adequate funding. I therefore welcome the commitments made in the New Decade, New Approach agreement to address years of underfunding in waste water and am working with the Finance Minister and my other Executive colleagues to secure the level of finance required.

3.00 pm

Ms Armstrong: The Minister has my 100% backing for getting that additional money, because we all know the impact that the waste water system has on planning. What negotiations will there be with builders and developers to ensure that, if they are putting in pumping stations, they will comply and be able to attach to our waste water treatment works, so that it is not a waste of time. Will bonds be put in place to ensure that those putting in their own pumping stations will be held to account to ensure that they connect appropriately?

Ms Mallon: It is an area that I have begun to look at. I am beginning to engage with a range of stakeholders, because the facts are “No drains, no cranes”. It is about how we can work collaboratively and in partnership to address the issue. At some point in the not too distant future, I hope to write to Executive colleagues to see whether there are other things that we could do around developers’ contributions, but I am certainly of the view that we have a huge issue when it comes to matching the need for investment in our waste water infrastructure. There is a lot that my Department could do with developers and housing associations on sustainable drainage systems. It is very much an area that I intend to focus on, going forward.

Ms Anderson: Last week, our Committee was at NI Water, which outlined its PC21 priorities. I was shocked to discover that Derry, Strabane and Omagh were not included, given the level of inequalities in the north-west. I want to ask about the Seán Dolan’s development scheme in Creggan, because I know that there is a massive hole in the budget caused by British austerity cuts. Given that the development is for almost 100 houses, we need a sewage and waste water treatment plant built there. The developers say that they are willing to assist but that NI Water has to adopt that, if that is the case. Will she look at that?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I advise the Minister that it is at her discretion whether she answers that. A supplementary question has to be related to the original question. I leave it to the Minister’s discretion.

Ms Mallon: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is an important issue. There are now 116 areas in Northern Ireland where we are constrained in terms of planning applications and being able to build homes and grow our economy. It is an issue not just for the Department for Infrastructure but for all of us, and I recognise that there are particular pinch points. I want to work with all Members and Ministers so that we can deliver homes — that is very important to me — but also create the opportunities to grow our economy in places such as Derry and Strabane and across Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Before I move to the next question, I advise Members who are seated not to interrupt while another Member has the Floor. That is my job. OK? Thank you.

Mr Humphrey: The Minister will be aware of the pressures on the waste water system at Duncrue Street. As a result of her conversations with the Finance Minister and other Ministers, is she any closer to being able to inform the House about the upgrading of that centre?

Ms Mallon: I can assure the Member that discussions have taken place and are taking place. As he will know, there has been no allocation of the budget, so I cannot give him a definitive response to that question. I can, however, reassure him that, for me, investment in our waste water infrastructure is critical. If we are serious about delivering on the outcomes in our Programme for Government, it is essential. I will not be found wanting in continuing to make representations or in working with all Executive colleagues to see that ambition realised.

Mrs Barton: Does the Minister accept that it is her responsibility and that of the Northern Ireland Executive to ensure that there is sufficient capital investment to enable Northern Ireland Water to treat waste water and protect the environment and that it is not enough for some Ministers to

say what they would not do, without offering a solution to the problem?

Ms Mallon: I agree very much with the Member that it is essential that we ensure that our citizens have access to clean, safe drinking water and safe water treatment works. That is also essential if we are serious about growing our economy, tackling regional imbalance, tackling the climate emergency and improving people’s lives. I welcome the approach being taken in the Programme for Government. This issue demonstrates that responsibility does not reside solely in one Department: we all have a responsibility. I have made the case on the issue to Executive colleagues, and they have been very responsive. Mindful that we are in a difficult period that will bring with it its own financial difficulties, I hope that, when we see budget allocations, we will work together to begin to address this. There have been years upon years of underinvestment in our waste water infrastructure, and we are coming to a critical point.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for the swift measures that she has implemented to help tackle the unprecedented challenge that we all face: coronavirus/ COVID-19.

What impact has this place being closed for three years had on DFI’s ability to provide sufficient capacity in the waste water infrastructure to enable the building of new homes and businesses?

Ms Mallon: My Department has been severely impacted on in respect of its responsibilities. All Departments have been severely impacted on because, for three years, we had no one in charge. We had no one in position to make decisions so that we could do things in an improved way or begin to do things in a new way. People will be frustrated about what has happened in the past three years. This is the issue for us now: how ambitious are we for this place of ours? How committed are we to working together to ensure that we improve the lives of everybody who lives here, particularly the most vulnerable? We can look back, and we can be angry and frustrated. I choose to look forward. I choose to work with Executive colleagues in good faith. The people of Northern Ireland have been let down for three years. We now need to lift them up and deliver so much more for them.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): As question 4 has been withdrawn, I call Jonathan Buckley.

Winter Flooding: Strong Report

5. **Mr Buckley** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the lessons learnt by her Department from the findings of the Strong report, ‘Review of Winter Flooding (Northern Ireland) 2015-2016’. (AQO 342/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Following the flooding that occurred as a result of the heavy rainfall over a number of months during the 2015-16 winter period, an independent review carried out by Professor Alan Strong was published in December 2016. The report made 10 headline recommendations that covered a number of areas that would help to further improve the ability of government and society to manage and respond to flooding.

Recommendations included a review of the management of water levels in Lough Neagh that concluded that any alternative operation of floodgates other than the existing procedure carried out by my Department would not have

significantly reduced water levels on Lough Neagh. Other learning included the need for a coordinator to lead local government emergency preparedness work; support for the community resilience approaches that have been developed by my Department with multiagency partners; the benefits of natural flood risk management techniques; improvements to flood risk communications; and research into crops in flood-prone areas. I advise the Member that all recommendations have now been addressed and many positive benefits in the management of flood risk here have already been realised as a result.

Mr Buckley: A week and a half ago, the Agriculture Minister, along with me, met local farmers who had concerns that rising lough levels and rising tides could impact on their lands and businesses in the same dramatic way. They fear that the lessons have not been learnt when they look at dredging of the River Bann and lough levels. Some mentioned lock gates that have been broken for a considerable period. Will the Minister commit to meeting them, along with me, the Minister of Agriculture and Mrs Dolores Kelly, to see if we can address those concerns before we face the same situation again?

Ms Mallon: I was aware of businesses' concerns after the particularly heavy spell of rain. Dolores Kelly raised the issue, and I know that you have been raising it as well. I am happy to meet business people and farmers in the area to set out what the Department has achieved in terms of recommendations to address any concerns or issues that people might have about the operation of gates and what the Department is doing to manage the water levels in Lough Neagh. I am happy to have that meeting and to provide that reassurance to people.

Mrs D Kelly: I very much welcome that cooperation across the divide, but there are also fishermen who are very concerned about the water levels. Minister, will you agree to also meet the fishermen's cooperative at Toome about water levels? I also want to place on record my thanks to your officials for dealing swiftly with the businesses that were under threat from recent flooding around the shores of Lough Neagh, particularly at Kinnego.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her kind words, and I also wish to put on record my thanks to those in my Department who worked to protect those impacted on by the flooding at Lough Neagh. I am happy to meet the fishermen's cooperative when I am there, and perhaps we could do a morning or an afternoon when we could meet all the organisations and businesses in the area.

Mr McAleer: The Minister will be aware that 30 homes were flooded in Sion Mills in, I think, August last year. I am aware that her Department is considering improvement to the drainage network in that area to prevent it happening again. Is there any update on that work?

Ms Mallon: I am aware of the flooding incident there, and it is an issue and an area that my Department is looking at. I do not have details in front of me, but I am happy to write to the Member to provide a full update.

Suicide Prevention Barriers

6. **Ms Flynn** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department plans to install suicide prevention barriers on bridges and other areas of the transport network. (AQO 343/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for asking this question on an issue that we are both passionate about. Mental health and well-being are extremely important to me, both personally and as a Minister, and it is an important issue in my Department. Individually and collectively, particularly through the Executive working group on mental well-being, resilience and suicide prevention, we all have a responsibility to act to address the issue, which is devastating families across Northern Ireland. I recognise that our infrastructure has an important role to play in improving mental health and preventing suicide, and I am committed to ensuring that my Department contributes fully to that agenda.

I fully appreciate that engineering solutions may provide part of the answer, and I will be led by the expert advice. My Department is currently working in partnership with stakeholders to consider positive actions that can be taken at a number of locations, including the M2 and the Westlink corridor. However, we must all work together to address the underlying problems and the contributory factors to poor mental health right across our society. I believe that an innovative and collaborative approach is required, and I look forward to working closely with Executive colleagues through the Executive working group but also to working with local communities, experts, stakeholders and staff to promote positive mental health and resilience.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): You have time for a very brief supplementary, Órlaithí.

Ms Flynn: The supplementary has been covered already in relation to the bridges. Thanks very much, Minister.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I can take a very quick supplementary from William Humphrey, then.

Mr Humphrey: Very kind.

Minister, you will be aware of the tragic scale of suicides in our constituency of North Belfast. Can you assure the House, in terms of the Executive working group, that work is going on across the Executive table to ensure that the pandemic of suicides that affects Northern Ireland in general and North Belfast in particular is being addressed?

Ms Mallon: I am very aware of the devastation being caused by poor mental health and suicide, particularly in our constituency of North Belfast. We have had some very difficult times of late. This is an issue that, I believe, transcends party politics.

I sit with Executive Ministers on a range of issues, and I have to say that the discussion that took place at the last meeting of the Executive subgroup was sincere and genuine. Ministers from all Departments were committed to doing what they can because they have been affected by this, if not from within their own families then with their friends and their community. I do believe that we will have sincere, genuine collaborative working on this.

3.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That ends listed questions. We now move to topical questions. We have 15 minutes.

COVID-19: Public Transport

T1. **Ms Bailey** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given that, today in the South, transport unions were

meeting with state-owned transport companies to discuss whether they can continue to operate and whether cash-handling on public transport needs to stop, have any such discussions taken place here with Translink. (AQT 241/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I assure the Member that my Department and my officials are in daily contact with senior officials in Translink. A number of measures regarding the advice being given to staff have been put in place on cleaning and upscaling the cleaning that is required. To ensure the safety of everyone involved, Translink is amending its procedures for staff on contact with customers. This has included the position whereby no contact between staff and the public will take place for ticket checks. In addition, Translink has issued staff with personal hygiene products in the form of hand sanitisers and wipes, whilst all handwashing facilities are continually replenished.

I can also confirm that Glider ticket-vending machines are cleaned weekly, and I have asked Translink to continue to review this in line with PHA guidance. However, we must all be mindful of advice from the Public Health Agency, as advice on personal hygiene is among the most important advice being given currently. Therefore, I again reiterate the appeal to people to follow the medical advice to slow down the spread of the coronavirus by making sure that they very frequently wash their hands.

Ms Bailey: I thank the Minister for her answer. Has the Minister any concerns that our transport systems, particularly our cross-border transport systems, are acting in line with each other or are there any ongoing difficulties there?

Ms Mallon: I assure the Member that we are in close communication. The situation facing us is unprecedented. We need to work together across this House, across all Departments, across these islands, and across this island North and South. I am committed to doing that as Minister for Infrastructure, and I am committed to working with Translink, our community transport operators, the Public Health Agency and with those responsible for transport in the South.

Glider: North Belfast/South Belfast

T2. **Mr Blair** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether discussions about the north Belfast to south Belfast Glider link will take into consideration the fact that the population around Mallusk and Glengormley has increased massively over the years, with a great number of people coming to that area to work. (AQT 242/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. Belfast rapid transit phase 2 proposes to extend the existing network to serve, as I have said, north Belfast, south Belfast, Queen's University and the City Hospital and was submitted by my Department for inclusion in the Belfast region city deal. My officials are working closely with councils and other partners to take forward a feasibility-and-options appraisal, which will help in identifying route options.

We aim to have this work completed by the end of this calendar year, and it is my intention that a public consultation exercise will follow to allow the public and Members to comment on route options. I accept the point that the Member makes about Mallusk. There has been significant population growth in the area, and I encourage

the Member, when the consultation goes out, to feed his views into it, as I am sure he will continue to do, at every opportunity possible.

Mr Blair: The Minister will not be surprised that I will take the opportunity now to do the same thing and ask that consideration be given to an alternative corridor to the one that I mentioned. That, of course, is the Antrim Road corridor. It has to be accepted that the other corridor is already served by a railway line, while the Antrim Road corridor is not. I am hopeful that that issue will be taken into consideration.

Ms Mallon: I would not want to pre-empt the outcome of any public consultation, but, no doubt, there will be consideration given to issues such as the level of demand and the level of public transport service provision already in place along those routes. All those things will be analysed in the round. Of course, I ask him and others to encourage as many people as possible to respond to the consultation so that we can get to the right option.

COVID-19: Taxi Operator Guidance

T3. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will issue practical guidance to taxi operators to minimise the spread of COVID-19, particularly because, as was highlighted earlier, procedures have been put in place by Translink to minimise the transmission of coronavirus on public transport. (AQT 243/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The advice to everyone is to follow the Public Health Agency's advice, and I encourage everyone to do that. I have begun a round of engagement with the taxi industry about taxi-related matters and concerns, but I will use that opportunity to make sure that it is as updated as possible on the advice from the Public Health Agency. I am happy to engage in that proactively by contacting the industry and its representatives to ensure that the latest advice is being followed for the safety of our taxi drivers and their customers.

Mr Beggs: Does the Minister recognise that public transport workers and, indeed, taxi operators provide an essential service and that, without them, many of our health service staff will not be able to get to work to treat patients?

Ms Mallon: I very much recognise that. They are the backbone of our economy and our society in connecting people and ensuring that they are able to access work and services. I do not disagree with anything that the Member just said.

A5: Timeline

T4. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an assessment of the timeline needed by her Department to scrutinise the responses to the A5 public inquiry and to move on to the next stage, given that she will be aware of how crucial the A5 dual carriageway is to east-west regional balance in the North and to connecting the north-west to the rest of the island. (AQT 244/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Member will be aware, from the priorities that I outlined when I took up the post, that I am serious about doing what I can to tackle regional imbalance. The A5 is a project that is referenced specifically in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. As he outlined, it has been subject to a public inquiry. When the findings of the

public inquiry are completed, a submission will be made to me. I am mindful that I need to robustly follow due process and ensure that all the statutory processes are complete but that I also need to expedite things. People have been waiting for a very, very long time on this project. I assure the Member that, as soon as I am in a position to be able to make a decision on it, I will do so.

Mr McAleer: I thank the Minister for her response and her assurance that this remains a top priority for her Department. Will she also give an assurance that she will continue to liaise with her counterparts in the South on future funding for the road? At the outset when the road was envisaged, it was planned that more than one of the phases, or, indeed, all the phases, would move ahead simultaneously. Will she give an assurance that she will continue to liaise with her counterpart in Dublin to ensure that the scheme moves forward, once we get past all the outstanding hurdles?

Ms Mallon: As the Member points out, as part of the New Decade, New Approach, the Irish Government reaffirmed a £75 million commitment in the Fresh Start Agreement to the A5 project to complete phase 1A from Newbuildings to Strabane north. I assure the Member that, as soon as possible, I will engage with my counterpart in the South, because it is important that that commitment is realised. I believe that there is full intention to see the commitment realised by the Irish Government, and I will continue to work with my counterpart to ensure that we get that project delivered.

COVID-19: DFI Contingency Planning

T5. **Mr McGrath** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, following references to Translink and taxi services, for a breakdown of her Department's overall contingency planning, given that the smooth operation of the Department for Infrastructure will be critical during the coronavirus outbreak. (AQT 245/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As I said, I am aware of the concerns that many communities and people have regarding coronavirus and how best to tackle the outbreak. I assure the Member that the Department is working with all Departments, agencies, operators and the Public Health Agency to respond to and plan for this evolving situation. No effort will be spared, and I am committed to working with my arm's-length bodies and Executive colleagues to ensure public safety.

The most effective means of protecting the public against the spread of coronavirus is for all of us to follow the medical advice and frequently wash our hands with soap and water or clean them with alcohol-based hand rub. However, in line with PHA advice, the Department and its bodies have introduced contingency measures to protect the public against the spread of COVID-19 and ensure that, as the situation evolves, essential services and connections are maintained.

For example, Translink has implemented a range of measures that are continually reviewed in light of the latest advice and developments. That includes enhanced weekly cleaning of buses and enhanced twice-weekly cleaning of trains, which is in addition to the regular daily cleaning that is undertaken for our public transport fleet. Enhanced cleaning regimes have been introduced to bus and rail stations. My officials are working closely with NI Water,

its regulators, DEFRA and the wider industry in the UK on a coordinated response to managing issues arising as a result of COVID-19.

Northern Ireland Water has assured me that it is confident that it is taking all necessary steps to maintain services during the outbreak. The company's priority is to ensure the continued provision of water and waste-water services to customers while maintaining the safety and well-being of staff. I am also urgently exploring options to maximise flexibility around drivers' hours rules without compromising on-road safety.

There is a range of other measures, and I will continue to keep the public and Members updated.

Mr McGrath: Could the Minister give us more information about the discussions that she is having with operators to ensure that there is provision during this very worrying time?

Ms Mallon: On Saturday, I issued a letter to councils in Northern Ireland on the urgent matter of enabling retailers of food, sanitary and other essential items to increase the frequency of deliveries to stores to support the response to COVID-19. The letter, which comes into effect immediately, was issued because of the exceptional challenges that we are facing. I asked officials to meet urgently this week with representatives from Freight NI to discuss its concerns so that we can work with it to put solutions in place.

This is a frightening time for people. I assure them that my officials are working round the clock across my Department and with other Departments to respond and put plans in place to deal with this constantly changing situation. I will keep Members and the public fully updated.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Time for a brief question from Rachel Woods.

Heathrow Airport: Expansion

T6. **Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in light of the Court of Appeal's ruling on 27 February 2020 regarding the Heathrow Airport expansion, for her assessment of any regionally significant developments that are not consistent with our obligations under the Paris Accord. (AQT 246/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am very much aware of the Heathrow ruling. My officials are working through it to identify all implications and how the ruling relates to my Department.

Questions for Urgent Oral Answer

Education

COVID-19: Guidance for Schools

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I remind Members that if they wish to ask a supplementary question, they should rise continually in their place. The Member who has tabled the question will be called automatically to ask a supplementary question.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education for an update on his Department's guidance to schools regarding the COVID-19 outbreak.

3.30 pm

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): I thank the Member for his question. I appreciate that this is a very challenging time for schools and for all our partners in the education sector. I pay tribute to school principals, teachers, classroom assistants and all those who are working so hard and with such dedication in the wider education sector at this challenging time.

The position on COVID-19 is exceptionally fast-moving, and new developments are emerging daily. I recognise and share the genuine fears and concerns that people have: that all of us have. Our priority at this time must be public health and saving lives. That is why I will continue to follow the expert medical and scientific advice from the Chief Medical Officer, the Public Health Agency and the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), and, indeed, wider advice given by government.

Schools will continue to remain open until such time as that expert scientific advice changes. In the event of schools having to close, my priority is for teaching and learning to continue. It is not a question of school closures meaning effectively an extended holiday, and that is particularly true for those who have GCSE or A-level examinations. My Department has put in place arrangements to work closely with all its education partners on a range of very complex issues that arise from the coronavirus outbreak, including the Education Authority on service-delivery issues and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) on examination issues. I will ensure that there are appropriate contingency plans in place and that schools are regularly updated with appropriate advice as the situation evolves.

My Department convened a COVID-19 education planning group on 13 March to coordinate efforts across the education sector. The group will meet regularly to consider and respond to issues that arise. I am aware of the importance of regular, clear and reliable information. I issued guidance to all schools and education settings earlier today. That guidance will be updated on an ongoing basis, as new information becomes available and decisions are taken. I also re-emphasise the need for schools to consider Public Health Agency advice.

Mr Lyttle: The coronavirus is an unprecedented public health challenge. We are asking the people and school

leaders of Northern Ireland to be alert but not alarmed. They are asking us for clear and measured leadership and guidance. I therefore ask the Education Minister to provide a fuller explanation of the expert clinical advice informing his approach to school closures, of the guidance that he is offering to protect immunocompromised pupils in special schools and of his plans to sustain childcare provision during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Mr Weir: On expert advice, I have spoken directly to the Chief Medical Officer, and I will try to keep an updated flow of communication going. On Thursday, when the position changed in the Republic of Ireland, the Chief Medical Officer gave clear advice to Executive members, and that advice was relayed as part of the press conference afterwards.

The Chief Medical Officer's concern, rightly so, is that we have the right interventions at the right time to make the biggest difference. That may well mean that, at a future stage, we face school closures, but his advice was very clear-cut, in that this is not the time to bring into effect school closures. In particular, there are concerns that simply closing schools across the board will take out of school about a third of a million children. That will have implications for parental care. In particular, it will mean that large numbers of parents who are involved in front-line medical services and emergency services are taken away from those roles at exactly the point at which the outbreak needs to be fought. It is also the case that, if we are looking at care responsibilities, a lot of grandparents will take on the role, despite their widely being considered to be the most vulnerable group.

On the medical side, I am liaising with the Chief Medical Officer. I had hoped to speak to him prior to this question for urgent oral answer, but he is involved in the COBRA meeting. The Chief Medical Officer and the PHA are looking at the specific advice for medically vulnerable children, and it may well be that that advice moves in a different sphere from the broader position on schools. If we are in a position in which there is closure of schools, that will also impact on youth facilities and childcare. I am looking to see whether there are any measures to do something about childcare to mitigate some of the particular issues for key workers, if we move to that point. A range of preparations is ongoing.

Mr Newton: The Minister has said that, in the event that schools may close, he will base that on the expert advice that is offered to him. In the context that the expert advice says, "Yes, close the schools", what will be the method of contacting the principal? What will he expect the principal to do with the information? How will he get it out to parents, and what will be the plan at that stage?

Mr Weir: The Member has raised a number of aspects. Obviously, we will be communicating with principals, and the C2k system enables all schools to be contacted directly. It would be wrong, when we reach the point of closing schools, to simply spring it on schools. Therefore, even when we make that decision, we will need to give some notice to people. It is not a question of an announcement at lunchtime and closure by the close of play. There will have to be at least 48-hours' notice for schools, and that applies to parents as well.

There will need to be preparation work, because, again, there is perhaps a misconception that, by closing schools,

we are ending education. Remote learning, preparation and teaching will go on, and that will be prioritised, particularly for examination subjects but also throughout the school system, depending on the capacity to cope.

All those issues will have to be taken into account when decisions are being made. I do not want to spring any surprises. I suspect that we are still some distance away from school closures, but schools and parents need to be thinking ahead about what arrangements they will put in place, particularly the arrangements that parents will make for their children. That is critical. People should be exercising their minds about this at present.

Ms Mullan: Minister, over the last number of days, I, you and everyone in this Chamber has been inundated by messages from school leaders, trade unions and others about closing. Today, we are hearing about confirmed cases of pupils who have been diagnosed. In my city, the council, community sector and business sector have led the way. They have closed facilities and businesses, and yet we still have children attending school along with a large workforce. We also have people who live in Donegal and cross the border to work or attend school in Derry. It just does not make sense.

If a school's board of governors decides to close the school, will there be any repercussions? Today, we are hearing that a third of pupils have turned up to school, so parents have already taken action themselves. Minister, we live on a small island with many variables in people's lives. We need urgent and decisive action on school closures today.

Mr Weir: I appreciate that was more of a speech than a question, but I will try and deal with it as best I can.

First, yes, a different approach has been taken in the Republic of Ireland, and, in part, that has been driven by some of its circumstances. There is less opportunity in the Republic of Ireland to close individual schools. It is also the case in the Republic of Ireland that there has been a range of geographical spikes, so its position is not quite the same.

Let me make it absolutely clear: this is not a political issue. If medical advice means that timing or action in Northern Ireland take a different position from those in either the Republic of Ireland or Great Britain, I will follow that advice because that is my only consideration. A global tragedy is coming, and we do not know whose family this will hit. At the end of this, I want to be absolutely certain that we have done all that we can and have taken the right steps to minimise the tragedies that are facing different families, from whatever community, and that is why I will continue to follow the scientific advice throughout.

Mr McNulty: I thank principals and teachers for the dignified and calm approach they have adopted in making decisions arising from the unprecedented crisis that we now face with COVID-19. Will the Minister please explain how the expert advice is so different between Crossmaglen and Castleblaney?

Mr Weir: I said to the last Member to speak that there is a different position in the Republic of Ireland. It has a different health system. We also have to look at the implications for our health system if we take large numbers of staff out of it. I said that the power to close schools rests on a slightly different basis in the Republic of Ireland, and that it has faced geographical spikes.

You may say that, at some stage, we will face a situation where there is a difference between Larne and Stranraer, which are only a few miles apart. We have to do what is best for public health in Northern Ireland. We cannot view this situation through the prism of a border. Indeed, throughout Europe, a range of different approaches have been taken. There is a difference between Germany and Denmark, which share a border; between Germany and France; between Spain and Portugal; between Austria and Italy. I could go on.

We have to take the professional advice. If we took a different approach to that advised by the Chief Medical Officer, who is the principal person giving that scientific, professional, medical advice, it would be highly irresponsible. It would be wrong and dangerous. It would risk the number of the deaths that we will almost inevitably see in Northern Ireland being greater. That is why his advice is the golden thread that will run through this. We should take that clear-cut medical advice.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Chambers: Minister, you are under a lot of pressure to replicate the closure of schools as undertaken by the Republic of Ireland. Are you in a position to confirm that its decision was taken on the heels of generic advice that it received from the European Centre for Disease Control? I will quote from two paragraphs in that document. It says:

"The impact of generalised school closure in limiting the progression of the COVID-19 pandemic is uncertain."

It also says:

"Therefore, proactive school closures should be carefully considered in the context of a series of other prevention and mitigation layers to reduce the transmission of COVID-19 weighing the expected impact of the epidemic against the adverse effects of such closures on the community."

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I remind the Member that there should be a question in there, please. A lot of Members are trying to get in. I ask Members to be concise and to sharpen their questions. Has the Member asked his question?

Mr Chambers: I have already asked whether the Minister was aware that that was what the Republic based its decision on.

Mr Weir: Decisions taken in the Republic of Ireland are obviously for the sovereign Government. They have to take their own decision. I indicated that the positions of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are different. Any expert medical advice will say that, when we reach the point at which schools close, it will have to be for an extended period. I was very surprised that the position in the Republic of Ireland indicated that it was a two-week closure. That will not wash this out of the system. When closures happen, they will be for the rest of the academic year or for the full term. We have to look at the implications, not just for a two-week period — people may be able to make particular arrangements for a fortnight — but what will happen over months to come. None of us should delude ourselves. Coronavirus will not be for the short term. It will be with us, potentially, for months to come. Therefore, there has to be a sustained and long-term response.

Miss Woods: Notwithstanding the clear need to address plans for schools and our children, as well as those providing childcare, I ask the Minister about the community and voluntary sector, which is engaged in providing after-school clubs, detached youth work and children and family mental health services. I am aware of a letter issued by the Education Authority to Youth Service providers on Friday. It stated that educational visits were to be immediately postponed until September. Does the Minister believe that that is satisfactory? What communication plan is being put together by the Department for the Youth Service and the youth, community and voluntary sector to let them know and keep them updated on their services and what they should do?

Mr Weir: It is likely that whatever decision is taken about the closure of schools will have implications for youth services as well. This is a blanket situation. When we reach the point where the Chief Medical Officer says, "We should not be gathering children together in schools", there is no point if children can gather in youth services. There has to be a uniform response.

There has been some good work. Youth services have proven to be very helpful and productive in respect of some of the thoughts that are ongoing between us, Communities and the Department of Health on how we can tackle the issue of providing meals as we move towards the free school meal situation. There is a productive role to be carried out there. We will be happy to engage with that, particularly with the Education Authority. I mentioned the cross-sectoral group that involves the various sectors, particularly the EA and CCEA. They meet on a regular basis. Obviously, they will have direct input in respect of youth services as well. It is important that all our facilities are made available.

The advice given to schools is publicly available; it should be on the departmental website and may also be on Northern Ireland Direct. It is, therefore, accessible. It is important that as much information gets out to as many people as possible.

3.45 pm

Mr Allister: Can the Minister confirm and be very clear that the professional medical advice that caused the Executive collectively to decide last Thursday not to close schools has not changed? If that is correct, is there any escaping the conclusion that Sinn Féin's decision to rat on that decision is entirely political?

Mr Weir: I can confirm that the medical evidence that was given was given directly by the Chief Medical Officer to the Executive, along with officials. I was present in the room when he gave it; I heard it at first hand. That is the position that the Executive reached. There has been no change in the Chief Medical Officer's opinion. It is for others to explain what has changed their position.

Mr Carroll: Does the Minister not realise that some schools are already closed and that his Department is acting too slowly to deal with the crisis? The advice from across the globe is that early intervention works, and it needs to happen here as well.

Mr Weir: I was not aware that the honourable Member for West Belfast was a virologist. The advice of the Chief Medical Officer is to have the right interventions at the right time to have maximum impact. He has given

direct advice that now is not the time to close schools. Some schools may take a particular course of action — I appreciate that — but, in the same way, there is a duty on all of us to behave as responsibly as possible. Sometimes, a crisis brings out the worst in people, and, sometimes, it brings out the best. We need to create a situation in which we are all pulling in the same direction. The key test for this should be the impact on public health. This could impact on everybody.

There is an expectation that, before this is over, it will impact on a very large number of people. I will be guided by the medical, scientific advice, but my key consideration — I keep coming back to this — is this: what is the key thing that will limit the number of deaths? Too early an intervention, for instance, can have an impact on the spike of cases. It may create a wave that pushes us into a main point in September/October when we are, perhaps, less able to cope with it. All those things are carefully worked out, and everybody is trying to take all the action that they can to diminish this as much as possible.

Ms Sugden: Will the Minister detail the rationale of the anticipated up to 16-week closure suggested by the First Minister at the North/South Ministerial Council at the weekend? How will that impact on students studying for qualifications? Will they, indeed, be able to conclude those qualifications?

Mr Weir: There are two things. Again, that is based on the medical advice. Previously, I was at a session at which the Chief Medical Officer talked about a minimum of 13 weeks. From a practical point of view, if you have a quarantine period of two weeks, you simply stall the problem and then release the same people back out. The clear medical evidence is that, if something needs to be done, it will need to be done for a considerable period.

The Member asked a good question about qualifications. We are working closely with CCEA on that. There is a wider context, which is that CCEA needs to plug into the broad exam regulator. There is also work ongoing with qualification boards from England and Wales because around 15% of our A-level students take English examinations. There has to be a UK-wide response.

I am confident that we will reach a situation in which, one way or another, qualifications will be able to happen. There are different routes to that because of the wider UK context, particularly as regards A levels. Around 97% or 98% of GCSEs come through CCEA. There is less of a direct problem in Northern Ireland because of our linear progression mode, but a range of options will have to be agreed on a UK-wide basis, some of which will be in conjunction with the universities. There are different options. The ideal situation is if we reach a point where students can simply sit their exams. We may look at issues around predicted grades or, indeed, later sittings. Universities may be responsive to that and have later start dates, because the grades that people receive will be critical to whether they get a university place, where they get it and what course they get on.

Mr Stalford: Does the Minister agree with me that it is important that, at a time of genuine national crisis, Members of the House do not engage in behaviours that are likely to cause panic? I refer specifically to the Member for Upper Bann, Mr O'Dowd, who used social media to

accuse the Government of engaging in a “twisted medical experiment”. I also refer — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Order, please.

Mr Stalford: I also refer to the Member for Foyle, Mrs Anderson, who directly tweeted the Health Minister. Does the Member agree that actions like that will simply cause panic in our society and we cannot engage in them?

Mr Weir: It is obvious that we all share deep concerns and fears. This is a time, though, as much as possible, for calm heads, for not engaging in colourful language that could exacerbate the situation and for avoiding anything that creates panic in our society. Unfortunately, we have seen some people panic. For instance, anybody going round a lot of our large shops will see the impact of panic bulk buying, which is not only unnecessary but deeply selfish. It may well deprive elderly and vulnerable people of things that they need. People are taking supplies that they could never get through. There is a task for all of us to ensure that we moderate our language and that this is done in a measured, calm way, given the scale of the crisis not simply here but throughout the world.

Ms C Kelly: Today, we have been informed that the Education Authority has directed its staff to postpone training in schools. Education conferences have been postponed, and education welfare officers have been told, “No home visits”. Was that a directive from the Department? Why is there a difference in the approach to school-based staff and pupils? Is their health more important than the children?

Mr Weir: Frankly, everybody’s health is important. The EA will deal with its own situations. All of us can agree that unnecessary gatherings and visits should not happen. One of the implications of whole-school closures is the impact that that would have on caring responsibilities for parents. If, for example, a group of adults decides not to meet another group of adults, that has no implication for front-line medical services. Taking a third of a million children out of school and relying on their parents to come out of their jobs to care for them will have a major impact on the ability of the health service and the emergency services to deal with this. That is why I think the two are completely different situations.

Mr McCrossan: It is safe to say across the House that teachers, principals and parents are absolutely already panicking regardless of what is said on social media or in the House. They are panicking simply because they see a lack of direction on this important issue. Many parents have already taken their children out of school because they are very concerned for their children’s well-being. If the Minister is so adamant and set against closing schools, what will happen to parents who make that decision in the interests of their children’s health?

Mr Weir: As I have indicated, we are working with the Chief Medical Officer where there are particular medical issues. Advice will issue on that. Unfortunately, as I have indicated, we have seen panic at different levels in our society. As a responsible body, we can try to provide calm leadership and reassurance, or we can fuel that panic. Unfortunately, too many people who hold positions of responsibility are helping to fuel that panic today. We need to adopt that level of responsibility. We need calm heads. We need to ensure that we do not exacerbate that panic.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for coming to us at such short notice and thank him for behaving in the manner in which he has, along with the Health Minister, and being so stoical in the face of such pressure. I speak as one with 16 years of emergency planning experience. I know that there are lots of experts in here on virology and viruses, but I just want to commend the Minister on his approach to emergency planning.

Has the Minister given any thought to what a start-up might look like or how difficult it might be, given that there are likely to be closures in the region of 14 to 16 weeks?

Mr Weir: A start-up?

Mr Butler: How difficult might a start-up be after a gap of 14 to 16 weeks?

Mr Weir: There will be a range of challenges. Broadly speaking, if we are looking at a lengthy closure, the emphasis will be on ensuring, as much as possible, that teaching and learning continue. This is not simply a question of sending children home and they will not be carrying on with school work as much as possible. There is a major challenge across the board. For example, with regard to remote learning, the C2k system may not be able to deal with a third of a million children. If there is difficulty, there will be prioritisation. It is undoubtedly the case that planning needs to operate over a longer period. That will be the challenge.

The Member has a great deal of experience in emergency planning. It is good to hear from an expert in the Chamber.

Ms Armstrong: Do you know what? I will declare an interest before I ask the Minister a question. I am the mummy of a 16-year-old who is going through her AS levels. I sent my child to school because I trust the Chief Medical Officer and the way forward. I commend the teachers who are trying to prepare ahead.

We are seven or eight weeks out from GCSEs, AS levels and A2 levels. The Minister started to allude to the problem with C2k. Not all parents can afford to buy tablets or have phones and things with which teachers can work. Given the stress that exams cause pupils, how quickly will those plans be in place to help teachers to deliver satisfactory outcomes for those children, who are trying their best to get through exams?

Mr Weir: The Member makes a valid point. As regards materials, we will need to work with a slightly mixed economy. While C2k will have the principal role, some will not have access to the internet and, indeed, with the roll-out of broadband, some will be in a physical situation. That will need to be worked through.

Trialling of C2k is being done to see what reach can be produced. In circumstances in which it is not able to be delivered to everyone, pupils who are going through those key examinations will be prioritised. Priority will be given to those doing A levels, GCSEs and AS levels. There is a range of options for examination arrangements. In Northern Ireland, we are in a better position because of the way in which we structure our courses. However, because there are implications for a reasonable number of pupils who follow examination boards that are outside Northern Ireland, I want to get an overall solution, rather than try to announce a particular route — it may change in any event — that, for the sake of argument, might impact on 90% of those doing exams but leave the other 10% wondering. I want to be able to give people a full picture.

4.00 pm

Economy

COVID-19: Support for Small Businesses

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I remind Members again that if they wish to ask a supplementary question, they should rise continually in their place. The Member who tabled the question will be called automatically to ask a supplementary question.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy to outline her plans to support small businesses and their responsibilities as employers as a response to COVID-19.

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): I thank the Member for raising this very important issue at a critical time for Northern Ireland. First, we should make no mistake about this at all: this is an economic crisis as well as a health crisis for all our communities. It is no coincidence that Governments across Europe are launching emergency fiscal stimulus packages, with the aim of limiting the economic damage that is accumulating. I am fighting to mitigate the worst effects of the crisis on the Northern Ireland economy, on our small businesses and, in particular, on our tourism sector.

Assessments by the OECD and the governor of the Bank of England suggest major disruption to the economy, with short-term growth projections slashed. From what we have seen so far, it looks more and more likely that the modest growth that was projected for here for this year will be wiped out, if not worse. My Department has been working hard to understand the economic and business consequences of the crisis, and, just this morning, I shared the economic sectoral assessments with Executive colleagues and the Economy Committee.

What is crystal clear is that businesses in the travel, tourism and hospitality industries have been hit first and are being hit hard, with an alarming drop-off in all sorts of economic activity. The Northern Ireland tourism and hospitality sector employs 65,000 people and generates approximately £1 billion per annum for the Northern Ireland economy. The coronavirus outbreak comes at the end of the quietest period in the tourism calendar, on the back of the period of uncertainty relating to EU exit and the collapse of Flybe, which has significantly decreased regional air connectivity. Businesses rely on the spring/summer season to build reserves and are therefore facing this crisis without the level of reserves that are needed.

To help everyone to appreciate the extent of the crisis, I will give you an insight into what is occurring. Hotels and restaurants are seeing a sharp fall in occupancy levels. Booking.com's forward bookings are down 80%. Titanic Belfast is experiencing a 50% drop in visitor numbers compared with this time last year. The first nine days of March show a 40% drop from this time last year. I have no doubt that, over the last number of days, that percentage may well have increased further. The industry estimates that there are around 3,000 tourism businesses that might not survive in the long term without immediate help for the sector. One of our largest tourist attractions has indicated that it will be able to continue for only 10 weeks without revenue if it maintains core staff on full salary. Its wage bill is around 40% of its costs, and that is the same whether

the business is large or small. Wages are therefore a significant element of the cost.

With the St Patrick's Day parades having been cancelled across Northern Ireland, perhaps it is worth reflecting on the fact that the Belfast parade alone is worth about £1.3 million to the local economy. Airline travel has been slashed. Reduced demand is affecting airports, and firms are curtailing business travel. The collapse of Flybe has impacted on about 200 local jobs and has had knock-on effects for workers at the City Airport. Retail is also beginning to feel the pinch, with footfall down by around 6% in Belfast city centre and by around 7% in Northern Ireland so far this year compared with the same period last year.

I have highlighted to you and to Executive colleagues the result of my Department's analysis. It is clear that the emerging issues are cross-cutting and require an urgent response. The Executive need to work collectively to help our businesses and people through this crisis and ensure that we safeguard employment. Everyone is seized of the need to act quickly, but this should not be about just the here and now. We will absolutely need a Northern Ireland stimulus package.

For starters, a number of the key measures announced in the Budget are England-only measures. We need to take action for Northern Ireland. The first step is for the Executive to ring-fence the incoming Barnett consequential. Funds are allocated across the United Kingdom, and the consequential in relation to coronavirus must be ring-fenced and used to mitigate the impact of coronavirus on the economy, health and different sectors across Northern Ireland. I will not stand by and let Northern Ireland businesses be left behind.

Secondly, we need to move faster and further. I have written to the Executive asking that we put together the fiscal firepower for an enhanced stimulus package to enable us to deliver what is available across the United Kingdom and to deal with the specific issues that will emerge locally. I look forward to your questions.

Ms Sugden: Minister, I anticipate significant cash flow issues over coming months, particularly for businesses in the service and retail industries. Will the Minister support a suspension of non-domestic rates for businesses of a certain size and, perhaps, use the money ring-fenced as a response to COVID-19 to try to get businesses over the worst effects of this virus?

Mrs Dodds: Thank you for your valuable question. Before I answer on the specifics of the question, I will say that, just before I came into the Chamber, I met representatives of the Northern Ireland banking sector. It is clear that cash flow will be a major problem for not just small but medium-sized businesses throughout Northern Ireland. Many in the hospitality and tourism sector rely on cash coming in immediately in order to meet the demands of investments that they have made or for staff purposes. They recognise that cash flow is an important issue. I have urged them to be flexible in their dealings with customers, particularly those that they have a long-term relationship with. Many of the banks were keen to stress that there is plenty of liquidity in the system and that, therefore, they are keen to offer flexibility to customers. Some are already undertaking a large programme of outreach to individual customers.

It is important that the message goes out from the Chamber that, if you have immediate cash flow issues,

you should quickly get in touch with your bank to talk about that. However, cash flow, borrowing or even deferral will not offer us cover either for the immediate period or for a recovery period. That is why the Executive need to look at something more. We discussed the issue of rates earlier today. I understand that the Finance Minister will take forward some proposals around that. I urge that those proposals are as far-reaching as we can make them because rates are a substantial bill that businesses have to face, particularly at this time of year. It should not be just a deferral of the payment. We should look at how we can help businesses with their rates in a very practical way.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Minister for the seriousness with which she is dealing with this issue. We know the widespread impact that it will have on our economy, so it is strong that we have a devolved Government that are dealing with this issue in a coherent way. We heard at the weekend that the British Government are engaging with industry in an attempt to try and find the additional ventilators that will be needed to deal with this crisis. Has the Minister engaged with industry locally to see whether some companies can diversify to provide the ventilators that will be needed?

Mrs Dodds: Yes. One of the things that never fails to amaze me is the ingenuity and ability to adapt of our businesses in Northern Ireland. In fact, there has been some specific contact between my Department and firms in Northern Ireland who wish to contribute in this particular way. However, that is only one of the issues. There are other issues that we will need to deal with for firms. The measures that we will need to take will include looking at the coronavirus business interruption loan scheme, which has been announced by UK Government, and how we can make that business-friendly for Northern Ireland so that, whether you are a business in Bristol, Belfast, Birmingham, Glasgow or wherever, you can avail yourself of the programmes that are available at a UK level.

We need to look at refunding statutory sick pay to SMEs and the small business grants scheme. Of course, the interest rate reduction in the base rate will have some impact. Although, interestingly, from talking to the banks today, many customers are on fixed-term interest rates. Therefore, the reduction will only apply to a small proportion or percentage of customers because most customers are on a fixed-term rate. There are significant interventions that we need to consider. My plea is that we consider them as quickly as possible. I have sent correspondence to the Committee, and I know that the Chair will progress this as quickly as she can. Working together, we need to tackle what is a very serious crisis for the economy in Northern Ireland and, in particular, our tourism and hospitality sectors.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Minister for her answer, which, as she has outlined, has been very stark. Unfortunately, it does not come as much of a surprise because I have been speaking to representative organisations and other people over the weekend and there is real concern out there. Some have already taken decisions to close — difficult decisions for them and their employees. It is likely that, over the next number of weeks, we are going to see more of that. Will the Minister seek to clarify that insurance providers will pay out on insurance for employers who have to close but still pay their workers?

Mrs Dodds: It is an interesting question, because there is the issue of the extent to which employers are insured. That

is a very big issue in Northern Ireland, without going into the statistics around it. On the issue of whether businesses should close or not, I think that in all of these things we should not be guided by what somebody has said. We should be guided by the science and what our Chief Medical Officer is recommending and follow the very basic things that we can all do personally, in our businesses and in our contact life to limit the impact of the virus on ourselves, our families, our communities and our businesses.

Ms McLaughlin: This is a major crisis, and it is combining the health and the economic crises. I am really concerned that some businesses have no choice. They have to close, because nobody is actually going into their business. People are social distancing, and it is happening as we speak.

Does the Minister agree that we need to urgently set up systems to provide financial assistance to those workers, including zero-hours workers and the self-employed, who are losing income because of self-isolation and self-distancing and, as a result, are being laid off?

4.15 pm

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for her question. Over the weekend, I was talking not just to the tourism industry but to Hospitality Ulster and various members, and I commend them for the actions that they have taken so far. They have voluntarily introduced measures on social distancing. Many of them are very worried about the impact on their business. Many of those businesses are small businesses and, as the Member who spoke previously outlined, cash flow is a huge problem for them. I commend them for their work and for the actions that they have taken so far and urge them to follow the advice from the Public Health Agency. In all these things, we should follow the science and not what we think is possible.

The issue of our staff and our workers is, of course, not just about business and making money; it is about families. I have been looking into some of the issues around what will happen. Last week, the Chancellor announced £5 billion of support for smaller businesses that are threatened with possible collapse because of cash-flow problems or absent staff, including a government rebate for the first 14 days, which accounts for about £94 a week of statutory sick pay. There is some action on that. Statutory sick pay will also be made available to all those who are required to self-isolate, even if they are not displaying symptoms, without the requirement to obtain a sick note from the doctor. For those who are self-employed or employed in the gig economy, there is a £500 million boost to the benefits system, which will include a temporary halt to the minimum floor in universal credit and quicker payments for employment and support allowance claimants. The Chancellor is clear that we need a safety net for people.

I was talking to the tourism sector and Hospitality Ulster, and it is something that my Department will quickly look at. If firms and businesses have to close, we will need to relocate some of those people into other areas of the economy. Many of them will have skills in food preparation, or whatever the skills are, that we may need in our hospitals and so on as this thing reaches a peak. We will be looking at that and at how we can set up platforms to look at how we can relocate people so that, if one business closes, there are temporary opportunities in other areas of the economy. That is an important thing for us to get on with as quickly as possible. We had some discussion at the

Executive this morning about how exactly we could do this, and we need to try to do it as quickly as possible.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for her statement. There needs to be a collective effort in response to this, because it is a public health emergency and an economic crisis, and bickering in the Chamber or on Twitter will not do businesses any good. We need to come together and deliver on this. We are not covering this place in any glory at all by what we have seen today.

Minister, when will you bring forward the measures that you have outlined? Will that include measures to help businesses that are struggling with cash flow — they are struggling with cash flow today — and, in that situation, how can we ensure that staff are not made redundant and that we can keep employees on so that, when we get through this crisis, they can be re-engaged and businesses can get back to work? Redundancies should be the last option. We should be keeping staff on.

Mrs Dodds: I absolutely agree with the Member. I think that our communities deserve clear, collective advice from the Executive, and I regret entirely that this has not been the case. For our party's part, we will continue to follow the advice of the Chief Medical Officer. We will put our faith in those who have spent a lifetime protecting the safety of the public in Northern Ireland and who know and understand how these situations escalate and the appropriate steps that are to be taken. So, you will not find a distancing on my part from the scientific advice and from the advice of the Chief Medical Officer and his heroic efforts to keep us safe in this emerging crisis. I regret very much that others took the opportunity to distance themselves from that advice over the weekend. That is regrettable and is not to the benefit of Northern Ireland and the people who we seek to serve. I made that perfectly clear at the Executive this morning. I am not saying anything in this Chamber that I have not said in other forums that are available to me. I think that that is very important.

It is important that we try to avoid redundancies and that we try to keep staff for as long as possible. Those are individual businesses for individual companies, but I want us as an Executive to have a Northern Ireland package to address Northern Ireland issues so that people, families and communities do not suffer unnecessarily.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for taking the time to come here and speak on this important issue. As has been covered already by a number of Members, the high street is under immense pressure, irrespective of the further pressures through the coronavirus. We are in that intervention stage, and the pressures are there. Has the Minister given any thought to a package that may be available to businesses on the other side that may have had to close down due to financial pressures and who are indicating to all of us, I am sure, almost daily that, if they have to close the door, they may not open again?

Mrs Dodds: I think that, regrettably, that may be the situation for some businesses, but we will try to put together a package that mitigates against the worst of the economic impacts of the crisis that we are now facing. I have been giving some thought to the fact that the hospitality and tourism sector in particular, after a very quiet winter period, is facing a very uncertain period over the next number of weeks and months. Therefore, we have to be ready with a recovery package, including for tourism getting out there with new, better tourism messages and

helping people to understand that Northern Ireland is open for business and wanting to welcome them to our shores.

As an aside and for information for the Chamber, I was in New York and Washington last week. I met a number of companies that are already investing and opening up job opportunities in Northern Ireland. I met other companies that, because of the quality and calibre of the workforce and the young people who are coming into the workforce in Northern Ireland, are on their journey of investing in Northern Ireland and creating jobs in Northern Ireland. I look forward to not just having a stimulus package to help us over the worst of the crisis but to helping Northern Ireland to get more and better jobs as we move into the future.

Ms Bailey: I thank the Minister for being here today. Before I ask my question, I would like to point out that the £94 statutory sick pay rate will not cover the rent for the week of the majority of workers.

I know that you are taking the long-term view and following the evidence, and that is good. A lot of the scientific evidence is trying to encourage us to practise social distancing. Particularly for the hospitality trade in my constituency, what we are seeing is not long term; it is right now. It is here. Tomorrow is St Patrick's Day, and we know that, every single year, thousands and thousands of people travel to the Holylands in south Belfast to party on the streets and in houses. Many of the bars in the area have taken it upon themselves to close, but many others have not, and many of the off-licences have not done so.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Would the Member have a question, please?

Ms Bailey: So, I am wondering is there any advice —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Excuse me?

Ms Bailey: — that the Minister can give to businesses in the area to try to stop the emergency services being put under such pressure tomorrow.

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for her question. I am, of course, aware of the cost of rents vis-à-vis statutory sick pay. I, too, live in the real world.

I know that the Member has worked consistently on this issue. I urge restraint and responsibility tomorrow as we celebrate St Patrick's Day, although in a more muted fashion than we would normally do. In my opening statement, I acknowledged that the St Patrick's Day parade and the ongoing events bring about £1.3 million to the wider Belfast economy. That is a very important contribution to the economy. However, there have been long-standing problems in the Holylands area, with some of the celebrations getting out of control.

Today and tomorrow, more than ever, people need to think of the wider good and of the communities around them and understand that they are putting themselves, their families and their friends at risk. They need to have some social responsibility to the wider community, and I urge that. I commend businesses that have taken measures in relation to this. Those are not easy decisions. However, I urge responsibility from the community at this time.

Mr Allister: I take the Minister back to the supplementary question that Ms Sugden asked her on the rates issue. The Chancellor announced a package that will effectively give many small businesses total relief in the upcoming period, and there is a Barnett consequential of some significant

proportion that works through. The Minister said in reply to Ms Sugden that we need to take action that will be:

“as far-reaching as we can make”

it. Will she commit to lobbying the Finance Minister, in the Executive, that there should be 100% relief, as is being afforded in GB?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. That issue will be addressed by the Finance Minister, and the decision will be taken by the Executive. For my part, as the Minister responsible for the economy, for the promotion of small businesses and for the care of those businesses in the community, it is important that we see action that is as far-reaching as we can possibly go. I personally would like to see rates relief for those businesses for the full term, but I am not in receipt of all the figures and information on that. I will allow the Minister his place in dealing with it.

Simply pushing back the term that you pay the rates or a deferral for a short time will not be enough for some small businesses. We will need to look at this in the round. It will be about rates relief. It will be about loans. It will be about flexibility from the banks. The Executive need to put together that total package that will be important to the economy.

Mr Carroll: I welcome the Minister's support for a stimulus package. She referenced an economic and financial crisis. Does she recognise that workers and vulnerable people were penalised in the last financial crisis? Does she agree that no workers, private or public, should be financially worse off? Does she support the measures that were introduced in Italy such as mortgage and rent suspensions?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. I recognise that many people, including those who own small businesses, were impacted gravely in the last financial crisis.

One of the questions that I asked the banks today was around their liquidity and their ability to support small businesses and families as we face an uncertain period of months. That is extremely important. I am reassured by their answer that they are operating in a time of greater flexibility, with greater liquidity and a better ability to support small businesses. Supporting small businesses means that we support families and communities, and I am absolutely concerned about that as well.

4.30 pm

Finance

COVID-19: Support for Businesses

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): As before, I remind Members that if they wish to ask a supplementary question, they should rise continually in their place. The Member who tabled the question will be called automatically to ask a supplementary question.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance to outline his plans to safeguard jobs and support businesses during the COVID-19 outbreak by providing support through the non-domestic rating system and any other measures within his Department's remit.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I am acutely aware of the extreme pressures on businesses and households at this difficult and uncertain time. There is already a range of reliefs and measures available to help household and business ratepayers. Further information can be found on the nidirect and the nibusinessinfo websites. People can contact Land and Property Services (LPS) if they wish to discuss alternative payment plans.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

My Department has been working over the weekend and is actively looking at options to provide additional support to businesses. I spoke with Executive colleagues this morning to discuss options for how we can best support ratepayers. I intend to make an announcement on that shortly.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for his statement. The COVID-19 issue is a public health emergency and a rapidly developing economic crisis. If an employer's company collapses, that risks workers' jobs and livelihoods. Businesses are worried sick about the difficult decisions ahead and about the risk of bankruptcy after investing so much time and money in their business. When does he feel that he will be able to bring forward those measures to the House? I ask because people are looking for decisions and direction very quickly. The Scottish Government brought forward a package on Saturday, and other Governments have been bringing forward packages in recent days.

Will the Minister issue a direction that government will not enforce the statutory payments that are in his gift, including the payment of rates, during the crisis? We should bear in mind that many businesses are struggling to pay and will potentially be unable to make those payments.

Mr Murphy: I fully understand the issues that are facing businesses, and we want to put together a package that recognises that there has been some movement from Westminster. This has given us some scope to do that. We also have our Budget, which we are setting, and, in that, we can look at the issue of business rates. We can also look at the timing of rates bills and at the other supports that ministerial colleagues mentioned.

On the timing of announcements, this morning's Executive meeting was interrupted because we had to come to the Chamber for business. We now have to conclude the Executive meeting. Any proposition that I make about spending money, or forgoing money that might otherwise be available to the Executive, requires Executive approval. We intend to make an announcement as quickly as we possibly can.

Mr Givan: The Executive rightly stepped in, with urgency, to avoid the cliff edge of welfare mitigation and help those facing that financial extremity. Will the Minister assure us that the same urgency will be applied when it comes to the cliff edge that businesses now face across Northern Ireland and that there will be a reprioritisation of budgetary expenditure that focuses on ensuring that our economy can get through this crisis?

Mr Murphy: First, we are in the position that we will be able to announce some support measures as a consequence of decisions that have been taken in Britain. From my understanding, those are the first in a series of measures, so we expect to get ongoing consequentials to

support business and other areas, because COVID-19 will affect not just the business community but Departments across the board, particularly Health. There is an urgency in trying to support that. There is a recognition — there was a very full discussion in the Executive this morning — about trying to face the crisis that this issue is creating right across public services, particularly in relation to the economy but others as well. Of course, we have the opportunity to set the Budget because we delayed beyond 11 March.

The Budget will, quite rightly, focus on responding to the crisis, but bear in mind that that involves not just business and the economy but support for our health services and the other services that may struggle as a consequence of what is coming at us. Of course, there are opportunities in the initial support that has come across and also through setting our own Budget. We have a range of issues to consider as part of that.

Mr McCrossan: We are certainly in unprecedented times. Businesses, in particular, are extremely worried about the impact that this is having on our economy, on them and on the welfare of their workers at this uncertain point. As you know, Minister, in Strabane there are many large businesses, such as O'Neill's, Frylite and others, that employ workers from both sides of the border. Will the Minister explain what the lockdown in the South will mean for those businesses and what support his Department will provide to them? Are there any conversations around taxation, VAT and the sorts with HMRC?

Mr Murphy: Some of those issues, such as taxation, VAT and discussions with Treasury around support for business, are the concern of the Minister who answered the previous question for urgent oral answer. We are not in a lockdown situation yet in the South, so obviously workers can travel across. There is a different emphasis on social distancing and restriction. Obviously, that creates significant concern. As a border dweller, I know the implications of having two different approaches in such close proximity and the added uncertainty and concern that that causes communities who live right across those areas.

Of course we want to offer all the support that we can. We want to provide reassurance to industry and business generally. We want to make sure that the economy continues to function as best it can in circumstances that recognise the health difficulties that are coming at us. We want to provide all the support that we can to ensure that business continues to function. That is measured against the support that will be required, particularly for the Health Service, but for other services as well.

Miss Woods: When will we get sight of the fiscal plans that the Minister of Finance and the Minister for the Economy mentioned to stimulate and support business and staff in Northern Ireland? How long do you envisage that recovery package lasting?

Mr Murphy: One of the difficulties of having to come into the Chamber to do business is that we actually interrupted the Executive meeting to take those decisions. However, the sitting was fixed for today, and Members are entitled to ask questions and raise these issues; they are hugely important issues for all of the constituents whom we represent, and they want to hear us talking about them in the Chamber. Ironically, it has affected the speed with

which announcements can be made. We hope to be able to give some sense of some of the measures that will be made available in the near future to assist businesses.

Obviously, this is an unfolding crisis. We will have to monitor the particular sectors of the economy that are affected by this because we do not have that data now. We have heard — as you have, I am sure — from virtually every sector about the challenges that this is going to present. Obviously, some sectors will be affected worse than others. Tourism and hospitality have been spoken about. We need to make some immediate interventions, monitor them on an ongoing basis and assess what might become available from Westminster. We have a Budget to set. I have asked Executive colleagues not only to work out what their bids may be in relation to specifically dealing with this but to identify where spend may not happen as a consequence of what is happening in terms of shutdown and slowdown across various departmental responsibilities, so that they can redirect some of their resources to tackling this crisis.

This is an unfolding issue, as the Member will know. We will try to get decisions as early as we possibly can to give some degree of confidence. Obviously, we will have to monitor and readjust those as time goes on.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister look afresh at the efficiency and suitability of his Department's hardship relief scheme for rates? He will be aware that, in a recent answer to me, he indicated that, in this current year, there have been only nine successful applications to it. In the past five years, the success rate has been about 25%. Does that not suggest, having regard to the hardship that businesses are passing through, that that scheme is not fit for purpose and needs to be revisited and made more usable by those who are in hardship?

Mr Murphy: I do not disagree with the Member. The hardship rates relief fund has not really been as effective as it could have been. We will want to look at that. It is important to remember that, if any ratepayer is experiencing difficulty, they are encouraged to contact LPS at the earliest possible opportunity because, in most cases, payment arrangements to assist can be put in place. I accept his criticisms of the hardship fund; it is something that the Department needs to look at as part of the overall rates review.

Mr Storey: The Economy Minister made a comment in relation to fiscal stimulus, and obviously there has been a lot of talk about a rates holiday. I notice that chambers of commerce wrote to the First Minister and deputy First Minister today. The issue that is perplexing many businesses in Northern Ireland is not that we are waiting for some medical diagnosis to determine what our response will be; they know now the challenge financially that they will face. What will the Minister do about rates relief or a rates holiday so that businesses today will have some certainty about how they will deal with this crisis?

Mr Murphy: The Member will know, as he was previously in my position, that I have to have that discussion with Executive colleagues and get their sense of it. We had wanted to make an announcement, but the enormity of the issue that we dealt with this morning meant that the Executive meeting was lengthier and there was a much fuller discussion. The issue was parked, and we intend to revisit it later on. The Executive meeting is restarting as

we speak, so I am keen to get back to it to develop these propositions.

The Member should know — I heard other Members raise this with the Economy Minister — that the rates holiday package announced by the British Government would cost us in excess of £200 million. The Barnett consequential that might come to us is probably less than half of that. It is a matter for the Executive, but if they were intent on following that through in full for businesses here, given the difference in terms of our approach, they would have to find the money from elsewhere. If that is a decision they take, that is a matter for the Executive, and they will have to try to discover that money from another source or cut other budgets accordingly to meet that.

That is the extent of some of the challenges facing us, but it is not to say that there is not a determination within the Executive to try to meet this, to recognise the very real difficulties that there are and to provide whatever support we can to business.

Mr O’Toole: I thank the Minister for coming to answer questions today. I appreciate that everyone’s time is of the essence. I have two quick and related questions. First, of the four big banks in Northern Ireland, 14% of the Bank of Ireland is owned by the Irish state; about 60 to 70%, or possibly more or all, of the Allied Irish Bank is owned by the Irish state; and about 60% of the Royal Bank of Scotland, which owns Ulster Bank, is owned by the UK Treasury. Given that, will he and the Economy Minister have urgent conversations with their counterparts in London and Dublin about what kind of liquidity and what genuine political leverage we can place on those institutions, because that is basically our entire banking sector?

My second question, reflecting what my colleague from South Belfast said earlier and reinforcing that, if this is on the news tonight and if anyone is listening and is going to the Holylands tomorrow, I say, “Don’t do it”. Will the Minister reinforce that message and say the same thing to publicans in Newry who might have the temptation of people coming up from Dundalk, or even further afield, to say, “Don’t open your pub”, and to those coming over the border, “Stay at home”?

Mr Murphy: In relation to the first part of the Member’s question, of course the Economy Minister has signalled that both the First Minister and deputy First Minister will be having discussions with the banking interests. As part of our discussions with both Governments, there was a meeting focused more specifically on the health issue, but I know that there is a desire and a plan to have further intergovernmental meetings over the next short period. That issue should be one of the items on the agenda to try to ensure that what the Executive are doing with public money is not contradicted by what the banks are doing with private lending and liquidity issues.

I absolutely concur with the Member. I think that Michelle O’Neill put it well yesterday when she said that this is going to be a different St Patrick’s Day. It will not be the same as normal for younger people. For some young people, there is an air of invincibility about them and they think that they will not get these illnesses. They may well not, or they may well survive them, but in coming into contact and potentially passing them on, they have to take into consideration their family members, their siblings who may

have underlying health issues, and their grandparents, for whom contact could be fatal.

4.45 pm

I urge younger people to think and act responsibly tomorrow, and the vast majority of young people are doing so. A significant number of people in the hospitality industry have voluntarily taken steps to deal with that, with many closing their premises. I have to admire them for that, because it is a real financial challenge at a time when the tourism season is starting to kick off; St Patrick’s Day usually heralds the start of that. A lot of people are socially responsible and recognise that we are in a very serious situation that we have never experienced in our lifetime and that that requires serious action socially.

Therefore I hope that premises owners and those who feel like going out tomorrow reflect on that and take a decision to stay at home and celebrate St Patrick’s Day in another way. There will be another St Patrick’s Day next year, and we will be out then to celebrate.

Mr Lyttle: Childcare and childminding small businesses are vital to the economy. Will the Minister commit to early engagement with childcare providers to help them to survive and to help us to respond to the coronavirus public health challenge?

Mr Murphy: There is a request from virtually every sector in business, and I have to be honest that if I commit to engaging with every sector, I might not be able to do what I need to be doing, namely providing support for all sectors. I am not saying that I will not engage with them, but I can give a reassurance to people in the business community that the Executive are urgently looking at what support measures we can put in place. We want those measures to assist all businesses, and we recognise the particular challenges.

I also recognise that if childcare providers go out of business and there is a return to full normality, those businesses will be needed to assist with that. So, there is a particular importance attached to those facilities to allow other workers to get back to work to rebuild our public services and the economy on the other side of this crisis. I very much recognise that, but I have to allocate my time wisely between the necessary business of the Department and with other Executive colleagues and getting out and engaging with people from various sectors.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his efforts on this issue. Will he give some assurance to the small-business sector, especially on the high street — those that still remain — that he will look very seriously at the issue of rates? The large supermarkets will gain from the recent influx of business, but the small businesses that are left on the high street are struggling and need help at this difficult time.

Mr Murphy: Yes, I can assure the Member that we will certainly look at that. In the very short term, some businesses are benefiting, particularly the big supermarkets, but that may not last much longer. The situation is evolving day by day and patterns are changing day by day, so it is very hard. It was only last Thursday that some announcements were made, and we moved from considering social restrictions on large numbers to almost discussing a lockdown within three days. So, this is a very fast-evolving situation.

Of course, we are looking at two phases. One is the immediate support that we can give to businesses to try to ensure that they can stay open and staff can remain employed so that we do not put pressure on the social services due to people being out of jobs and businesses hitting the wall. We want to do that in the immediate term. Then we have a Budget to set, and rates will be a central part of that. In the third phase, we are engaging in a wholesale review of rates generally; we want to improve the situation for businesses. We have three attempts. Whatever may come from London as Barnett consequential in the meantime might assist with specific packages for specific businesses.

As I said in answer to an earlier question, it is not possible to thoroughly assess which sectors will suffer the most, so we need to support all sectors initially. Then, over time, we will be able to assess who needs specific interventions.

Mr McNulty: I empathise with the concerns and fears of businesses and employees in the mouth of the unprecedented COVID-19 crisis. Our job is to give them reassurance.

The Minister will be familiar with a gentleman called Phelim Quinn of Quinn Coaches, who came into my office on Friday. He has a family-run business with 10 employees and 14 tour coaches, and, in 20 years of business, he has never missed a payment. Overnight, his April order book was wiped out. He does not know where he will get his money from or how he will stay in business. The same applies to small businesses like Minus 20, the Shelbourne Bakery, Macari's, Harford Copelands event management business, the Brass Monkey, McGrane Nurseries and multiple other businesses in our constituency. How can the Minister and the Economy Minister work together to ensure that the appropriate fiscal stimulus package of supports, and a rates holiday if necessary, will be put in place to give those businesses and their employees reassurance?

Mr Murphy: The Member makes his point well; the businesses that he named cross the entire business spectrum. If we were sure that this was hitting a certain sector, we would be able to direct support to that sector. We have to come up with a way to support business in general in the immediate term, and if further support package interventions come from London, we need to look at where they can be directed when we have a clearer idea of the affected sectors.

I have had contact from coach companies in the tourism sector that are immediately feeling the effect of a drop-off in bookings. They are almost in the front line of that. It is recognised that hospitality, tourism and the associated businesses are going to really struggle as a consequence of this outbreak, coming as it does in their busy season. We need to find a way to make direct interventions to support business in general, and, as time goes on, through our own Budget, through other Barnett consequential that may come our way, and through the rates review into next year, to target those in most need.

Ms Sugden: I welcome the fact that the Minister is to make a statement on a relief package. Can we expect rates relief or rates delay?

Mr Murphy: It may well be a combination.

Mr Buckley: Minister, over the past few weeks, we listened intently as you outlined the severe pressures facing our

public finances. Given the unfolding crisis, we know that that will get a lot worse very quickly and over a sustained period. Does the Minister agree that, over the next few weeks and months, the Executive must refocus their priorities to meet this unfolding local crisis?

Mr Murphy: I think so. To be honest, it was not for that reason that the Executive delayed their Budget. Coincidentally, that allows us to focus the Budget over the next two weeks. The Budget will be introduced on 30 March. I have asked Departments to come forward with plans and bids for specific measures to tackle coronavirus, and to do that collectively as an Executive. This morning, I asked them to look again at some areas of spend, which, given the unfolding circumstances, may not now be done by Departments. Some areas where they intended to spend money will not be possible over the short to medium term. I asked them to refocus their spending plans and to direct them towards the crisis.

There are opportunities for us to channel as much support as we can to tackle this crisis, but the Member knows that we have very limited resources. Even with additional support from London, our resources are limited, and we have to use them as wisely as we can.

Mr Durkan: Mr Buckley touched on the inevitable impact that this situation will have on the Assembly and Departments, and their ability to function. Has there been much conversation, discussion or thought across the Executive about the impact that this might have on our legislative programme, particularly legislation that is required promptly to extend welfare mitigations? It is vital that we know what we are doing should extraordinary action be needed to ensure that the worst situation that any of us will have experienced does not become even worse.

Mr Murphy: That probably is a function for the Speaker. Not only do Departments need to make plans but this institution needs to make a plan if it cannot function in the way that it does currently. I notice that only a few of us are practising social restriction at this end of the Chamber. If the Assembly cannot function in its normal way, it is incumbent on all of us to ensure that the democratic function of the institution can continue and that we remain able to pass the necessary legislation that will make an impact. We cannot allow that to fall.

This morning, the Executive discussed an emergency Bill in relation to coronavirus and the range of measures required. That legislation will have to be done very quickly. Other associated pieces of legislation will assist people as they personally face what might be very challenging times through jobs losses, reduction of income and the problems that go along with that.

So, that will be a matter for the Speaker. I have no doubt, from what I have heard, that discussions are happening as to how this institution can continue to function in what might be challenging circumstances, whereby we may not be able to secure — or it may not be wise to secure — full attendance. In the Dáil, there are suggestions of a reduced presence of TDs based on d'Hondt numbers, with an appropriate number from each party without crowding the place.

I am sure that there are other options that will be looked at for the Assembly, but it is essential that we get all the necessary legislation passed that we have to.

Executive Committee Business

Renewable Heat Incentive Inquiry Report

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly takes note of the publication of the renewable heat incentive inquiry report. — [Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]

Ms Sugden: I take no comfort from knowing that the outcome of the report was found to be incompetence rather than corruption; indeed, the weeds of corruption are more easily pulled than the deep-rooted incompetence and systemic failures that have the opportunity to unsettle the institutions above it.

What were the last three years for? I cannot begin to tell you what the last three years were for. They served no purpose, and they certainly did not serve the people of Northern Ireland. If I were to hazard a guess, I would say, “Political expediency”, and those who tried to do that even failed in their endeavours.

I want to talk about some of the elements that came up in the RHI report. A key word for me is “responsibility”. I was a Minister for all of nine months. It was a great privilege for me to be in that position and to have an opportunity to do wonderful things for the people of Northern Ireland, and that is what I sought to do. With great power comes great responsibility, to paraphrase my maiden speech in the Assembly in 2014, and it was my job as a responsible Minister to ensure that the mistakes of the Department were looked at and sought out and that the Department was held to account for them. I will go as far as to say that I would not have accepted the role of Minister if my spad had had more power than I; indeed, the Ministers who did have to share much of the blame and cannot blame others if they felt that they were under the thumb of special advisers.

We also have to look at the reform of the Civil Service. The legacy of the deep-seated Troubles in Northern Ireland has led to a circumstance in which we are not good at governance. We are too distracted by inter-party political fighting. The politics gets in the way of the policy. It is disappointing that, given the three years that have passed and the water under the bridge, the Assembly has again sought to move forward without good governance. I will reiterate and will not stop reiterating that the lack of an Opposition in the Assembly makes for poor governance. Ms Armstrong —.

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Ms Sugden: Yes.

Mr Frew: I will be quick. Now that she is a Member and not a Minister, she will realise that, when she submits questions to some Departments, it seems to be business as usual, whereby we as MLAs are not treated with respect and do not get the transparent answers that we sought through the question.

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his contribution. That is indeed disappointing.

I will make the point that I have made in the past, which is that Ministers should not fear opposition or challenge. If the policy is bad and cannot stand up to challenge, it is bad policy, and the people of Northern Ireland suffer. The Assembly suffers from the lack of an Opposition.

If anything, the RHI report and the need for good governance moving forward demonstrate that that is what we need as an Assembly.

A Member talked earlier about the fact that, if your friends are in the same camp as you, they will not make accountable decisions. If you are in a government party, you will not legitimately hold that Government to account. Moving forward, I would really like to see the recommendations in ‘New Decade, New Approach’ implemented to the point at which one of the governing parties might decide to go into opposition, to make governance in here better and so as not to repeat the mistakes of the past.

What I find disappointing about the RHI report is that the recommendations are what, I would have taken for granted, we should be doing already.

Our role is to ensure that we provide better services for the people of Northern Ireland. That did not happen here, and it failed at so many points.

5.00 pm

I come back to my point about the reform of the Civil Service. I am a big advocate that we should never go back to direct rule. The length of time that we had direct rule has caused the systemic failures. There was no one there to hold civil servants to account, and, in many cases, those civil servants are still here. No one was giving them the representation that happens on the ground to ensure that the policies that we put forward are right for the people we represent. We see that systemic failure. Our legacy of the past has led to an environment in which, perhaps, that would only have happened to the extent that it did in Northern Ireland. That is what we need to learn from.

When the Assembly was restored in early January, I asked for a root-and-branch review of the Northern Ireland Civil Service. I hope that the Minister of Finance, when he forms his subcommittee and it makes recommendations, takes a view on that.

Whatever your pursuit in the Assembly, whether it is towards a united Ireland or to maintain the status quo within the United Kingdom, we have to make Northern Ireland work. To do that, we need good governance. Sadly, nothing that I see put forward at this stage lends itself to that. That is disappointing. We should not let the last three years be in vain. Let us try to put confidence back into the people of Northern Ireland that we are capable and that we are here for a reason: for the people rather than the politics.

Mr Butler: The RHI inquiry report, unveiled on Friday afternoon, at long last brings some closure to the latest chapter in the discovery of systemic cultural dysfunction and political failure at the very heart of Northern Irish politics. Sadly, what seems to have gone relatively unnoticed and unmentioned over the weekend is the ongoing pain and suffering, loss and humiliation of the many legitimate users of the RHI scheme. At this point, they look to be the most significant losers of all. I sincerely hope, though, that that will not be the case.

For some of us in this room — I do not speak for all — the reputation of Northern Ireland politics and our attitude to our place in the Union are very important. That extends not merely to our behaviour in the Chamber but, perhaps

more importantly, to the wider nation and, indeed, the world. I must be candid and declare that it was the lack of credible, noteworthy, inspiring and visionary voices leading Northern Ireland politics that convinced me to get elected to this place. The scandalous findings in the report vindicate that decision.

In 2016, I was a member of the Public Accounts Committee, which, under the chairmanship of Robin Swann MLA, was making good headway. If not, at times, in the party-partisan, fractious manner of some, we tried to uncover the allegations of mismanagement, gaming, useful heat and other serious allegations suggested by the whistle-blower. Time will never tell us whether the PAC would have delivered the same analysis as Sir Patrick Coghlin's report, but, at a cost of some £15 million, I sincerely hope that the findings do not go up in a puff of smoke, to which the "Cash for ash" strapline lends itself.

As Mr Nolan cornered the air waves and Sam McBride captured the story in script, the reputations of politics and politicians and Northern Ireland plc were left in absolute tatters. I clearly remember that, at Question Time on a number of occasions in late 2016, I was spoken to by a couple of the Ministers referenced heavily in the text of the report in the most condescending of ways. A favourite put-down by those Ministers then — still being used as recently as the past few weeks — is to remind the new MLA, boy or girl, in the Chamber that they are clearly new and inexperienced, that, perhaps, they are not over the detail of the question or, perhaps, they should get their facts checked. Even then, I remember wincing and thinking, "How obnoxious", "How superior", and now, with all that we know, "How hypocritical".

Much has rightly been made of the influence and opportunism of spads and the lack of accountability and the blurring of roles and responsibility. I hope that, in the near future, as we explore new Bills and rules, we can, once and for all, protect those who have operated in an honourable fashion whilst removing the ability of less conscientious, unelected officials from interfering in matters that are absolutely outside their jurisdiction.

With regard to unwelcome and unjustified interference by unelected sources, the sharing of RHI-related documents and other matters by the then Finance Minister to more sinister sources, further compounds the disdain and lack of trust felt by most of the voting population since that time.

It is noteworthy that project mismanagement or fiscal failure by senior departmental officials is highlighted repeatedly in the report, and we must ensure that systemic cultural change at the highest level is effected in the Civil Service. However, that cannot distract from the real cost to Northern Ireland and the role that RHI played in bringing these institutions, which mean so much to some of us, to a shuddering halt for three years.

The world is in crisis. The spread of the coronavirus, our growing mental health problems, economic inactivity, poverty and homelessness need to be our combined priorities in the near and distant future. Dealing with those key issues will require politics of trust, honesty, maturity and humility and politicians with a vision for a better future for all our communities in this country. The question is whether the findings and other facts pertaining to this sad debacle will be enough to change some of the attitudes, habits and failings of some in our near past and help

rebuild trust and faith in elected politics, which should and could be the pinnacle of public service.

Mr Speaker: Thank you for that. No other Members have indicated that they wish to speak, so I call the Minister of Finance to conclude and make his winding-up speech. He has 10 minutes.

Mr Murphy: The contributions this morning and this afternoon have underlined the critical importance of the inquiry report to the development of good government. There is much to be done to ensure that such a failure cannot happen again. The Executive have agreed to establish a subcommittee, which I will chair, to oversee the work across all Departments, and we will bring a full report on the actions taken and proposed for the inquiry's findings and recommendations to the Assembly before the summer recess.

I want to respond to specific issues that were raised in the debate, some of which were raised by more than one Member. Some Members chose to focus almost exclusively on the report's findings in respect of the Civil Service. The report and the challenges contained in it go across Ministers, special advisers and civil servants. That is why we have already moved to improve the codes that apply to all three. Of course, we will have a further review of the Civil Service. A specific course of action has been proposed, because the Civil Service is responsible for its own disciplinary proceedings. Nonetheless, the Executive subcommittee that I will chair will look across all areas that are responsible and are found to be responsible for change that is required as a consequence of the report. Some people have chosen to focus as if the sole subject of criticism was the Civil Service, but there was a significant share of criticism across Ministers and special advisers as well.

Members also referred rightly to those who were on the scheme and have been left in difficulties as a consequence of the decisions taken. I recognise that. It is for the Department for the Economy to bring forward propositions in relation to the scheme, whatever may replace it and how people who are currently on it will be treated. I look forward to the Department bringing that. It has been raised as an issue by a number of Members.

Andrew Muir raised a specific point in relation to whistle-blowing that I want to respond to. As part of the Civil Service response to the issues in the RHI scheme and the evidence to the inquiry, a Civil Service-wide review of whistle-blowing policies and their operation has already taken place. Specific areas for improvement were highlighted in three Departments, and those Departments have taken action to address the issues identified. When people from outside the Civil Service raise matters of concern, the draft revised Civil Service code of ethics makes it clear that civil servants have a responsibility to take seriously any such concerns raised and ensure that it is properly addressed. The code forms part of the Civil Service employment contract and outlines the high standards of behaviour that are expected, and new arrangements for speak-up champions who will drive change in Departments are being developed.

A further point was raised by, I think, Kellie Armstrong in relation to the panels. I am not sure whether it was on the ministerial code panel or the panel in relation to the Civil Service, but I am happy to give answers on both.

The Executive have agreed enforcement arrangements for ministerial standards, and that will be published shortly. The proposal follows from the transparency and accountability working group that sat during the talks. It proposes three panel members for ministerial standards who could be called on to investigate alleged breaches. They would work on an ad hoc call-off basis. The Assembly Commissioner for Standards would be included as an ex officio panel member. Panel members will be able to indicate the relative severity of any breach. Responsibility for determining the nature of the appropriate sanction will rest with the authorities with the power to impose sanctions, which, in this case, is the Assembly and/or the Minister's party. The sanctioning authority would be expected to explain its decisions on sanctions publicly. The Assembly has the power to exclude a Minister from office or to censure a Minister for breach of the Pledge of Office under section 30 and section 51D of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 respectively. Resolutions under both provisions require cross-community support. Panel members will be appointed as soon as possible.

Members asked about the external Civil Service disciplinary panel. The panel members for it are June Milligan, Niamh O'Donoghue and Jim Barron. June Milligan is a Civil Service commissioner; Niamh O'Donoghue is a former secretary general in the Department of Justice and Equality in Dublin; and Jim Barron is a former senior civil servant who worked for the Cabinet Office.

Claire Sugden raised the issue of the review and reform of the Civil Service. I assure her that that is actively being considered, and I hope to bring forward proposals in relation to that. Obviously, the inquiry, as well as throwing up issues for Ministers and special advisers, has thrown up significant issues in relation to the Civil Service. There is an appetite in the Civil Service to assist in that reform, and I intend to bring propositions to the Executive in the near future in relation to that.

In conclusion, I appreciate the input of Members to the debate, which has been wide-ranging and invaluable. There can be no doubt that the Assembly must take seriously the conclusions of the inquiry. The Executive, likewise, will give our response to the inquiry report a high priority in the coming days and weeks, and we will bring our plan back to the Assembly to allow for full scrutiny of it. In the meantime, as I set out previously, I do not intend to provide interim updates but will respond to questions by reference to the commitment that I have already made today for the production of that plan. We have an opportunity to oversee the transformation of government here. It is in the interests of the whole community to see that change happen, so we will work together to effect real and lasting change. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly takes note of the publication of the Renewable Heat Incentive inquiry report. — [Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]

Common Agricultural Policy (Direct Payments to Farmers) (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

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

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I beg to move

That the Common Agricultural Policy (Direct Payments to Farmers) (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

As the House will be aware, the UK-wide Direct Payments to Farmers (Legislative Continuity) Act 2020 — DPLC — which received Royal Assent on 30 January 2020, incorporated direct payments EU legislation into domestic law for claim year 2020. The Act contained powers to make further regulations in order to correct deficiencies in domestic law to ensure that the Department can administer the direct payment schemes effectively and make eligible payments to farmers in 2020.

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

The House will also be aware that DEFRA has made two UK-wide statutory instruments to address inoperable provisions in retained EU law: the Direct Payments to Farmers (Amendment) Regulations 2020; and the Finance, Management and Monitoring of Direct Payments to Farmers (Amendment) Regulations 2020. Those statutory instruments also amended the domestic legislation that enforces EU direct payment rules in England. Furthermore, Scotland and Wales have made similar legislation, and it is necessary for DAERA to do the same to ensure that Northern Ireland domestic legislation is also fully operable.

The changes contained in the Common Agricultural Policy (Direct Payments to Farmers) (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 — annex A — are minor and technical. As I said, they are necessary so that the rules continue to operate effectively in Northern Ireland for 2020. The Assembly will be aware of the importance of that to support the farming industry.

I will now provide further details on the nature of the technical amendments, which will correct two regulations. First, the amendments to the Common Agricultural Policy Basic Payment and Support Schemes Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015, SR 2015/191. Amendment 1, to regulation 4, clarifies that paragraph (3) refers to article 22(1) of the Horizontal Implementing Regulation (EU) No 809/2014, as it relates to the 2020 scheme year direct payments. Deadline for applications remains unchanged at 15 May. Amendment 2, to regulation 12, removes references to EU regulation 1307/2013 that have become incorrect due to how the EU regulation has been retained in UK law.

Operability amendments that were made by DEFRA to the EU regulation have changed those references. Minimum claim size, which is what is specified by regulation 12, is unchanged at three hectares.

5.15 pm

Amendment 3 to regulation 16 removes an incorrect reference to article 2(c) of the direct payments regulation

1307/2013. That regulation relates to the tree species that can be considered as short coppice rotation, which can be used to meet ecological focus area requirements under greening.

Amendment 4 to regulation 20 is a rewording to include the words:

“as it had effect immediately before exit day”

That is to make it clear that the reference is to the EU regulation as it applied before the EU exit, and therefore extend the areas designated as environmentally sensitive permanent grassland on 31 January 2020 to 31 December 2020. There is no change to the fields that are considered to be environmentally sensitive permanent grassland and are subject to a ploughing ban. As was previously the case, permanent grassland — land that has been in grass for more than five consecutive years — that is located in areas that are covered by the habitats directive and birds directive is considered to be environmentally sensitive and is subject to a ploughing ban.

The Common Agricultural Policy (Control and Enforcement) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015, SR 2015/192, amendment 1 to regulation 1, corrects the reference to the definition of “direct payments”. Amendment 2 to regulation 1 clarifies references to EU regulations or how they have been retained in UK law, that is, after the operability amendments, and relate to direct payments for the 2020 claim year.

Amendment 3 to regulation 7 excludes the reference to a Commission official to accompany an authorised person at an on-farm inspection for the 2020 claim year. As claims for 2020 will all be paid from national funds, there is no need for the EU Commission to carry out audits and visits to farms.

On 12 March 2020, my officials briefed the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. I am grateful to the Committee for facilitating that briefing. To sum up, my view is that the regulations should be approved in order to ensure that direct payments can continue to be made to farmers in Northern Ireland for the 2020 scheme year.

I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Mr McAleer (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I thank the Minister for moving the motion. I welcome the opportunity to speak as Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and to outline the Committee’s views on the motion.

The Committee became aware of the changes to direct payments to farmers when it received a briefing from the Department on 21 January 2020. At that meeting, officials updated the Committee on its proposal to ask the Assembly to give legislative consent to the Direct Payments to Farmers (Legislative Continuity) Act 2020.

Members heard that EU direct payments legislation, which provided the legal basis for common agricultural policy pillar 1 support to farmers, would no longer apply from exit day on 31 January 2020. The Act provides powers to fill the legal gap that was created through the withdrawal agreement of 19 October 2019, and incorporates EU legislation into domestic law for the direct payments scheme for the claim year 2020. It also creates delegated powers to make subordinate regulations to ensure

that legislation operates effectively from a domestic perspective. The delegated powers in the Act also enable any deficiencies in domestic legislation in respect of the 2020 scheme to be corrected. Members welcomed the legislation and forthcoming subordinate legislation, which will ensure that the Department has the ability to administer direct payments to farmers without any delay, as well as being able to process payments to eligible farmers for the 2020 claim year.

Members welcomed the reassurance from the Department that no changes to the application process were planned that could have the potential to complicate matters further for farmers. That was one aspect on which we had been lobbied very heavily by the farming sector. The sector very much welcomes the fact that there will be no complications or changes, and that it will, effectively, be a rollover for 2020.

At its meeting on 27 February, the Committee considered a written briefing on an SL1 for a statutory rule, arising out of the Act, on the direct payment to farmers. We are debating that statutory rule today. The SL1 made it clear that there was an urgent need to correct deficiencies in domestic legislation relating to the 2020 payments to farmers. The Committee considered the issue and indicated that it had no concerns or objections.

The Committee received a further oral briefing from the Department on 12 March on the proposals to bring forward the statutory rule, entitled the Common Agricultural Policy (Direct Payments to Farmers) (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2020. The officials advised the Committee that the regulation is minor and technical in nature and will provide assurance that direct payments will continue to be processed for the 2020 claim year. We very much welcomed confirmation from the officials who came before us at the Committee last Thursday that the full payment amount will be made in October. That will be very welcome in the farming community. The Committee also learned that the jurisdictions of England, Scotland and Wales have made a similar technical amendments using their own procedures.

The Committee posed a number of questions to the DAERA officials, including on confirmation that the funding allocation for 2020 was still estimated to be £293 million and that the timelines for the 2020 payment year would remain the same for the application and assessment process. We are glad to say that the Department confirmed that that was the position and that it is still on track to process and issue 100% of the payments from mid-October onwards. The Committee was content with the proposals from the Department and recommends that the statutory rule is confirmed by the Assembly.

I turn more broadly to my role as spokesperson on agriculture and rural affairs. The topic of the direct payment permeates strongly throughout agricultural and rural communities. Indeed, throughout our scrutiny of the Agriculture Bill and the statutory rule that is before us today, the issue of direct payments runs very deep. Recently, we received research findings from Dr Dobbs and Dr Gravey of Queen’s University, which indicated that, without the direct payments, as many as 30% of farms would cease to exist. That, in turn, would result in high levels of land abandonment, unemployment and, obviously, knock-on implications for services in rural areas.

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In my constituency of West Tyrone, single farm payments totalled £43 million last year; that is the absolute backbone of our rural economy. Without that, the effect on farming families would be absolutely phenomenal. The representatives of the Livestock and Meat Commission (LMC) who attended last Thursday's Committee meeting drew on that point as well; that the direct payments are crucial for the sector to survive and, particularly, to try to stem the decline of the beef and lamb sector. The certainty around the direct payment, for this year at least, is very welcome. People from rural backgrounds will know that our farmers face a great many issues, including climate change. That is maybe more profoundly felt in the hills and severely disadvantaged areas.

We have looked at many other issues, including income. We noted recently that farmers' incomes had dropped by a staggering 25% in the last year. That should also be noted in the context that the overwhelming majority of a farmer's income comes in the form of direct support. That is really important. People who are not farmers should realise that, whilst the farmer is subsidised to produce food, the subsidy is, effectively, passed on to the consumer, who is able to buy food for a reasonable price. That is a really important point; people who are not farmers think that farmers are getting grants and support but do not realise that the subsidy is passed on to the consumer who can, then, buy traceable, tasty, nutritious food at a good price that they can afford.

Low farm-gate prices is a huge issue, as is climate challenges. We also have the challenges of Brexit. Something that has come up in the Committee, time and again, is the prospect of Britain diverging from here and the EU regulations and the implications for the market given that 75% of our produce goes into Britain. That is absolutely crucial, as is the continuation of the direct payments. Whilst we have certainty this year and guarantees that the amount will remain the same for the remainder of the Westminster mandate, we do not know what will happen after that. We see farmers in Britain effectively being incentivised to leave farming. We do not know what implications that will have for the future here.

We are also looking at changes such as the immigration-points rules that the Home Office plans to bring in. They will have a huge impact here, particularly on our food-processing sector. There are factories and food processors here, up to 90% of whose employees are new nationals. We also have about 1,500 seasonal workers who come here, particularly at harvest time, and are hugely important to the industry. There are many challenges posed by the immigration-points rules that the British Home Office proposes. Many of the farmers that I met over the weekend — and no doubt some in the Chamber — are relieved that the red diesel rebate was spared in last week's Budget. However, we are also looking at possible removal of the agricultural property relief, which could lead to inheritance tax and the inhibiting of the intergenerational renewal of farms. Again, that feeds into concern for the future.

Of course, our most prevalent concern is how to deal with coronavirus. The Minister will no doubt be heavily involved in trying to work out the Department's plan on that. Indeed, on Thursday, officials will give the Committee a briefing from the Department's perspective, focusing on legislative and operational matters and what advice they will give to

the industry. Indeed, the matter arose when the LMC was at Committee last week. The point was made that there are exceptional challenges for the farming community, as it is perhaps more challenging to deep-clean farms and factories than other institutions, and it is difficult to lock down a food supply chain. In this era of great uncertainty, anxiety and unrest, we need to appreciate our farmers and food producers more than ever so that they can give us the security and supply of food that we need.

We welcome the motion. There are many challenges facing the sector, and this will at least give farmers at some degree of certainty for this and the coming year.

Mr Irwin: I declare an interest as a partner in a farm business that is in receipt of a basic farm payment. I welcome the motion. There has been a considerable discussion of this matter at the AERA Committee. I have found it very useful to hear submissions from various industry leaders and representative organisations that are involved in agriculture in Northern Ireland.

The post-Brexit era that we are entering will offer opportunities in the long-term interest of agriculture in Northern Ireland. I am optimistic about the future outside the fetters of the European Union. The legislation before the House is necessary to enable a transition from the EU basic payment towards a new system of support that can be properly tailored to the realities of farming in the United Kingdom.

The process for reaching the new system of payments will intensify in the coming weeks and months. It will continue to be important to canvass the views and opinions of farmers and stakeholders in the industry to arrive at a system that is best placed to support, sustain and grow agriculture outside the EU. Change is coming with a new system of support. How that change is managed and implemented will direct the course of agriculture and wider food production in the UK in coming years. Agreeing this motion will bring an important element of stability in the shorter term and allow for the continuation of an engagement process between the Stormont institutions, Westminster centrally and, of course, the industry.

5.30 pm

The exchange rate for the payments being set at last year's rate is also a welcome reality and has given confidence to farmers, which is another important factor for the industry. The fact that payments can be made in full in October 2020 is another welcome addition, and, as I said on a previous occasion in the House, thanks must go to our Department staff for working hard to create a payment system that has delivered payments on time. Farmers have adjusted well to the online system, and that, in no small part, has accelerated progress in this regard.

With the current COVID-19 response, we are seeing across the globe a renewed importance attached to food production and, indeed, more critically, locally accessible food production. That should be considered more acutely, and the United Kingdom must create a food production network that utilises local producers as much as possible. That creates a lesser reliance on outside sources for food and helps to achieve greater sustainability.

I look forward to the discussions and debates ahead on the replacement support scheme or system, and I will continue to represent the farming community to achieve the best

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possible outcome for sustaining and growing agriculture in the future. I support the motion.

Mr McGlone: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister for this.

The direct payments to farmers legislative continuity regulations before you are of critical importance to farmers across the North. Crucially, the payments make up a significant proportion of the income generated by our farmers. They have been a lifeline through many difficult months and are worth more than £280 million of farm income. Let us not forget that farmers have been in receipt of basic payment scheme payments because it was a widely held belief that what they were doing was in the public interest and, therefore, it was imperative that they should be supported, correctly so.

Brexit now raises so many more uncertainties for our farmers. That is undeniable. As soon as the referendum result in 2016 became clear, SDLP representatives consistently pressed the Government to outline their plans to replace this vital income; indeed, colleagues, these payments and the millions more we received from the EU are part of the reason why the SDLP resolutely opposed Brexit. It is clear that the uncertainty caused by Brexit over the last three years has impacted negatively on many different sectors, not least farming, given the uncertainty that has been created. Today, we have the opportunity to finally provide some clarity to farmers across the North by continuing to fund direct payments. Whilst the common agricultural policy had its weaknesses and imperfections, at least it provided our farmers with some sort of security on a year-on-year basis and an ability to forward plan with some degree of certainty. With the ever-increasing impacts of climate change and extreme weather patterns, the last thing that farmers in our rural economy need is further uncertainty. Our farming industry is about to be opened up to unprecedented global competition. Our farming communities have uncertainty regarding their future funding and the competition that they may now face.

Whilst the legislation is welcome at this moment and provides some hope, the uncertainty seems destined to continue, with the legislation providing welcome months — months only — of clarity. Can we really expect to have a settled agriculture policy and a replacement payment mechanism in place by the end of 2020? That is one of the reasons why the SDLP has sought a transition period extension. Why are we not seeking breathing space for our farmers by requesting that the basic payment scheme extension be much longer?

The payments have already gone some considerable distance towards improving public health, animal welfare and environmental standards, but there remains a lot more work to be done. Whilst few would argue that there has not already been a welcome shift in emphasis on improving the environment, adapting to climate change and protecting the welfare of our livestock, we need to be mindful that this is enabling legislation. The detail to be set out in regulations will need to be drafted and approved before farmers can be sure about what the new payment system will mean for them. If we want to ensure that any new scheme is robust, properly monitored and measured and transformative, we need to engage in a purposeful manner with our main players in the agriculture sector. As we all know, that takes time.

It is important that the direct payments legislation for 2020 is entered in the statute book. We need to think carefully about the years ahead, as our farmers need to be able to plan ahead. Once again, I welcome the regulations and the fact that the UK Government will provide upwards of £250 million of support for 2020. However, there is no mention of what support will be provided in the following years. Can the Minister provide assurances that support will not drop off dramatically for a key sector of our community? In the current health climate, there will be increasing uncertainties. Local food supply will be a key element in making sure that we get over the coronavirus crisis.

For our farming communities, the prospect of losing perhaps 60% of their income with no real certainty about what their replacement income will be will certainly not be an incentivisation. It is possible that many small farmers may decide that now is the time to quit. As we all know, farming is not an easy career option. It is increasingly difficult to attract young people into the industry, and we do not want to have a bad situation become worse. We are all too painfully aware of the increase in poor mental health among farmers. We must be mindful of the pressures that they already face when it comes to making decisions that influence heavily their futures.

I am concerned that farmers may be somewhat in the dark as to exactly what their income is likely to be beyond this year, and I would be grateful for the Minister's comments. Like any other business, farmers need to make a profit. With regard to our environment, can we realistically expect our farmers to go green if, in fact, they are in the red? In the future, I look forward to schemes that will hopefully allow us flexibility, are focused on outcomes and, where possible, are tailored to the needs of individual farmers, particularly those in upland and less-favoured areas. Those farming communities are often forgotten.

I ask Members to join me in supporting the regulations, and I thank the Minister for his efforts in this regard. Without them, farmers would be even more severely prejudiced against in future. However, although we accept the need for the legislation and that it is now inevitable, we cannot accept that it is an ideal situation. Much work remains to be done.

Mrs Barton: The welcome confirmation of direct payments for 2020 will be good news for the farming community, which has faced uncertain times in recent years and has seen its income reduced by 25%. Further, the clarity that it provides in the form of the exchange rate remaining similar to that of the last year and the fact that 100% of the direct payments will be paid in October is most beneficial, particularly when farmers are trying to plan ahead for farm improvements for the forthcoming year.

The full payment of direct payments, not the 70% initial payment that happened in October 2019 with the remainder paid in December 2019, has also signalled that, as a country, Northern Ireland is now moving towards taking control to regionalise a Northern Ireland-tailored scheme for our Northern Ireland farmers. The certainty that the 2020 scheme will provide crucial comfort for farm businesses will continue to support the production of the high-quality, affordable food that many of our consumers demand. That can only be welcomed. The regulations are welcomed by the Ulster Unionist Party.

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Mr Harvey: I thank the Minister for tabling the regulations. First, I welcome the amended regulations, which, as has been outlined, will provide for the continuance of direct payments following the EU withdrawal and the subsequent ending of the UK legislation under which payments were previously administered. Those living in rural communities will be all too aware of the importance of payments received under the policy and of how vital they are to farm businesses across the country. It is important that decisions on CAP are taken in consultation with all those involved and that farmers are provided with as much certainty as possible to enable them to best plan ahead. The extension of the current framework and the adoption of the amended regulations will provide for that.

It is evident that any future policy must be compiled in light of the UK's trading position beyond Brexit. That will, undoubtedly, have a major bearing on what help farm businesses will require and, therefore, on what form the new policy will need to take.

The Ulster Farmers' Union, with other union representatives, was before the AERA Committee recently. It was evident that their members are in need of continuity and stability, given the fact that there has been an estimated 26% depletion in income for farmers over the past two years. The retention of some form of resilience payment, incentivising production and growing sustainable, environmental activity will need to be considered in a future policy. We must also ensure that Northern Ireland farmers can compete with their counterparts in the Republic. In the meantime, provision for the continuance of direct payments under the CAP scheme is essential, and I thank the Minister for ensuring that that is the case.

Ms Sheerin: The purpose of the statutory rule is to make minor technical amendments that will address deficiencies in our domestic law, namely section 24 of the NI Act 1998. The SR is intended to bridge a gap in legislation enabling direct payments to be made for 2020. The powers in the statutory rules are time-limited and expire on 31 December 2020. The rule will ensure that existing law functions effectively for the direct payment scheme for this year. The regulations have not been subject to consultation because their purpose is to retain the status quo for this year. Effectively, the rule will provide continuity and stability, albeit limited, for farmers in receipt of direct payments for this year only.

As everyone is aware, funding for direct support to our farmers currently comes from the EU as part of the common agricultural policy. What people might not be aware of is the impact that that funding has had on our rural farm families. Sinn Féin is gravely concerned at the loss of CAP single farm payments to farmers in the North of Ireland as a result of our exit from the EU, which, as people will remember, was a decision made against the wishes of the majority of the population here.

Between 2014 and 2020, the single farm payment was worth in excess of £2.3 billion to farmers and their families in the North. In my constituency of Mid Ulster, payments in 2018 alone amounted to more than £29 million. That is a huge amount of money. Think about the number of rural households, small businesses and independent contractors that have been able to keep their lights on as a result of that funding. That is not something that we can dismiss. Annual payments from the European Union account for 87% of annual farm income here, compared with 53% in the UK

as a whole; in other words, for every £10 that farmers in the North earn, the common agricultural policy accounts for £8.70. The challenges faced by our farmers, who are engaged in a livelihood that has no guarantees, no monthly salary and no statutory sick pay, are exacerbated now by uncertainty about the future.

The purpose of CAP pillar 1 funds is to support agriculture sector incomes. In 2017, the European Union issued a communication on agriculture. 'The Future of Food and Farming' outlines the main objectives of the future CAP to:

"Foster a smart and resilient agricultural sector

Bolster environmental care and climate action and to contribute to the EU environmental and climate objectives

Strengthen the socio-economic fabric of rural areas".

Central to achieving those objectives is that direct payments remain an essential part of CAP, unlike the English draft policy, which phases out direct payments. It will be for a Minister to decide future agricultural support here in the North. I am aware that schedule 6 will provide the legal basis to continue direct support for farmers after this calendar year. Also, according to the Treasury statement, while the North will receive £279 million for 2020-21, it is not clear how much money will be allocated for direct payments for farmers beyond that date.

Sinn Féin responded to the Department's 2018 discussion document on a future agriculture framework. That engagement exercise by the Department received 1,200 responses from across the North, a sizeable number made all the more significant when you consider the rural areas across the North with little to no broadband provision.

Sinn Féin wants to see our own primary legislation evolve from that consultation. We have an opportunity in this mandate to look at having an agriculture Bill that is designed to cater for and best serve our all-Ireland economy.

5.45 pm

The Government in the South of Ireland invest more heavily in agriculture than the UK Government. A number of weeks ago, I spoke at length about areas of natural constraint (ANC) payments. Those have been scrapped in the North, while the South has increased them to €250 million for this year. It is vital that we retain and enhance our share of the CAP budget to help mitigate trade distortion across the island. Sheep in Glenties in Donegal are no different from sheep in Glenuillin in County Derry.

Ivor Ferguson, the president of the UFU, recently stated:

"We were pleased that the withdrawal agreement took into consideration the current political situation in"

the North.

"The level of support payments given to agriculture in"

the Republic

"must be tracked and matched so that"

the North's

"competitiveness in the all-island economy is maintained."

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Data on farm income revealed that dairy farmers and cattle and sheep farmers had the lowest average farm-business income in 2017-18 across all the devolved regions. Given that that was the case even when they were in receipt of EU direct payments, the cessation of payments does not bear thinking about. The rule is necessary to provide some certainty for our farmers as we plot our way through the uncertainty ahead.

Ms Dolan: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. As has already been highlighted, the SR makes technical amendments only. It will have no policy impact. The amendments will ensure that direct payments to farmers under retained EU law will continue to operate effectively in the North as far as they relate to direct payments for this year, 2020. Farmers will receive payments the same as last year. It is my understanding that 100% of payments will be made in one payment in October of this year. I also note that Scotland and Wales have adopted the same regulations.

Sinn Féin is an all-island party. We have a vision for the agri-food sector in a new and united Ireland. Agriculture has led the way in all-Ireland cooperation and trade. Agriculture in an all-Ireland context will enhance and strengthen the social and economic needs of our society. Agriculture, farming and food are interconnected: they are the backbone of our communities. I represent Fermanagh and South Tyrone, which, as I outlined in my remarks a few weeks ago, sees approximately £48 million a year in single farm payments direct to farmers. As I also highlighted in the recent ANC debate, Fermanagh as a county has almost 92% of land that is severely disadvantaged. I welcome the fact that the Assembly supported the implementation of a new areas of natural constraint scheme. It goes without saying that the farming community in Fermanagh welcomed it. Fermanagh is a cross-border community, where my neighbours, my family and my friends live their daily lives with euro in one pocket and sterling in the other. Border counties will be impacted on the most by the challenges of Brexit. Any changes to what we currently have will be a disaster. People work and operate on borders throughout Europe, but, when it comes to Ireland, the only real difference is the colour of the postboxes or the road markings. Agriculture is one of the most important industries in the North, with an annual turnover of £4.5 billion and a workforce of almost 48,000 people.

Regarding GDP and employment, the North of Ireland is more reliant on agriculture and the agri-food industry than any other area of Britain. Agriculture operates on an all-island basis. Greater support for small farms has more environmental benefits than supporting large intensive farming practices, especially in severely disadvantaged areas (SDAs), where land management and biodiversity are very important. Being the daughter of a small farmer and having grown up on a small farm, I saw the importance of that at first hand.

Although the regulations provide some form of continuity and certainty for farmers, the devastating impact that Brexit will bring to the agri-food sector and the farming community in the North of Ireland cannot be overestimated. We have no answers to so many questions. We welcome the unfettered access on an all-island basis that the Irish protocol will bring in. It will help our economy to operate on an all-island basis. However, we will not have a level playing field when it comes to farm

support. Research shows that the North of Ireland is the most reliant on agriculture regarding its share of GVA and percentage share of total employment. Compared with Britain, Scotland and Wales, the North has the smallest average farm size. Grass-based cattle and sheep account for 89% of the total number of farms in the North. We have more dairy cattle and sheep less-favoured-area farms than any other devolved region, with 70% of the total agricultural area farmed in the North defined as being less favoured. That brings challenges in productivity. Figures reveal that farm income here, including that of dairy farmers and less-favoured-area cattle and sheep farmers, is the lowest of the devolved regions.

Farms are reliant on EU direct payments. As a result, the agri-food sector is reliant on EU direct payments. Consequently, our economy is reliant on EU direct payments. I support the statutory rule.

Mr Boylan: I welcome the opportunity to speak to this motion. I was talking to the Minister in the corridor a couple of weeks ago. Unfortunately, I did not get the opportunity to sit on the AERA Committee, but I have a good interest in it, representing one of the best constituencies in the North, Newry and Armagh.

Sometimes, when we speak about the rural and farming communities — this is not any slight on any Committee members — they do not get the recognition that they deserve for the contribution that they make to the economy and the environment. I went to the Christmas show mart in Keady, and anybody who might think that they could take the farmers for granted would get their eyes opened. If you spend a day in the mart, it is a learning experience for those people who have not tried it. Any urban people who have not spent a day in the mart should go down for one day at least, and you will get your eyes opened to what it is all about. I recognise the contribution of the rural community and the farming community.

As I said, I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate and await with bated breath to hear how the Minister is going to get himself out of this one. Whilst I recognise that the 2020 payments will be secured, we are going to have great difficulty over the next number of years in trying to address the concerns of the rural community.

As has been said, the intention of this statutory rule is to make technical amendments in order to ensure the operation of the direct payment scheme for 2020. I also note that Scotland and Wales have adopted the same regulations, basically so that there are no policy changes. Farmers will welcome the fact that for this year — 2020 — there will be no changes to direct payments, the application process or inspections. That will provide a degree of certainty and continuity in what are uncharted waters for some of us. Whilst we have certainty, as I said, for this year, there are concerns in the agricultural sector that it cannot survive without financial support. In the constituency that I represent, Newry and Armagh, £25,113,862 a year comes in from single farm payments.

I also welcome the fact that the Assembly voted in favour of the new areas of natural constraint scheme a couple of weeks ago. The farmers in my area will welcome that, and I congratulate all the Members who took part in that debate and secured it in the House.

In a presentation to the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee, Queen's University flagged that,

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without direct payments, 30% of farms are likely to cease functioning, which will lead to unemployment and land abandonment. That is deeply worrying for the agricultural sector. We are very proud of our agri-food industry and our farming community. We have international customers buying our products, based on our high-quality standards. Our farm operations are based on high standards, regulations, farm quality assurance and traceability. We produce food to standards that are amongst the highest in the world. We need to design a future agriculture policy that is based on the needs of our sector in the North of Ireland.

In a recent presentation to the Agriculture Committee, the Livestock and Meat Commission (LMC) highlighted the following figures for cattle and sheep producers: approximately 20,000 farmers are classified as cattle and sheep producers, and the 2018 figures show that they represent more than 25% of the gross output of farms; the beef and sheep meat processing sector employs over 5,000 people, and, in 2017, its annual turnover was in excess of £1.31 billion; over 87% of sales were outside the North, primarily servicing the GB marketplace.

We must tell the positive story of our industry. These figures highlight the need to give financial support to our farming industry. The LMC has also highlighted a concern that the sector could be completely undermined as part of UK trade deals due to the implementation of a cheap food policy at any cost. As we move forward, we need to confront the challenges that Brexit poses to our rural communities, agriculture and farming. Agriculture and farming are policy areas that will be significantly impacted by Brexit. As we know, there are many economic benefits for local communities from the subsidies that local farmers receive. What would be the consequences if those farmers did not receive those subsidies or if those farmers went out of business?

In conclusion, I am interested to hear what the Minister is going to do for the good people of Newry and Armagh following the 2020 direct payments. I support the motion.

Mr McGuigan: As the Deputy Chairperson of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee, I note and welcome the comments made by the Chair about the issues before us, and also his comments about the industry having come before the Committee to give evidence on this and other issues. I welcome the Minister bringing the SR to the Chamber today. I welcome approval of the regulations before us, and the direct payments to our farmers here in the North. This support, and the knowledge that their payments will be made in full this year, will bring some relief to farmers across the North. I also welcome the Minister's comments, when the issue first came to the Floor, that the limit on advance payments, which was 70% of the total payment in 2019, has been removed. As a result, his Department intends to make full payments in October.

I note and welcome the comments from the Ulster Farmers' Union:

"As the Brexit process progresses, it is vital that"

the North's

"competitiveness in the all-island economy is maintained. The level of support payments given to agriculture in the"

South

"must be tracked and matched."

Of course, as has been said by others, the certainty that this SR brings is only for the short and medium term. What we do not know is now long these vital direct payments will last for and what they will cover in future. All this uncertainty, of course, is a consequence of Brexit. The European Union placed a priority on farming and protected it for decades through the common agricultural policy. Annual payments from the EU, as has been said, account for 87% of annual farm income here in the North. We now face the uncertainty of what will replace that payment and whether or not our agriculture industry will be adequately funded. I, for one, have no great confidence that it will. Therefore, whilst we have clarity for this year, we do not have that clarity for the years beyond that.

Our farming and agri-food sectors are vital to our economy and to the fabric of our communities, and that is particularly true in my rural constituency of North Antrim, where these direct payments are worth over £29 million to local farmers, their families and the local economy.

North Antrim gets the third highest contribution across the North, and, given the number of major companies that have been lost in that constituency in recent years, the number of jobs that have been lost as well and the impact that that has had locally, the importance of direct payments to local farmers is clear, and we must do everything that we can to protect it.

6.00 pm

Investment and support is needed to deal with the consequences of Brexit and the challenge of farming more sustainably. It is therefore critical that there be adequate funding to replace the EU funding that is being stripped away. It is also critical that we have a policy suited to our farming and agri-food industry across the whole of the North, a policy and funding that supports sustainable farming and family-run farms.

It has to be said that single farm payments and EU membership have done more than just offer direct payments to the agriculture sector in the North; they have played a huge role in increasing environmental and public health standards. That must continue.

I support the continuation of the direct payments. I support the SRs. I do not support — other Members have mentioned it — the uncertainty for our agriculture industry and farmers beyond 2020. Any future agriculture policy must ensure that there is no diminution of food standards as a result of any potential trade agreement that the British Government may reach. We must also ensure that there are no barriers to trade. Others mentioned the British Government's rules on migration policies and how they will have a negative impact on our agriculture industry.

I support the SRs, but I ask the Minister to do all that he can in future years to ensure adequate funding and support for our agriculture industry in the North.

Mr Poots: I welcome the comments made in the debate. Agriculture remains the most important element of industry in Northern Ireland. It employs in or around 100,000 people, has a turnover of £5 billion each year and provides food for close on 10 million people. Agriculture remains a

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key part of our society; it is part of the fabric of our society. It should not be dismissed as being of no relevance; indeed, the recent outbreak of coronavirus should drive home to people the importance of having quality food available at a source close to home.

I was with the Chief Scientific Adviser in the Irish Republic last week, and he believes that such viruses could come on a more regular basis as the years go forward. It could be in a particular breed of animal next time, or it could cross into humans. We do not know. However, we can expect that there will be more viruses across the world. Consequently, food security should be important to all of us. Having quality food produced in Northern Ireland, on the doorstep of the GB market, is something that should be appreciated and supported.

I welcome the fact that it is being supported to the tune of £293 million this year; indeed, four of the Members who spoke from Sinn Féin quoted the figures in their constituencies. They are gobbling up £129 million in four constituencies. Thank you for giving me that useful information. It is appreciated and taken note of.

As we move forward, we will seek to ensure that we can retain as large a single farm payment as possible that supports production, the environment, animal health and food quality and supports companies that do their job well and provide good care for the people they employ. Those are the food standards that we in Northern Ireland want to meet. We can face head-on the South Americas of this world by doing that, because we have the qualitative material going on to the supermarket shelves that the public need and want.

The European Union was mentioned. I hear what was said about uncertainty. There is uncertainty. We have a manifesto pledge from the Conservative Party, but what exactly that will be, going forward, has not yet been tied down. However, does anybody believe that there was certainty in the European Union? Europe is just going into a round of talks for the next seven years. The one thing that I am certain about is that the slice of the cake that we would have got, had we remained in the European Union, would have been smaller, because, reasonably, the countries that joined the European Union — the accession countries — had not got their fair share of the cake, and part of the deal the last time round was that they would get their fair share the next time round. There are only two ways in which to increase payments to the accession countries. One is by increasing the European Union's taxation on all nations, but I do not think that the other nations will wear that. Will the big contributors, such as Germany, France, Denmark and Holland pay more? In the absence of them paying more, the only way that the accession countries can receive more is if they take something off the other countries. That is exactly what will happen. Let us be honest with the farming public — they know it anyway; farmers are ahead of the politicians most of the time —.

Mr Stalford: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Poots: I will give way in a moment. Farmers know full well that, had they stayed in the European Union, they would have seen their single farm payment diminished.

Mr Stalford: Will the Minister also reflect that, now that the 28 is 27, those who, up until this point or relatively recently,

enjoyed being in the position of net recipient will quickly find that their club membership fee rises rapidly?

Mr Poots: Over the past number of years, the Republic of Ireland has been contributing, I think, in and around £700 million net. That is likely to rise to over £2 billion as things stand, and, having been a net recipient for many years, they might find that it is not as desirable a place to be when they are contributing large amounts of money and having most of the laws made for them and most of their democracy stripped away from them.

We will seek certainty; that is what Members are asking for.

I welcome the fact that farmers in this part of Ireland — Northern Ireland — will receive all of their money in one payment, in October. I know that some Members want it to be as it is for farmers in the Republic of Ireland, which would mean that they would not get it all in October; they would get only 70% of it and 30% later on. I did not hear Members say that precisely, but they were saying that they wanted to be the same as the farmers in the Republic, which would mean that we would give them only 70%. I have good news for the people whom Sinn Féin represent: I will give them 100%, not the 70% that Sinn Féin wants to give them.

It is an important issue. Farming incomes have been down 25%, two years running. That is well over 40% when taken cumulatively. This is an important element of farm income. Ultimately, we need to work across the board to drive up profitability, because this does not cover the pressures that farms are under. We need to push to drive up profitability, and the best means of doing that is by ensuring that we have qualitative markets — the best market that we have is the Great Britain market, which takes around 50% of our product — and no barriers. No barrier is of benefit to any person in Northern Ireland when it comes to trade between Northern Ireland and Great Britain.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Common Agricultural Policy (Direct Payments to Farmers) (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

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

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

Private Members' Business

Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill: Second Stage

Mr Allister: I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill [NIA 01/17-22] be agreed.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: In accordance with convention, the Business Committee has not allocated any time limit for the debate. I call Mr Jim Allister to open the debate on the Bill.

Mr Allister: For me, the catalyst in drafting and moving the Bill undoubtedly was much of the evidence that was laid before the RHI inquiry. Even before we had a report, it was abundantly clear that there were many issues — some of them compellingly basic — that needed to be addressed by the House. That is what the Bill would do.

I make it plain that I am not in the business of usurping the role of the Executive in what they need to do in consequence of the Coghlin report. The greater number of recommendations — matters touching on the future of the Civil Service, on the management of public money, on all those things — patently fall within the ambit of and require consideration by the Executive. However, there are other issues that can be actioned now; indeed, I believe that there is a public expectation, having listened to the evidence, that those issues will be addressed. We have had lots of words today about the Coghlin report. Now is an opportunity to put some of those words into action.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Allister, could you resume your seat briefly? It has been brought to my attention that we are inquorate, so I will suggest that the Division Bells be rung to allow us to reach a quorum in the Chamber and then we will proceed with the debate. I hope that Members will forgive me but it is important that we get this right [Interruption.] Doug Beattie MC has arrived, so we now have a quorum. I beg your pardon. Mr Allister.

Mr Allister: Thank you. Well, the public may well observe the studied disinterest in making things better in regard to these things.

There is a public expectation that action will be taken as swiftly as it can be taken on issues that can be addressed — such basic things as making sure in law that there is a requirement for minutes to be kept of meetings. It would astound anyone from outside Northern Ireland who starts to read the Coghlin report to see such basic gaps in how this place has been administered, that there has been a lack of taking minutes of meetings. Equally, there is nothing to stop us — indeed, there is everything to speed us — taking action against the leaking of confidential information and taking action in favour of statutory requirements to register interests.

None of that requires to be ruminated on by the Executive. That all speaks for itself. Clauses 6 to 11 of the Bill, which I will come to shortly, are all crisp, almost self-contained issues, each of which is crying out for action.

6.15 pm

I have heard it asked, when I appeared before some of the Committees, “Can we not handle all this through codes? Do we not have codes of conduct and a ministerial code? We have a code of conduct for special advisers. Is all that not enough?”. The answer, in querying whether that is enough, is to recognise that codes are exactly that: they are just codes. They can be unmade as quickly as they are made. Indeed, there was significant legal action across the water about a code of practice that was made by the Health Secretary under the Mental Health Act. That case went all the way to the House of Lords, and Lord Bingham, who is noted for his contributions on public law jurisprudence, had a very concise riposte on the status and value of codes. He said:

“It is in my view plain that the Code does not have the binding effect which a statutory provision or a statutory instrument would have.”

That is a truism. There it is. A code does not have the binding effect that a statute has.

Perhaps the most compelling argument for why these matters should not be left to codes is that codes already, in the experience of this House, have proved insufficient. The old code, for example, on special advisers, specified:

“Special Advisers should conduct themselves with integrity and honesty. ... They should not misuse their official position or information acquired in the course of their official duties to further their private interests or the private interests of others. ... They should not without authority disclose ... information which has been communicated in confidence”.

Paragraph 24 stated:

“As a civil servant high standards of confidentiality must be observed.”

They must not disclose information that is held in confidence.

So, we already had provisions in codes, but what worth were they when it came to some of the evidence in regard to RHI? It is quite clear from that evidence that special advisers, or one in particular, despite the protections of the code, was, nonetheless, doing the very thing that was prohibited. That makes the point that a code is fine but is not enough. That is why I argue that we need to put all those things into statutory form, so that they have, in the words of Lord Bingham, “binding effect” and so that to defy them is to break the law. We may have thought a few years ago that you would not need to reach that position, but I think that it is quite clear that we need to get to that position.

On the point of how easily codes are made and unmade, we saw how, overnight, the previous First Minister, along with the Finance Minister of the day, simply changed the pay bands in the codes in respect of special advisers and boosted them from the £70,000s to £92,000 a year. A code can be made and unmade as easily as that. I do not think that that is a healthy position to be in.

Little wonder then, I suggest, that, when the Minister published updates on his codes of conduct and codes of appointment, the editorial in the Belfast ‘News Letter’ had no hesitation in saying that codes are not enough.

John Manley said something similar in 'The Irish News'. Suzanne Breen said something similar in the 'Belfast Telegraph'. All of them are respected political analysts and journalists.

Of course, we are in the bizarre situation that, although 'New Decade, New Approach' promised that existing codes would be strengthened, in fact, when it came to the code on the appointment of special advisers, they were significantly weakened. The old code required Ministers, in making their choice, to have a pool of candidates from which they made that choice. The old code required that they should keep a written record of how and why they made that choice. The Minister of Finance came along and stripped all that out of the code of appointment. How was that strengthening the code?

Of course, that is exactly an issue that was raised by Lord Justice Coghlin. If you look at some of the findings in respect of that, findings 305 to 307, you will be struck by how critical he was of steps that were taken in that regard. Findings 305 to 307 state that:

"305. It is clear from the evidence received by the Inquiry that both of the two main parties in the Executive, the DUP and Sinn Féin, breached the spirit and/or provisions of the 2013 Act passed by the Assembly and the mandatory codes issued by DFP in accordance with sections 7 and 8 of that Act in one way or another.

306. At the time of Mr Cairns' appointment as SpAd to Minister Bell in DETI in 2015, some two years after the passage of the 2013 Act" —

which brought in statutory codes —

"and the mandatory appointment code, the procedure was not, as required by the appointment code, by way of a competitive selection from a candidate pool set up after a trawl by Minister Bell, but was instead conducted by the DUP through its then leader, and the then First Minister, Mr Robinson.

307. Minister Bell accepted that the practice adopted in signing the letter of appointment effectively 'camouflaged' the complete failure to comply with the appointment code."

It goes on, in finding 308, to state that:

"The Inquiry finds that the practices adopted by the DUP and Sinn Féin in centralising the appointment, control, and management of SpAds effectively frustrated that purpose of the democratically enacted legislation."

It was quite clear that Lord Justice Coghlin was aghast that when the codes, which did exist, did require a pool of candidates to be considered and did require a record of that to be kept, were just ignored, it created the circumstances of which he speaks.

Yet, instead of strengthening that, we now have a situation where that code has been weakened; stripped out of it is the requirement for candidate pools, and everything else. If the Bill proceeds, I will, at a further stage, seek to strengthen — actually strengthen — the code of appointments, not weaken it in the manner in which that has been done.

That caused me to ask a series of questions for written answer of the Ministers: how many were in the candidate pool that they considered? Did they keep a note or record? Not one Minister has been prepared to answer those questions. They have all taken refuge in saying that they made appointments in accordance with the existing code. That was not my question. The question was this: how many were in the candidate pool, and did they keep a note of that? They failed to answer. Even on the openness and transparency business, that is a failing. Codes are not enough. Matters need to be put in legislation because only legislation gives binding effect.

Let me move to some of the Bill's clauses. Clause 6, of course, is that which requires the records of meetings by the Civil Service. It states that:

"The Civil Service will make and keep an accurate written record of every meeting attended by a minister in departmental service, recording, in particular, those present, date and time, topics discussed, each ministerial indication of intent and every decision and action point."

Now, I remind Members that Dr Crawford told the inquiry that, in seven years in DETI, he had never seen minutes of a meeting involving a Minister. That is astounding. In fact, Members will recall that the evidence was that the Minister and her spad communicated by Post-its, which were then readily disposable — politics by Post-its. Members will recall that Mrs Hepper told the inquiry that no records were kept about the whistle-blower. Mr Sterling told the inquiry that there was a conscious decision not to record, for fear of FOI requests. Mr Brimstone told the inquiry that that was not the way they worked. Mr Ó Muilleoir said that there were no minutes of the important meetings that he had with Simon Hamilton about the business case — but he did, of course, email Padraic Wilson.

It is quite clear — the findings of Lord Justice Coghlin are there, and recommendations 26 and 27 make it plain — that there should be notes. There are eight separate findings in Coghlin's report that there was no keeping of notes when there should have been, hence recommendations 26 and 27. I say to the House that, codes in the past having been breached, it is not enough. We need to move to a statutory provision requiring the keeping of minutes. The keeping of minutes is a protection for everyone, not least for the civil servants. Indeed, one of the things that is striking about the inquiry report and the evidence is that, more often than not, the civil servants did not have answers that might well have been there had notes been kept. It is a protection for anyone.

Clause 7, then, requires Ministers and special advisers to:

"log and retain records of all meetings they hold with non-departmental personnel about departmental matters".

I will give Members one or two examples. The House may recall the evidence that a former Finance Minister, Mr Storey, held a meeting with Moy Park along with Dr Crawford, with no civil servants present and no notes kept. That is exactly the sort of item for which a log should be made if there was no note — "Today we met with". There has to be a trail of such things. Indeed, we also know that there were multiple meetings between Dr Crawford and Moy Park, none of them logged whatsoever. That

is just not good enough. It does not speak to good and accountable government. It is something that needs to be changed.

That takes me to clause 8, which is about the presence of civil servants. They:

“must be present and take a contemporaneous note at every meeting held by a minister or special adviser with non-departmental personnel about departmental matters”.

I will give Members a couple of glaring examples where that did not happen. I have mentioned the then Minister Storey’s meeting with Moy Park.

I remind you that the evidence was that, the Monday after that meeting, Moy Park started to push for new applications before closure; that is in the evidence. We know that there was then a meeting in Brazil between the leaders of Moy Park and Mrs Foster, Dr Crawford and Alastair Hamilton, the CEO of Invest NI. They were all on a trade-type mission to Brazil. They had civil servants with them, but the evidence to the inquiry was that, consciously, the meeting was held without civil servants. Why? Why should the House accept that? I say that it should not, and that is why a clause such as clause 8 is necessary. Some might say — and it has been said to me — “You cannot account for every single incident when, as a Minister, you bump into somebody and they say, ‘Can I have a word with you? I want to raise this or that’ and they raise it”. Yes, that will happen but that is why clause 7 is there. You then log that fact — “I had a conversation last night at a dinner. It was about Moy Park or whatever” — so that there is a record. Clauses 6, 7 and 8 complement each other in that regard.

6.30 pm

That brings me to the use of official systems. The RHI inquiry was littered with evidence of people consciously not using the official email and electronic systems. Why? I would say that it was because they wanted to hide matters. You will recall the evidence of Minister Bell. Though he said that he used only his departmental emails, in fact, the evidence turned out to be that he used only his Hotmail account; Dr Crawford likewise. Mr McCormick gave evidence about it being expedient to do that. I direct you to Lord Justice Coghlin’s finding 204 and recommendation 41 that electronic means of an official nature should be that which is used. I want to make the non-use of official systems a criminal offence so as to create a real deterrent. However, I recognise that there can be unforeseen circumstances, situations in extremis, where someone does not have immediate access to the official systems and has to use their own phone, private email or whatever; fair enough. That is why I provide within this a defence of “reasonable excuse” if anyone is charged. Of course, to be charged with any criminal offence, it has to be in the public interest. It is pretty unimaginable that, if someone used a non-official facility in a situation in extremis, it would ever pass the public interest test to prosecute them.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes.

Mr Wells: Does the Member accept that that can happen? There is nothing to stop the official, Minister or civil servant, when he gets back on to the Civil Service system, sending that email from his private email address and

logging it on the official system saying, “I had to do this in extremis. I am now regularising the situation by putting it on the system”, where, of course, it can be the subject of FOI.

Mr Allister: Yes, quite so. Lord Justice Coghlin made that point in passing at one stage. Indeed, it might be a suitable amendment to clause 9 to impose such an obligation on someone in circumstances where they have used unofficial facilities, so that it is all regularised. Again, it seems to me that these are pretty self-evident things that need to be addressed and should be addressed.

Clause 10 is about the register of interests. It is important that public servants, and civil servants who are special advisers, need to be under a statutory obligation to make a declaration of interest. Until now, they effectively have not been. You think of the links that Dr Crawford patently had, through family, with Moy Park. You think of John Robinson, who had family members in the RHI scheme but was the spad in the Department for the Economy, which was administering it. You think of Mr Brimstone, who was a beneficiary of the scheme but who never recorded anything in a register of interests. You think of the evidence about Dr Crawford removing the reference in a document to the poultry industry being a cause of the spike. On a more trivial level, you think of Mr Bell and his big turkey.

Findings 310 and 212 and recommendation 40 of the RHI inquiry report all refer to the requirement for a register of interests. The system that I have suggested is that the register of interests should be held in the Department of Finance and that it should be published. Interestingly enough, New Decade, New Approach talks about addressing the issue of a register of interests, but where it falls down is that it does not require it to be published. It simply requires it to be formed. If we are in the business of openness and transparency, just as the MLAs’ register of interests is declared, that of a special adviser, and, indeed, a Minister, should be published. That is what clause 10 is all about.

Clause 11 brings us to the second new criminal offence: the offence of unauthorised disclosure. Examples are multiple, such as Dr Crawford to his family, information to a brother-in-law, and all of that, and confidential information to Gareth Robinson. Remember the evidence about that, Members? There was confidential information given to Gareth Robinson for another individual. Privileged legal documents were given to Gareth Robinson. Why should that not be a criminal offence? There was the evidence that Timothy Johnston got the list of recipients of RHI via Robinson from McCormick. Of course, there are findings relating to this: findings 179 and 185 and recommendation 41. I say that we should make the unauthorised disclosure of such information a criminal offence as a deterrent so that it does not happen.

Spads are already subject to the Official Secrets Act, but, in reality, the Official Secrets Act deals with high-level issues pertaining to national security. It seems to me that, for the sort of thing that was exposed in the RHI inquiry, there needs to be a new criminal offence as an active deterrent and as a demonstration that such a thing will not be tolerated. This has been raised with me: might that be a deterrent to whistle-blowers? I do not think that it would be, but I am more than open to an amendment that would make that abundantly clear. I am also open to an amendment that would import here, as in clause 9, the reasonable excuse defence. Those are some of the

practical things. We do not need to wait a long time on them; we just need to recognise that putting them in a code is not enough. They need to be in legislation, and, by putting them in legislation, we meet public expectation and declare that we are serious about this business.

Let me take you back to clauses 1 to 5 very quickly. Clause 1(2) is a response to Mr McCormick's evidence to the inquiry. He perceived, in regard to the DUP, that there was a rank structure of spads. Timothy Cairns gave that evidence in regard to Timothy Johnson, and Timothy Johnson eventually changed his evidence to admit that there was a hierarchy. The point was adopted and seen by Lord Justice Coghlin: if a special adviser is a special adviser to a Minister — yes, their duty is to the whole Executive — then by creating a hierarchy of spads, their loyalty transfers to the top of the pile in respect of the hierarchy of spads. I think that that was the evidence. Mr Cairns, for example, felt greater deference and need to accord with the wills of Mr Johnson than maybe he did with his Minister. It is wrong to have a hierarchy of spads, other than within the Executive Office, where there is more than one. Clause 1(2) seeks to restrict any hierarchy of spads to the Executive Office.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes.

Mr Wells: The Member has talked about the hierarchy of spads. Will he agree that Kim Jong-un, the supreme leader of North Korea, would have been envious of the power exercised by Mr Johnson?

Mr Allister: The Member said it, not me, but he might well be right. He said that with feeling and maybe a little experience. *[Laughter.]* I think that clause 1(2) is important.

Clause 1(3) takes us to the issue of discipline. My proposition here is quite a simple one. If a special adviser is a civil servant, with all the benefits and privileges of being a civil servant, why should he not be subject to the discipline of the Civil Service? I remind you of a situation during the Red Sky investigation, which emerged through the work of the Committee for Social Development. Mr Brimstone, because of what had been going on, had been investigated independently by civil servants in the Department of Finance, who recommended that he should be disciplined. The Minister of the day simply said no, he quashed it and would not allow it to happen. He left his spad beyond discipline.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member agree that, rather than facing investigation and possible disciplinary action, it gave a very stark message to others in the Civil Service when he was promoted into the Office of the First Minister?

Mr Allister: Yes, Mr Brimstone's path at that point was, yes, promotion into the Office of the First Minister, yet there was a report in the Department of Finance recommending a formal disciplinary investigation, which his Minister was able to overrule. That should not happen. If a special adviser, as a civil servant, deserves to be disciplined, he should be disciplined. New Decade, New Approach simply leaves it in the hands of the Minister. That is not, I suggest, good enough.

We need to address that by formally putting special advisers within the ambit of the disciplinary code pertaining to the Civil Service.

6.45 pm

With clause 1(5), we come to the tetchy area of salary. There was public unease, to put it like that, that special advisers were in some cases eligible for a salary above that of their Minister. Some of them could be paid up to £92,000. I note that, in the recent code, that has been reduced to £85,000 max. As I understand it, four of the spads are on £78,000. It is better not to have salaries in a political code at all, because the code is written by a Minister. It would be far better to link, and cap, the salary of special advisers to a Civil Service grade.

Indeed, I was doing a bit of research in the Library, and I came across a little booklet that looks at ministerial advisers across the world. It tells me that, in 75% of countries, an adviser's salary scale is linked to the public service's. I am talking only about the maximum. I am quite happy to leave in the code three bands, two bands, one band or whatever, but it would be far more preferable if we put in statute that there must be a statutory cap, and the statutory cap would be that of a grade 5, an assistant secretary. It is no mean salary. At present, a grade 5's salary can go as high as £80,800.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes.

Mr Wells: Does the Member accept that it is perhaps not particularly useful to compare spads in Northern Ireland to those in the rest of the world? In every other jurisdiction, a Minister is like an Egyptian pharaoh: when the pharaoh dies, so does the adviser. Therefore, the average span of service for a spad in most other democracies is only three or four years. Here, we have had experience of spads for 15, 16 or 18 years, because, when the Minister changes, the party simply moves the special adviser on to the incoming Minister so that there is no volatility. Therefore, there is no reason for the exceptional salaries that some jurisdictions pay, because there is not the exceptional situation of being in a volatile position that could come and go in a very short period.

Mr Allister: It is the situation that a spad is in office only as long as his Minister is in office, but I think that the Member is making a different point, which is that, when the Minister falls from grace or moves on, the spad seems to live on, because he is moved elsewhere. It is an equitable thing to say, "Let's take this out of the hands of the politicians. They can decide how best to fix the bands, but let's put a cap on salary so that you cannot be remunerated above the level of an assistant secretary in the Civil Service". That does not seem to me to be at all unreasonable. That is what clause 1(5) is about.

Clause 1(6) is all about the fact that the evidence was very clear in the RHI inquiry that, after the passing of the Civil Service (Special Advisers) Act 2013 — the Bill that I steered through the House — which removed from office those with criminal convictions of a serious nature, the evidence was that Sinn Féin deliberately circumvented the legislation by appointing an effective super-spada, paid not from the public purse but paid, presumably, out of party funds, and that that person, nonetheless, was able to exercise all the functions of a spad and, indeed, oversaw

the rest of the spads. That is why, in clause 1(6), I want to impose a statutory duty not just on the Minister but on the permanent secretary. The evidence from the RHI inquiry is that the permanent secretary knew that was happening, gave them a free run of Stormont Castle and simply closed his eyes to it. I want to put a statutory duty on a permanent secretary so that they:

“must ensure that no person other than a duly appointed special adviser is afforded by the department the cooperation, recognition and facilitation due to a special adviser.”

We cannot have those phoney, substitute special advisers running about as special advisers, if there is going to be any order whatsoever in these matters.

I also want to put in that:

“No special adviser, directly or indirectly, shall be supervised by, directed by, answerable to, or report to any person other than the minister who appointed him”.

No Ted Howell, no Wilson, just the Minister. That is an important thing to put into law, in respect of these matters.

Clause 2 deals with the numbers. The House will be aware that in statute, at present, the Executive Office can have eight special advisers: three for the First Minister, three for the deputy First Minister and one for each of the junior Ministers. Historically, before 2007, there were none for the junior Ministers. That was brought in by a change in the law in 2007. You now have eight. That is the same number as the entire Welsh Government: that is unconscionable.

I notice, so far, I think, that the Executive Office has only appointed six spads, with three for each party. Maybe that is a recognition that it was being overdone at eight. I think four is a better number, but there will be different views about that, and if this Bill proceeds, there will no doubt be debates about where the right number lies. Is the right mechanism to reduce the First Minister and deputy First Minister's special advisers, as I am proposing, from three to one — granted that there is a junior Minister — or is it better to take away the junior Ministers' special advisers and adjust the number for the First Minister and deputy First Minister? Those are all debateable points, but the principle is that it is really unsustainable to say that one Department in this House needs the same number of special advisers as the entire Welsh Government. The public, more than ever, are looking at us and we need to respond with sensitivity.

Clause 3 is a little bit technical. Members will recall how Mr David Gordon was mysteriously appointed as a super press secretary in the Executive Office. That was done by the then First Minister, Mr Robinson, and the late Mr McGuinness by exercising a royal prerogative power from section 23 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. They exercised that prerogative power, without the Assembly knowing about it, to change the Civil Service Commissioners Order 1999 to give them the power to make that appointment. That was done behind everyone's back, in this House. That is not healthy or good, so I want to remove the amendment that was made, and I want, for the future, to impose in clause 3(2) a stipulation that no such change can be made in future unless a draft of it is laid before the House, and approved by the House.

Why should there be a facility to change the law behind the back of the legislative Assembly? That is what we are about — a legislative Assembly — and yet legislation was able to be changed behind the back of the House. That cannot be right and cannot be healthy, so that is why clause 3(2) is there.

In clause 4, I am saying that, if we were to reduce the number of spads, the date to do that would be the end of the next financial year, to give plenty of notice and time. Clause 4 is about providing those who are displaced and do not come back in as special advisers with their rights to a degree of compensation that is fair and reasonable. This clause and the schedule deal with that.

Clause 5 seeks to address a fundamental lacuna in accountability in the House. At the moment, Members are accountable through the standards commissioner for their behaviour and any breaches that are alleged against them in respect of their code of conduct. Ministers have a ministerial code, but there is no accountability. The last act of the House before the Assembly fell in January 2017 was to pass a motion, without division, saying that Ministers equally should be subject to the aegis of the standards commissioner. That is exactly what clause 5 seeks to do.

If MLAs are subject to the Assembly commissioner, why not Ministers? Today we have heard an announcement, “Oh, but we're going to appoint a panel”. Why are we reinventing the wheel? We have a situation where we have, or should have, a standards commissioner to deal with issues of conduct. Why not give that standards commissioner a widening of his ambit to include the ministerial code as well as the code of conduct? That would put everyone in the House on the same footing. Instead, the proposition is that we should spend £120,000 a year on three new panellists. It really is delusional.

When you go to what has been said today and what is in ‘New Decade, New Approach’, you see that the panel can reach a view but cannot recommend sanction. Only the party of the complained-against Minister, or the Assembly, can decide whether there will be a sanction. What is that all about, other than the optics? You will have a panel to determine what happened, but it will not be able to recommend sanction; it will hand over the matter to the Minister's party, which will decide what to do. Alternatively, if 30 Members can get their act together in the House, they could bring it to the House. That is not good enough in terms of a transparent, fulsome disciplinary process for Ministers. Clause 5 is simple and straightforward, and it sets the matter in very clear terms.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes.

Mr Wells: The Member gave evidence to the Finance Committee on his Bill. There is certainly an awful lot of merit in what he is saying, but there is one issue that I think the House would wish to receive clarification on. There is a fundamental difference between a Member and a Minister. A Minister, by virtue of his or her position, has to take very difficult, and sometimes very controversial, decisions. For instance, the Minister of Education could recommend a school closure, or the Minister of Health could recommend the withdrawal of a service from a hospital, and there could be uproar in the community. The inevitability is that a complaint will be lodged to the commissioner, saying

that the Minister is behaving recklessly, unreasonably and without any care for the community.

How do you prevent the system that the Member is suggesting, which has considerable merit, from being used, not as a way of controlling Ministers who are out of control, but by malcontents who simply want to use it to attack the Minister for making a decision that is well within his powers and where another Minister might well do exactly the same thing?

Mr Allister: The Member makes a good point. It is a point that was made to me at the Committee, and I have been thinking about it since. I think the answer is an amendment to insert a filter into the complaints process that provides that the commissioner must be satisfied that a complaint is not frivolous or vexatious or otherwise an abuse of the complaints process before he investigates it.

Putting in a positive filter would be a protection for MLAs and for Ministers, particularly for Ministers, who could be the object of capricious complaints such as that. If the standards commissioner has to be satisfied before he starts investigating and must continue to be satisfied throughout that the complaint is not frivolous or vexatious, that affords a protection that would be worthwhile, viable and well worth doing.

7.00 pm

I bring you back to clause 12, the last substantive clause. Its purpose is to ensure that this is not just a one-off event. It is clear to us all that there are things that need to be fixed, but, as time progresses, it will equally become clear that there are other things that need to be fixed. Therefore, in clause 12, I wish to impose an obligation that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister bring a report to the House every two years on any further proposals that there can be to improve the functioning of government. In any two years, there will, for example, be judicial reviews in which High Court judges will have criticised how things are done in various facets. Why should we not learn from that? The way to make sure that we learn from that is to have a review report and proposals every two years. I do not think that that is too onerous. It is twice a term — twice a mandate, essentially — so that the House can consider whether there are other things that we need to improve. Of course, to do that they would consult all the relevant commissioners and ombudsmen and all who are listed there.

These are sensible and rational proposals. There is nothing in the Bill that is green or orange; it is just about doing things better. MLAs may not agree with everything in it, but I hope that they believe in the general principles, in a circumstance in which the public most definitively expect change. Simply rejecting the Bill would be to defy public expectation. The other night, Mrs Foster told UTV that mistakes had been made and that what is important now is that we put in place structures to make sure that we do not do it again. This is a little part of that architecture, and the House should not run away from that. It is not it all, but it is a start on pretty basic but necessary provisions. I commend the Bill to the House.

Mr Frew (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): I speak on behalf of the Finance Committee. The Committee took oral evidence from the Bill sponsor, Mr Allister, at its meeting on 26 February 2020. I thank Mr Allister for his comprehensive evidence to the Committee,

and I thank Committee members for their detailed and in-depth questioning of the Bill sponsor on aspects of the Bill. It is worth informing the House at the outset that, following the evidence session, the Committee did not wish to form a view on the general principles of the Bill. Rather than rehearsing the evidence provided to the Committee by the Bill sponsor, I will confine my remarks to aspects of the Bill on which Mr Allister addressed issues raised by members during the evidence session.

Mr Allister informed the Committee that he had deliberately drafted the long title of the Bill so that it lent itself to a wide range of amendments. During the evidence session, members explored aspects on which amendments may be appropriate, should the Bill pass Second Stage.

Clauses 1 to 5 propose changes to current legislation. I will first address the Committee's consideration of those clauses. Members questioned the Bill sponsor on how the recent changes to the code of conduct and the code for the appointment of special advisers had impacted on the provisions of clause 1 and whether those changes had addressed his concerns. They also asked whether it would have been preferable to await the outcome of the RHI report before seeking to legislate for a code of conduct under the Civil Service (Special Advisers) Act (Northern Ireland) 2013. Mr Allister's view was that the amended codes were guidance and did not have the binding authority that, he believed, was required and would be provided through his Bill. He suggested that putting matters into a code rather than into legislation would not meet the public expectation of significant action being taken to deal with the issues arising from the RHI inquiry.

On the proposed cap on pay for special advisers, as outlined at clause 1(5), the Bill sponsor reminded the Committee that, when special advisers were initially appointed, the salary level was in the region of £70,000 but the First Minister and deputy First Minister subsequently agreed to raise it to £90,000, which is why he proposes to link special adviser pay to Civil Service pay at grade 5. Mr Allister acknowledged that the action already taken by the Executive to reduce special adviser pay and introduce banding was good in that the issue needed to be addressed. However, he stated that, in addressing it through the code, rather than through legislation, there would be more scope for the cap to be removed. When questioned further, Mr Allister acknowledged that an amendment may be required to make provision to compensate special advisers who had or would have their salaries reduced.

There are six special advisers in the Executive Office. The facility exists to appoint eight. The proposal outlined in the Bill is to reduce the number of special advisers in the Executive Office to four. When questioned by Members, Mr Allister agreed that it would be open to debate and amendment as to whether four was the right number.

The proposal at clause 3 is to repeal the Civil Service Commissioners (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016. The order makes provision for the First Minister and deputy First Minister to appoint:

"a person to provide specialised support".

Mr Allister informed the Committee that that provision had arisen as a result of the use of a prerogative order of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in the appointment of

an Executive press secretary. The Bill sponsor believes that the provision should be repealed and any future amendment of that order should be made not by prerogative powers but only by affirmative resolution in the House.

There were no concerns raised in the Committee about clause 4. The clause will provide for compensation for any special adviser who loses their job as a consequence of a reduction in their number.

The Committee questioned Mr Allister in detail on clause 5, which would extend the powers of the Commissioner for Standards to investigate complaints against Ministers. There was concern that the provision could lead to large numbers of vexatious complaints relating to ministerial decisions on policy issues that may be considered unpopular. Mr Allister assured the Committee that, for a complaint to be considered valid, it would have to relate to a breach in the ministerial code and that the commissioner had the discretion to decree that a complaint was vexatious and therefore quickly dispose of it without the need for an investigation. He stated that he was considering tabling an amendment at Consideration Stage to prescribe that a petition of concern may not be used on an issue relating to clause 5.

I will now address the Committee's consideration of clauses 6 to 11, which, Mr Allister advised the Committee, address specific issues that have arisen as a result of the renewable heat incentive scheme.

Clauses 6 to 8 deal with meetings. Members considered it important to define what the Bill sponsor meant by a "meeting". Mr Allister's view was that, where two or more people came together, it had the capacity to be a meeting. That could include any contact whatever. He suggested that, even where a Minister encountered a member of the public informally in, for example, a supermarket or a coffee shop, if departmental matters were discussed, it could have a bearing on the shaping of future policy or decision-making. That encounter should fall within the scope of the Bill. That would mean that, under clause 7, a Minister would have to make a written log of that encounter. Mr Allister informed the Committee that, although clause 7 would capture such an encounter, what he had in mind when drafting the clause was of the more serious side, where someone with a vested interest persuaded a Minister off the record that certain action should be taken. When questioned about the potential and incentive for fictitious and inaccurate claims from people who were opposed to the Minister, Mr Allister acknowledged that that could occur, but he felt that it was a question of balance between the need to address any mischief that may have occurred and avoiding any inconvenience to a Minister from having to record such an encounter.

Clauses 9 and 11 deal with criminal offences. Clause 9 deals with the electronic communication of government business via anything other than departmental systems and email addresses. Clause 11 deals with the communication of confidential government information to a third party. Mr Allister was questioned about the requirement to always use departmental systems and email addresses and the potential for that requirement to impede good and agile government. Officials acting in the interests of the Minister and the Department outside those parameters would have to do so in the knowledge that they would have to construct a reasonable excuse defence. Mr Allister's view was that there could be no prosecution

unless there was a reasonable prospect of conviction and the case passed the public interest test.

Concerns were expressed about the potential for clause 11 to capture many forms of communication with the media, including informal briefings that helped the media to do a good job in holding Ministers to account. Mr Allister agreed that, in a modern Government, there is a role for such press briefings.

Mr Allister outlined why he considers the tariffs appropriate under clauses 9 and 11, and, should the Bill pass Second Stage, the Committee will consider those tariffs in detail. He indicated that he would be willing to consider an amendment to clause 9 relating to the construction of a reasonable excuse and a suitably framed amendment to clause 11 that would exempt authorised briefings. Should the Bill pass Second Stage, the Committee will consider in detail the provisions outlined in clauses 9 and 11.

The Committee did not raise any issues in relation to clause 12, which establishes a process for the First Minister and deputy First Minister to report to the Assembly every two years. Should the Bill pass this stage, the Committee for Finance will work with the Committee for the Executive Office and relevant Standing Committees to ensure robust scrutiny of the Bill's clauses.

There was a range of views in the Committee on the general principles. As I said at the start of my remarks, the Committee for Finance did not wish to form a view on the general principles of the Bill. I believe that, in most cases, it is good practice for a Committee not to form a view on a Bill, even the general principles, until it has had time to scrutinise it in detail.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I now speak on behalf of my party, the DUP, and as finance spokesperson. We support the core principles of the Bill. In light of the findings of the RHI inquiry, every party and every Department has a responsibility to pursue reforms that rebuild public confidence in the governance of Northern Ireland. Sir Patrick's recommendations cover a wide range and a panoramic view of that governance: the Executive and the decisions and policies that they wish to adopt; the behaviour of Ministers; the behaviour of spads, the roles that they play and the parameters in which they operate; the interactions between Departments, Ministers and spads; the interactions between Departments and Statutory Committees; the transparency of Departments; the information that is offered to Committees; the respect for MLAs in this place as individuals, when we ask questions of Departments; the respect for MLAs as they perform an important role in the Statutory Committees; and all interactions with the public.

In some areas, this Bill may be the right vehicle to take forward systemic improvements and reforms. For others, we may need further legislation to cover all aspects of governance. I welcome the Bill sponsor's decision to name the Bill as "miscellaneous", which allows the greatest scope for amendments. Delivery for the people of Northern Ireland in a transparent and accountable way must be our aim in this place.

7.15 pm

A sustained and faithful implementation of the 44 recommendations of the RHI inquiry report is only the start. We have nothing to fear and much to gain from a

better system of government, with a transparent challenge function and an accountable Executive. We can never ever go back to business as usual. We will not get a second shot at this. We need to treat the public with respect. The Executive need to treat MLAs with respect. MLAs have to do their job, which is to scrutinise through asking ministerial questions and in the scrutiny Committees, and the Departments must furnish all information to the Committees so that we can do our job. Committees are not only here to scrutinise Departments but they are here to support and advise. If there are measures whereby spads can behave badly, whereby Ministers can behave badly, and a Civil Service that is not fit for purpose, well really, the Committees might be the last defence. It is important that we get this right.

I could go on about the failures, at departmental and Committee level, that I have witnessed as an MLA, but this probably is not the time, and there will be many people wanting to speak about this Bill. We should and will revisit it.

I hope that the Bill can be used as a vehicle for change, and that we can change the practices that we have had to live with regarding spads: their appointment, their behaviour and the input that they have had into departmental offices. I hope that Members seek ways to amend the Bill to widen its scope and to bring in a panoramic view of governance that allows us to make tangible changes so that we can better serve the public.

There is absolutely no doubt that the Executive must bring forward a reform Bill to pick up all the other aspects — the panoramic view — that this Bill will not. Such a Bill should come sooner rather than later so that we can introduce reform as quickly as possible. We have had three years of wasted time and opportunity in this place. We have two years to make it right. Let us get our skates on.

Mr O'Dowd: Apologies to the House for my not being here for the entirety of the debate. I have been at a Business Committee meeting and an Assembly Commission meeting to discuss recent events.

I will not speak for too long. I will set out my party's position on this Bill. We will not support it. We will not divide the House tonight. Many of the clauses are unnecessary, and I do not think that a private Member should introduce this legislation. Mr Frew talked about the Executive introducing a reform Bill. If there is a requirement for legislation, it should be brought forward by the Executive, not by a private Member from any of the Benches.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. Did the Member hear me when I said that MLAs should get respect? He knows fine well that any Member can bring legislation to this House. For him to reduce that in some way, compared to the Executive, is a very bad and telling thing.

Mr O'Dowd: The Member needs to have a conversation with his party leaders in that regard.

The Bill is unnecessary in many regards. It may catch newspaper and media headlines in that we are going to send people to jail, but do we really believe that, in the circumstances that Mr Allister is setting out, anyone will end up in jail? I do not believe so. Is it necessary to send someone to jail? Not in the circumstances that he set out. However, already, if special advisers or, indeed, Ministers break the law, they can and should be sent to jail, if that is the sentence decided by a court of law.

The findings of the RHI report show that there are many areas where we do not need new governance or legislation. No one should have to be told by a piece of legislation, a new governance rule or another piece of bureaucracy that you should not leak emails to your neighbours, cousins, brothers and sisters to give them financial advantage in some government scheme.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: Sorry, where did that come from? Yes.

Mr Wells: The Member makes an interesting point. I hope that, during his speech, he will provide us with a detailed explanation as to who Mr Pádraic Wilson and Mr Howell were. In that case, it was not a question of leaking information. The information was automatically sent from DETI and DFP to Connolly House, where these two gentlemen, who were not spads and not subject to any of the controls in the code, weak as they were, seemed to have the final say in everything that any Minister of his party decided upon. I am flagging this up because Members' opinion on this Bill will be very much flavoured by an explanation as to what exactly was going on there, why it was needed and why his Ministers were, not leaking stuff, but automatically referring everything to those two gentlemen.

Mr O'Dowd: Mr Wells has put two and two together and got five. One of the reasons why he sits on the side Benches is that unelected executive members of his party put him there. They are unknown to many of the public, but there are people who sit on the DUP executive who are not elected to public office. However, they have every right to be there, because they are party representatives. They have been elected by the membership. They have authority to be there from the party membership. Every party in the Chamber is the same. There are previous chief executives of the SDLP who were unelected public figures, but they were elected by the membership. In some cases across the Chamber, some people were appointed to paid posts. When Mr Wells refers to "the two gentlemen", that is who they are. They are elected officials in Sinn Féin. However, neither of those two gentlemen received emails to alert them to a very lucrative scheme so that they could profit.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: No, I will not give way again.

The two members — the two people he referred to — were actually involved in trying to resolve the mess made elsewhere, because the RHI debacle was conceived, born and reared within the DUP.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: No, I will not.

It was conceived, born and reared within the DUP. You can try and twist it, turn it and move it, and do all those sorts of things. Mr Wells referred to two gentlemen. The other day, I heard someone in the media say, "Nobody knows who these men are." These men have met Prime Ministers, presidents and taoisigh. They are well known.

Mr Wells: We do not know who they are.

Mr O'Dowd: You do not need to know. Jim, if you want, the next time you are in the canteen, I will introduce you to them. I will bring you over and say, "Jim, Ted" —
[Interruption.]

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. First, Members should not make remarks from a sedentary position. Second, all remarks should go through the Chair.

Mr O'Dowd: As I said at the start, I am not going to speak for too long. My opinion, and that of my party, is that Mr Allister's Bill is unnecessary. If there is to be legislation, it should come from the Executive, and that legislation should be stringent and strident in building public confidence around our policy-making and politics.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: No, thank you. As I said earlier, the RHI report flags up the things that will happen if anybody acts in the manner in which the people who were working with Members from the opposite Benches acted. If you want honesty and scrutiny within the organisation, policy-making and legislation, you have to have credible people. That is key as we move forward.

Mr McGrath (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): I make these opening remarks in my role as Chairperson of the Executive Office Committee. A number of weeks ago, the Committee received a briefing from Mr Allister on the principles of the Functioning of Government Bill. Mr Allister outlined the three strands of the Bill. The first strand deals directly with some of the issues that were rehearsed during the progress of the RHI inquiry. Obviously, that report had not been published at the time of the briefing. The second strand deals with the changes to the law to address the number of special advisers in the Executive Office, amongst other related matters. The third strand establishes a rolling review of the functioning of government.

While a range of issues were covered during the question and answer session that followed the briefing, members spent considerable time discussing the lack of consultation on the Bill and the timing of its introduction. When asked about the lack of consultation, Mr Allister informed the Committee that he did not feel that there was a need for further consultation on the Bill's provision. He advised the Committee that he had carried out a consultation on various issues around special advisers in the course of drafting a Bill that he introduced in 2015 and that some of those provisions are contained in this Bill. He also told members that he drew on the well-publicised issues arising from the evidence given to the RHI inquiry to inform his drafting.

Mr Allister went on to outline the two routes that can be taken to introduce a private Member's Bill: one where you draft the Bill yourself; one where you get the Bill Office to draft it for you. He informed the Committee that he was not obligated to carry out a formal consultation as he had drafted the Bill himself. He simply presented it to the Speaker's Office and, because it was legally competent, it was able to be moved forward.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way.

Mr McGrath: With pleasure.

Mr Storey: The Member may or may not be able to provide clarity, or maybe Mr Allister could supply it to me, but what is the legal position with regard to a statutory requirement for either an eight- or 12-week consultation period? Is there any requirement in statute on that, or is it solely at the discretion of the House?

Mr McGrath: I thank the Member for his intervention. I am not going to pretend to be an expert on the legal process of private Member's Bills, but I am sure that Mr Allister will take the opportunity to respond to that, given the remarks that we are making.

If Mr Allister had gone down the route of not drafting the Bill himself, a consultation process would have been necessary.

In relation to the timing of the Bill, some members questioned whether it would have been prudent to wait for the outcome of the RHI inquiry to ensure that the Bill, as introduced, covered most, if not all, of the issues raised. In response, Mr Allister acknowledged that he was confident that he could second-guess the outcome of the RHI inquiry. That was why he drafted the long title of the Bill to make it as wide as possible. His idea was that the Bill could accommodate amendments to address any additional issues that were raised in Sir Patrick Coghlin's report.

The new ministerial code that has now been published, but was not at the time, was also raised. It was highlighted that the changes to the code would likely go further than the proposals contained in the Bill. As we now know, the new ministerial code and guidance have been significantly strengthened, and an independent panel will be established to rapidly investigate alleged breaches of the ministerial code. Whilst Mr Allister made the point that a code is only a code and can be unmade as quickly as it is made, further doubt was added to the timing of the Bill's introduction.

7.30 pm

Following an in-depth discussion, there was unanimous agreement amongst members that the status quo was not an option. Members agreed with the principle of change and felt strongly that action needed to be taken not just to restore public confidence but to improve the functioning of government. There was, however, some disagreement on the right vehicle or vehicles to do that. Some members felt that now was not the right time to consider the general principles of the Bill, while others offered their support.

As I have mentioned, there were concerns over the timing of the Bill. The question was asked on numerous occasions why the Bill was introduced in advance of the publication of the RHI inquiry report. Introducing it in advance of the publication of the new ministerial code was also questioned.

In the end, members could not reach consensus on whether the Committee should form a view at that juncture on the general principles of the Bill. Subsequent to a Division, the Committee agreed to consider the general principles following the publication of the RHI report. Unfortunately, the Committee cannot be afforded that opportunity because the Bill is having its Second Stage today, in advance of the next Committee meeting.

I wish to speak now in my capacity as an individual MLA. While I am aware of the threat posed to our way of life by the coronavirus, I wish to begin by acknowledging the great work that is taking place in communities across Northern Ireland, with people pulling together to help one another in the difficult and dark days ahead of us. Alas, the work of this Chamber goes on, and I wish to make a few comments about the Bill.

The RHI report was discussed earlier today, but we cannot downplay the link between that report and Mr Allister's private Member's Bill. Given that the report of the RHI inquiry was released on Friday and many of us are still digesting it, I recognise that Mr Allister's Bill seeks to address some of the issues contained in that report. There are, perhaps, lessons to be learned that were not raised in the RHI report. The fundamental flaw in the RHI scheme was the lack of accurate information.

When directives are given to civil servants from a special adviser, they should have a note explaining explicitly that it is a directive to be given by the Minister, as opposed to that adviser. Are we, as an Assembly and an Executive, giving due consideration to the overall special advisers' code of conduct? Special advisers have an obligation to their Minister, but maybe it could be considered that it should be to the Assembly or to the Executive.

The issue of whistle-blowing is linked to the report, and we need to ask ourselves whether we take it seriously enough. For instance, what should happen if a whistle-blower were to approach us as individual MLAs? Do we have the capacity and knowledge to deal with that, and where should that information go?

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGrath: Yes, of course.

Mr O'Toole: Perhaps the Member will reflect on the issue of journalistic briefings — it is something that the Bill author has given some thought to — that may be off the record but are not malign. Some of the clauses of the Bill should not capture that kind of fruitful interaction between whistle-blowers or people in the course of their jobs in the media.

Mr McGrath: It is a valid point. If we record absolutely everything, it could frighten off whistle-blowers who may not want to come to you and detail some things. Whilst we have concerns about things that are off the record, there needs to be some capacity for off-the-record conversations, certainly in the context of whistle-blowing.

A point that was raised earlier and I raise again is whether special advisers' employment should be term-limited. The current code of conduct states that a special adviser's employment ends when their Minister ceases to hold office. I will not rehearse the eloquent remarks that were made earlier about that.

These are the questions that all of us have to address. We have big, deeply systemic issues that need to be addressed in the functioning of our Government. While Mr Allister's Bill attempts, in theory, to address the matters raised, it poses more questions than answers, with one of the most questionable aspects of the Bill being the criminalisation of special advisers. There are many questions that need to be answered and clarity sought at Committee Stage. At this point, we cannot support or reject the Bill, but we will have our perspectives at Committee Stage.

Mr Beggs: I give broad support to Mr Allister's Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill. Its timing is fortunate, coming just after the publication of the RHI inquiry report. Earlier, I was astounded when I attempted to make an intervention after Mr O'Dowd asked whether there was a need for legislation. After the publication of the RHI inquiry report, which exposed the many failings and

the dysfunctional nature of the Executive, a senior MLA asked whether there was a need for legislation. Clearly, we need to improve the situation. The current codes have not been working, have not been applied and are not strong enough. There is much merit in what is proposed. The Assembly has to thank the Rt Hon Sir Patrick Coghlin and his team for their report. The Bill actually carries out many of its recommendations. It addresses many of those areas.

In the explanatory and financial memorandum that accompanies the Bill, policy objective b) states:

"special advisers are subject to the processes and procedures of the disciplinary code operative in the Northern Ireland Civil Service".

I was on the Committee for Social Development at the same time as Mr Allister. The Committee eventually managed to extract the fact that there had been an inquiry into the behaviour of a special adviser and, using our legislative powers, demanded access to papers. Eventually, we got a heavily redacted report that recommended that there should be formal disciplinary action. However, that needed the approval of the Minister, and the Minister at that time, Mr McCausland, blocked it. Clearly, there is a failing when, at present, a Minister can prevent a special adviser from being subject to the normal Civil Service code of behaviour that would be expected of someone in the Senior Civil Service. Clearly, we need change.

Then, there is the issue that special advisers should be accountable to the Minister. We have discovered a hierarchy of special advisers and learned about how that complicated arrangement caused internal issues and delays and may well have cost millions of pounds to the public purse. Spads were not accountable, nor were they, on occasion, formally or properly appointed by their Minister. A new process had been determined, and their loyalties seemed to lie elsewhere than to their Minister. That, in itself, caused problems.

Policy objective d) aims:

"to restrict the remuneration of special advisers".

I thank the Research and Information Service for its briefing paper, which is available in the Assembly Library. It compares the annual cost of special advisers to those of other devolved regions and the UK Government. The last time that figures were presented for all the devolved regions was in 2014-15, so those are the figures that I am quoting. At that stage, Northern Ireland had 18 special advisers, costing over £2 million; Wales had nine, costing only £600,000; and Scotland had 14, costing £950,000. Why should special advisers to the Northern Ireland Government cost twice as much as those of the Scottish Government, who have to account for a much larger budget? Surely, it should be much more proportionate to the size of the budget. We have many more special advisers. I accept the fact that we have nine Departments and nine Ministers and therefore each Minister will need a special adviser, but do we really need up to eight special advisers in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, especially when anyone who investigates recent behaviour will find out that they may have contributed to the problems rather than helped to provide good governance in Northern Ireland?

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. I listened to the point that he and Mr Allister made where he equated the number of spads here to the number working for the Welsh Government. Does the Member agree that that is not a fair representation? He is comparing pears with oranges, given that our circumstances — an involuntary coalition — are unique.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: I will give way briefly.

Mr Wells: Does the Member accept that there have been coalitions in other devolved Administrations in the United Kingdom — at one stage, in Scotland and Wales — yet they did not need to have extra spads to manage the situation?

Mr Beggs: You can create a need for many more spads. You create a hierarchy by appointing so many spads. In doing so, you create that power base whereby they try to over-intervene in other Departments. I question the need for the current three, never mind four. Why do we need so many spads? What do they add to the process? Things might even run more smoothly if there were fewer of them in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Certainly, there is merit in reducing their number. Remember that this is public money that is not being spent on our schools or our health service. We spend an extra £1 million on spads in Northern Ireland compared with Scotland. I would much rather that that money be spent on front-line services. The number of spads that we employ is a problem.

Looking down the list of the Bill's policy objectives, I see that objective e) is:

“to impose a statutory duty on a departmental minister and Permanent Secretary to ensure no person exercises the functions or enjoys the privileges of a special adviser other than the duly appointed person”.

We have heard reference to Ted Howell and the infamous quotation from the former Finance Minister in an email that was brought out in the RHI inquiry:

“Would you be content if I were to sign off the business plan on Wednesday afternoon?”

This is the Minister of Finance in the Northern Ireland Executive, who is looking after all our public money, has inside briefings and knows the pressures, and he is asking of someone who is not a Minister — a party official, but an unknown person as far as I am concerned — “Can I do this?”. When Ministers take the oath of office, they swear to act on behalf of the public, and that has been overlooked. We need to get back to Ministers acting on behalf of all the people of Northern Ireland and not seeking to exercise their decisions only when they get approval from party apparatchiks.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. He hits an important note in the debate. The PSNI's 2015 assessment stated that the Provisional IRA army council was still overseeing both Sinn Féin and the remaining structures of the terror organisation, the Provisional IRA, with an overarching strategy. We then learn from the evidence of the RHI inquiry that Sinn Féin Ministers were under instruction from people who were not accountable or democratically elected. Surely that sends shock waves through the democratic world, in this place and outside.

Mr Beggs: I agree entirely with what the Member says. When you add that information to what we saw happening, that causes great concern for the democratic process.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for being gracious and giving way when I did not do so earlier.

I have two points to make. He refers to the then Finance Minister seeking permission and suggests that he was not acting in the interests of all of our society. I think that the business case that he refers to related to the reduction of the costs of RHI.

Surely reducing the cost of the RHI scheme to the public purse was acting in the interests of the public, regardless of colour, creed or class.

In relation to Mr Frew and this much-misquoted quotation from a report, the actual quotation refers to most IRA members believing that the IRA army council was directing. I do not know how they came about that. Did they send out a questionnaire and say, “Fill in this questionnaire, return it and you might win a weekend in Paris”. It is the most ludicrous piece of evidence-gathering that I have heard of in all my life, but Mr Frew will hang to it because he does not want attention drawn to where it belongs. They conceived it, they reared it: it is their problem.

7.45 pm

Mr Beggs: The Member indicated that the legislation referred to in the email from Mr Ó Muilleoir to Mr Ted Howell was to reduce costs. My question is this: why was he asking someone else whether he could do it? Why does a Minister of the Northern Ireland Executive have to ask someone else, “Can I do it?”? What would he have done if he had said no? If he had said no, would he have left it for another couple of weeks? Bear in mind that there were already delays from both the DUP and Sinn Féin sides, all of which cost the public purse money.

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: Yes.

Mr Frew: We are getting into quotes tonight, which, of course, we should. The most senior civil servant in the Finance Department, Mr David Sterling, believed that the then Finance Minister may have been “acting under instruction”. On 21 January 2017, David Sterling sent a text message to his fellow permanent secretary, Andrew McCormick. Mr Sterling said of his Minister:

“I can't say whether the will is there and wonder whether he knows himself. He may be acting under instruction”.

Mr Beggs: I turn to some other aspects of the Bill. I am looking at clause 6 on records of meetings. This should not have to be stated but, in Northern Ireland, it clearly does because of the way that some of our Executive Ministers have behaved. They avoided keeping records in order to avoid the Freedom of Information Act or whatever. The Civil Service's general instructions or requirements would have been to follow the good practice of keeping minutes, but clearly that was not done. There is a need to put it into legislation to remove that wriggle room, ambiguity and bad practice that came into being over the years under the DUP and Sinn Féin's direction and leadership of the Northern Ireland Executive.

On records of contacts, Ministers should not meet other parties to discuss departmental business without it being logged and a record established. Clearly, that should happen. A civil servant should be there to ensure that everything that was discussed is recorded and is appropriate.

On use of official systems, we have heard how Minister Bell did not use his official system. There are issues of cybersecurity there. Will someone with outside financial interests somehow hack it and gain access to it? It is a much less secure system than would be provided by government. There is then the whole issue that it does not create a trail and, therefore, the Ministers involved could avoid leaving any trail of their actions should they happen to be inappropriate.

On a register of interests, it is very apparent that special advisers should register their interests. I agree, Mr Allister, that it should be a public record. If it had been a public record, someone may have decided to take a look. They may then have made a complaint if they knew that someone had not divulged their interests on a register. We have to register our interests, and we do so diligently to keep ourselves right. Just as it applies to us, spads should have to follow suit and sign a register of interests, and that should be in the public domain.

I am looking for more information on the issue of whether there should be criminal offences. I can see that, if there were to be a criminal sanction involved, it would certainly concentrate the minds of those who have bypassed codes in the past and have avoided using appropriate means of communication. That is worthy of further investigation, and it should be brought out more at Committee Stage. It has much merit, and I do not know how else we will achieve our objective, but I look forward to hearing more about this, so that, if there is to be a criminal sanction, it would be set at an appropriate level. I am sure that, if it were there, senior civil servants who were aware of inappropriate actions being taken would take action to protect themselves. Equally, if they were to become subject to possible criminal investigation, Ministers and spads would be much more particular to avoid inappropriate actions.

As I said at the beginning of my comments, we are very fortunate that the Bill is coming shortly after the RHI inquiry report. Many of the proposals in the Bill address many of the issues that have been highlighted by the inquiry and provide solutions to them. I consider many of them to be appropriate, and, if this comes from the bottom up, from a private Member's Bill, from amendments at Committee level and, ultimately, from the Floor of the House, it will have much more respect in the Assembly and the Executive than something that is top-down and imposed. There is much merit in what is being proposed, and I give Mr Allister my best wishes as his Bill proceeds through the Assembly. I look forward to it being back here.

Mr Muir: Earlier today, we debated the RHI report, and the tone of that debate was perhaps much better than the tone of the debate this evening. I am disappointed at the tone of this debate. Northern Ireland is facing a public health emergency and an economic crisis —.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Muir: Yes.

Mr Wells: I have been in this Chamber for nearly 26 years. In comparison with many of the debates that I have witnessed, going back as far as 1982, this debate has been good mannered and well behaved. He has not seen a bad debate in this House. When he does, he will recognise it, but there is nothing here tonight that would shock anybody who has been watching this Chamber for more than the last five years.

Mr Muir: Thank you very much, and I take the advice from my learned friend, but we are facing very different times in Northern Ireland at present, and people are looking to the Assembly for leadership.

I thank the Member for bringing forward his Bill, and I understand that my colleague Kellie Armstrong, who is not here at the moment, has previously engaged with Mr Allister on it. We will continue to engage with him. It will not be surprising to anyone that the Alliance Party believes that it has been championing a number of the issues in the Bill, such as openness and transparency — they were integral to the negotiations that led up to the restoration of devolution as part of New Decade, New Approach.

In the past three years, we did not have devolution here and the behaviour of the previous Executive shattered public confidence in democracy and in these institutions. Whether through inaction, wrong action or complete ignorance, we saw scandals emerge over time, such as Red Sky, NAMA and RHI. This is our opportunity to rebuild trust and to secure long-lasting confidence in these institutions.

During the debate on the RHI inquiry report that was released last Friday, we were able to consider some of the issues, and, in due course, once we get through the crisis that we are experiencing, we will hopefully be able to consider those issues in a bit more detail and consider how we take forward the recommendations arising from that report.

Holding government to account is a fundamental foundation of democracy, and the idea that accountability should be set aside, ignored or completely mislaid has shown us the need for action to ensure that all those at even the highest level of government are held accountable. We need only look today, and in recent weeks and months, at the actions of Dominic Cummings, the special adviser in Downing Street, to see why we need to take action and see that people are held to account. There is no doubt that people across Northern Ireland have —.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Muir: Yes.

Mr Wells: The Member will be interested to know that Dominic Cummings, who we accept is the special adviser who wields the second-highest degree of power of any adviser in history, earns considerably less than what many of our spads were getting before 2017.

Mr O'Toole: He does more damage, I am afraid, than the spads who were here.

Mr Muir: My colleague from South Belfast has answered the intervention.

People are expecting action as a result of the RHI inquiry report, and that must include action on special advisers. It is, however, important to know that the majority of special advisers carry out their work with professionalism and

integrity. Nonetheless, we must address the concerns and implement additional measures to ensure that there is appropriate scrutiny and accountability in their role.

I move to the specific measures contained in the Bill. As I said, there are many elements with which we can agree, but there are some on which we have concerns. The elements that we welcome are matters that we raised in the negotiations, and, for us, the inclusion of the recording of minutes taken at meetings attended by the Minister with departmental officials, or between Ministers and non-departmental personnel, is a small step but an important one.

The taking of notes and minutes of meetings where very significant decisions are taken is a small but key thing that we should be doing already, and the implications of when that did not happen came out very clearly in the RHI inquiry report. The presence of civil servants in such meetings is another obvious step, and we believe that this would put in place necessary measures to ensure continuity of accountability. We feel that the idea that special advisers would engage in discussions and meetings without the presence of civil servants, who, on many occasions, have the expertise on and know the background to what is being discussed, needs to be addressed.

We have also as a party been supporting and pushing for a code of conduct. I understand the concerns in relation to a code of conduct, but we think it is important that that be in place.

We also believe in a reduction in the number of special advisers, but we think that it is important to clarify to whom the special advisers in the Executive Office are accountable to, whether it is the First Minister and deputy First Minister or the junior Ministers. It is important that that is clarified.

The Bill does go some way to bringing special advisers in line with the Civil Service, and we must acknowledge the reality that the role of a special adviser in providing political advice to the Minister is unique. However, their role should be brought in line with the Northern Ireland Civil Service code of ethics, ensuring that they are held to account.

As I have said before, the Alliance Party does have some concerns about the Bill — for example, the criminal liability elements. We are willing to work with the Member on that, and we support the Bill at this stage.

Mr Wells: I said in my last contribution to the debate on the Budget that the Assembly was in the last chance saloon and that the public perception of this body is at an all-time low. When this Assembly fell in 1970, there were 100,000 people protesting outside at the bottom of the steps. When it fell in 1986, there were 3,500 people protesting against its closure. When it fell in January 2017, there was one man and his dog, and the dog was a conscript. That indicates to me the level of approval of this institution.

We have just had the release of the RHI inquiry report, and I was present on Friday for that. What did it say? It said that the First Minister was entirely open and honest, and that is correct; she was. It said that neither she nor any other Executive member made a single penny out of the RHI debacle, and that is true. However, what it did show is that the First Minister and many other Ministers in this Chamber were very, very badly let down by their special advisers. The question I have to ask is whether, had Mr Allister's Bill been law from 2014 onwards, we would have

had the RHI debacle. Would we have had the crisis that this Chamber and the Executive faced? I believe that we definitely would not have. Indeed, you will remember that Mr Allister raised his concerns in 2013.

8.00 pm

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way on the point about whether it would have taken place. I believe that it would have done because the Bill only fixes one part of the panoramic view of governance. You would still have a dysfunctional energy branch, and you would still have senior authority in the Civil Service not chasing down the detail. I do not believe that the Bill would have solved that issue, and nor will it do so in the future. Even with this Bill, if it gets support at its further stages, we will still need wider, holistic reform of governance in Northern Ireland.

Mr Wells: I accept much of that. Indeed, Mr Allister suggested that this is only one part — he says a small part; I see it actually as a major part — in the overall reconfiguration of how we govern ourselves in this part of the United Kingdom. There is no doubt that there is a requirement for root-and-branch reform, but I am somewhat surprised that one of the major parties, led by Mr O'Dowd, is suggesting that it will oppose even this tiny step forward in protecting people's beliefs in this institution.

By the way, I should have said, when I mentioned Mrs Foster, that I hope that all those who passed thousands of very nasty, evil comments about Mrs Foster three years ago will now have the decency to apologise for what they said, because, clearly, there was an awful lot said that was based on innuendo, false information and downright untruths. I would like to think that the First Minister's postbag will be full of grovelling apologies from those who condemned her when, in fact, the report indicates that she had behaved honourably. I still emphasise that she was very, very badly let down by the spads.

I mentioned earlier that I have been in the Chamber for about 26 years, and I have lots of experience of working with spads. There are spads, and there are "speds". There are special advisers, and there are special enforcers. That is a problem that we had for many, many years. I have experience of spads and "speds". At this stage in the debate, it would be totally improper for me to name any individual who cannot be here to defend themselves. Let us take a mythical Department that has a spad and a "sped" who are both earning £92,000 a year. One is a solicitor — very able, very intelligent, very helpful — who certainly does not see it as his role to enforce anything; instead, he acts as a conduit between the Minister and his party and other MLAs. On the other side, there is the "sped". He is on £92,000 a year, and let us suggest that he is an accountant who is very able and very intelligent. However, he regards his role as the enforcer — the "sped" — and he exercises power that has never been seen in a western democracy before. Certainly, even Dominic Cummings — we have heard about the power that he exercises in 10 Downing Street — would be envious.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Wells, I have just been informed that they are having difficulty picking you up. Do you want to move slightly closer to a microphone, as that will aid Hansard to put your thoughts into the record?

Mr Wells: Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, that is the first time in my life that somebody has said that they are having

difficulty picking me up. They might not have agreed with a single word that I said, but they certainly heard me, so there is always a first.

As I say, we are continuing with this mythical situation of a spad and a "sped", both of whom are on higher salaries than many of the Ministers in the Executive. One of them exercises the proper spad role and is universally liked in the Assembly, and then we have the "sped" who exercises an enforcement role. In fact, the "sped" exercises a role that is a mixture of chief executive, special adviser and Chief Whip.

Mr Beggs: Give us a clue.

Mr Wells: I certainly will not be naming them. I do not want to reveal anything.

The "sped" could exercise power and would often arrive at a timorous, fearful Back-Bencher saying that he had the power of his Minister behind him. That did not happen in just one Department. As an obscure Back-Bencher from South Down, I certainly received many visits from "speds", who made it very clear to me that they were not coming within their own right but that they were coming to enforce the view of their Minister. I never knew whether the Minister knew anything about their visits — I do not know — but that certainly gave them a power that was well beyond their position. That should never have happened. A spad should never have been a "sped", but we allowed a situation to develop where they could do exactly that.

On the other side, in another mythical Department, we had a situation where very powerful, highly paid spads — no doubt "speds" as well — were liaising between Back-Benchers and the Ministers. However, there was a further step: every decision, as was confirmed by the RHI report but which Mr O'Dowd is very shy about explaining to us, had to be referred up to Connolly House, where Mr Howell and Mr Pádraic Wilson had to give the OK. Those "speds" — of course, they were super-spads because they had control over all the spads in Mr O'Dowd's party — were not accountable to anybody. We all remember —

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wells: Yes, I certainly will. Unlike you, Mr O'Dowd, I will give way.

Mr O'Dowd: You are very gracious, Mr Wells, as your reputation before you is known. During the time that he refers to, the Assembly was on the verge of collapse. We were in the middle of a political crisis. My party set up a management group, which was made up of senior political officials, who were widely experienced in negotiations in the peace process, in an attempt to save the institutions. I will introduce you some day in the canteen to both gentlemen, because I think that the three of you would get on very well together. They were part of that group in an attempt to save the institutions and clear up the mess that had been made elsewhere.

Mr Wells: That certainly brings a whole new meaning to the phrase "the enforcer". I have to ask: why could no decision be made by the shy, retiring then-Finance Minister, Mr Máirtín Ó Muilleoir? Why could he not make any decision without getting Mr Wilson and Mr Howell on board? That indicates to me that they had a level of power. You criticise other parties — I was using only a mythical example of another party — for having a super-spada, when

you had two. At least the spads in the other parties were accountable to the code of conduct.

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wells: Certainly.

Mr Frew: On the point about being under instruction and seeking advice from outside people, it would be interesting to know what expertise those individuals had of an RHI scheme, or any sort of incentive scheme for that matter. Does that tell us that there was nobody in a ministerial post in Sinn Féin who could have read anything to gain expertise?

Mr O'Dowd: *[Interruption.]*

Mr Wells: On Thursday night, the Executive made an important decision about coronavirus. Everybody, including his Ministers, agreed to that policy, which was directed by Michael McBride, the Chief Medical Officer. Were Mr Howell and Mr Wilson consulted on that policy? Did they instruct the Sinn Féin Ministers on the Executive to change their view very rapidly by Friday morning?

Mr O'Dowd was Education Minister for many years. He was certainly a more acceptable Education Minister than his predecessor, but that would not be hard. Did he, during his time as Education Minister, refer any decisions up to the super-spads in Connolly House? What if there were an inquiry today on his actions as Education Minister? He is shy and retiring as well. Was he complicit in going with a begging bowl to Connolly House, and saying, "Please, Mr Howell, please, Mr Wilson, is it all right if I make this decision on this school?". Was that regularly happening?

That structure came in after Mr Allister's Act in 2013 because he stopped Sinn Féin employing people who were clearly undesirable as spads. It was brought in to circumvent that legislation; effectively, Connolly House had two super-spads who made all the decisions. I notice that he is not very quick to come to his feet say whether those spads were making decisions for him in his role as Education Minister. Were they?

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wells: Yes.

Mr O'Dowd: The debate is straying in a direction that is totally opposite to the Bill. Let me be clear: I have already answered that question. The political group was set up as a result of the political crisis in December 2016. There was no group there beforehand, where I or any other Minister went to seek permission.

I have to say that it is not in my nature to seek permission when I am asked to do a job: I do the job. By the way, one of the things that I found benefited me in doing my job was to read the legislation that I brought to the Assembly. I always felt that that helped when I was doing my job. Other Ministers had a different way of doing things, but I read the legislation that I brought to the Assembly and knew what it was about.

The answer to your question is no, because the group was set up specifically to deal with the political crisis that was there. I believe, a *Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle*, that we are straying off the subject.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that we should try, insofar as it is possible, to stick to the subject

matter. By the same token, I am loath to suppress debate or stop Mr Wells when he is in full flow.

Mr Wells: I noticed that the honourable Member for Upper Bann did not answer the question of whether, on Thursday night, the “speds”, or spads — Mr Howell and Mr Pádraic Wilson — had any input into the complete reversal/volte-face/U-turn that happened on the very serious issue of the coronavirus.

Mr O’Dowd: I am happy to answer, if the Member will give way.

Mr Wells: Yes.

Mr O’Dowd: The answer is no.

Mr Wells: That is good to know.

We have also noticed from the RHI inquiry that, apart from the mythical example that I used and the actual example of what was going on in Connolly House, the behaviour of some of spads is something that totally undermined public confidence in the whole system.

I know Andrew McCormick very well. Andrew McCormick was the permanent secretary in the Department of Health when I was Chairman of the Health Committee. We worked well together. I found him to be a totally honest, principled, hard-working and decent man, and I certainly trusted every piece of advice that I got from him. Many’s the time we had discussions, and he was able to direct me on to perhaps a different path as Chair of the Committee, because I was able to understand where he was coming from as permanent secretary, and there were times that we disagreed. At any stage in my career as a Minister, had I deliberately attempted to undermine my permanent secretary by leaking information to the media that was clearly meant to deflect blame for a particular policy away from me towards him or other civil servants, and that had become public, I would have resigned on the spot. You simply cannot undermine the relationship between the permanent secretary and the Minister in that way and have any credibility. If I had discovered that any special adviser had been complicit in trying to undermine the permanent secretary, I would have expected that spad, or “sped”, to resign immediately.

You had the grotesque situation, which was mentioned not so much in the report as it was in the evidence, of the permanent secretary of one of the most important Departments in the Government of Northern Ireland rushing into the office panicking because the ‘News Letter’, through Sam McBride, had obtained leaked information. He was telling the Minister and the special adviser of his angst and of how concerned he was, because there was the potential to name civil servants in follow-up articles, which happened. It was grotesque for those two individuals to sit and sympathise with the permanent secretary when they knew that they were entirely responsible for the leaking of that material. Moreover, I notice that they did not pay the correct postage, which, I suppose, is a level of incompetence.

In any other organisation anywhere in private industry, would those responsible for such acts be allowed to continue in employment? Absolutely not. It is those sorts of activities that have undermined, fundamentally, public confidence in the spad system.

Members have asked whether there would have been any difference had Mr Allister’s Bill been on the statute books. I would have thought that if those individuals had known that, were they discovered, they could face a custodial sentence, they might have acted rather differently. More importantly, did they realise that, if they had been discovered and the case went to court, the full antiseptic of sunshine and publicity would shine on their acts and that they would have to defend themselves in open court? That would have acted as a deterrent even if they were not convicted. It will be an interesting argument when we come back for Consideration Stage whether a custodial sentence is commensurate with the crime. I can see arguments on both sides, but such were the consequences of the actions of spads from various parties, so serious was the way in which they were acting, and so serious were the implications for this society and Northern Ireland that I believe that a custodial sentence is correct.

8.15 pm

I raised with Mr Allister the one concern I had. He gave evidence to the Finance Committee. We tried to pick holes in his argument — I hope that they are all hearing me now, by the way — but he was able to answer them all. There will be people in the Chamber who oppose the Bill, not because it does not have considerable merit but because it is sponsored by Jim Allister. There are people in this room who, if Jim Allister argued that swans were white and crows were black, would put down an amendment to say that was untrue because it was him. Simply because Mr Allister is sponsoring the Bill does not mean that it is without considerable merit.

I raised with him the issue that I have concerns about. I think that I hold the record in the Chamber for the largest number of referrals to standards and privileges, all of which failed and failed miserably. Some failed at the Committee and others failed because my then party had the good sense to put down a petition of concern to protect my integrity. None of them have ever stuck to me.

Mr O’Dowd, I am sure, would remember that, during his time as Education Minister, he had to make some terribly difficult, wisdom-of-Solomon decisions that were not popular in certain constituencies. He had to, quite rightly, amalgamate some schools in South Down. That had to be done because numbers were decreasing and there was no other option. Whilst publicly we may have condemned him as wrecking the education system of my constituency, privately there were people saying that that was the right decision.

The difficulty with those sorts of decisions is that the malcontents who do not accept the decision might simply refer the Minister to the Commissioner for Standards. Therefore, I agree with Mr Allister that there has to be some filtering mechanism to ensure that vexatious or false accusations are not permitted. Under the old equality legislation, there was a filtering mechanism. There were people alleging religious discrimination even though they were Protestants, the employer was a Protestant and everyone who was interviewed was a Protestant, so there could not have been. Therefore, there was a filtering mechanism to ensure that that did not happen, and we will probably need that with this legislation. Without it, I would be fearful that, instead of being deluged with complaints about Jim Wells, the commissioner would be deluged with

complaints about various Ministers, particularly those who have to make the really difficult decisions, namely the Health Minister and the Education Minister. Other Departments generally get away scot-free from numerous complaints.

For instance, if Robin Swann made the decision to remove an essential service from a rural hospital because he could not get clinicians to carry out the role, there would be 20,000 on the streets, demands for his head and, inevitably, people who, using this legislation, would make a formal complaint. That ridiculous situation would happen daily.

I am glad that Mr Allister has taken that on board and indicated that he is prepared to amend the legislation. He was a paragon of moderation and sense in the Committee. Any time an issue was brought up, he said, "Yes, I would be prepared to accept an amendment on that". There is a lot of reasonableness here.

Mr Storey: He has mellowed.

Mr Wells: I do not think that he has mellowed; it would be an insult to say that Mr Allister could ever mellow. I was with the Finance Committee, so I did not hear what he said to the Executive Office Committee, but he understood when reasonable points were made.

It is just unfortunate that Mr O'Dowd has stood up here tonight to represent 27 MLAs. In a very brief statement, he said, "We're against it". They are against it because the Executive did not propose it. He is a veteran of this place — he has been around here since the Boer Wars — and he knows that the reason why that would not work is that his three Ministers on the Executive could veto the Bill, meaning that it would never get out of the Executive. He knows that, and that is the very clever plan that he had to kill it stone dead.

There are Bills, documents and consultations lying in the Executive that will get absolutely nowhere because either one party or the other is using its veto, through its three Ministers, to ensure that that is what happens. He knows that that is what would have happened had this Bill been sponsored by the Executive. In my opinion, he is too clever by half. I believe that, with amendment — and not very much amendment — this Bill will start us on the road to recovery so that people will start to have confidence in this institution.

At the minute, we are held in the same high esteem as drug dealers and armed gangsters — and no doubt that will stimulate a writ from armed gangsters saying that to compare them to MLAs is impugning their integrity. There is absolutely no doubt: we are the lowest of the low. We are beneath estate agents, solicitors and bookies. You name it, we are beneath it, and deservedly so if you read the RHI inquiry report, which certainly did not paint us in a good light.

We have an opportunity. We have two years, because do we dare to go before the electorate in 2022 having not put our house in order? People ask whether the RHI inquiry was worth £7 million. It shone a light into so many aspects of where we have got this wrong.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. Will he also accept from me that we have had all this talk from the party opposite over the last number of days — I am glad that the Member is in the House — about "moral corruption"? It really does beggar belief that he had the audacity to say

that, as he comes from a party whose history is littered with the victims of a terrorist campaign. I have known the Member long enough, and I have worked with the Member, and I was extremely disappointed in the comments that he made. He has not yet been big enough to apologise for the disgraceful comments that he made. If I had made those comments, despite the current crisis, those Benches would have been filled with Members calling for my resignation.

My point to the Member is this: RHI was a convenient cover, because ultimately Sinn Féin had made a decision in Connolly House to bring these institutions down. The context of RHI was that Sinn Féin had a bad day at the polls, it was getting grief from its own community about not "putting it up" to the DUP, and a host of other things. It was a convenient issue for Sinn Féin, which it was complicit in. It was asleep at the wheel in holding this institution to account. Therefore, they cannot just put all the blame on one particular party in this House.

Mr Wells: RHI was the excuse rather than the reason for Sinn Féin after that famous meeting in the Felons Club, where it was made very clear that the DUP was running rings around the Front Bench of Sinn Féin, and therefore it had to get out. RHI suddenly came along, and Sinn Féin used that as the excuse to get out; it is as simple as that.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order, Members. This is now veering far from Mr Allister's Bill. I try to be fair with people, but it is important that our comments are directed towards the content of Mr Allister's Bill.

Mr Wells: Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I certainly got away with more than I expected there. *[Laughter.]* Me lambasting Mr O'Dowd will look very well in next week's 'Mourne Observer'. That is where the vast majority of the material in this Chamber ends up: in the local newspaper, and certainly he is a figure that is not particularly loved in some parts of Kilkeel and Rathfriland. I am disappointed that Mr O'Dowd, who is normally very verbose, long-winded and articulate, has not taken the opportunity to explain — and neither have his Committee members — what is going on. I think he is against it because Mr Howell and Mr Padraic Wilson have told him that he is against it. I would not be surprised if they had actually written his short missive here this evening.

I wish this Bill well. I happen to be on the Committee that is dealing with this particular issue. I am looking forward to it, and it is quite clear that the vast majority of Members here tonight are in favour. As we know, a petition of concern cannot be used to block the Second Reading of this Bill. I suspect that, even if Sinn Féin had wanted to do that, it could not find a second party prepared to sign to get the 30 signatures. We will now go into the scrutiny of this Bill. I hope it comes out of that scrutiny largely unamended, because after talking to many Members privately, I know that they think this is an excellent piece of legislation that is well thought through. I wish it all the best.

Miss Woods: I rise in support of the principles of this Bill, and of the possible amendments which have already been addressed. I look forward to engaging with Mr Allister on the Bill, especially on the issue of whistle-blowing.

The Executive parties made commitments in the NDNA, one of which was to establish a subcommittee to consider the findings of the RHI inquiry report, which, as we know, was released on Friday past. The Committee would propose reforms beyond that published in the 'NDNA'

document, and I look forward to learning the terms of reference for this group, who will be a member of it, and what the recommendations will be, further to Friday's report. However, this is long term, and we do not have any details on it yet. It is really important that legislation like this is brought forward.

As we know, the Finance Minister has already reduced the salaries of spads, introduced a new code and altered somewhat how spads are appointed. However, this lacks any independent enforcement mechanism and leaves many more unanswered questions about the process, as it is not transparent and the decision to hire ultimately rests solely at the Minister's discretion. Do we honestly think that this is the correct way of hiring people, at such expense to the public purse, given their role in advising Ministers? There would also be room for appointing extra commissioners to investigate breaches of the code and the spad code. In effect, we would be hiring more people, paying more public money for investigations into people that could be done by the Commissioner for Standards, which is something that the Green Party has been calling for since 2015. Is there any need for further duplication of work at further cost?

What of this code? It is not on any statutory basis, so where is the enforcement? "A code is a code", as we have heard, and we know from previous experience that these codes can be broken and have been broken. Legislation, on the other hand, is binding.

In January 2017, the Green Party's motion on ministerial accountability was passed, and I am very supportive of my colleague Mr Allister in bringing this into effect in clause 5. We need an independent, open and transparent process for investigating Ministers and their staff and, if required, especially spads. Given the closed-off nature of their appointments and the lack of public scrutiny, people will very reasonably expect that Ministers and staff should be held to account by an independent investigator, just as MLAs and councillors are, should any allegations arise.

Minister Murphy's written statement, received this afternoon, is timely, in that there are new codes for Ministers agreed, but again this leaves it all up to personal responsibility that the highest standards should be expected and upheld. Of course they should. There is no question about that. I further welcome, in the statement, the establishment of a panel to include the Commissioner for Standards. Who else is on this panel? How are they employed, to whom are they responsible, and how are they being appointed? It just begs further questions.

This Bill is required. It is timely and has advantages. I will not go into the issues that the RHI inquiry has brought up or the whole RHI experience. We briefly discussed this today, and it is not the time to rehash what has already gone on. We know what the issues are.

If RHI has taught us anything — it has and will continue to teach us a lot — about the way in which government works, and, importantly, does not work, we must restore confidence in politics in the eyes of the public.

We support the principles of Mr Allister's Bill.

Mr Carroll: This debate is particularly pertinent and important, given that we talked earlier today about the latest scandal to bring this place to its knees: the RHI

scandal. In that, the roles of spads and their Ministers were heavily criticised and their actions deemed incompetent.

It is ludicrous, for example, that, during the whole RHI scandal, Arlene Foster was deemed accountable for the actions of her spads but not responsible. For too long, this place has been run behind closed doors by those who have no elected mandate, who do not have to state their agenda on the record, and who will not face the consequences of their actions, scandal after scandal, from Red Sky to RHI and many in between.

That is by no means to let Ministers off the hook. Ministers were supposed to oversee the activities of spads and civil servants and have a basic understanding of what was going on in their Departments, but they did not. There can be no doubt that if some of the measures in this legislation had been brought in before RHI, the scandal might have proceeded very differently.

We are told, or are led to believe, that all is to change; openness and transparency are now key and that sustainability has been written into the new deal. I, for one, am sceptical. I smell a rat. I have so little faith in the two big parties of these institutions to lead the charge in ridding this place of backroom dealings and stitch-ups that I was unsurprised to learn that our new Finance Minister, in his first days in the role, had removed some of the measures that would ensure transparency around the hiring of a spad.

I was unsurprised to learn that Conor Murphy made it so that Ministers can select whomever they want as their spad regardless of merit and without any prescribed process to ensure transparency, but I am left with no less of a bad taste in my mouth. 'New Decade, New Approach'? I do not think so.

8.30 pm

There is a long way to go before we have measures in place to stop the serious misdealings that we saw in the RHI. Even then, I will not be in the least convinced that those running this place are interested in taking those measures on board. Where there are measures that attempt to make positive changes to the working of the Assembly, we will back them to ensure the fairest possible system for those who elect us to represent them, but, when a system is as fundamentally flawed as this, I am not convinced that any sticking plaster or tightening around the edges will go far enough to root out the rot at the heart of this place. I am happy to support the Bill's Second Stage.

Mr Allister: I am grateful for the contributions and the general indication of a fair wind for the principles of the Bill. I do not expect everyone to be bowled over by every clause, but, if Members, on balance, can see wisdom in the general thrust of the Bill, that is a good start. I look forward in the further stages, as they arise, to debating the detail of the Bill.

I will not overly detain the House, but I would like to deal with a couple of issues. On behalf of the Committee, Mr Frew — he is not here any more — drew attention to the fact that the long title of the Bill is deliberately drafted with a wide ambit so that it lends itself to being a vehicle for further amendments. I do not claim to have thought of everything that needs to be done in the sort of functioning that the Bill addresses, but, with the long title, the Bill can be amended to make it better as we go along.

A recurring theme with some Members was whether we needed a criminal sanction. The best testimony to good legislation with a criminal sanction is that it never needs to be used; it is the existence of the deterrent. I do not want to send spads, Ministers or civil servants to jail, but, given what has happened, given the capricious leaking of documents, the deliberate hiding of material through private emails and the advantage sought to be levered to family members by leaking documents and given that the old codes, which already said that you should not do that but must behave with integrity and honesty and respect confidentiality, were patently not enough, a new code that simply repeats that will not be enough. That raises this question: do we not then need legislation that says, "If you do that, you break the law. If you break that law, there is a risk, upon conviction, that you could go to jail"? I think that that is a necessary deterrent. That is why clauses 9 and 11 contain that ultimate deterrent. I look forward to debating further with Members the necessity for all of that, the proportionality of that and whether clause 11 could discourage whistle-blowers, as has been suggested. I do not think it would, because it says:

"it shall be an offence for any Minister, special adviser or civil servant to communicate, directly or indirectly, confidential and/or commercially sensitive information to any natural person or legal entity for the financial or other potential benefit".

A whistle-blower is not blowing the whistle for "financial or other potential benefit". However, it would be a useful safety net to amend that clause to say that it shall be a defence to any charge herein to show reasonable excuse or that the person was acting in the public interest. That is the catch-all for whistle-blowing: acting in the public interest. If people are concerned about that, I am more than content to see that added to clause 11. That would be a useful enough addition.

I will not deal with everyone's contribution, but I will deal with a few of the points. Mr O'Dowd said that this should not be a private Member's Bill. You could probably say that about most private Members' Bills, if you think that the Executive are the fount of all knowledge and have the capacity and the right to legislate. Yes, they do, but it is not exclusive. We are a legislative Assembly. We are here to legislate. Therefore, it would be wrong for us, as legislators, to say simply that, without dealing with the content of the Bill, it should not come by this vehicle. Maybe the problem was that it was the wrong private Member; I do not know.

Mr Wells made the poignant point that, if it had to come through the Executive, Sinn Féin and the DUP equally had a veto to block any legislation. Hence the reason —.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for giving way. There is agreement among the Executive parties that we need to introduce stringent regulations or rules in relation to the points raised in the RHI report, implement the recommendations of the report and regain public confidence. There is already momentum in the Executive to bring forward change. That may include legislation. That is why I said, "If legislation is required". I note that the RHI report does not refer to legislation, but it may require legislation.

I used to say, when I was Education Minister, that, when a Minister brought a Bill to the Floor of the Assembly, they

lost control of the Bill. It becomes the Assembly's Bill. It is no longer the Executive's Bill as such, so, if the Executive bring forward legislation, the Chamber decides the final shape of that legislation, as it should. It is not Executive legislation when it comes into the Chamber. The Assembly takes control, and it decides what it looks like at the end.

Mr Allister: I acknowledge that, for good reason, the Member was not present when I opened the debate, but the first thing I said was that I totally recognised, out of the RHI report, that there were many things that only the Executive could consider and do. I am not here to usurp their role. There is reform in the Civil Service. There are all sorts of things pointed out in a multitude of recommendations, but there are some things that are so patently, blindingly obvious: we need to have a requirement for minutes; we need to have a register of interests; we need to stop people leaking documents. There should not have to be a lot of debate, and the Executive should not have to ruminate over any of that. If there are things that we can do now, let us get on and do them. If the Executive have other things that they, in a more considered, long-term fashion, have to do, let them do it, but that is not a reason, I respectfully suggest, for not doing what urgently needs to be done.

Mr O'Dowd also suggested that the Bill was unnecessary and we could, effectively, do all this in codes. Apart from the fact that the codes we have had some of this and did not count for a row of beans — that is why you need it in legislation — I remind Mr O'Dowd that, if his party had had its way, we would not have even statutory codes. Statutory codes — a code of conduct for special advisers and a code of appointment for special advisers — came about in statute only through sections 7 and 8 of my first special advisers Act.

Who voted against those clauses?

Mr Wells: Sinn Féin.

Mr Allister: Sinn Féin. Here is that party telling us that all of this could be done through codes, yet its Members are the very people who did not want codes in the first place. When it is obvious that those codes have deficiencies and have neither deterrents nor impact, they nonetheless say, "Let us do this just through codes".

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes.

Mr Storey: I accept the point that the Member is making, but will he accept that what happened subsequent to the introduction of his Act was that the party opposite found other ways in which to employ the same people, via another vehicle? Should consideration be given to that issue so that, if one door is closed, another opportunity is not opened up for the party to do something else?

Mr Allister: That is absolutely right. As I was going through the Bill, I drew attention to clause 1(6), which places a statutory obligation on a permanent secretary. It states:

"a permanent secretary must ensure that no person other than a duly appointed special adviser is afforded by the department the cooperation, recognition and facilitation due to a special adviser."

The evidence in the RHI inquiry was that the permanent secretary in Stormont Castle turned a blind eye to the fact that a party super-spads, who oversaw the regular spads, had the run of the place and that that was being facilitated. In an attempt to close down that circumvention, I want to make it emphatic that that cannot and must not be done. There is no better way in which to pull not just civil servants but everyone into line than by having something in statute so that not to do it is unlawful. Civil servants, if nothing else, are creatures who naturally and properly want to obey the law. If we put an obligation on a permanent secretary not to facilitate those phoney super-spads, there can be a fair expectation that that is what will happen.

Mr Storey raised another point. His intervention reminded me of his earlier intervention. He asked the question — I think that it was him — about the consultation requirement. My understanding is that for this Bill, because I drafted it myself, there was no obligation on me to consult, although I did consult on the first several clauses of my 2015 Bill. Where the Executive bring a Bill, there is a guidance requirement for consultation. It will be interesting to see, for example, whether that is met for the language legislation that is coming. I do not think that it has been met yet. There is that requirement for Executive legislation. However, the particular circumstances of my Bill mean that there was no such requirement.

I thank Mr Beggs and others for their general level of support. I think that I have dealt with the points raised about whether a criminal sanction is needed. Clearly, that will be a live debate as we go forward. Mr Muir, the SDLP and others raised the matter. I will happily address those issues further down the line.

I want to acknowledge what Rachel Woods said. The inspiration for clause 5 is indeed Steven Agnew's motion, which was the last motion passed by the House in January 2017. It was a very simple but compelling proposition: if we have a Standards Commissioner who looks at MLAs, he should look equally at MLAs who happen to be Ministers under the ministerial code. Why are we reinventing the wheel when we have that mechanism? All that we need to do is add the ministerial code to his ambit. That is reasonable and sensible.

8.45 pm

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes.

Mr Wells: Will the Member deal with an issue that, perhaps, has not been raised? I was one who benefited from it, as did several other former DUP Ministers. It is that, when a report was brought from the Standards and Privileges Committee admonishing an MLA or a Minister — well, it had to be an MLA — for his behaviour, a petition of concern was tabled immediately before the debate. That meant, of course, that it required cross-community support. Is there anything in the Member's Bill that would prevent that happening or would that require an amendment?

Mr Allister: The answer is that there is nothing in it yet, but since that point was raised with me at the Finance Committee, I am favourably disposed to an amendment that would say that a petition of concern may not be used in respect of a report from the Standards and Privileges

Committee. The Member may have had the benefit of that in the past, but I am not sure that it was good procedure. It is something that the House would need to look at because it is, maybe, a step too far in affording a party the right to throw a protective shield — a human shield — of fellow Members around that individual, whether they are a Minister or a Member. That is something that will probably give rise to debate, if and when we get to that point.

I am grateful for the time that I have been given, and I am happy to leave my remarks there. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill [NIA 01/17-22] be agreed.

Adjourned at 8.46 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 23 March 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: I wish to make a few opening remarks. Members will be aware that I have issued a number of communications since the last sitting. Today, I want to recognise the very significant cooperation that there has been in my discussions with party Whips and Assembly Commission members. There has been an absolute unity of purpose to ensure that the Assembly is focused on the public health crisis at this time, and I want to thank all those Members who have so cooperated.

I met junior Ministers last week, and I have received a positive response from the First Minister and deputy First Minister that Ministers will come to the Chamber frequently, as shown by the fact that there are two statements to the Assembly today. Members will also be aware that the Assembly has significant business tomorrow when it will consider giving consent to the Coronavirus Bill.

I have had further meetings with officials this morning, and continued work is being done to revise the practical arrangements for Assembly working procedures during this period, some of which you can see here this afternoon. I will have further conversations with the Whips and the Assembly Commission as required over the next number of days. I plan to attend a meeting of the Committee Chairpersons tomorrow to discuss the business of Committees.

As I conclude this morning, I thank all the Assembly staff, Members and their party staff who are working to support us in Parliament Buildings during these very concerning times.

Finally, I want to take this opportunity to express my thanks and the thanks of the whole Assembly to all those in our community and our public services who are working to mitigate the impact of COVID-19. It is, indeed, a fast-moving situation. They are making extraordinary efforts, and it is only right that the business of the Assembly adjusts to support them.

Mr Ivan Davis

Mr Speaker: I wish to make a number of remarks in relation to the passing of Ivan Davis, a former Member. The former Ulster Unionist Member for Lagan Valley, Ivan Davis OBE, sadly passed away on Friday 13 March. As his funeral service was taking place at the same time as the plenary sitting last Monday, I agreed with the Ulster Unionist Party that it was appropriate to delay tributes to Ivan until today. I want to thank personally Robbie Butler, the Ulster Unionist Party Whip, for his full cooperation in this matter.

Before joining the Assembly, Ivan had been a Mayor of Lisburn. In the first term of the Assembly, we were the Chief Whip of our respective parties for a period of time.

While we came from different political perspectives, I always found Ivan to be courteous in all our dealings, and he was someone with whom you could certainly do business. His passing follows other losses of late of Members who served in that first Assembly and who, many would say, were courageous in doing so. In what are already very sobering times, that gives additional cause for reflection.

We extend our sympathies at this difficult time to Ivan's wife Betty and his children Allyson, Hayden and Gareth.

Before I invite Members to pay their tributes to Ivan, I put on record and extend the House's condolences to Mike Nesbitt, whose mother Brenda passed away on Saturday 14 March.

Mr Butler: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for your kind words. It is an honour for me today, even briefly, to pay respect on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party and the Assembly to the late Ivan Davis OBE. Along with the OBE, Ivan was a freeman of the city of Lisburn, something of which he was very proud. He sadly left us on 13 March 2020 — peacefully in hospital, and for that we are grateful. As you said, Mr Speaker, Ivan was the much-loved husband to Betty and father of Allyson, Hayden, Gareth and the late Alvin. He was also a devoted grandfather and great-grandfather, and our thoughts are very much with those people at this time.

Ivan was first elected to political office in 1973, one year after I was born. Some of us newbie politicians may think that the decisions that we make today and have had to make in recent months have been difficult: they have, but, when I cast my mind back and think about people like Ivan, who, when this country was imploding violently, stepped up to the podium and, at great risk to them and their

families, sought to serve their community. For that, Ivan, we say, "Thank you".

Ivan was a proud unionist, a proud working-class guy and a devoted family man. Thankfully, I did not need to google any of that; I know that because I lived where Ivan lived. Ivan lived in the community that he served. He raised his family in the Roseville estate in the Low Road, Lisburn. In 1987 and to my delight, he moved from the Democratic Unionist Party to the Ulster Unionist Party and quickly became a community champion who seemed to know everyone. He was able to fix any problem that was brought to him, and he gained great respect and admiration across the political field that will be shared by many, including you, Mr Speaker, today. For that, Ivan, we say, "Thank you".

At Ivan's funeral, a tribute was made by Lord Trimble. He and John Hume are known as the architects of the Good Friday Agreement, and it was with a sense of local, Low Road, Lisburn pride that I learnt of his role and the support that Ivan gave from the Benches of the Ulster Unionist Party in the design and delivery of what, we now know, brought an end to our Troubles and helped to pave the way for peace in Northern Ireland. For that, Ivan, we say, "Thank you".

Finally, though — I did learn this from Google — when I was made Chief Whip a number of months ago, I felt a great sense of achievement and pride that that wee working-class guy from the Low Road was Chief Whip of the Ulster Unionist Party, but that self-satisfaction was short-lived. I merely follow in your footsteps, my friend, and pick up the baton as you did before me when you held that role. If I can carry even half the reputation that Ivan Davis had, I will be doing fine. For all that you did and all whom you served, Ivan, I say, "Thank you".

Mr Poots: I have known Ivan Davis since 1973 when my father and Ivan were first elected to Lisburn Borough Council, which later became Lisburn City Council. Ivan was a true gentleman through all the time that I knew him. As Mr Butler pointed out, Ivan left the DUP in 1987. That was largely due to one particularly difficult individual, and we deeply regretted the loss of Ivan. Ivan was a fantastic community constituency worker. That was reflected in the old area D of Lisburn council, when he received some 3,700 votes in the 1981 election. That was more than three times the quota. It demonstrated the guy's individual popularity. He was elected to the council for 38 years in total.

Over the past number of years, I would have called with Ivan. One thing that he rebuked me for was that, in 2017, I did not call round to get my nomination paper signed by him. He had signed it for a number of years previously, despite the fact that he was a member of the Ulster Unionist Party. That was a demonstration of the friendship that existed between Ivan and me. One thing on which he reflected regularly was his imprisonment with my father for their protest against the Public Order Act 1986, when they walked from Smyth Patterson's in Lisburn to the police station on the road in defiance of that Act. They would not pay the fine and ended up being imprisoned for several days together. Ivan often reflected on that experience and had many a chuckle about it.

Ivan was a really decent guy, a really decent individual. He will be truly missed. One thing that I will say about Ivan is that, although he stood down from the council in 2011, he still provided huge support to many communities in Lisburn

thereafter. He turned up to many of their events. He still engaged in a way in which many public representatives do not engage with their communities. Every year, the Lisburn Assessment and Resource Centre holds a fantastic event where the learning-disabled community has a night together: Ivan was always there. We will miss his friendship and community spirit. He has delivered much not just for the community in Lisburn and Lagan Valley but for the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr O'Dowd: I did not know Mr Davis, but, on behalf of Sinn Féin, I add our condolences to his family, friends and, indeed, former colleagues. I have said in the Chamber often that, regardless of our political differences, I have huge respect for anybody who serves the public in elected office. We pass on our sympathies.

Mrs D Kelly: On behalf of the SDLP and, in particular, my party colleague Pat Catney, who worked across a range of community projects with Ivan Davis, I extend our sincere condolences to his wife, extended family and, indeed, his party colleagues. These are difficult times for us all, but, after so many years together, the loss of a father and husband who was, there is no doubt, a guiding hand and presence in the family home, must be acute for them at this time. I extend our condolences on behalf of the SDLP.

Mr Muir: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I add to the condolences that have been expressed. I did not know Ivan Davis, but I knew that he had a long record not just here but particularly in local government. As has been outlined, he was a freeman of the city. In better times, I had the opportunity to visit Wallace Park to do the park run, and I noticed that the pavilion is named after him. That reflects the esteem in which he is held in the community and the contribution that he made to sports groups in the city of Lisburn. Today, we remember his passing and the contribution that he made to communities and society generally.

Mr Givan: I did not know Ivan to the same extent as my colleague Edwin Poots did, nor did I have the history that his family did with the Davis family. I first met Ivan on a school tour in Parliament Buildings shortly after the Belfast Agreement was signed. Ivan had been elected for Lagan Valley with his colleague Billy Bell of the Ulster Unionist Party. My school principal was an avid Ulster Unionist. Of course, it was that party who provided the tour. He was interrogated by a group of students who were not really that way inclined, and I was one of them. After that meeting, Ivan said, "Paul, you will be here with me some day". I said, "Well, I hope so, but I might take your seat", because I was after representation at that time. Ivan always engaged with me in very good humour.

12.15 pm

I served with Ivan when I was a councillor on Lisburn City Council. Ivan was always a very steady, consistent individual. He was gracious and mannerly, and he worked across all the parties with that type of approach. Ivan was unique in that you would never have seen him in Lisburn without him wearing his suit. Until very recently, in any public appearances that he made, he was always in a shirt, tie and a jacket. I am not sure whether he would appreciate that his replacement in the Assembly does not adhere to the same dress code when he is out in Lisburn, but Mr Davis was always very well turned out.

Ivan's working-class roots have been mentioned. Many's the public group AGM that I attended, even within the last 12 months, Ivan was there providing advice to those community organisations that he continued to support long after he was an elected Member.

Ivan also had a museum of newspaper articles from the 'Ulster Star'; he obviously kept every edition. He was able to produce what had been said 20-plus years ago. He had a fantastic ability to recall previous statements that people had made and what they were now saying.

I offer my condolences to his wife, Betty, and to the wider family on the loss of Ivan.

Mr Allister: The late Ivan Davis was a man whom I had the honour of knowing for over 40 years. I found him, at all times, whether in agreement or disagreement with him, to be as he is being described today: a true gentleman.

Ivan personified what it was to be a community politician. He was "Mr Lisburn" for many years, and the torch that he carried for that city always came first. Within the community, he was undoubtedly the go-to man, from the mundane to right above that when people had problems. It earned him, quite properly, a remarkable reputation as a community and political representative. He served in all the various fora that we have heard about.

I last saw Ivan at a disabled police officers' event. That was typical of Ivan: even though he had retired, he sustained an interest on behalf of such a variety of community interests. There he was, and we had a good chat and look back over some old times.

When I was first in this House, from 1982-86, I was the Chief Whip of the DUP group, and Ivan Davis was the assistant Whip. I will not say that I taught him all that he knew, but he did follow my example of leaving the DUP [*Laughter*] so maybe I did. He was a very personable and honourable man, and he will be much missed, but primarily within his family. To his wife, Betty, and family, I add to the condolences.

While I am on my feet, I convey to Mike Nesbitt our sympathy on the loss of his mother. No matter how long we have our mother, and Mike had his for many decades, the parting is not easy. I am sure that we will all join in conveying that to Mike.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. If there are no further Members indicating that they wish to speak, that concludes the tributes to Mr Davis.

Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: The first item of business in the Order Paper is a motion about Committee membership. As with other similar motions, it will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

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

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You are going to invite us to consider another motion.

The House is being invited to consider that motion without debate. Yet, that motion will remove the opportunity for Members during coming weeks to ask oral questions of Ministers in the House. That seems to be a wholly retrograde step compounded by the fact that we are not even to debate it.

I recognise entirely that these are utterly unprecedented times and that our focus should be single-minded in respect of the medical crisis but we are sent to the House as MLAs, and part of that function is to scrutinise the work of the Executive. Once the Coronavirus Bill is passed, tomorrow or in the following days, the Executive will acquire immense, draconian powers, because that Act is effectively an amazing special powers Act. Yet, that will coincide with removing the regular facility of the House to question Ministers at Question Time. That is not happening, generally, elsewhere. It is not happening in Westminster. The First Minister in Scotland is still taking questions, and, I believe, it is so in Wales. Yet, in this House, we will, on the nod, remove that facility from Members. That is incongruous, it is wrong and it is particularly wrong that we will do that without debate. If that is the will of the House, then let it be manifested in debate. The House is a place apart. It is a place without an opposition, and yet now we will have an Executive with the facility of Members to even question them removed. That seems wrong.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for giving me advance notice of the point of order that he wished to raise and has just raised. I would like to think that Members would acknowledge that, since I took on this role, I have contacted Ministers as an Executive and a number of Ministers directly in relation to matters around the delay in responding to questions or coming to the House. I have reported on that routinely through Speaker's announcements in the morning. I have made it clear to all concerned that the role of the Assembly has to be exemplary in holding to account and scrutinising the work of the Executive. But that is for more normal times, I have to say.

As I explained in my letter to all Members last week, the Whips and I agree that the Assembly should not unnecessarily divert or distract from the delivery of public services to deal with the impact of COVID-19. That is why the Business Committee subsequently agreed a motion to suspend the normal routine of questions for oral answer to Ministers. In return, I encourage Ministers to come to the Assembly regularly to update Members with oral statements, after which Members will be able to conduct more focused scrutiny through their questions. That motion reflects the seriousness of the current public health situation, and I commend the Whips for their

support. Of course, as the motion indicates, the decision will be reviewed by the Business Committee at the end of April, and Members' feedback, through party Whips and representatives on the Business Committee, will be welcome at that time.

I just want to say again that we all know that the Assembly has to give leadership. I have made it clear, as I have pointed out, that it is our job to scrutinise and hold the Executive and the Ministers to account for the work that they are involved in. It is very clear, increasingly so over the weekend with the concern around people not heeding the advice to socially distance and so on, that the Assembly has to lead by example. Hopefully, through leadership — including from the House — the sooner that people take heed of the medical advice around public safety, the sooner we can get back to business as usual. In the meantime, we will be inconvenienced and have less opportunity, but not necessarily so, because I am encouraged by the response that I have been receiving from the Executive Office and the Ministers that they wish to be regularly in contact with Members through the Chamber.

I thank Mr Allister for raising the point of order, but, as I have said, the Whips and the parties have agreed the course of action that we have tabled in the Order Paper this morning. I think that we all believe that it is reasonable that we take the burden from the Executive and Ministers at this point in our history — an unprecedented time of public health crisis. Again, I thank the Member for raising the issue: it will be kept under constant review.

Standing Order 10(2)(a) and Standing Orders 20 and 20A: Suspension

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

Mrs D Kelly: I beg to move

That Standing Order 10(2)(a) and Standing Orders 20 and 20A be suspended until 13 May 2020.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Order 10(2)(a) and Standing Orders 20 and 20A be suspended until 13 May 2020.

Mr Speaker: I am satisfied that cross-community support has been demonstrated.

Standing Order 15(1): Suspension

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

Mrs D Kelly: I beg to move

That Standing Order 15(1) be suspended on Tuesday 24 March, for the purposes of the legislative consent motion on the Coronavirus Bill introduced at Westminster; and that amendments to the motion shall be given in writing to the Speaker not later than 9.30 am on Tuesday 24 March 2020.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Order 15(1) be suspended on Tuesday 24 March, for the purposes of the legislative consent motion on the Coronavirus Bill introduced at Westminster; and that amendments to the motion shall be given in writing to the Speaker not later than 9.30 am on Tuesday 24 March 2020.

Mr Speaker: I am satisfied that cross-community support has been demonstrated.

Executive Committee Business

Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): I beg to move

That the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be affirmed.

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

Ms Hargey: The regulations will increase the value of lump sum awards that are paid under the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (NI) Order 1979, known as the "1979 scheme". The uprating of the scheme stands apart from the main social security benefits uprating, and there is no statutory requirement to increase the rates. However, it has been agreed to increase the rates payable from 1 April of this year in line with inflation. Therefore, payments will increase by September's consumer price index of 1.7%. That is consistent with the uprating of industrial injuries benefits.

The purpose of the 1979 scheme is to pay compensation to people who suffer from certain dust-related disease and their dependants. The five respiratory diseases that it covers are mainly related directly to asbestos exposure: mesothelioma, diffuse pleural thickening, primary carcinoma of the lung, byssinosis and pneumoconiosis. The lump sum payment scheme is intended to compensate people who, in the course of their work, have been exposed to asbestos or other listed agents but have been unable to seek compensation from their employer, even though the disease was contracted as a result of working for that employer. Symptoms tend not to appear until many years after exposure. By that stage, the employer might have ceased to be in business. To be eligible for payment under the scheme, there has to be no current or previous claim for damages in respect of the disease for which the person is claiming; there must be no relevant employer who can be pursued through the courts; and the person must have been awarded industrial injuries disablement benefit.

The lump sum compensation is paid in addition to the weekly disablement benefit for the same disease. Dependants of the sufferer can make a claim if the person has passed away before they were able to make the claim.

12.30 pm

Payments of the lump sum are based on the age of the person with the disease and their level of disablement at the time of diagnosis. Higher amounts are paid to people with higher levels of disability and whose condition is diagnosed at an earlier age. Lower amounts are payable to dependants who make a claim after the sufferer has died. The maximum amount that can be paid under the 1979 scheme is being increased this year to £93,827 for a person aged 37 or under at diagnosis. That helps to ensure that the compensation that is provided under the Order maintains its value.

No amount of money can compensate a person who is affected by these terrible diseases. However, I am sure that Members will want people who are making a claim on or after 1 April 2020 to receive the higher amounts and will, therefore, support the regulations.

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): The Committee for Communities considered the regulations at its meeting on 12 March 2020 and acknowledged that the regulations would simply increase the amounts that are payable under the relevant Order and make provision for payments to dependants where the sufferer did not receive a payment under the Order before their death. We can all see the justice and fairness in making such a provision for dependants.

The Committee noted that the uprating is in line with that for other disability benefits; that is, according to the consumer price index rate as of September 2019, which was 1.7%. The Committee was, therefore, content to recommend that the Assembly affirm the regulations.

Ms Hargey: I thank the Chair and I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be affirmed.

Ministerial Statements

COVID-19 Preparations

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Justice that she wishes to make a statement.

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): I made a statement on 16 March 2020 and I would like to provide a further update to Members on the arrangements that are being made in the Department of Justice to continue to deliver essential public services in the face of the challenges that are presented by COVID-19.

Officials briefed the Justice Committee last Thursday and did so again this morning. We are committed to providing reassurance that, across the Justice family, we are working together to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic. Our priority is to ensure public safety, the safety of our staff and those in our care and to maintain access to essential justice services. In that context, I will take the opportunity to place on record my appreciation, and that of my departmental staff, for the recent decision to keep non-urgent Assembly business under review and to manage the use of written questions in particular. That will enable staff to focus on the maintenance of essential services while, through regular statements like this, I can provide frequent and timely information to Members on how we are handling the situation.

Key to our contingency planning is strong communication and collaboration right across the wider justice system and with other Executive colleagues. Significant work continues across the Department's business areas, agencies and non-departmental public bodies to develop and refine the contingency plans and emergency response plans that we need in order to have the resilience to continue operating in the event of increased staff absence. The Department's operations centre has recently been opened and I believe that the Department is doing everything that it can to prepare.

As I said before, we have identified the highest priority public services that need to be maintained and we will, if necessary, make further resources available to do so. This is a dynamic situation, and significant resource is being devoted to ensure that we keep our plans under review in light of emerging information and as the scale of what we are all facing becomes clearer.

We know that it is estimated that 50% of our workforce will take time off as a result of COVID-19 during the total period of the outbreak and that during the peak weeks of the outbreak — a period that is estimated to be three to four weeks — we can expect up to 20% of staff to be absent at any one time and that is before we account for absence for other routine reasons.

Safeguarding our staff is paramount and we continue to take proportionate steps, in line with Public Health Agency guidance, to ensure staff well-being. We have asked individuals who are displaying

symptoms to stay at home. We are reducing non-essential contact, particularly for those who are in vulnerable groups. People have been asked to work from home where possible, limit their use of public transport and avoid unnecessary social gatherings.

Staff have also received the central Northern Ireland Civil Service advice clarifying working arrangements and physical distancing measures to help reduce the transmission of COVID-19. I understand that more will be forthcoming, including in light of the recent decision to close schools. For those who must work in the office, we are taking action to enable physical distancing. It has been recommended that meetings should not take place unless absolutely essential and that other tools are used to avoid face-to-face meetings. We have asked that everyone continues to maintain the highest possible personal hygiene standards, including through frequent and thorough handwashing. In certain areas, such as prisons, protective clothing is available for staff.

The emergency Coronavirus Bill, which is being debated in the House of Commons at Westminster today, gives us the powers that we need to take the right action at the right time to respond effectively to the progress of the outbreak. The Justice Committee was briefed on the detail of the Bill earlier today. At a high level, the measures in the Bill fall into five broad categories: measures to contain and slow the virus; measures to increase the available health and social care workforce; measures to ease the legislative and regulatory requirements for front-line staff; measures to allow us to manage the deceased with respect and dignity; and measures intended to provide support to people.

The powers relating to policing and justice functions will help to alleviate the administrative burdens in that regard, in the event that widespread absences related to the spread of COVID-19 reduce our capacity to deliver those functions. Provision is also made for additional powers for the police to support actions taken by the relevant health authorities to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. These will enable the police force to enforce sensible public health restrictions, including returning people to isolation and, where necessary, directing individuals to seek relevant treatment or attend suitable locations for further help. The Bill includes certain powers of direction to enable local government to direct private providers in the death management industry — for example funeral directors, mortuaries and crematoriums — individuals and services to implement a central plan.

Under a reasonable worst-case scenario, the justice system would continue to deal with the highest priority issue of maintaining public safety, but it is likely to need to stop work of a lower priority. We all appreciate the sensitivities involved in planning for what we could be dealing with if the coronavirus really takes hold here in the way that it has done in other countries across Europe. I do not want to create unnecessary anxiety — of course I do not — but what my officials and I do want to do is to ensure that we are as prepared as we can be for that worst-case scenario.

All too sadly, we have already heard from the Health Minister that the worst-case scenario involves up to 15,000 people losing their lives to this virus. As a society, we do not like talking about death but it is a sad reality that, unfortunately, we will have to do so increasingly as the virus spreads. As figures rise — and all the evidence points to the fact that they inevitably will — my Department will be working to ensure that respect and dignity for the deceased and bereaved is preserved. We are taking precautions to prepare for the risk that the normal burial

arrangements are not sufficient. We will do all that we can to ensure dignity for the deceased and their family.

We must also safeguard public health. In the event that the virus hits Northern Ireland very hard, as we have seen elsewhere in the world, this gives rise to challenges that we are working to meet. We are working with all of those involved to enable as many people as possible to be buried or cremated in the usual way. Nonetheless, pressures on the system as a result of coronavirus are likely to mean that some families may need to wait longer for the burial or cremation of their loved ones. We have already seen restrictions on attendance at the crematorium, with services being conducted at gravesides. The wider health crisis may well mean that there need to be restrictions on attendance at funerals, but that is a matter for the health experts to advise on. As I have mentioned already, the Westminster Bill contains powers in this regard that are intended to help with potential pressure on the system at every stage up to burial or cremation. These are sensible, precautionary powers that we need to provide for in the event of the worst-case scenario, but that is not to say that it will happen.

Another of our most significant issues continues to be the impact on the Prison Service. Our priority during these unprecedented times will be to support our staff and keep safe those in our care.

The challenges that the Prison Service is facing should not be underestimated. We have just under 1,600 people in custody, and we know that 32% of our prison population suffer from mental health issues, 50% from addictions and 55% have a history of self-harm. Many of those in our prisons fall into the high-risk category, both in age and through underlying medical conditions.

The Prison Service, working closely with the South Eastern Trust, has identified isolation units, which it has been using on a precautionary basis over the past few weeks. All prisoners who have been placed in isolation have tested negative. So far, we, thankfully, have no confirmed cases of COVID-19 in our prisons.

It has been the objective of the Prison Service to maintain as normal a regime as possible for as long as possible. However, on Friday past, I agreed with the director general that all prisons visits should be suspended from today. The Prison Service is working on a range of measures that will allow contact to be maintained between prisoners and their families during the period of suspension.

In my last statement, I focused on the issues that the Courts and Tribunals Service is facing. Significant steps have been taken since then, including guidance that was issued by the Lord Chief Justice, to minimise the number of people who need to attend court and to prioritise the most urgent business.

We remain committed to playing our part in tackling this crisis and keeping people safe. However, people need to get real, and I echo the call for social responsibility that began via social media over the weekend. I applaud those who are doing the right thing and those well-known local people who are using their influence to call on more people to do it. Now, it is time that we all do the right thing. I have talked about emergency legislation, but the best and easiest way to protect the public is for us all to wash our hands and to follow the guidance: stay at home where we can, social distance where we cannot. None of us has

ever faced a challenge like this. What may have seemed inconceivable a few short weeks ago is increasingly becoming our reality, and it may remain so for a reasonable length of time. We are planning and preparing with that in mind. We will continue to follow PHA guidance. If that guidance changes, we will move quickly to adapt our approach and planning accordingly.

There are difficult times ahead for all of us, and we need to be there for each other, as a caring and compassionate society, as never before.

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): I thank the Minister for her statement. Late on Saturday night, we spoke for over an hour and discussed a wide range of areas across the justice system. I also want to thank her officials for the way that they have engaged with the Committee. An emergency session of the Committee was held this morning, and members were able to dig deeper into these issues.

There are some points that I need to put on record. The first is about the police powers that are being taken on. When they will be triggered remains with the Department of Health. The risk to the public is serious and imminent. We need clarity as to when the Department of Health will trigger the laws that are going to be given to the police.

There are issues around the retention and recruitment of police officers, those most recently retired and the capacity to bring them back. The PSNI should be supplemented if necessary. If it becomes a requirement, I hope that the Minister will support assistance from the Ministry of Defence.

The PSNI needs personal protective equipment (PPE), as well as testing for officers and their families, so that officers have the confidence to re-engage and to ensure that the capacity exists. We cannot afford to have 50% of the justice system off at any one time during this crisis.

We need to address mass gatherings. At the weekend, we saw an invasion of tourist areas across the country and into Donegal. That is unacceptable. I want to know that the measures that are taken on board will be enforced and that the capacity exists so that, should pressure come on the police to have to enforce those measures, that can happen. What punitive measures will there be to fine individuals who continue to act in defiance and those businesses that do not act responsibly?

In respect of possible deaths, which is a very sensitive issue, officials told the Committee that we have the capacity to store 280 bodies. Further capacity is being sought.

Is engagement now taking place across the public sector where there are provisions in place so that they can also be utilised in the event that that becomes necessary?

12.45 pm

I appeal to the public. They need to act and act now. They need to listen to the advice that is being given. These measures are now being taken on board. I will give my full support to the Minister of Justice as she seeks to expedite these matters with the urgency that they require. As the House comes together, as it is doing, and rallies round our Executive and those Ministers who have this responsibility, I will not be found wanting in giving my support for the

extraordinary measures required in these extraordinary times.

Mr Speaker: I call John O'Dowd.

Mr O'Dowd: I welcome the statement and offer our support to the Minister in the action that she has to take to protect public safety and the safety of those who work in the Prison Service and the justice system and also those who are inmates in the justice system. I am aware, from reports over the weekend, that prison visits have now been stopped, but one visitor to Maghaberry prison over the weekend described it to me as being like a Petri dish for passing infection. We have to ensure that all precautions are in place. Clearly, we have some of the most dangerous people in our society in prison, but we also have some of the most vulnerable people in our society in prison. If our health service and our mental health services were fully equipped, those people would be in different settings other than in prison. Will the Minister reassure everyone that all services and protection are put in place for those people?

I agree with the Member who spoke previously. Those who are not respecting the advice that they are being given are quite literally killing people, and they need to understand that. They are spreading this disease. While they may be feeling healthy, they are literally killing people, and they need to take that on board.

Mr Speaker: I call Patsy McGlone.

Mr McGlone: Thanks very much to the Minister for all her efforts and those of her staff; we heard some of them at the Justice Committee this morning. Very briefly, I will raise two major issues. The Member who spoke previously touched on the first of them. There is mention of the potential for a release scheme, and many of the individuals who are in prison suffer from addiction and mental health problems. Some of them have a lot of vulnerabilities and even tendencies to self-harm. Can the Minister advise what measures are being taken to ensure that, upon release, those people will have the necessary support? That involves collaboration with the health services.

Secondly, we heard that there may be an announcement on testing for front-line staff in the PSNI and the Prison Service to ensure that they too, as key workers, are kept safe. Can the Minister advise when that testing will be available to those front-line key staff?

Mr Speaker: Minister, in my eagerness to invite Members to speak, I neglected to invite you to respond to Mr Givan and Mr O'Dowd. You may wish to respond now accordingly.

Mrs Long: I thought that we were being especially efficient in leaving all the answers to the end. I hope that you will indulge me with some time to do that. I thank the Members who have spoken already for their questions and also for the robustness with which they have asserted the need for the public to take this seriously.

I was appalled, frankly, at the laxness with which people were treating the advice. People have not been sent home from school and from work because this is a holiday; people are being sent home in order to try to protect lives. For them to do that, they need to stay in their homes and maintain social isolation. Failure to do that creates massive challenges for those who must go to work: our nurses, our doctors, our police officers, our prison services and so on. Therefore, it is absolutely vital that, if people do not need

to leave their homes, they stay at home and follow the advice that is given.

Paul Givan raised a number of issues that I want to give a brief response to. Under the legislation that is going through today, the commencement of police powers will reside in the Executive Office, so it will be for the Executive Office to declare an emergency, based on the health advice that is provided. The Executive Office will also have the power to ban public gatherings, to close facilities and so on, and it will then be for the police to enforce those decisions. You also asked about the potential consequences of not doing so. We have already said that people will lose their lives. That is the reality. However, if that is not sufficient to bring people to their senses, I draw their attention to the fact that in the Bill there is a fine of up to £100,000 for disobeying instructions in those circumstances. If people do not care that they may be endangering their own elderly relatives, and indeed those of other people, perhaps that will bring to their attention how serious this is.

With respect to retention and recruitment in the police, you will be aware that that is an operational matter for the police. However, they have continued, where possible, with the recruitment that was already under way and they have continued to maintain police training, albeit in a different format, so that they have a flow of new officers in to the service, as they have a flow out on retirement at the other end. Some will perhaps wish to delay retirement until after this crisis.

Similar measures are in place for the Prison Service. It is a matter for the Chief Constable to request MOD support at the point where it is necessary. He will liaise with me, and with Executive colleagues, in doing so, and particularly with members of the Policing Board. At this stage, he has not sought that advice and support.

In terms of PPE and testing, there is a worldwide shortage of PPE. However, my most recent understanding is that a source has been identified for PPE and for tests. The Department of Finance is taking that forward collectively on behalf of the Executive. We want to do that quickly, particularly for those in enclosed environments and in front-line services, so that we can protect the integrity of the workforce. We do not want people having to self-isolate for two weeks, when after three days we may be clear that they are not affected by the virus.

Finally, Paul Givan mentioned liaising with those in the sector on deaths and burials. You will appreciate, as I have said, that this is a very sensitive and difficult area. We have already reached out, for example, to those in faith communities, those who work in that sector in terms of burials and disposals, and with the council in respect of Roselawn crematorium and managing gravesides.

We need to manage this in as sensitive a way as possible. We want to ensure that families are able to grieve and that the dead are dealt with in a dignified manner, but we do have to recognise that, for those infected by the disease, that also is a public health risk that needs to be very carefully managed. We will need to work very carefully and sensitively with bereaved families to ensure that we maintain dignity but also protect public health.

I agree with John O'Dowd; that is one of the reasons why we took the extraordinary measure of suspending prison visits. Most of us will recognise that prison visits are crucial

for mental health, family connections and maintaining a calm and cooperative regime in the Prison Service. We suspend prison visiting as a last option. We also recognise that many of the people in our care are very vulnerable and rely heavily on prison visits for their morale and mental health.

I want to reassure Members that whilst face-to-face visits have had to be suspended in order to protect life, there was extensive discussion with those in our care before that action was taken. Many voluntarily asked their families not to come to the prison, because they believed that to do so was to place them and their families at risk. We have also taken measures to reassure them that we will, insofar as it is in our gift, seek to support them to maintain contact with their families outside the prison system. Those measures include, for example, additional phone credits and additional opportunities to make contact with families, and the use of videoconferencing and the internet, in limited fashion, to enable face-to-face contact with families. Those are all now being implemented, as are some additional measures to offer support to vulnerable people in the system.

We recognise that for families this is also a very difficult time, because they will, on the one hand, want to see their loved one, and on the other hand they will not want to expose them to any risk. It is imperative, not just for those in our care, but also that their wider families get the support that they need to cope in this estranged situation and that contact is not lost.

I will move on to the questions from Patsy McGlone. There has been some toing and froing with the Ministry of Justice on the release scheme. As things stand, as of an hour ago, it is not now including the amendments to implement a different release scheme. However, we already have the powers here under prison rules to release people where that becomes necessary to maintain health and order in the prison system. Those powers will be used judiciously and not recklessly. You are absolutely right to identify that there are people with significant mental health issues and significant vulnerabilities. There are also people who would pose a danger to society were they to be released early.

If we reach that point — we have not reached that point — we will look at those who are low risk to the public and also those who are low risk to themselves, and we will prioritise release on that basis rather than on length of time served or on how much of their sentence remains. Rehabilitation is crucial in the prison system, and so it is important that those who have made most progress through the rehabilitation process in the prisons, those who pose the least risk of reoffending, and those who pose the least risk to their personal, physical and mental well-being are prioritised in such emergency and extreme conditions.

Finally, you asked about testing for key staff in the prison system. We are actively pursuing being able not only to test staff, but, should an emergency arise where someone in the prison system is infected with COVID-19, that we are able to take suitable precautionary measures to protect those who may have been in contact with them. It is an evolving situation, but we are taking whatever measures we can at this time to create the confidence that their health and well-being will be looked after.

Mr Beattie: Thank you Minister for giving us the briefing and answering questions. We are in extraordinary times, and we have some extraordinary measures coming down

the road at us. They are things that we never thought would happen and many of us will be rightly fearful about those extraordinary measures, but they are necessary. I must echo the Chair of the Justice Committee's comments. He is absolutely spot on about this. He and the Justice Minister have my support and that of my party in doing whatever we need to do to fight against this terrible virus that is afflicting our society.

Nobody should be standing today as unionist or nationalist, socialist or republican. It does not matter if you are Irish, British or European; we are all part of the human race. We do not stand in splendid isolation. We just need to look to Italy to see how bad it is there, with 800 deaths in one day alone. We should not think that we are immune from that, and people who do not understand social distancing need to look in that direction to understand just how bad it can get.

We talked about how we deal with death and about our death-management plan. My question is: have we engaged with the National Association of Funeral Directors? It buries about 6,000 people a year in Northern Ireland within three to four days and it believes that it has the capacity to bury up to 30,000 people a year within three to four days. Part of this is about taking away fear and panic from people who feel that they will not be treated correctly whenever their loved one dies or they fall sick and maybe become deceased themselves. It is about making sure that we do not spread fear and panic.

I am really happy to hear that, on prisoner release, the Justice Minister has been absolutely clear. She is absolutely right: the first thing is safeguarding. We must safeguard our society. If we have to release prisoners — we may well have to — she is right not to release those who could cause safeguarding issues for our society or, indeed, release people who will put pressure on our health service, which will already be overstretched.

1.00 pm

I am pleased, and I want to relay this to the Minister, that, having raised at the Committee for Justice this morning my concern about a course that is starting today for 20 prison officers, particularly my concern about social distancing, the Director General rang me, no more than 20 minutes ago, and explained the measures that they are putting in place to make sure that social distancing can take place. People are taking it seriously and I am glad that they are.

When we talk about Military Aid to the Civil Authorities (MACA), everyone looks to the Justice Minister, but people need to understand that it is not just about the Department of Justice. If the military are called on by the Northern Ireland Office, it will not just be to support the Department of Justice. The military can provide a role 1 medical facility to help the Department of Health. They can provide a tented testing facility so that we can test people for the virus. They can provide logistical drivers, and they can provide support for our water industry to ensure that our water supply is secured.

Let us not throw this away or let us not just throw this in the direction of the Justice Minister. This is something that some of us might have to suck our teeth on, and I get that, but this is something that we might have to do to safeguard our society, which is going to be incredibly changed at the end of this process. Therefore, if we put our bickering aside and reach out to one another for the next number

of months, possibly longer, maybe a year, we can get ourselves through this.

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for his very robust comments around the need for social distancing.

The issue of prisoner release has been raised. There are issues as well about releasing people who may be higher-risk, in that, as you rightly identify, it places a burden on probation and health. Far from releasing people into a system to relieve pressure, it could actually create pressure in other places and so we need to approach that with caution. At the same time, we have to have plans in place that, if we reach that point, and I hope that we do not, we are prepared to deal with that in a way that does not endanger public safety or the vulnerable prisoners who are in our care.

I want to take the opportunity to pay tribute to my staff in the Department. They have been doing a fantastic job in responding to a rapidly developing situation. Your comments about the Director General of the Prison Service are something that I will convey back to him because he has had a huge amount of work to do over the last number of weeks to prepare for the situation. He is one of a number of officials in the Department who have been investing huge amounts of personal time to ensure that we are adequately prepared.

I also agreed with the Member when he said that this is not a green or orange issue. He is absolutely correct: this virus will see only host and victim. Those are the only categories that the virus will recognise, and, so, we have to make sure that we are neither.

On death management, we have been in contact with funeral directors. The Bill that is coming through Westminster will give us the powers, as I explained in the statement, for local government to compel those in the private sector, and in other parts of government, to work with us to ensure that we can maintain the dignity in death that we wish people to have.

There are cultural sensitivities around that of which we are hugely aware. There are religious sensitivities around the expectations of how quickly people should be buried, or, indeed, whether they should be buried or cremated. We will endeavour to maintain that sensitivity throughout this difficult time. There are also cultural sensitivities. Many of you will be aware that, here in Northern Ireland, we expect to bury our dead in two to three days and that that is the normal and expected period. In parts of England and Wales, however, two to three weeks is a more normal expectation and, so, we will have to manage expectations should we get into the position where we have excess deaths to manage. However, I agree with those who have spoken to date. The easiest way to avoid having to manage excess deaths is for people to take control of their personal behaviour, here and now, by ensuring that they stay at home and ensuring that they maintain a social distance when that is not possible.

Finally, on MOD support, which I referenced earlier, that will be, as you say, a whole Executive decision. It will not solely be a decision for the Department of Justice. At this stage, there has been no request for that through civil contingency, but when it comes, it will be taken through the Executive and given the appropriate response.

Mr Allister: I want to raise with the Minister a very sensitive issue, touching upon the management of funerals and cremations. Schedule 27 to the Bill that is going through Westminster contains a provision that would disapply the current protection that means that a deceased person can leave instructions that they do not wish to be cremated. There is a power within the Bill to disapply that protection. Does the Minister anticipate utilising such a power? Is she fully aware of the devastating impact that would have for many grieving families if such a course of action was taken?

The Minister has not mentioned our courts, but schedule 26 to the Bill contains provisions for live links for our courts. Have we got a sufficiency of infrastructure to enable that to be availed of?

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for his question. I have indicated that there are huge sensitivities around dealing with a situation where there are excess deaths. There is a clause that allows us to disapply the rules with respect to people's individual wills around cremation in those circumstances. I do not necessarily expect that to be the biggest pressure in our system. We have only one public crematorium facility, so it is more likely to be the reverse that becomes problematic if we have a large number of excess deaths. Access to crematorium facilities may be more restrictive than access to burial.

The Member may not be aware of this, because the Bill is being amended by the Government as we speak, but there are also new duties, on which I signed off this morning, on us to consider the wishes of the deceased as we make these decisions. It is not a duty to comply with them, because we should not falsely raise expectation that that may always be possible throughout this crisis, but there is a duty to consider the wishes of the deceased in making decisions for burial, disposal by other means and, if necessary, storage.

In my statement, I mentioned courts in respect of the actions that have been taken with regard to the Lord Chief Justice and the various announcements that he has rolled out in conjunction with my Department and the Courts and Tribunals Service. Work has also been done by the Department for Communities on restricting face-to-face tribunals. All of that work is proceeding. We are already at the stage where routine business, such as applications for adjournments, for example, are being handled by email. Where there is consent to do so, we will continue to roll that out, as we will for hearings at which the presence of parties, in addition to their legal representatives, is not required.

I move now to the use of video links and conferences. As the Member will appreciate, there are limitations in the system to the number of video links available. However, we have done some work around trying to accommodate more vulnerable witnesses being able to give remote evidence. There are, therefore, possibilities to use that and other facilities more frequently in order to cut down on the need for face-to-face contact. We need to work very closely with the Lord Chief Justice.

As someone who is legally qualified and has practised as a barrister, the Member will appreciate that as well as my duty to protect public health, public safety and life, I have a duty to protect essential access to justice so that it is not compromised during what may be a protracted period of unusual circumstances.

Mr Nesbitt: In response to Mr Givan's remarks about inappropriate public gatherings, the Minister made reference to a £100,000 fine, which, I think, is included in the Coronavirus Bill that we will debate tomorrow. Will she confirm that that fine can apply only to the owner or occupier of premises staging an event that has been prohibited by the Executive Office, or to the organiser of such an event? Clause 37(7) of Part 5 of schedule 21 specifically excludes people who are simply attending an event, so attendees face no sanction in this proposed legislation.

Mrs Long: That is correct. The Executive, as I explained, will have the power through the Executive Office to ban events from taking place and to close facilities. Those who do not comply with those bans and closing orders will be subjected to the fine. I believe that, in such cases, if an event is closed by the Executive Office and the organiser faces a £100,000 fine, it is unlikely that there will be any event for people to attend.

This brings us back to the key point that all of us have been trying to make over recent days. It is not good enough for people to sit down and wait until they are forced to behave appropriately. We all have it in our gift to implement social distancing now. We all have it in our gift to cancel events that are taking place now. We all have it in our gift to maintain our social isolation, if we are in vulnerable groups, now, or to work from home, now. We do not need an emergency Bill for common sense. We have to appeal to people: while £100,000 is a lot of money, it will not compensate for the loss of a grandparent, the loss of a brother or sister, or the loss of a child. People need to take responsibility for their actions, because their decisions today will dictate what happens in two and three and four weeks' time, and I do not believe that anyone wants to be standing lonely around a graveside because they went to an event that was completely unnecessary today.

Mr Blair: I also thank the Minister for her statement. Whilst, like many others, I support the emergency Coronavirus Bill and understand the rationale and urgency behind it, can the Minister assure Members that measures will also be put in place to ensure that any long-term impacts on basic civil liberties will be minimised, if possible?

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for his question. It is important that we reassert this. First of all, the legislation will only apply in respect of the prevention of spread of coronavirus; it does not have wider powers than in relation to coronavirus. Secondly, the legislation will automatically expire after two years, so, at that point, it would have to be renewed. I believe that the Government have also indicated in Parliament that they are willing to agree to a six-month review of the legislation so that, should this pass more quickly than expected, the law will be able to be repealed.

As someone who believes fundamentally in personal freedom and personal liberty, I think it is hugely important that we have those protections. However, I would also say, as someone who believes in personal liberty and freedom, that I also believe in personal responsibility. Ultimately, if people will not take responsibility for their actions, there is nothing that we can do other than to bring in measures that will force them to act in a responsible manner.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Minister for her detailed statement. We are in unprecedented times, and people are genuinely fearful. My mother has been in isolation for 10

days, simply because, if she were to become infected, her life would be at risk, and we are all conscious of that. It is a very difficult time for many families, and we recognise that.

Many people in my constituency have been speaking to me about large groups of young people who are congregating in public spaces, not necessarily within premises or anywhere else, but, for want of a better description, roaming the streets throughout the weekend and since the schools have closed. No doubt this will continue to be an issue. What can we do, Minister, to ensure the safety of those children and to educate them that this is a very serious issue? They are not immune to it. We heard about a 14-year-old child in the UK, with no underlying conditions, who died from the virus this week. The reality of this virus is that it can affect everybody very differently, depending on their own system, and there are many people who have unidentified underlying issues as well. What can we as an Assembly, and your Department, do to ensure that parents keep children, where possible, within closed doors and educate them as to the importance and the dangers of this thing?

1.15 pm

Mrs Long: I thank the Member particularly for what he said about conditions that are unknown. We know that people with underlying conditions are vulnerable: we do not know everyone who has underlying conditions. For example, from the news, we know that a very young sports person — only in their 20s — who was otherwise fit and healthy and would not have considered themselves to be vulnerable to the disease passed away as a result of contracting the virus and that exposing an otherwise unknown health condition. No one should be glib about the risk. No one should take it for granted. We know that age increases risk, but that does not mean that those who are younger are at no risk. They are also vectors in transmitting the disease through the community. It is hugely important that parents take responsibility and ensure that their children are indoors, supervised and safe. It is not acceptable, frankly, for people to treat this like a holiday, to go for a jaunt to the coast, to go to stay in their caravan or to take their kids to a play park where they will associate with other children. It is not acceptable to take them to the supermarket, along with their elderly grandparents, to do the week's shopping, because it is a danger to people's lives.

We need to communicate to young people that, while they may feel invincible — we all felt invincible as young people — they need to look around their family at those who are more frail and are worried about their health and consider whether they can live with their conscience if, through reckless behaviour today, they cost family members their lives tomorrow and in the future. Most of our young people have more sense than that: for those who do not, parents have to step into that gap and ensure that good social distancing is enforced.

This is not an easy issue for any of us, and the Member is absolutely right: it is distressing not to be able to spend time with family, particularly at a time when people are distressed, lonely and fearful. Our natural reaction as human beings is to reach out and comfort each other: in this crisis, that is the worst thing that we can do, but we can find other ways. We have talked in the Chamber many times about the health risks of young people refusing to go

outside and of spending all their time on social media and in front of computer screens. Now is the time to encourage them in the very behaviour that we have tried to dissuade them from for many years: "Get on social media and talk to your friends there. Skype each other. Have conversations online. Do not go out in the community. Do not put other people at risk, and do not put yourself at risk or believe that you are invincible — you are not".

Mr Carroll: As Members have said, we are in unprecedented and worrying and dangerous times. Will the Minister give some detail of the rationale to suspend non-jury inquests into deaths? Obviously, it is a very sensitive issue, but does it relate to complications and issues with the bodies or to social distancing in courts? If it is the latter, has any work been done to find alternative arrangements for juries?

Mrs Long: A number of changes will be made to the operation of the Coroners' Courts and the inquest system. The reasons are multiple. The first is about bringing people unnecessarily out to do jury service. You run the risk of not being able to complete the inquest, if members of the jury have to self-isolate. There has already been the ending of a case that will now probably require to be retried because of illness and the need for a juror to self-isolate. It is unwise to start down a course of action that cannot be sustained.

The other issue is about volume. Again, these are difficult issues to talk about, but, if we are talking about significant numbers of deaths, including those who might otherwise have been seen to be fit and healthy, the system will not have the capacity for all the inquests that would take place normally. We have to take proportionate measures to ensure that deaths that are genuinely suspicious can still be processed in the normal way and that we get a degree of clarity from the coroner and the inquest system on the reasons for death but that we do not overburden a system that may well be stretched in those extreme circumstances. The rationale is complex, and it is sobering.

What we are trying to do at this time in the justice system is to make sure that people's access to justice is not compromised but to do that in a context in which we know that resource will have to be redirected to other parts of the justice system and in which we cannot place people at risk in terms of their health and the health of those who work in the court system.

Mr Speaker: That concludes questions on the statement.

Before we move on to the next item, I remind Members that, first, they need to be in the Chamber to hear Ministers making statements if they wish to ask a question and, secondly, those who are in the Chamber who wish to ask a question should put their name on the normal speaking lists, which are available.

Response to COVID-19

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Executive Office that the First Minister and deputy First Minister wish to make a statement on their response to COVID-19.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have just checked: there are no copies of the statement available to Members. Have we also suspended that expectation?

Mr Speaker: I am not aware of the statement being made available as of yet. We have not suspended that issue or discussed it. I will seek clarification.

Mrs O'Neill (The deputy First Minister): A Cheann Comhairle, I apologise for the lateness of the statement. It should be being placed in Members' pigeonholes as we speak. I apologise for the statement not getting to you sooner. It is a rapidly changing situation, and things are evolving. We are trying to be up to date and to give people as much information as possible.

I make the joint statement today on behalf of the First Minister and me. The entire Executive are behind the enormous efforts being made to keep us all safe. I thank you for accommodating our statement today. We recognise that our people need information, and we have given a commitment that we will update the Assembly and our people as often and as speedily as we can. Undoubtedly, things will change and develop on a daily basis — even on an hour-to-hour basis. We will need to keep people up to date to keep people safe.

Very sadly, we had our second COVID-19 fatality yesterday. The thoughts and prayers of all of us across the Assembly will be with the families of the loved ones who are deceased.

The situation as of 2.00 pm on Sunday 22 March is that testing has resulted in 20 new positive cases, bringing the total number of confirmed cases to 128. The total number of tests completed is 2,484.

Our messages today are simple and cannot be repeated often enough, and I commend all elected representatives for trying to get that message out to their communities: "Stay at home if you can. Wash your hands. If you have to go out, practise social distancing. Stay apart. Protect our health service so our health service can protect us".

These are not normal times. This is a time for cool, calm heads and for big, warm hearts. The First Minister and I were so grateful to everyone who did the right thing yesterday on Mother's Day, despite the difficulties. They did the right thing to keep mothers and other vulnerable people safe. We definitely understand the difficulty for many people, but it was really heart-warming when you saw images of people and how they got in touch with their mums. We are grateful to all those mothers who worked for us yesterday on the front line in critical services. That is a demonstration of us at our best.

We know that there are more difficult developments to come, and, in our families and communities, there is confusion and hurt. There are financial worries and worries about our loved ones, our neighbours and our communities. We ask everyone to please do the right thing and to carry on doing the right things in the weeks ahead.

Extraordinary times need extraordinary steps. Ministers and officials are meeting every morning and will offer

very regular updates to the Assembly and to the media. We have made the health and well-being of our citizens our number-one priority. Our economic well-being and the well-being of society are also at the heart of our discussions. We need to maintain, as far as we can, other critical services, and we need to look after our people who are working on the front line.

We are taking part in COBRA discussions, and the announcements from London are being supplemented by local solutions that we need for the problems that we face here. We are looking far beyond the normal ways of working and policy development and how decisions are made. We are doing things now in days and hours that would normally have taken months and weeks. We are being responsible with our finances, making sure that decisions are quick and that the front line has what it needs to keep people well. That requires new real-time thinking, and it is absolutely the right thing to do in these circumstances. We are working across departmental boundaries in new and important ways.

To be absolutely clear, the top priority is to protect our health service because it protects us. We need to slow down the spread of COVID-19 by keeping the pressures on our health service to an absolute minimum. We must make space for our health service to look after those who will need care now and in coming weeks. That is vitally important. This is about keeping people alive — this is about keeping people alive. It is about making space for our nurses, our doctors, our hospital cleaners and our social care staff to do their job and follow their vocation. We are asking an awful lot of them now, so we need to do everything that we can to support them.

Other key decisions such as closing schools and limiting pupil attendance to key workers are focused on protecting our health service so that they can protect us. We totally appreciate that this is a difficult situation for parents. Please think about and understand the motivation. Closing pubs and restaurants is about keeping people well and protecting our health service. We made clear requests to pubs and restaurants on Friday to close. We are grateful to all those who closed their doors, those who distributed their supplies to people in need and those who are looking after their staff.

We say to parents and to young people, “Please do the right things, now that the schools are closed. Young people are not immune to COVID-19. COVID-19 does not care about your age, so you need to care about yourself and the potential for you to catch it and to pass it on. Young people need to follow exactly the same advice. The schools are shut, but education, learning and planning for your future should be at the heart of what you do in the coming weeks”. We ask parents to help get our advice across to young people: “Stay home, wash your hands, and stay apart”.

The economic support that is becoming available will help to cushion our businesses and family incomes. It will help to keep our economy able to function again when normality finally returns. We are conscious that we cannot entirely insulate ourselves and our economy from the pain and the hurt that COVID-19 brings. It is a dreadful disease with dreadful consequences.

There are many things that we can do now. The Minister of Health has already taken steps to free up resources in our health service to provide hospital care for the most serious

COVID-19 cases. All non-urgent services have been reduced, and steps are being taken to make greater use of the telephone and other digital technology for patients who need follow-up care as outpatients. Trusts will work to ensure the prompt discharge of medically well patients from hospitals to ensure that beds are available for any increase in admissions.

Initial support measures have been announced for businesses through grants, the support around workers’ salary costs and the measures to provide rate relief. They will provide much-needed breathing space for our business community. We continue to work with the British Government to further enhance the assistance available and are lobbying hard to ensure that our businesses and workers receive the support that they need.

The Minister of Education has taken steps to close schools to pupils, with the exemption of children of key workers who have no alternative childcare provision. We appreciate that that causes disruption, but it is a necessary step. The Minister of Education is working with the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessments (CCEA) and other awarding bodies to put in place robust processes for awarding grades.

We also recognise that there are vulnerable children and young people in our education system. The Minister of Education and the Minister for Communities are working together to put in place alternative arrangements for free school meals, and we expect to hear more about that throughout the course of today. The Minister of Education is also working with the Minister of Health to ensure that vulnerable children and young people in the education system continue to have access to the services that are necessary for their well-being.

The Minister for Communities is working to develop a COVID-19 community contingency fund to help groups that support those who are socially isolated, those who struggle financially or those who cannot access food supplies. She has also made arrangements to suspend the face-to-face assessment for benefits over the next three months and has temporarily removed the waiting period for statutory sick pay and new employment and support allowance (ESA) claims.

The Minister for Infrastructure has temporarily relaxed the legislation on drivers’ hours. That will be an important measure to ensure that the supply chains can continue to operate effectively and to maintain flows of food and vital supplies. That change now applies to the items being delivered directly to consumers’ homes and will help to support those who are self-isolating.

The Minister of Finance, the Minister for the Economy and the Minister for Infrastructure are also working hard to support our airports and are pressing the British Government to provide specific support for the aviation sector. That sector faces significant challenges at present, but it is vital to ensure that air connectivity is maintained in the short and longer term. Our aviation industry will be essential in the times ahead.

1.30 pm

The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs has put in place measures to protect citizens and staff accessing DAERA Direct services. We also recognise that, to ensure the best response, we must not work in

isolation. Through the North/South Ministerial Council, we have agreed that everything possible will be done in coordination and cooperation with the Irish Government and our Executive and with the active involvement of the health administrations across both jurisdictions.

A total societal approach is the only way forward. Every person in our society has something to do. Every person in our society has a very important thing to do now to help us to beat COVID-19. We need all people to follow the advice: stay at home, wash your hands, and practise social distancing.

We need responsible shopping. Please, please do not be involved in irresponsible shopping. There is enough food to go round for everyone. Be generous to others by buying only what you need. Leave supplies on the shelves for the elderly, the vulnerable, and our front-line workers. We do not need our nurses and doctors, after working long shifts, and all the people who work in the health service — hospital cleaners and those who look after the most vulnerable for our families and for our communities — at the end of a day to go to the shops and not be able to buy food for themselves or for their families. Please be kind. Look out for your neighbours and the most vulnerable in your communities. If you can, leave one or two items in the food bank box in your community.

I suspect that most, if not all, families have had to think about how they will cope as this situation unfolds. I am confident that most, if not all, people have already thought about how they can help someone who is less fortunate. We can do these good things because we are part of the giant spirit that makes this a very special place. This situation will bring out some wonderful acts of kindness; of that I have no doubt. We can see it already. At the end of this, we all want to look back and say that we all did the right things.

Tougher times are coming. We can look at other countries to know that we are only at the start of what is going to be the most difficult of times. We cannot make this situation go away unless we all do the right things now. Every day that we do not follow the advice, the risk increases. Please help us to protect our health service and our health workers so that they can help us and our families.

We realise that we are sending out very difficult and very worrying messages, but we will get through this when we work together. We will come out of this, because we have looked to every part of society to play a role. That is because this is a great place and we have such a wonderful spirit in our people.

The First Minister and I, along with the entire Executive, recognise that we do not have all the answers today. We are working tirelessly to do the right things. We are asking all our people to work with us and to do the right things. Our commitment to the Assembly is that we will keep you up to date as things develop. We thank you again for the opportunity to update you today.

Mr McGrath (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): I thank the deputy First Minister and the First Minister for the update from the Department today. I also echo the condolences that have been sent to the families of those who have passed away as a result of the virus.

This is a worrying time for people, and, as the deputy First Minister said, information is key. I welcome all

the announcements so far, but I ask whether some consideration can be given to funnelling the information through to MLAs because we are literally being contacted by hundreds of people and are having to go on to news websites and twitter feeds to try to find information. If there were a way of getting information funnelled out, it would be greatly appreciated.

I am concerned for our health sector staff, as they are very worried that they do not have the equipment that they need. Many carers are going in and out of people's homes where the only protection that they have is a set of gloves. There can be up to four people coming in, and that is very worrying for the people in those houses.

Testing remains a major issue. If we do not know who has the illness, we do not know how to isolate. If people in the health sector are isolating for 14 days at a time, that means that they are taken off the wards and off the floor for 14 days. A test could be turned around in 48 hours to get those people back on to the floor if they do not have the illness.

I echo the remarks that have already been made and say that we need to get a clear message out as an Executive and as an Assembly to curtail people socialising at this time. In constituencies such as mine, resorts, including Newcastle yesterday, were absolutely jam-packed, while beaches had tailbacks of cars trying to get into them. People have to realise that they have to heed the advice and stay at home. If they have to go out, it is simply for work, to go to the shop or to care for somebody, and really not much reason beyond that.

Finally, I hope that some Departments do not use the crisis as an opportunity to settle some old goals with regard to relocating and closing down services. I am hearing some very worrying remarks about the Downe Hospital. Many people and staff have contacted me. If things have to be done for safety, that is perfect as long as it is detailed out. However, I hope that the opportunity is not taken, under the cover of this crisis, to realign services and leave rural areas deprived.

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for all that. First, I concur and will restate again — we cannot say it strongly enough — that we need people to follow the advice. The actions of some individuals over the weekend endangered lives. Going to beaches, caravan parks and doing any of those things puts more and more people's lives at risk. We, collectively as the Executive and Assembly, need to send out the strongest possible message: you are killing people by doing those things. It is time not for soft language but for us to be very straight with people. We need to keep driving home that message.

With regard to information, I understand that it is frustrating. It is frustrating for me. We are involved in a situation that is changing rapidly, minute by minute, hour by hour. We are endeavouring to pull all that together. We will have one information portal to which people can go to get information, whether that be advice on health, economics, benefits, the school situation for key workers, and all those issues. It is a one-stop shop that will be launched over the coming days. I think that it went up this morning, but it will be built upon. That will be helpful. We will ensure that all Members get notification on how to access that information. It is vital, because everybody has so many questions right now. It is difficult to get the

information out. There is a lot of noise, and we have to give people key, essential information. Hopefully, the portal will be helpful.

We will also roll out a communication plan. We have taken steps to enhance the communication output. Over the course of the next two days, Members will see a significant difference in the Executive's response to ensure that people get key messages and that they are shown where to go to get those messages. People will see a great improvement in that over the next couple of days.

We are taking very seriously the situation with regard to PPE. At a meeting this morning, we were told that, through Finance, we have been able to secure a contract for additional PPE. That is good news. We will continue to keep those matters under review. It is crucial that we have enough and that people and staff are not fearful that we do not have enough. We will continue to work our way through that. The Member referred to carers — people on the front line — who go from home to home. They need protection, too. It is important that we have sufficient stock across the whole range of protection equipment for them. I can definitely give assurances that we are working day and night to ensure that they have that.

On testing, we have to do more. The World Health Organization says, "Test, test, test". It says, "Test, isolate, trace". That is what we have to do. We continue to work with the Health Minister. Testing has been ramped up significantly, but we need to do more. It is not there yet; it is not enough. We can assure the House that we will work to ensure that that is the case and that we get there.

It is a challenging time. It is not normal business. We cannot behave as normal, because these are not normal times. We have to be responsive and act decisively. We have to be quick on our feet. We are here to tell the public that every decision that we take, we take in people's best interests. In every decision that I have to take as a Minister, I am thinking about my family, too. In every decision that we take collectively here, that is how we will be guided.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for their presence in the Chamber. I agree with the deputy First Minister about the need for testing, especially in order to keep key workers working when we need them.

Another scenario has been raised with me with regard to MOT testing. A key worker got in touch to tell me that her car needs to be MOT tested, but, because of the MOT difficulties, it will now not be able to be tested until April. That takes either her or her husband, who is also a key worker, off the road until then. Is there any way in which key workers could get priority? Is it actually appropriate that MOT tests continue at this critical time?

Mrs O'Neill: The Minister for Infrastructure, Nichola Mallon, is looking at all those things and is working her way through them. I will raise your concerns with her. We have prioritised protection for key workers and facilitated them in schools to assist them with getting to work, so the logic follows that we will do the same with MOT testing. I am happy to talk to the Minister for Infrastructure about that. I am sure that she will be very positive and open to doing whatever is necessary to make sure that we support those workers to do the work that we are asking them to do.

Ms Anderson: I want to acknowledge the leadership that has been given by the joint First Ministers. Yesterday, above all, I was inundated by people commenting on how you interacted with each other and the public. I want to make that general point.

Most people are listening to you; most people are taking your advice. However, can you comment on those who are treating this as an inconvenience? We have heard about some of the behaviour that is happening across sites. Most people are hearing about how we have a responsibility to stop the transmission of the virus and that all of us have a role to play in that. So, it goes back to what you said about "test, test, test" and the intensification of that. Like many MLAs, I am being inundated by people demanding that we test, we trace and we isolate in order to stop the transmission. I know that you have answered some of that. However, can you reassure people, as test centres open in the Twenty-six Counties, that more test centres will open here and that we will have an all-Ireland approach? Politics cannot come into this: this is about protecting people's lives.

Mrs O'Neill: First, I cannot say it strongly enough: people who are being reckless and ignoring the advice are killing people. We need people to hear that, because this is what we are talking about. This is not planning for something that may happen or could happen somewhere down the line in the future. This is here; this is now. We are now in the week where it is spreading without people even noticing. It is so important that we collectively take every opportunity that we have to drive home the message and ask others to join us in driving home that message. We all have our different heroes in life, and people look up to different people, and I really welcome the fact that a number of sports personalities and others have come forward to drive home that message. We implore them to keep doing that over the difficult days and weeks ahead of us. Let us all be consistent in driving home the message.

Testing is so important. Over the weekend, I spoke to a midwife whose child has symptoms, so the family is now isolated. She now cannot go to work. The testing is about trying to get our health service staff back into work. If the daughter was tested, she would be able to get to work. It is so important that we ramp up testing and that we do it with speed. The First Minister and I are working on this as we speak.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the deputy First Minister for her statement. Probably the most useful thing that I can say on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party is again to thank the wonderful staff of our National Health Service and to applaud every citizen and group of citizens who have shown the finest side of humanity by helping others. I wish the deputy First Minister, the First Minister and the Executive godspeed in this uncharted and unprecedented journey.

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his comments. I concur with him on the health service staff who are absolutely amazing. They are in for tough times, and we have to do everything that we can to support them. I really welcome your warm words, because we have tough decisions to take in the time ahead, as it will take a collective, joined-up effort from us all to get through to the other side of this. It is important to say that we will come out the other side of this. However, we will have a lot of building to do, we will have a lot of people who will have lost loved ones, and we will have a societal challenge to

build it all up again, but we can do that collectively. I have no doubt about that.

Mr Storey: Mr Speaker, I thank the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for the update to the House today. I also place on record our appreciation to our Executive colleagues for the way in which they are endeavouring to deal with what, everyone will concur, are unprecedented times.

1.45 pm

The deputy First Minister said that we would look back and say that we did the right thing. She may be aware that a Matter of the Day that I tabled in the House last week calling for a day of prayer was rejected by the Speaker. She will also be aware that I wrote to the First and deputy First Ministers at the weekend encouraging them to call on our people to recognise that there is a God in heaven and that, at a time when we face a crisis, people should resort to the greatest place of safety, which is calling on the God of heaven to intervene, and to earnestly pray that we will see the other side of this and that, out of that prayer, there will come to all our families the peace, confidence and comfort that we need, ever mindful of what the scripture says:

"If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray ... then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land."

It is that healing that we need along with the work that we, collectively, all must do.

Mrs O'Neill: I have not received the Member's letter, but I am sure that I will pick it up. We will all need to look to our inner strength throughout the period ahead and to look deep down into our soul to be able to support not just our own families but everyone else around us. This will be the most trying of times. It is an understatement to say it is unprecedented: this is the challenge of our lifetime and we will all have to work with each other, support each other, look out for those who are more vulnerable and do everything that we can. We will also have to be creative in how we reach out to people. Not everybody has somebody. That is an unfortunate reality of life: not everybody has somebody. We all need to think about others at this time.

Mr McCrossan: I begin by applauding the tremendous efforts of the First and deputy First Ministers throughout what has been a difficult and challenging few weeks. It comes as a great relief that the House is restored, we have an Executive in place and the First and deputy First Minister working together throughout this tremendously difficult and unprecedented challenge. This is, as the deputy First Minister rightly said "the challenge of our lifetime". It has instilled a huge amount of fear in our community in people of all walks of life and even church leaders.

I know that there is discussion on the Coronavirus Bill today. What powers has your office to enforce a lockdown of Northern Ireland, for want of a better description? You have put out a clear message and have continued to repeat that message. It has resonated with a large percentage of the population across Northern Ireland, but there is still an element of people who are just not listening. It frustrates me deeply to see, even yesterday, huge numbers of people continuing about their business as though this is just the flu, with some people even treating it

as if it is a holiday. We need to make it very clear that this is a life-or-death situation. People will die around us, and we are very worried about that.

With regard to advice, Dr Gabriel Scally, on the news during the week, was very good. He said that his advice to the public would be to behave as though we already had it. In doing so, people will self-isolate and realise that it is the best possible measure that they can take. Staying indoors is the solution to this.

With regard to testing, even in the health service, a huge amount of people are concerned about the lack of testing. I know that that will be largely resolved. I spoke on the phone yesterday to a nurse who was in tears and was frightened because she sees in front of her what is coming. She feels the pressure now. She is entirely and absolutely dedicated to saving lives and supporting people, but her mother, father and her family are worried about her, in turn. I worry too about mental health and the impact that that has on those in front-line services. I know that you will continue doing all that you can to support them.

I will make a final point about information for businesses. With every problem that occurs, we face 100 questions emanating from that one problem. I am continually being asked, as are other Members, by business owners, business leaders and people who are self-employed for reassurance about what will happen in the coming weeks.

Now, information is coming out, but we need clarity on how people can access the necessary provision that is being, gratefully, granted.

Finally, we, in the House, must work together, all politics aside. This is us standing shoulder to shoulder for the greater good of the people of this place. I know that if we focus our attention strongly on protecting human life, we will save countless lives. I thank you both for your leadership.

Mrs O'Neill: Thank you very much for that and for your positive comments. On the question of a lack of information or the desire for information, you are right: everyone wants answers when something is announced and a lot of questions come on the back of the announcements. We are trying to have all that information collated and put on the one-stop shop portal. That will be a game changer that will signpost people to the right place and give them exactly the right information, which, we know, everybody wants.

The Member asked about self-employed people. Last week's economic package was very welcome and it gives people assurance that their livelihoods will be protected. That is a welcome thing, but the self-employed category has still to be resolved and we need it to be resolved. There are companies that are out working today and that should not be the case. We need to find a way to support them, so the Executive have made the case for self-employed people and will continue to do so. As a matter of fact, the junior Ministers are on a call as we speak and they are making the case for self-employed people as part of the conversation that they are having.

The Member's points about testing are well made. We concur, and we are going to do everything that we can to make sure that testing is significantly ramped up.

We all need to mind our mental health at this time — every one of us, even, and everybody else out there. People are

isolated and cut off from their normal circles and activities — going to bingo or to a community hall — and they cannot do any of those things now and that will be difficult. We have to be creative, and I have been so impressed by people who have come up with different things online. We need to do a lot more of that as we go through what are going to be very dark and difficult days.

The emergency legislation that is going through will give us a lot more powers to shut things down as required. We need to have the tools and the powers to take the right action at the right time, and that is what the legislation will give us. We welcome the fact that we are going to have those measures, but they are going to be temporary. They are available to us for a period of time in order to get us through the situation and they are proportionate to the threat that we face. They are stark and draconian powers, and we would not allow legislation such as that to go through at any other time, but these are the most extraordinary times, so we need extraordinary legislation. That law will come into operation tomorrow and it will give us even more certainty to be able to take the right action at the right time.

Mr Newton: I thank the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for the statement. It is, indeed, helpful and encouraging to see the actions that they are taking. Many points have been made in the Chamber and running through all of them is the concern for the individual, for society, for our health workers, for our teachers, for supermarket workers and for the people who run small food shops and chemists' shops. Those people are all on the front line of this crisis.

References have been made to the health crisis as it is, but are we not going to face another health crisis further down the line when this issue has been solved? There will be an impact on the health of those who have been serving on the front line. As we know, soldiers returning from war suffer from PTSD, and it is likely that many in the health service and other services who are fighting this battle will suffer from something similar. Should we not start thinking about what, at the end of this crisis, the outcomes will be for those who are fighting this battle on our behalf and how we are going to treat them?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes; absolutely correct. People will have to make very tough decisions. People working in the health service, on the front line, will have to make very tough decisions. They will be working in the most challenging of circumstances. They will be trying to support patients. Their number one priority is always their patients. They will be dealing with people's families. It will be very distressing, so we have to mind our health service workers. We have to think about how we will respond to all of that when we come out the other side. Life as we know it has changed; that is the reality of what we are dealing with. We will come out the other side, and we will have to support everybody who has been involved on the front line. We will have to support everybody to rebuild on the other side of this. However, our priority for now has to be how we can save lives — and we can save lives. Everybody out there has the opportunity to save lives. If they follow the advice, if they do the right thing, if they make sure that they wash their hands and if they stay apart, we can bring down the level of deaths.

Mr Allister: I want to direct attention to the knock-on effect in our health service. What should I say, Minister, to the

family of the 32-year-old mother who have contacted my office? She is a patient with a very serious cancer, and she has a two-year-old child. She has just been told that her chemotherapy will end because choices have to be made as to who will be treated.

We have talked much about social distancing, yet I was contacted this morning by a worker in a production factory in Ballymena who told me that the production line continues as was with people working elbow to elbow. What instructions have been given to factories in that situation?

Mrs O'Neill: On factories, the First Minister and I intend to make some more announcements later today. We both said on 'Sunday Politics' yesterday that non-essential services should be shut down. Nothing but essential services should be operating right now, and we are working our way through that. The additional powers that we will have will be important in order for us to be able to take things to where they need to go.

What do you say? What can you say? What can you say to that person? These are the challenges that we will have to deal with.

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two. Thank you. *[Long Pause.]* Do you want to take a break for a few minutes?

Mrs O'Neill: No, I am OK.

That is the kind of situation that we will have to deal with. That is the kind of situation that staff who work on the front line will have to deal with. That is why we have to mind our healthcare workers in this period. Robin Newton made the point about how we mind their mental health when they come out the other side of this. This is the kind of stuff that will be so challenging and so difficult. There are no good answers to those kinds of questions.

Mr Carroll: Testing was referenced already. There is a perception in society that much more needs to be done to make testing more readily available to everybody and to roll it out much quicker and much more rapidly, especially to NHS workers, some of whom are off work because they are showing symptoms but might not have COVID-19. Have there been any discussions in the Executive about the requisition of private healthcare facilities to ensure that everything possible is being done to enable us to test quickly and that public health is coming before private profit?

2.00 pm

Mrs O'Neill: The Department of Health has published its surge plan. It will be a living document and will be constantly refreshed and looked at. We will have to do that, because we will need those hospital beds. We are working our way through all those things. We will need the hospital beds in the private sector and every available resource.

To be fair, I have been astounded by the public's goodness. People have offered up hotels that have closed, their services, their kitchens, their laundries — everything. People have been absolutely amazing. We have to think outside the box, and we are trying to look at how to collate all those sources of information and offers from people who want to help and then funnel them through the right Department, the one which it would be most helpful to. We are discussing those things, and, yes, we will need those beds.

Ms Sugden: I want to make a point about the leadership of both the deputy First Minister and the First Minister. It certainly has not gone unnoticed by my constituents. It is something that I always saw was there, and we will need to build on it when we pass this difficult time.

I appreciate the comments of the deputy First Minister about the communications portal. It is critical. We, as MLAs, are the voice of the people we represent but it does not directly find its way to the Executive table. Those ideas on the gaps in the policies that are being announced so quickly may help the Executive identify where we can better support what they announce. I welcome that opportunity.

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

Perhaps it has already been raised, but we should try to find more support for the self-employed and sole traders. I appreciate that it is not within the financial gift of the Northern Ireland Executive to bring forward those measures, but how will you engage with the UK Government to ensure that they give them support? In Northern Ireland, we know that comparing our situation with that in England and Wales is almost like comparing apples with pears or oranges. We have a significant number of self-employed and sole traders who are not being supported. The measures that have been announced are for businesses that have premises or employees. If we are to underpin our economy, as much as helping those individuals, the Assembly has to encourage the UK Government to support the self-employed and sole traders.

Mrs O'Neill: The portal — the one-stop shop with all the information — will be continually built on. Perhaps we need to find a way for Assembly Members to flag up questions that are not already reflected in that. We will open up a course for all MLAs to contribute to that. This is a commonly asked question, and we need an answer to it. We will lend ourselves to doing that.

As regards the economic package, the Finance Minister and Economy Minister have been in touch with the Treasury over the weekend after Friday's announcement to say that there is a gap with the self-employed and we need to have it addressed. As I said, there is a COBRA call as we speak, and I know that the junior Ministers are involved in that. We have to continue to champion the needs of the self-employed. When we come out the other side of this and we have to build, we want people to have jobs to go back to. It will be a difficult and trying situation, but, if we can support those people as best we can to maintain their operations, when we come out the other side of this, they will still be there.

Ms Bradshaw: I place on record my condolences to the bereaved families. These are very sad times, and I am sure that the passing of those people was gravely felt by the healthcare family.

I welcome the information that the deputy First Minister has provided regarding the self-employed and the efforts of the junior Ministers. That is great, so I have no need to raise it.

I have two things, Minister. First, you will recall how well received the sign language interpreter was in the Chamber, when your colleague, the Communities Minister, spoke about the Bill coming forward. Have you any plans

to incorporate, notwithstanding social distancing, sign language into your daily statements?

Secondly, given the apparent lack of consideration among some young people about social distancing and the gravity of the situation, can one of your daily sessions facilitate questions from groups like the Northern Ireland Youth Forum and other peer groups? We might find that young people start listening. It is clear from some of the feedback and imaging on social media at the weekend that a lot of young people are just not taking heed of this.

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, we can certainly look at that. We need to find creative ways to engage with people, and we can see whether there is something that we can do there.

We can certainly look at sign language being part of our daily conference, because we need to make sure that we get our message out to everybody. As part and parcel of our new communication plan that will be rolled out in all the TV ads, there will be a signer, and I think that that is important. I am not sure whether it would be practical to do that as part of a press conference, but we will certainly look at it.

Mr Buckley: I thank the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for their presence today. It is true that, in situations like this, we see the best and the worst in humanity. We see the best in our local health workers whom we send to the front line to fight the virus. I pay tribute to them, because I have seen what they have done in my constituency in Craigavon Area Hospital. They are truly heroes of our time, and, when we pass this awful period, it will be said that never has so much been owed by so many to so few. In that regard, Minister, I have watched how you have echoed the point that it is key now that our healthcare professionals receive the testing that they need and, more importantly, even at this stage, the vital PPE supplies that many of them are crying out for. I know that that work is ongoing.

We saw the worst in society as we watched over the weekend how people openly flouted the recommendation to socially isolate and keep social distancing. More has to be done to encourage everyone to take this as seriously as possible at this time.

I wanted to lay on you the key message from many of my constituents who are worried for their income. While I recognise, as, I think, the entire House will, the blessing that was that huge financial package from the Chancellor, which really did put a lot of people at ease regarding day-to-day incomes, the self-employed, who represent a huge part of our economy and our society, feel vulnerable, as do their families. That is understandable. I know that a lot of work has been going on among Executive colleagues to address the issue, but I plead with you all to put it as a matter of priority and ensure that self-employed people have some form of cover in these deeply uncertain times.

Mrs O'Neill: I concur. We will do everything that we can to make sure that we can get support for the self-employed, because that allows us to ensure that there is economic security for people across the board and that all the measures that we take mean that people are less anxious about their income and about putting food in their family's mouths. I wanted to restate that.

To clarify the point for Paula, we have two sign language interpreters. We will do the daily press conference to give

people information every day at the same time. It will be live-streamed so that people are able to keep up to date with anything that has happened throughout the 24-hour cycle. We will do that every day.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the deputy First Minister and, indeed, the First Minister for coming here today, when their time is precious. First, I congratulate them on the last day or two and the improved commitment to giving a joined-up, serious, humane message to the people of Northern Ireland. It is completely critical, and, I suppose, I encourage them to keep it up. I know that, in the days and weeks ahead, it will be difficult. In a sense, in Northern Ireland, we have a unique political context because we have a unique society. The old Irish saying, "We live in the shadow of one another" is one that we should bear in mind, and, in a sense, that unique political context, that unique societal context might be one that we can draw strength from. We know that we share things, and we know that we have to work together. That is something that we as a society have learned. Hopefully, we can draw strength from that in the weeks and months ahead, and I encourage the First Minister and the deputy First Minister in their endeavours to do that.

I have a few specific questions about a couple of specific issues. The first is about engagement with companies and manufacturers of things that, we know, we need and, we know, are critical in the days ahead. One of those is ventilators. We have talked about the need for all-island working and all-Ireland partnership. One of the biggest manufacturers of ventilators in the world, Medtronic, is based in Galway. What conversations have happened with them and with the Irish Government to expedite, frankly, them giving us ventilators? Secondly, there is Randox, a major diagnostics producer based in County Antrim. I do not mean to use the bully pulpit here to name individual firms, but I would like to know what conversations are happening. A third industry I will mention is clothing manufacturers. I know that, over the weekend, O'Neills talked about being in contact with Altnagelvin and seeing what PPE could be produced. What conversations are happening with it and other clothing manufacturers in Northern Ireland to get PPE? We know that they can be innovative and nimble when it comes to turning around their production lines, hopefully with social distancing rules on the production lines.

The final ones are that, in Ireland generally, in Northern Ireland and all over the place, we have seen in the last few years a flourishing of distillation. We have many more craft distillers. They can make hand sanitiser. There are craft distillers not just in a certain north Antrim village but all over the place. There are people making gin, vodka, all over Northern Ireland: what are they doing to make hand sanitiser? We think that should be relatively straightforward. What conversations are happening? That is essentially what I want to ask about all those manufacturers.

I also want to ask about testing, which lots of colleagues have asked about. It is vital. In addition to testing, are we giving thought to ramping up contact tracing? One thing that we are fortunate about in Northern Ireland is that we have a relatively dispersed rural population and have small, cohesive communities. I speak as someone who only relatively recently moved back here from London. In my morning commute into central London, if I had COVID-19 and was asymptomatic, God knows how many

people I would have infected on the train and Tube. Driving from where I live now in the great constituency of South Belfast up to Stormont, it is very unlikely that I would. That does not mean that people should not be social distancing and staying at home, but we have small, cohesive communities and very often people will know 50% to 75% of the people they might have met, if they have tested positive. In addition to testing, what are we doing about setting up phone banks of people to do contact tracing and to say, "Who did you come in contact with in the last 24 to 48 hours?". That is a strength that we have in a relatively rural, dispersed population. We do not use very much public transport, which would be good in the long term, but right now that might be something that is a strange advantage. What are we doing to ramp up contact tracing?

Those are my three questions, really. What are we doing to talk to manufacturers and what are we doing about contact tracing?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for all those questions. Going back to the spirit of people and how good they are, we have had numerous companies that have offered to repurpose what they do. Manufacturing companies are offering to repurpose to build ventilators. People such as O'Neills and others who are offering to see if they can be of help with PPE. We are continuing those conversations, which have been ongoing across the Department of Finance, the Department for the Economy, Invest NI and others. We are actively talking to a range of businesses. The Medtronic company in Galway is being talked to, and they certainly can play a role. We have one company here in the North that can also help. We are looking at everything because we have to be prepared for this. All those things are really helpful and are being worked on as we speak. Certainly, conversations with the likes of O'Neills have been really good about what they are offering. They could make up disposable scrubs really quickly for staff. That would make all the difference, because they would then not be worried about washing uniforms and carrying things home with them. We have to be creative about all those things.

I do not have much information about hand sanitisers, apart from saying that I know that there is a company, perhaps in Derry, that is producing sanitisers, even though it does not have the proper trademark that you normally would have, but we are not in normal times.

Mr O'Toole: There are loads of craft distillers all over the place.

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, there are the craft distillers. It is time for creative thinking and thinking outside the box, so we can certainly do those things.

On testing, the World Health Organization is clear in saying — Mike Ryan said it again at the weekend — that, even if you are in lockdown, that is not enough. You need to test; you need to isolate; you need to trace. We need to follow this right through and remove those people, so that we can get actually get on top of this. In my mind, those three things have to work together. It is not enough just to test; you have to do the other things as well. We are in conversation and will continue to be in conversation with the Health Minister, the Chief Medical Officer and all concerned. There was work done over the last few days around the testing piece. The Chief Medical Officer brought together a group of people to look at how we

can ramp this up and what we can do. We will have a conversation about that, hopefully, later on today.

It is a moveable feast. We are working our way through it, but certainly, people are great. They are great in the way that they have been offering to, just like that, turn their business from one thing to another just to meet the need that we will have.

2.15 pm

Mr Muir: I echo other Members' words of thanks for the collective leadership that you have been showing in recent days. It is exactly what we need at this time. I also thank the officials. Policy decisions are being made in Northern Ireland at breakneck speed; they would usually take years to be made but have been made in days. I also thank the healthcare workers for the service that they are giving.

I was particularly disappointed — that is a diplomatic word — to see the disrespect shown to our healthcare workers in recent days. Some people are treating this as a national holiday rather than a national emergency. It was shameful to see Crawfordsburn country park and Helen's Bay car park overflowing and to see people bringing elderly relatives out for a walk in the country park. The vast majority of people in Northern Ireland are observing the guidance and showing respect to our healthcare workers, but seeing other people showing such disrespect filled me with a lot of anger and shame. I know that 35 outdoor organisations have encouraged people to engage in exercise, but do that locally. You do not need to travel to the beach to do your exercise. Go out for a jog or take your dog for a walk. You do not need to go to the country park or the beach. My first question is: when will we get to a point that, if people do not observe the guidance that we are giving them, we will have to close the beaches and the parks?

Last week, there was a very welcome announcement about grants for businesses, but when will we get a bit more information about when they will be distributed? The Chancellor of the Exchequer's announcement last Friday about PAYE is welcome, but it will not come into place until April and businesses need to have some money to assist with cash flow. When will we be able to distribute those grants? There are also concerns that some organisations pay their rates as part of their rent and service charge to the landlord. We need to ensure that the money goes directly to those businesses. Lastly, what representations can we collectively make to ensure that the self-employed are covered? They face significant hardship. They are the backbone of many aspects of our economy, and we need to see what way we can support them.

Collective leadership is what we need, and I really hope that, today, we do not see beaches and country parks packed, because that is shameful, disgraceful and disrespectful and is not the Northern Ireland that I am proud to be part of.

Mrs O'Neill: It is important to restate that this is not a holiday. This is not school holidays; it is an emergency. That is the message that people need to hear. I agree that the number of people who went to beaches over the weekend was disgraceful. We need to send a clear message from here. All of us need to take every opportunity to use every forum that we have to make sure that we drive that message home. The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs will probably

have more to say over the coming days on issues that are within his Department's remit. We know that councils have moved to close parks and public areas, and that is necessary.

I understand that this is difficult. It is difficult to be cooped up in the house, and children want to exercise, but we cannot behave as normal; we have to act in a way in which we have never acted before. This is ultimately about saving people's lives, and we need to drive that message home.

We are working to get the grants for businesses out the door as quickly as possible. More details will be finalised this afternoon, but we are hopeful that grants will be processed and out the door and, within a couple of days, will be in people's bank accounts.

Mr McNulty: I start off by paying tribute, once again, to our healthcare workers, who are facing an unimaginable challenge. I wish them all well with that challenge. I also want to applaud the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for working in unison and doing what it takes to guide us all through this crisis.

I have a few questions that I would like clarity on. Schools have been semi-opened to provide childminding facilities for our key workers. I question the wisdom of pulling all the children of key workers together at one location and want to point out that some teachers, staff and principals feel very compromised. Equally, front-line healthcare workers feel let down because those facilities are not in place. Can we build a sustainable, safe solution that can be implemented even after a lockdown scenario?

On the implementation of measures, with the business rates grants and the 80% of salaries that are available to employees, what provisions will be available to the self-employed and freelancers? I suggest that 80% of last year's earnings should be made available to them, with up to a £2,500 limit. Those are all very positive initiatives, but people want to know when they will be implemented. When will those moneys be available to them?

Testing has already been raised. Forty-one testing stations are available in the Republic, with more due to open today. Are there any in the North? Healthcare workers need not be quarantined just because they have a head cold. We need those testing facilities available widely, specifically for our healthcare workers.

On PPE, some front-line medical professionals are refusing to make patient contact or even to carry out assessments because they do not have the correct equipment and cannot protect themselves. What initiatives are planned? Thinking outside the box, as you mentioned earlier, deputy First Minister, has O'Neills been engaged? O'Neills has staff ready and waiting to deliver equipment to our front-line healthcare workers. Has that initiative, to get that equipment to people when they need it most — now — been put in motion?

To reiterate a point that has been made in the Chamber, the penny does not seem to have dropped with large sections of our society. They do not recognise that this is do-or-die time. It is crystal clear: stay apart to stay alive. I hope that you can re-emphasise that point, deputy First Minister. I wish you and the First Minister well, and I wish all of us well in this huge challenge that we share.

Mrs O'Neill: I am happy to repeat some of the things that I have said, particularly on PPE. We need our healthcare

staff — not just our healthcare staff but anybody on the front line, our emergency services, and our domiciliary care workers who are going house to house caring for people — to have protection. We have committed to do everything that we can to make sure that we have adequate protection, that it is ample, and that people have no fear about being protected when doing their job. Just this morning, we signed a contract that will see additional PPE brought in. We are also, as I said, working with and have been speaking to O’Neills, and others, who can perhaps support us at this time. A number of things are under way that will help the PPE situation, give the assurance that our healthcare staff need and ensure that we are doing the right thing to protect those who are helping to protect our families.

On the testing centres, we have to ramp up testing. I cannot say it enough. We must do much more testing; we must isolate, contact and trace. We have to do all those things. People are looking at the level of testing elsewhere. We do not have that here, but we need to get it here, and we will get it here. They are looking towards Croke Park and saying, “Where is our Croke Park? Where are our centres?” The Minister of Health will make some more positive announcements on that over the next number of days.

On school closures, let us be very clear: schools are closed. However, we are using school facilities to deal with the emergency and to support our key workers. We have to be nimble right now. It is not all clear-cut, and it is confusing for people.

My appeal to everybody who works in a public service, across the Civil Service and public services is: we need you. We need you to help us through this period, to help key workers to do their job, and to help to save lives. That means that we will not do what we always used to do all the time. Teachers might be asked to do something that is not in their normal run of duty. Somebody who works in the Civil Service might be asked to do something completely different, and alien, from what they have ever done before. We need people to respond in that way at this time.

This is not normal, and people need to stop thinking that it is normal. These are not normal times, so we have to behave differently. We need everybody to put their shoulder to the wheel and do their bit. That means stepping out of our comfort zone and doing the right thing, because we are trying to save lives.

Ms Bailey: Thank you, First Minister and deputy First Minister for your statement and for being here today. It has been widely acknowledged, as has already been mentioned, that the general public are reassured to see you stand so strongly, shoulder to shoulder, over the past few days and throughout this time.

I commend you for working so well and for being so strong, particularly under such extreme pressure. I can only imagine the emotion that goes behind every decision that you have to make and carry out over the coming weeks. For that and the work that you are putting in, thank you.

There are, of course, ongoing issues, and things will change. Are there plans in motion to launch a series of public announcement campaigns to keep the public updated and informed, particularly given the large gatherings that we saw over the weekend? It is not just about young people and gatherings in open spaces.

We are talking about it, and we have seen it in our supermarkets and other areas.

On the fiscal packages, what are we doing to address the situation faced by those who are renting and expected to pay their rent, when we have seen a mortgage holiday given to those with mortgages? We have the bizarre situation where we are seeing workers who have lost their jobs continuing to have to pay rents to landlords who have been given a mortgage freeze. That is not OK. What are we doing about that?

Have conversations been held at Executive level to move Northern Ireland into a full lockdown situation? We hear Boris Johnson announcing that flights and airports could be closed and that London could be moved into lockdown. Are we having those conversations?

A lot has been said about testing, but are the Executive looking at any epidemiological modelling to predict and plan for the virus and its spread? Are they looking at how we will plan to measure it going ahead and allocating resource to that?

Thank you for the work so far.

Mrs O’Neill: We are working our way through the issues you raised regarding renters. We have heard disturbing news from Housing Rights and others who are saying that some unscrupulous landlords are moving to try to evict people at this time. The Minister for Communities will bring forward legislation that will protect people against being evicted in this period. That is important. We are working with the Housing Executive, the housing associations and others and looking at the issue of rents. We need to help people to get through this as best they can. Last week’s announcement on the financial package for income was very important, but we also need payment holidays for mortgages and rents to help people survive this period. We will continue to do that, and we will keep the Assembly updated as we move our way through that.

The Executive will be launching a public ad campaign; you will see that being ramped up over the next couple of days. You will see it everywhere. It is part and parcel of the work that we have done around the portal and the one-stop shop for information. There will be consistent messaging and people will see the factual position on all these things. You will see that being rolled out to drive home messages, and it will be very much welcomed.

You asked about a full lockdown, or whatever way you describe it. We will have additional powers tomorrow, but, as of now, anybody who is not involved in essential services should not be out and about. That is it. That is it in a nutshell. As of now, people should not be out if they do not have to be. We will have additional powers tomorrow that will give us the flexibility to move our way through this and take the right decisions with the right powers behind us. That is important.

I want to drive home the message that we must not strike fear into people to such an extent that they run out and panic-buy food. We have solid food supply chains, and we have medical supply chains. We are working with the hauliers and the retailers — with everybody — to work our way through this. That will not be a problem in the work that we are doing, so, my message to people is this: please, please, please do not go out and panic-buy. Not everybody can, and if they think that they are not going

to be able to get anything at the shops for their family, it adds on to them an unnecessary tension. There is enough food. We will have sustained food supplies and sustained medical supplies, and we are working with all the relevant partners to make sure that that is the case.

2.30 pm

Committee Business

Standing Orders 49(2)(a) and 52(2)(a)

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The next item in the Order Paper is a motion from the Committee on Procedures to amend Standing Orders.

Mr T Buchanan (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures): I beg to move:

That the Standing Orders of the Assembly be amended as follows:

In Standing Order 49(2)(a), for "11" is substituted "9"; and in Standing Order 52(2)(a), for "11" is substituted "9".

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that an hour should be allocated for the debate. The mover will have 10 minutes to move the motion and 10 minutes to wind up. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr T Buchanan: On behalf of the Committee on Procedures, I am pleased to bring the motion to amend Standing Orders to the House today. I will begin with some background to the proposed amendment.

Under the Assembly Members (Reduction of Numbers) Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, the number of MLAs per constituency was reduced from six to five, leaving a total of 90 seats in the House. Following the resumption of the Assembly on 11 January 2020, parties agreed voluntarily to allocate nine seats to Statutory and Standing Committees instead of the 11 required by Standing Orders 49(2)(a) and 52(2)(a). Whips and party representatives agreed memberships of Committees, and they are available in the Assembly reports NIA 5/17-22 and NIA 6/17-22. Subsequently, the reports were agreed by the Business Committee on 20 January, when it was also agreed to suspend Standing Orders 49(2)(a) and 52(2)(a) prior to moving the two motions on the Committee membership reports. The Assembly agreed the motions.

Recognising that suspending Standing Orders was only a temporary solution, the Business Committee agreed to refer the matter to the Committee on Procedures. On 27 January 2020, the Business Committee wrote to the Committee on Procedures asking for consideration of the issue and the introduction of a more sustainable arrangement in Standing Orders. At its first meeting, on 29 January, the Committee on Procedures, noting a letter from the Business Committee, commissioned research on the matter. In addition to asking Research Services to look into the number of members on Committees in the other devolved legislatures, along with the Houses of the Oireachtas and the House of Commons, the Committee also agreed to look into issues relating to the quorum of the Committees. On 12 February, the Committee considered the research findings and deliberated on the matter. I will briefly cover some of the discussions held during the deliberations.

On the issue of a larger Committee of 11 members, there was discussion around occasions when having a larger number of members on a Committee may mean it can be

difficult to reach consensus on an issue. However, on the other hand, with a larger Committee, members were of the view that there was a greater representation of parties and, therefore, more views and ideas provided on the issue. In respect of a smaller Committee of nine members, members fully acknowledged that there was a risk of less representation of parties but discussions and decisions could be made more quickly and therefore the Committee might become more effective in carrying out its business. Some concern was raised by members around the quorum for a smaller Committee and particularly on whether quorum could be maintained on a consistent basis. I will come back to that a little later.

There was discussion between members on whether Committee members were adequately resourced. If some members sit on multiple Committees, does that constrain the time available for them to read, research and prepare for each Committee? Does it have a corresponding effect on the capacity of members to undertake high-quality scrutiny? Those were some of the questions and issues that were raised by members during our deliberations on the issues.

Continuing on discussions around resource, some members highlighted the fact that a member may be on one or more Committees. However, compared with other members, they may have a very different level of background support behind them in terms of what they can give. It was the view of some members that support mechanisms for individual members on Committees may be an issue that the Assembly could look at at some time in the future.

On the issue of quorum, members noted that the Assembly's current quorum of five was relatively high compared with other legislatures that the Committee looked at, which mainly have a quorum of three. As I mentioned, there was concern amongst members as to whether a quorum could be consistently maintained. It was the view of some members that a quorum of five gave a better chance of a wider range of parties being in attendance at the meetings.

On the conclusion of its deliberations, the Committee agreed that the Standing Orders should be amended to reflect the change from 11 to nine members. The Committee also agreed that the quorum should remain at five but with a review of the issue in several months' time, when the Committee will write to Committee Chairpersons to ask whether they have experienced any issues or have any concerns about the quorum remaining at five. The Committee agreed to consider the issue again at a later date. However, the ongoing problems brought about by COVID-19 could mean that quorum for Committees is an issue that needs to be considered again sooner rather than later.

It would be remiss of me not to point out that, at its meeting on 26 February 2020, a member who was not available for the deliberations expressed his opposition to the reduction of members on the Committee. However, following consideration of the legal advice, the Committee agreed the motion that is on today's Order Paper by consensus and without Division. On behalf of the Committee on Procedures, I commend the motion.

As a member of the Democratic Unionist Party, I say that we agree with the motion. It will be in the best interests of Members, and the Assembly will be best served by

Committees with a membership reduced from 11 to nine. That will give more focus, result in quicker Committee decisions and allow business to be brought to the House in a much more efficient and quicker manner. Therefore, I commend the motion.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I have only one other Member listed to speak and then Mr Middleton to make a winding-up speech. Priority will be given to members of the Committee if they wish to participate in the debate. One has indicated that she wishes to do so, and that is Mrs Rosemary Barton.

Mrs Barton: Mine is not a speech. Being mindful of the extraordinary times in which we meet in the Chamber today, I will not reiterate what my colleague Tom said. However, I wish to express the Ulster Unionist Party's support for the amendments to the Standing Orders.

Mr Muir: The Alliance Party is content to support the motion. One thing, perhaps, that needs to be considered is a result of the adjustment to the numbers on Committees. For example, I cover the two portfolios of Infrastructure and Finance, but I am not a member of the Finance Committee. The current arrangement is that I do not get access to its papers. I find out all that I do by sitting there on a Wednesday afternoon, watching the Finance Committee's deliberations and sometimes wondering what members are discussing. Allowing Members to access the papers for other Committees, which they do not have access to as a result of the change to numbers, would be useful.

Another issue, which is to do with the current, completely unprecedented circumstances, is about allowing members to access Committees without having to attend in person and whether that could be via telephone or videoconferencing. We need to consider that as a modern Assembly.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The only other Member whom I have listed is Mr Gary Middleton to make a winding-up speech.

Mr Middleton: I welcome the opportunity to conclude on today's riveting debate on the motion to amend Standing Orders. I thank all the Members who contributed. As this is a fairly straightforward amendment, there is little that I can add, except perhaps to summarise.

As outlined, the amendment has come to the House following a request from the Business Committee to introduce a more sustainable arrangement in Standing Orders regarding the reduction of Committee members from 11 to nine. As responsibility to amend Standing Orders lies with the Committee on Procedures, the Committee agreed to consider the matter. The Committee commissioned research on Committee size and quorum in other devolved legislatures, the House of Commons and the Houses of the Oireachtas. The Committee considered the advantages and disadvantages of Committees consisting of 11 members and Committees with nine members. Members' discussions on Committee size and quorum have been outlined, so I will not rehearse those.

Ultimately, the Committee agreed that Standing Orders should be amended. It also agreed that the quorum be kept at five. The Committee will write to all Committee Chairpersons in several months' time to gain a more informed awareness of any issues relating to quorum. It was the Committee's decision to revisit the issue at a later

date to allow Committees to have a bedding-in period following their reduction in membership. It may be that current circumstances mean that the Committee will come back to the issue sooner rather than later.

In the debate, we heard from two Members — Mrs Rosemary Barton and Mr Andrew Muir — and we thank them for their comments. I commend the motion to the House.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Standing Orders of the Assembly be amended as follows:

*In Standing Order 49(2)(a), for “11” is substituted “9”;
and in Standing Order 52(2)(a), for “11” is substituted “9”.*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am satisfied that cross-community consent has been demonstrated.

Adjourned at 2.42 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 24 March 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Executive Committee Business

Coronavirus Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

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

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Coronavirus Bill dealing with: emergency registration of health professionals in clauses 2 and 4 and schedules 1 and 3; emergency volunteers in clauses 7 and 8 and schedule 6; mental health and mental capacity in clause 9 and schedules 9 and 10; health service indemnification in clause 12; registration of deaths and stillbirths etc in clauses 17 and 20 and schedule 12 (Part 3); food supply in clauses 23 to 27 and schedule 14; inquests in clauses 29 and 30; schools, childcare providers, etc in clauses 35 and 36 and schedules 15 (Part 3) and 16 (Part 3); statutory sick pay in clauses 40 to 42; pensions in clause 45; protection of public health in clause 46 and schedule 17; powers relating to potentially infectious persons in clause 49 and schedule 20 (Part 5); powers relating to events, gatherings and premises in clause 50 and schedule 21 (Part 5); courts and tribunals: use of video and audio technology in clause 55 and schedule 26; powers in relation to bodies in clause 56 and schedule 27; commencement in clause 73; power to suspend and revive provisions in clause 74; expiry in clause 75; power to alter expiry date in clause 76; power to amend Act in consequence of amendments to subordinate legislation in clause 77; power to make consequential modifications in clause 78 and procedure for certain orders made by a Northern Ireland Department in clause 82.

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

Mr Swann: Thank you, Mr Speaker. *[Interruption.]* I will give Members time to sit down.

We are living in unprecedented and challenging times and we will require unprecedented and challenging actions in the days ahead. Coronavirus is, without doubt, the most serious public health emergency that has faced the world in over a century. People have, sadly, passed away in Northern Ireland, and we must prepare ourselves, for there will be more. Never before has our National Health Service faced such a looming and fear-provoking crisis. The virus is here, and it will get worse before it gets better, but the actions that we take today, tomorrow and in the days ahead will have a huge impact on how many lives will be lost. As we discuss the objectives of the Coronavirus Bill,

I urge Members to keep that to the absolute fore of their thinking.

I want to take this opportunity to provide Members with an important update on the latest state of play in relation to testing.

We are scaling up testing capacity across our health and social care system. I am pleased to say that, as a result of the actions of staff, the scale-up is progressing at a rapid pace. The most recent update, which I received yesterday, is that we are now doing over 600 tests per day in the regional virus reference laboratory. This laboratory will be doing 900 tests per day by early next week. Two other trusts will commence testing this week, which will add another 250 tests per day. That will bring our testing capability to over 1,100 tests per day. I want to say a sincere thank you to all our staff who are involved in the work to scale up this capacity across our health and social care system.

Given the current context, laboratory testing is reserved for a number of priority groups. These are: people admitted to hospital; key healthcare workers; and in circumstances relating to the management of outbreak clusters. Key healthcare workers include staff working in emergency departments, critical care units and primary care, and front-line ambulance staff. These priority groups for testing have been determined following discussion with national expert scientific and advisory groups. The priority groups for testing are under constant review and are likely to be expanded further as our testing capacity increases. I have established an expert working group to take forward work on testing scale-up. We are fully plugged in to the national discussions relating to work to scale up testing for healthcare workers, and I will be able to share more information on this in due course.

Moving to the issue at hand, Mr Speaker, you will be aware that it was necessary for me to table an amendment to the motion in order to deal with some recent amendments to the Bill that relate to matters that are devolved to Northern Ireland. It was important to have those clauses reflected in this motion. Whilst I appreciate that this is not an ideal situation, we are operating in unparalleled times, and the Coronavirus Bill is moving through its various legislative stages at pace.

Members will be aware from my previous statements to the Assembly that my Department, including the health and social care system, has been planning extensively over the years for an event such as the outbreak of a pandemic. This is to ensure that we are well prepared to respond in a way that offers substantial protection to the public, as has

always been the case. My priority as Minister of Health is to ensure that all effective measures continue to be put in place in Northern Ireland, but I stress that, for the social distancing measures that were announced yesterday to work, everyone in Northern Ireland needs to understand clearly that the vast majority of commercial premises must close. Only those providing essential goods and services can stay open. All others must close, and close now. Let me be crystal clear about what that means. As the Prime Minister said yesterday, this is not merely guidance or advice. It is an instruction. If it is not heeded, our hospitals will be overrun and many people will die needlessly. If it is not heeded, we will not hesitate to enforce it with penalties that will include an unlimited fine. It is as stark as that.

As part of that work, my Department and the devolved Administrations in Scotland and Wales have contributed to the UK-wide coronavirus action plan, which was published by the UK Government on 3 March. The action plan highlights the procedures that need to be put in place to delay and mitigate the threat posed by COVID-19. Among the suite of measures identified in the action plan is the introduction of the Coronavirus Bill. This will ensure that the UK has robust, proportionate and effective legislative measures to deal with the impact of a widespread COVID-19 outbreak.

The Coronavirus Bill was introduced at Westminster on 19 March and contains emergency provisions that we need to have at our disposal, to deploy only if required. I want to stress that “only if required” are key words. In situations like this, it is normal and, indeed, good practice to plan for a reasonable worst-case scenario. I want to stress that preparing for such possibilities does not mean that we expect them to arise, but if we do not take the actions that we have been instructed to take, they will.

From a Northern Ireland perspective, the Coronavirus Bill is being used to provide the relevant Northern Ireland Departments with the necessary and proportionate legislative powers to allow them to act in a rapid and effective way to deal with the severe pandemic.

The Bill is regarded as a priority across the relevant Northern Ireland Departments. Ministerial colleagues from a number of Departments have included provisions pertaining to their remit. Each Minister supports me, as the Minister of Health, in taking forward those provisions on their behalf.

In broad terms, the main purpose of the Coronavirus Bill is to increase the available health and social care workforce by allowing recently retired health and social care staff to come back to work in order to support the efforts to tackle this outbreak. It will ease the burden on front-line staff by reducing the number of administrative tasks that they have to perform, and by allowing key workers to perform more tasks remotely and with less paperwork. It will contain and slow the spread of the virus by reducing unnecessary social contact — for example, through banning certain mass gatherings and controlling school and childcare closures. It will manage the deceased with respect and dignity by enabling the death management system to deal with increased demand for its services. It will support people by allowing them to claim statutory sick pay from day one, as well as helping the food industry to maintain supplies.

As stated, the provisions of the Bill cover a broad range of topics that relate to various Northern Ireland Departments.

For example, the Bill contains measures to help contain and slow the spread of the virus. Provisions in clause 35 in Part 3 of schedule 15 to the Bill will enable the Department of Education to give directions requiring the temporary closure of schools; the Department for the Economy to give directions requiring the closure of further and higher education institutions; and the Department of Health to give directions requiring the closure of childcare provision. However, I stress that the respective Departments are required to have regard to the advice of the Chief Medical Officer before issuing those directions.

Clause 36 in Part 3 of schedule 16 provides for temporary continuity directions, which will allow the relevant Departments to issue temporary continuity directions, which will require schools, further and higher institutions and childcare providers to stay open. The respective Departments will be required to have regard to advice from the Chief Medical Officer before issuing such directions.

The Bill includes powers relating to policing and justice functions, which are intended to alleviate administrative burdens in the event of widespread absences related to the spread of COVID-19, if they happen, as they will. They are to enhance the capacity to deliver those functions. For example, Part 1 of schedule 26 provides powers for the Courts and Tribunals Service in Northern Ireland to direct and use live links when participating in any court or tribunal proceedings, where the court determines that to be in the interests of justice. Live links can refer to either live audio or live video links.

Another key feature of the Bill is the inclusion of provisions to ease a number of existing legislative and regulatory requirements. Emergency volunteering leave is a new form of unpaid statutory leave. Its purpose is to maximise the pool of volunteers that can be drawn upon during a specific 16-week emergency volunteering period. The volunteers will fill capacity gaps in the health and social care sector, and will help to safeguard essential services that are at risk as a result of pressures caused by the pandemic. Schedule 6 to the Bill enables the Department of Health, the Health and Social Care Board and any of the health and social care trusts, to identify and certify volunteers by means of an emergency volunteering certificate.

Schedule 6 also addresses the two primary deterrents to participation in volunteering. The first is the risk to employment and employment rights and the second is the loss of income. Through the modification of the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996, the provision gives protection for employment and employment rights during, following or when seeking a period of emergency volunteering.

In the event of a severe outbreak of COVID-19, the number of people off work is likely to increase significantly. That would include those who are displaying virus-like symptoms, as well as those who are self-isolating as a precautionary measure, in accordance with Public Health Agency (PHA) advice. In a potentially reasonable worst-case scenario, it has been estimated that up to one-fifth of employees could be absent from work during the peak weeks. That would clearly present a significant financial burden on employers, through increased statutory sick pay costs. The proposed legislative changes are therefore intended to provide relief to employers, with the current focus primarily on small to medium-sized enterprises.

10.45 am

The Bill also provides the power for regulations to be made regarding the recovery from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs of additional payments of statutory sick pay by certain employers for absence related to coronavirus.

The ability to recover statutory sick pay is important so that employers are supported in a period when their payment of statutory sick pay is likely to escalate. It is also necessary to ensure that employees are incentivised not to attend work when advised not to do so for reasons of health security. Ordinary statutory sick pay is not payable for the first three days of sickness, which are commonly referred to as waiting days. There is provision in the Bill to allow regulations to be made that will temporarily suspend waiting days for employees who are absent from work due to coronavirus. That is only in the event and for the duration of a severe outbreak.

Clause 45 makes provision to adjust the pension scheme regulations for retired health and social care staff, which would enable them to return to work for short periods without the loss of pension entitlement.

The purpose of provisions at clauses 17 and 20 and Part 3 of schedule 12 is to relax requirements in relation to certifying deaths and cremations. As Members will be aware, there are normally very strict requirements around certifying deaths. Those clauses contain some relaxation of some of those requirements in order to cope with an expected higher-than-usual number of deaths and fewer doctors. The principal purpose of those provisions is to enable death registrations to be processed more expeditiously at a time when, regrettably, there may be an additional burden as a result of an excessive number of deaths.

In normal circumstances, if an inquest is held in relation to a death in custody, it needs to be held in front of a jury. Clause 29 makes provision to suspend the requirement in Northern Ireland for an inquest to be held with a jury in relation to a death from COVID-19. Clause 30 will also enable a coroner to hold or continue to hold an inquest into a death in prison from natural illness without a jury.

Mental health legislation exists to provide for the compulsory detention and treatment of patients in mental capacity legislation to ensure that those who are unable to make decisions for themselves are protected against arbitrary decisions. Our laws ensure that those powers are used only when a person is so unwell as to need them and when he or she presents a serious risk to him or herself or others. The law strikes a balance between safely caring for people and protecting their rights. The temporary modifications of the Mental Health Order and Mental Capacity Act at schedules 9 and 10 respectively have been deployed with the interests of the person in mind. We must do all that we can to ensure the continued and safe running of mental health services and the deprivation of liberty safeguards and to allow certain flexibilities to be introduced at the point at which they may be required.

Another key aspect of the Coronavirus Bill is having measures that will help to enhance the capacity and the flexibility in the deployment of staff across essential services. In that respect, the Bill makes provision to allow for the registers for various professions, such as nurses, other health professionals and pharmacists, to allow the temporary registration of people who would not otherwise be eligible for registration. That is to enable

gaps in the workforce to be filled. It may be used to enable the readmission of people who have retired or final-year students. The power is to be exercised with close cooperation between the Department of Health and the relevant registrar.

Clause 12 makes provision to provide indemnities for health and social care activity and allows the Department of Health to indemnify or make arrangements to indemnify persons who are doing jobs that they are not normally covered for within the health service.

Mr Speaker, I appreciate that the Bill has to make provision for outcomes that we may prefer not to contemplate but for which we must be prepared.

That would include measures to ensure that the deceased are treated in a dignified way, should we experience an excessive number of deaths as a result of a COVID-19 outbreak. Clause 56 in schedule 27 to the Bill makes provision for powers of direction in relation to bodies. It enables local government to direct private providers in the death management industry — for example, funeral directors, mortuaries and crematoriums, as well as individuals and services — to implement a central plan.

Part 1 of schedule 27 creates powers to require the provision of information about capacity to deal with the transportation, storage and disposal of human remains. Part 2 provides powers to give directions that require providers to do anything that is calculated to facilitate the transportation, storage and disposal of human remains. That will include the provision of services, facilities, premises, vehicles and equipment. Those powers are intended to improve the process through the system, at every stage up to burial or cremation.

It is also vital that we act responsibly in this situation. To that end, the Bill seeks to support and protect the public to do the right thing and follow public health advice. For example, clause 46 in schedule 17 makes new provisions for powers to deal with public health. It mainly enables the making of regulations by the Department of Health that allow for measures to be introduced to help to delay or to prevent the further transmission of an infection from COVID-19 that presents or could present significant harm to human health. It also gives powers to district judges and Magistrates' Courts to make orders, on application by the Public Health Agency, about people, premises or things. Those provisions are equivalent to the powers that have already been exercised in England and Wales in relation to coronavirus.

Clause 49 and Part 5 of schedule 20 provide powers relating to potentially infectious persons. Those provisions give powers to public health officers, such as officers of the Public Health Agency, or anyone acting under their direction, under arrangements for dealing with coronavirus. It is important to bear in mind that the powers are exercisable only if two safeguards are met. The Department of Health must make a declaration that COVID-19 is a serious and imminent threat in Northern Ireland and a public health officer has reasonable grounds to suspect that a particular person is, or may be, infectious. If so, the public health officer can direct the person to go to a suitable place to undergo screening and assessment or quarantine.

Part 5 of schedule 20 makes provision for additional powers for the Police Service of Northern Ireland to the support actions that are taken by the relevant health authorities to prevent the spread of coronavirus. Those

will enable the police to enforce sensible public health restrictions, including returning people to isolation and, where necessary, directing individuals to seek relevant treatment or to attend suitable locations for further help.

Clause 50 in Part 5 of schedule 21 to the Bill gives powers to the Executive Office to prohibit, or otherwise restrict, events or gatherings or to close premises. Those powers are being given to the Executive Office because it is recognised that the situation may raise cross-cutting issues. Again, it is important to highlight that the powers are accessible through the declaration of a threat to public health, as made by the Executive Office on the advice of the Chief Medical Officer, and that direction is given for the purpose of preventing, protecting against or controlling the incidence or transmission of coronavirus. It may also be given to facilitate the most appropriate deployment of medical or emergency personnel and resources in Northern Ireland.

Schedule 21, which clause 50 refers to, confers powers to issue directions to prohibit or restrict events or gatherings, or to close premises or places with restrictions on all persons entering or remaining in those premises. I should make it clear at the outset that these measures are not proposed lightly. The measures are proportionate to the threat that we face and they need to be used when necessary. Any direction to prohibit, close or to restrict events, gatherings or premises can only be issued during the type of public health response period that we are currently in. The Executive Office can make those directions on the recommendation of the Chief Medical Officer, or any Deputy Chief Medical Officer at the Department of Health.

I appreciate that, in the face of this, significant measures are being proposed and some people may say that they are draconian. A few weeks ago, I would never have thought that I would be speaking in support of measures to curtail the everyday life of everyone in Northern Ireland. Today, however, I am firmly of the position that they are necessary and proportionate. We all know that social distancing is key to ensuring that our health and social care system is not overwhelmed and that the effects of the outbreak are constrained as far as possible. We have already asked fellow citizens to drastically change their daily lives. These provisions will ensure that we can enforce social distancing when we need to. Members, the stark reality is that without effective social distancing and the measures proposed, we risk overloading our precious health system to the point of collapse and the needless death of fellow citizens.

The provisions at clauses 23 to 27 and schedule 14 confer a power on the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to require those involved in the food industry to provide information relating to a food supply chain. The information gathered will help to effectively support an industry-led response to any food supply disruption resulting from COVID-19 and inform a planned response. Again, it is important to stress that these powers may only be used in the event of food supply chain disruption or risk of disruption and that the person from whom the information is required has not complied with the previous request to provide the information voluntarily. Again, they would only be activated should it become necessary to use them.

It is vital that I make clear to Members that the Coronavirus Bill will operate on a time-limited basis and is not intended to remain in perpetuity. It will expire after a maximum of two years unless Parliament considers it necessary to extend or reduce it. Mr Speaker, I appreciate that Members are being asked to consider the legislative consent motion within a very short time frame. However, I know that Members appreciate that we are operating in extraordinary circumstances. When taking the steps to have the necessary legislative provisions in place, we are not blessed with the luxury of time. In normal circumstances, I would have preferred Members to have had more time to reflect on the Bill. However, the fact of the matter is that these are not normal circumstances. Given the nature and speed of the events with which we are dealing and the need to ensure that Northern Ireland provisions are included in the Bill, it has been necessary to expedite the normal process. I also understand that colleagues in Scotland and Wales are working to similarly challenging timescales in trying to attain consent from the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales respectively.

In conclusion, I believe that it is critical to have a consistent approach across the whole of the United Kingdom to have a legislative framework that will provide sufficient powers to meet the challenges that we may face in having to respond to this pandemic. The Coronavirus Bill provides for such a consistent legislative approach across the United Kingdom. Furthermore, on this occasion, I also believe that it makes practical sense for the UK Parliament to progress legislation dealing with the transferred matters, as it would not be possible to legislate for Northern Ireland separately within a similar timescale.

I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Minister. I invite you to move formally your amendment.

Mr Swann: I beg to move the following amendment:

At end insert:

“as introduced to Parliament on 19 March 2020; and those provisions made by amendment during the passage of the Bill as they extend to Northern Ireland.”

Mrs Cameron (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health): I will first take a moment to thank sincerely all those on the front line today, who are bearing the burden of this public health crisis on our behalf. They deserve our full support and cooperation as much as our gratitude and admiration. I also acknowledge the enormous efforts and dedication shown by the Minister and his officials in working to address the myriad challenges posed by this crisis in making regular media appearances and maintaining contact with the Committee, which is essential to communicate important messages and ensure public confidence. The Health Committee was briefed yesterday on the health aspects of the Coronavirus Bill and the legislative consent motion (LCM), including measures in relation to the workforce, mental health and mental capacity, and new powers in relation to public health. The Committee was in no doubt about the urgent need to take responsible action to save lives.

11.00 am

We know our health and social care workforce was already under immense strain before this challenge added to the

difficulties. Officials advised the Committee on measures to facilitate rapid expansion of all sectors by streamlining the registration requirements, and protecting the pension arrangements of those who are retired. We were advised that the immediate focus will be on those who retired within the last three years, and the next step will be consideration of those who have recently completed training, who are currently in preregistration roles or in their final year.

Members enquired about the likely impact of the measures and were advised that contact is being made with around 500 recently retired medical staff and around 200 pharmacists, in addition to other professions. Having raised issues in relation to Community Pharmacy, members were heartened to learn that greater support for the existing Community Pharmacy workforce is in train for the roll-out of personal protective equipment (PPE) and additional funding to respond to greater demand.

Members were also encouraged to hear that there has been an extremely positive response to the call for pharmacists in other sectors to come forward to help where resources are most needed. We were further advised that provisions for emergency volunteers, including a compensation scheme for loss of earnings, will help encourage further workers into the system. Members, are very appreciative of the speedy work to enable this and realise fully that our HSC workforce is our single greatest asset, and must be protected and supported as it works to protect and support us.

Turning to mental capacity and mental health, Members enquired about the clauses that streamline decision-making and were advised that, in all cases, two persons will be required to make key decisions and that the right of appeal will remain. It was explained that the streamlining will free up staff resource to focus on urgent care priorities.

The Committee discussed the new suite of powers available under schedule 17 for public health protection. It noted that before making regulations to avail of the powers, the Department would, having consulted the Chief Medical Officer, declare a serious and imminent threat to public health, and only then exercise powers if it felt it provided an effective means of delaying or reducing transmission of the disease. Members were further assured that the Department would be required to revoke the powers when this situation has passed. Members enquired about the nature of the additional powers, the time periods involved in detaining people for screening or isolation and were also advised about the right of appeal to a Magistrate's Court.

Members raised concern about informal public gatherings at the weekend, which seemed to suggest that not everyone had clearly heard the message about social distancing and staying at home were possible. The Committee was advised that, if necessary, the Bill could address that for public protection. Since yesterday, of course, we have seen the Prime Minister take the next step. It was further acknowledged, however, that if public health advice is disregarded, and the extra powers are needed, enforcement will put additional strain on public services

I will summarise the views expressed at yesterday's Committee meeting. Members acknowledged that the measures in the Bill went beyond what they might ordinarily support and that the opportunity for scrutiny has been much less than they would ordinarily require.

However, these are not ordinary times and they require unusual action and solidarity. Therefore, the Health Committee agreed that, in these circumstances, it was content to support the extension of the relevant provisions of the Coronavirus Bill to this jurisdiction.

Finally, in view of the inclusion of the extraordinary measures, the Committee also agreed that I should represent their support for the amendment in the House of Commons to provide for a six-month review.

I will add a few remarks as the DUP health spokesperson. From a party perspective, we recognise and fully support measures to increase our pool of doctors, nurses and healthcare workers. The emergency registration of health professionals provided for in clauses 2 and 4 is a necessary step in pre-empting the likely rise in staff absence due to the virus and those self-isolating. Equipping our health service with the skills and expertise needed to meet the surge should be our foremost priority.

There are, of course, issues that we must be cognisant of. We are hearing anecdotal evidence from some final-year students and trainees struggling with the unprecedented pressure of starting their careers in this environment. How will their well-being be safeguarded? How will older returning doctors and nurses be deployed so as not to increase their risk and exposure? Clauses 7 and 8 allow workers to take two, three or four weeks to volunteer in crucial health jobs, for example, carers or porters, without loss of employment rights and this seems a sensible and measured proposal. We need to utilise all available skills from across our economy and society to meet this major health threat. It is important that crucial sectors providing support to the public health response are not unduly weakened. Again, we have issues requiring clarity, for example, in what sectors will employees be able to take a period of absence and what training will be made available for volunteers of this kind? I would value some clarity on these issues.

We welcome the support and powers given to mental health workers and we stand with them as they take such responsibility on their shoulders. It is of vital importance that there are provisions around indemnity. We are asking people to step outside their areas of specialism and we need to provide them and their trusts with security as they do so.

With regard to registration of deaths and stillbirths, clauses 17 and 20 relax certifying requirements. That illustrates the scale of the threat of coronavirus and the likely impact of fatalities. It is important that morgues are not overwhelmed and are supported by other service providers, where possible, whilst ensuring vital doctoring and nursing time is spent in the most beneficial areas rather than on bureaucracy

There are, of course, other aspects that I would like to raise but I am conscious that my colleagues will raise some of them in their contributions and we must use our time in the Chamber in a very focused way.

We live in very uncertain days and the nature and detail of this Bill reflects that. It is a startling piece of legislation; it is a sobering piece of legislation; and it is a frightening piece of legislation. Sadly, however, it is also a piece of legislation that is necessary. Coronavirus — COVID-19 — is changing our world before our very eyes. What was normal is now exceptional or impossible. What we took for granted is now uncertain, and for how long, we simply do

not know. Our constituents are frightened; I am frightened. I am frightened for my husband, my children, my parents, my mother-in-law, my sister-in-law who is in the ICU unit, for wider family, friends, staff, colleagues and for this wee country which I love so much.

Like anyone, when frightened we look to others for reassurance. We look to the Prime Minister, our First Minister, our deputy First Minister, our Health Minister and to us, as elected representatives. The onus is on all of us to take all steps necessary to provide that reassurance. I believe this legislation will enable us and empower us to do that: it is necessary, but let us all hope and pray that many of its provisions are never needed.

Mr O'Dowd: It is, quite clearly, a very difficult time for our communities, families and society. In normal times, I would be rising to speak against this legislation and how we are processing it, as I suspect many in the Chamber would. This is not how we do business. This is not how we should be doing legislation but we are not, in any way, in normal times.

I too am frightened. I am six feet and six inches tall and weigh 18 stone, on a good day, and I am terrified of a virus that I cannot see or cannot hear but that I know is everywhere around us. I know that it poses the greatest single threat to my family, my neighbours, my community — and by community, I mean all the people who live here — that we have ever faced, and will likely ever face, in our lifetime. Those sentiments will be repeated time and time again across the Chamber, and people will be quite sincere when they say that.

The unfortunate thing is that there are people out there who are not listening. There are people out there who, out of bravado, stupidity, ignorance or arrogance, are continuing to flout the advice that is being given to protect their own lives and the lives of those around them. When their loved ones are choking to death in an ICU, if they are lucky enough to get a ventilator, it is too late to say, "I'm sorry" or "I didn't know" or "I thought it would happen to someone else". It is far, far too late. Now is the time; in fact, I think we are past the time, but we are on the right road to helping prevent many, many deaths.

Again, I appeal to those people who are flouting the restrictions and putting others in danger to stop it now. They will have to stand outside the ICU when their loved one is inside. Their loved ones will die alone, because they will not be allowed in to hold their hand, comfort them or be with them in their last moments. Their loved ones, and the loved ones of others, will die alone. I appeal to them once again to do the right thing. If they do not do the right thing, enforce the legislation that is before us.

I came into Parliament Buildings this morning, as have we all. In my humble opinion, there is still too much traffic on the road and there are too many people about. Not all of them can be essential workers. Many of the people in those vehicles may be saying that their employer will not let them stay off work or work from home. Those employers are putting the lives of their employees in grave danger if they do not allow them to stop work or allow them to work from home.

We will lose businesses as a result of the pandemic; we will lose jobs; we will lose livelihoods. All of those can be rebuilt, and they will receive support to be rebuilt. The entire economy of the globe will have to be reshaped to

rebuild an economy and to create jobs, but we will not be able to bring one employee or one loved one back from the deaths that they face if we do not take the actions outlined, or if employers do not take the actions that are outlined in the Bill.

On 11 March, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control stated that:

"The early, decisive, rapid, coordinated and comprehensive implementation of measures, closures and quarantines is likely to be more effective in slowing the spread of the virus than a delayed implementation."

As I said, much has been said about delayed implementation, but we are where we are, and we are taking measures. The other measure that we have to take is test, test, test. We have to know where the virus is, who has it and where it is spreading.

One of my concerns when I listen to the evening news or broadcasts is that when journalists — many of whom are doing a fine job — report the figures for that day, for instance at 20 new cases or 15 new cases. That does not reflect what is happening with regard to the spread of the virus. The virus is out there. It is in every community, village, estate and townland. It is being spread by people who maybe do not know they have symptoms, or by careless people who have symptoms, but who are going out. Every announcement of the number of confirmed cases needs to be accompanied by a health warning. At the minute, the island of Ireland has around 1,275 confirmed cases and there are around 148 in the North, I think. That health news comes with a health warning. It does not reflect the spread of the virus or the danger that our communities and families face.

We need more testing. I welcome what the Minister said in his opening remarks about us moving to a greater number of tests, but I think we need even more. We need to be opening up testing centres, and we need to be cooperating across the island of Ireland, across these islands and across Europe, because the virus knows no borders.

The response is commensurate with the crisis. The response and the legislation are needed, and the way in which the legislation is being introduced is needed. However, what is needed more than anything is for citizens to understand the danger that they face.

11.15 am

The amendment is, to me, far-reaching and is, literally, a blank chequebook. The legislator in my head hears alarm bells ring when I see things like that, but the alarm bell that is ringing in my head about the danger that we face is much louder. In the Minister's closing remarks, he might explain the rationale behind the amendment. I think that I understand it, but it would be worth putting that on the record.

I end by putting on record again our appreciation and, indeed, our admiration of all those working in our health service, be they a consultant, a cleaner, catering staff, a nurse or whoever. We owe them a huge amount. At the end of the process, we need to remember that we owe them a huge amount. We need to get the proper equipment for them, and I welcome the fact that, quite quickly, the O'Neill's factory was brought into play. That shows the thinking that we need now. Ministers and the

Executive acted quickly. They saw an opportunity and a solution. They went after that, and they got it.

I also congratulate and thank those working in supermarkets and shops and those producing food for us. It has to be nerve-racking standing behind a counter facing all those people coming in and transacting with money. They place themselves at risk for not great money. At the end of the process, we need to remember those people, too.

There will be an end to the process, and life will go back to normal, as we see in China. Hopefully, the Chinese experience of what they have been through will help the Western World to move forward. There is hope at the end of this, and we need to remember those who stood by us.

I will end on this note: I want to see the full weight of the law used against anyone who flouts the current restrictions or flouts the legislation. I hope and pray that they do not have to stand outside an ICU while a loved one chokes to death in it.

Mr McGrath (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): I speak on behalf of the Committee for the Executive Office on what is an important issue for every strand of our society. For the most part, it is crying out for much greater powers and restrictions to help in the fight against COVID-19.

I begin by offering my condolences to the families of those who have died as a result of the coronavirus in the North. We have had our third death, and we know that that is, sadly, only the beginning.

The scrutiny by Assembly Committees of legislative consent memorandums is usually full and intense. In normal circumstances, members would have the benefit of a Committee report on the legislative consent memorandum to help to inform deliberations on whether to grant the legislative consent, but, with such urgent legislation, that has not been possible. There is no doubt that a significant challenge faces us all in fulfilling our scrutiny role in the COVID-19 crisis setting. Everything is urgent. Everything is fast-moving. Things change by the hour.

The Committee for the Executive Office has carried out some scrutiny of the provisions of the Bill that fall under the responsibility of the Executive Office. It received written briefings from officials on Friday past, and the lead official helpfully offered to speak to members if they needed any clarification in advance of this debate.

As has already been outlined, the Executive Office has policy responsibility for civil contingencies. Therefore, clause 50 and part 5 of schedule 21 give the Department powers in relation to events, gatherings and premises in Northern Ireland. I understand that they will complement the powers to be made available to the Department of Health on the control of infectious diseases and are similar in effect to other provisions covering other jurisdictions. The powers will be available for use immediately on commencement, although it is hoped that the voluntary postponement of mass gatherings in response to the outbreak means that early use is unlikely. We have already seen many organisations take the life-saving step of postponing events, and they should be applauded for that.

The Executive Office will have the power to make and subsequently revoke declarations indicating that:

“the incidence or transmission of novel Coronavirus constitutes a serious and imminent threat to public health”.

Where such a declaration is made, the Executive Office has the power to prohibit or restrict events or gatherings and close premises or impose restrictions on persons entering or remaining inside them. Anyone who fails to comply with a direction will be guilty of an offence punishable by a fine of up to £100,000 on summary conviction or an unlimited fine on conviction or indictment. I sincerely hope that we do not get to that stage. There is a duty on every citizen to comply with directions that aim to protect society during these unprecedented times.

I mentioned earlier that a significant challenge faces us all in fulfilling our scrutiny role in the COVID-19 crisis setting. In that context, safeguards become even more important, to ensure that powers are properly and proportionately used. The powers are exercisable only if a declaration of threat to public health has been made by the Executive Office, on the advice of the Chief Medical Officer or any of his deputies and the direction is given for the purposes of preventing, protecting against or controlling the incidence or transmission of coronavirus or facilitating the most appropriate deployment of medical or emergency personnel and resources in Northern Ireland. What that means is that the advice of the Chief Medical Officer or his deputies must be sought before direction is made. That appears to be a significant safeguard.

I now speak as a member of the Health Committee and as an MLA for South Down. Much has been said over the last months about the Assembly and how it would define us and our collective capacity and resolve to work together. This day can be the defining moment of the Assembly. There is no other issue — not one in a generation — that has brought people together, removed the stain of orange and green politics and seen the need for us all to work together as this issue has. The Coronavirus Bill is brought to the House for consideration. We are told that, to effectively respond to the ongoing pandemic, consistency of outcome will be achieved by making the range of tools and powers consistent across the UK. I fully appreciate that this is not an easy ask for any of us. The legislation is not perfect, and it is not legislation that I ever believed I would be asked to support, but these are extraordinary times. The legislation before us will be time-limited for two years, and it is neither necessary nor appropriate for all of the measures to come into force immediately or at all. We have the ability, with scientific evidence, to bring the powers to an early close, and I welcome that there are moves in London to have this reviewed every six months. That would be appropriate.

Some of the clauses refer to the emergency registration of healthcare professionals. All over the North, we see doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals graduating early or re-registering so that they can put themselves on the very front line of the pandemic. Let us never forget the debt of gratitude that we owe them, and I hope that any concerns that they have regarding their pension payments can be quickly resolved.

Pharmacists are another set of unsung heroes. They will have emergency provision to prescribe medicines and drugs that they would otherwise not have been able to. We extend our thanks to pharmacists, who are at the front line

of the battle. Staff in other professions will be able to take blocks of leave — up to four weeks at a time — as part of emergency volunteering and that will enable them to help with the fight against COVID-19. That is critical, because the work may very well overwhelm our National Health Service staff, and they will need our help and assistance. We should welcome that provision to allow people to step up to the mark. Many in the health sector are concerned about their safety and the provision of personal protection equipment. They are at the front line, exposed to the virus day and daily. They need to be properly protected. We owe it to them, for their endeavours, to protect them, and providing them with personal protection equipment is a must.

Also, as has been mentioned, what of our retail and other sectors? They are at the front line, engaging daily with people who potentially have the virus. We should consider providing some assistance for them.

I accept that there may need to be some reconfiguration of services in our health network, and I would not question that. However, I want an assurance from you, Minister, that any such moves will be temporary. Can I seek from you today on the record an assurance that any reconfiguration of health services is temporary and will be moved back again once this passes?

On testing, the Bill is not perfect. There are glaring omissions. Why are we not testing more? I welcome the fact that the Minister referred to an increase in testing, because we need to ramp up our capability and see an immediate programme put in place in our communities that lets anybody who is worried be tested and then have the results quickly. It is silly to have medical and healthcare staff off sick for 14 days when a simple test with results in 48 hours could let them back onto the wards 11 days earlier. What of the other essential staff whom we are making work? Today, there are teachers in schools looking after children whose parents are day and daily in contact with people suffering from the virus. Can they be tested too? The potential for cross-contamination in such a setting is massive.

The Bill gives the Department of Education and, by extension, the Minister the power to direct schools to close temporarily. Unfortunately, it must be said that, up to this point, the lack of and confusing information provided by the Department has been unhelpful. My inbox and, I am sure, those of many other Members have been filled with concerned teachers, parents and unions worried about what to do, what not to do and then how to do it. I hope that the Minister of Education will ensure that there is greater clarity, although, judging by his tweet last night, I will not hold out too much hope for that clarity.

The Bill will bring into force provisions for a power in relation to the funding of additional employers' liabilities for SSP incurred as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak. Businesses are struggling, and the news of recent interventions has been helpful. SSP is a concern because most businesses will have people off sick at some stage and there could be a drain on the financial resources of their business, especially small and medium ones. I also hope that the rumours that there will be some assistance for the self-employed will come to pass, and I understand that there may be announcements in London this morning. Hopefully, that will provide some help for our self-employed sector, which has been waiting for information. These are worrying times, and the self-employed feel

a bit like a forgotten clan. They have been left to watch their employers get 80% of their wages while they face universal credit.

As I said, powers will be given to public health officers to require potentially infectious persons to go to suitable places to undergo screening and assessment, to remain in isolation and to place restrictions on their travel activities and contact with other people. The Executive Office will be enabled to restrict or prohibit gatherings or events and to close and restrict access to premises during a public health response period. Ordinarily, I would argue that it is not the task of the Assembly to prohibit activity — our task should be to enable people as fully as possible — but, as I have said, these are extraordinary times. The Prime Minister has said that two people or a family unit, if living together, constitutes a “mass gathering”, but what is the penalty and how will it be enforced? Will it be by the police, or will there be other officers? What happens if there is non-payment? By prohibiting gatherings or events, we enable more people to survive the crisis.

All across the North, we have seen a small section of people disregarding the expert medical advice up to now. They have directly led to the need for the near-lockdown scenario that we are currently in. They have not been able to follow simple directions and have had to be given direct orders. I hope that that will have the effect that is required to stem the spread. The vast majority of social media last night was welcoming of the new rules and guidelines, but some were already suggesting ways around it. I worry that, on my travel here today, I saw that the traffic was lighter but was not substantially reduced. There are still many people moving around our community, and that makes me worried. I also saw somewhat more people walking to the shop this morning on my journey up than I ordinarily would. Again, I think that people are taking the advice to go out, but I hope that they will not be going back and forward to the shop all day. We need people to heed the advice.

11.30 am

As regards who should and should not go work, confusion reigns. The guidelines say only work that cannot be done from home. So, what did the Prime Minister mean when he referred to only essential work in his speech? These are difficult times for people. There is much confusion. Boris Johnson needs to know that his words will have a massive impact on families, communities and economies. He needs to choose his words very carefully. There needs to be urgent clarity on those who can and cannot go to work, as that is causing serious stress for people who are genuinely afraid that they will break the rules.

Over the past few days, many people who are facing lockdown in other countries have contacted me from far-flung places. I have had people contact me from Australia, Thailand, America and Peru. People are frightened that they may not get home if airports are closed and flights are cancelled. Many young people who are on gap years and the likes are working from bar to bar or hotel to hotel in order to subsidise their travel. That work is drying up completely in other countries. With cancelled flights and borders being shut down, they are facing a short-term future with no income, no shelter and no way out. The Executive must link with authorities in Dublin and London to do what they can to help people who face that peril.

In conclusion, we have some truly difficult days ahead; difficult days for the Assembly, health and education services, businesses, and all the people of the North. Without revisiting the past too much, we have overcome some truly difficult days already. The virus will pass. When it does, when we step out of our homes and back into our meeting places and social circles, when we walk to the gym or our favourite coffee shop again, and when we reach out and shake the hand of a stranger or hug our loved ones close to us again, we will see just what each of us did to bring the dark days to a close. I support the Bill, and call on the support of all who are present.

Dr Aiken: I rise as leader of the Ulster Unionist Party to support the legislative consent motion to pass the Coronavirus Bill, and the amendment. May I also join with others to pass on my party's condolences to the bereaved?

Unfortunately, the legislation is a regrettable necessity. We need it in order to safeguard all the people of Northern Ireland. In normal circumstances, a Bill of that magnitude and impact would warrant many weeks of detailed scrutiny and would raise a considerable number of questions, not least about its scope and impact. However, these are not normal times. In view of the global impacts of COVID-19, it is important that we fast-track this necessary legislation in order to allow our Government, our Departments and those who provide vital public services the legislative power to do what is required.

The reason why we need to do that is not just because of the virus but because of the actions of an irresponsible minority who seem to be incapable of understanding even the most basic requirements to keep us all safe. The simplest of messages, clear though they are, seem to miss many people who think that, in some way, they are immune or will be infected only moderately, which demonstrates not only a cavalier attitude to their own health but, selfishly, to that of their families, friends and the many vulnerable people in society.

For those who think that going to an outdoor market at a disused airfield, having a rave on a beach or breaching social distancing at house parties, there is bad news: over one third of those with COVID-19 are under the age of 40, and two thirds are under the age of 70. They cannot say that they have not been warned.

It is now indisputable that many people will die. Many people will have their health irreparably damaged. Only with direct action by everyone will that toll of morbidity be reduced. I fear that only when the death toll rises will that selfish and ignorant minority realise that they have exacerbated the health crisis; by which stage, it may be too late. Even at this late stage, we can change our attitude and approach. Just by doing the appropriate social distancing, washing hands, not panic buying and listening to advice, everyone has the opportunity to be a lifesaver. To all those who are watching and listening, I say this: act now and become a lifesaver.

Turning specifically to the LCM, there are several issues that we are raising about specific parts of the legislation. Our party spokespersons will have raised those issues in Committees or directly with Departments, but they are worthy of noting here. In the context of what was to be the two-year scope of the Bill, we welcome amendments that were brought in Westminster yesterday that will allow

review every six months. Even a cursory examination of the Bill shows that it gives considerable powers to the Executive and individual Ministers to take actions that could, if not used judiciously, be seen to be taking away rights and liberties that we have all enjoyed. However, we are not living in normal times. Hopefully, we will be able to step back from many of the provisions in the Act, but we must be prepared not just for now but for the medium and the longer term. We welcome the opportunity to revisit this legislation in six months, as, I believe, will the people of Northern Ireland, who will be rightly concerned if these provisions prevailed unnecessarily.

My friend and colleague Mike Nesbitt will refer in more detail to some of those issues later in the debate, but, to paraphrase, provisions on mental health, on the registration or, should I say, re-registration of medical staff, the need to ensure continuity of food supply, restrictions on public gatherings and powers to detain potentially infected people are just some of the areas that my party will pay special attention to over the forthcoming weeks and months. That is to ensure the intent of this necessary legislation is not abused.

At this juncture, I and my party give our heartfelt thanks to all our health staff and those across the public and voluntary sectors who have unstintingly risen to the challenge of COVID-19. This, indeed, shows the best of our society joined together for us all. It is their spirit, supported by the people of Northern Ireland, that will help us prevail.

Finally, I will direct my comments to the Northern Ireland Executive. Over the last 72 hours, we have seen a commendable and much-needed solidarity of approach. The Ulster Unionist Party will play its role in making sure that there is strong support for the Northern Ireland Executive. For our excellent Health Minister and his Department, other Ministers, Departments and our very system of government itself, we will be tested heavily in the coming weeks and, let us be honest, months ahead, but I and my team across Northern Ireland will help to do what is right for all our people regardless of the challenges ahead. We support the measure and the amendment.

Ms Bradshaw: I will start by placing on record my sincere condolences to the third family bereaved in the last 24 hours. They and all those families affected are in my thoughts.

I support the legislative consent motion on behalf of the Alliance Party Assembly team. I do so with some reticence in principle. Naturally, I regret the trying and already tragic circumstances of this motion and the significant strain that will be placed on our front-line and key workers over the coming months.

Secondly, it does not come naturally to us as democrats and as liberals to endorse a Bill that places such powers in the hands of the Executive, the judiciary and other officials. My party colleagues and I have significant concerns about some aspects of the Bill, even if amended. We have significant concerns about the evident rush behind it. We would have wanted, as many Members have said in the Chamber today, much more time for scrutiny and consultation, not least with those most obviously impacted and their representative bodies. However, it is a balance. These are extraordinary circumstances and they require extraordinary action. This is a Bill of last resort.

I wish to run quickly through the five Parts of the Bill, outlining our support and then raise some areas that we accept are broadly necessary but will require considerable care and caution. I pay tribute to officials in Whitehall and here at Stormont who have worked hard to assess the challenges of every change brought about by this Bill, with the array of consequences arising from them that have to be managed too, and also to the Executive Ministers who are all operating under incredible pressure.

First, we recognise the need for particular officials to be able to direct people with COVID-19 or showing symptoms of it into quarantine. As we move into what we now hope will be the suppression phase, that will be more vital, given that we will only be able to lift the restrictions that have been imposed to slow the spread of the virus if we can isolate those who have or may have it and enforce that. It is also sensible that those rules are now common across the UK.

Secondly, the measures to bring back health and social care workers from retirement while protecting their pensions and to place medical, pharmaceutical, nursing and midwifery students prematurely into the workplace are extraordinary but will, sadly, be required. I wish to put on record my and my party's deep gratitude to all those who have stepped forward.

The clauses in the Bill that will make extraordinary changes to public administration are, in general, necessary to allow our front-line workers to focus on caring for our population. Focusing on our children's health, we may reflect, at this stage, on the extreme challenges for childcare in all senses. Education is being disrupted and childcare restricted and we need to ensure that the temporary provisions for looking after the children of our key workers is properly resourced. Let us work to ensure that children remember this time and this experience of being close to their loved ones fondly and do not have cause to remember the virus that brought it about.

We are all glad and even relieved to see containment signed into law. That, too, is not without complications. It is fundamental, in a liberal society, that we can congregate in public, and we must recognise that we are temporarily suspending that right. We are also placing significant power and responsibility with a few people, none of whom ever really expected or wanted it. However, the objective here is to make clear what is required of the public and how that can be enforced.

I will now turn to the issue of dealing with the deceased. Many aspects of this entire situation are distressing and shocking, none more so than the emergency provisions that may have to be made for burials. We must ensure that emergency measures, while rightly planned for, minimise the impact on cultural or religious customs.

The Bill provides for supporting people, and I welcome the placing into law, with the appropriate clarification, that all those measure to provide immediate sick pay must apply in Northern Ireland despite our devolved welfare system. It is, of course, also essential that we protect food supply.

Clause 4 of the Bill extends prescribing powers for pharmacists, including those recently retired pharmacists who are returning to the profession in this emergency. Community pharmacies are taking necessary risks right at the front line and we thank them for their professionalism and commitment.

Right now, and going forward, balancing healthcare priorities will be a mammoth challenge. For example, we cannot ignore the impact of lockdown on mental health and well-being, enhanced in many cases by the amendment to the Mental Capacity Act (Northern Ireland) 2016. That will have huge resource implications, as an inevitable consequence of the situation will be significantly poorer mental health across our population. We will also need to be able to scrutinise the safeguards and decisions relating to any forthcoming deprivation of liberty orders.

As I conclude my remarks, I wish to express my support and admiration for our healthcare professionals and make some points. First, we know that in-hospital transmission is a significant issue. Never has "front line" been more meaningful. That means that we need to get on immediately with sourcing safety equipment for everyone. We have done it for the police and we must do it for all our health and social care workers, including those who provide house-to-house domiciliary care. Secondly, we have to recognise the provisions in the Bill around indemnity and always balance those with necessary safeguards. Sadly, many will be making extraordinarily immediate but complex decisions in circumstances that few of us can imagine.

As regards the Assembly, it has never been more important to be clear about how we perform our duties as MLAs. We need to ensure that we can scrutinise departmental performance fairly and constructively as the Bill's provisions are implemented, that we can ensure that safeguards are adequate and effective and that, most of all, we can support all those who need care and all the workers who provide it in every way that we can.

Committees, in particular, have never been more vital, and all must absolutely continue to operate, adhering to social distancing and using technology where possible. I share the desire mentioned by my colleague, Mr McGrath, that the sunset clause be moved to six months as opposed to two years. The delegated powers are there in the Bill for extension, if necessary.

In conclusion, there is a monumental challenge ahead of all of us, but I have no doubt that the sense of community and determination for which we here are famed will see us through.

11.45 am

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): Mr Speaker, I do not intend to cover too many specific issues, because I appreciate that this is legislation and that, under your guidance, Ministers are to come in regularly, where they can, to give statements that will give us an opportunity to do that. Naomi Long came in yesterday, and we were able to go into detail. I do not want to detain the Health Minister any longer than is necessary, but I want to put on record some of the issues that we discussed as a Committee, because some of the Committee members from my party will not be allowed to speak, in order to give time for us to proceed with this as quickly as possible.

The Committee received a briefing in closed session from departmental officials regarding what was described, at that stage, as "potential legislation" that might be required in light of the then-emerging threat from coronavirus. The briefing was high-level, detailing what exactly would be

covered in such a Bill. The detail, however, was limited. Today we are seeing and considering the legislation. The Committee held an additional meeting yesterday to take more detailed evidence from Department of Justice officials on the Coronavirus Bill, and we want to put on record our appreciation to the officials who made themselves available to do that, given the pressure they are under.

Officials gave details of the justice-related provisions of the Bill as introduced at Westminster that will be extended to Northern Ireland, and that included information that the Minister has outlined here in the Assembly: temporary modifications to the Mental Capacity Act (Northern Ireland) 2016; temporary provisions in relation to the registration of deaths and stillbirths in Northern Ireland; provision to suspend requirements for an inquest to be held with a jury in relation to deaths from COVID-19; provision to disapply the requirement for an inquest to be held with a jury in relation to a death from natural illness; additional powers to act for the protection of public health, including, for example, the power for police to take a person into custody in particular circumstances; the use of live links in legal proceedings; and powers to enable local government to direct providers in the death management industry.

In addition, the Committee was advised of potential amendments to the Bill enabling the Department to make an early release direction that would have applied to certain fixed-term prisoners who fall within the criteria specified by the Department. I note that the Ministry of Justice decided not to proceed with including that in the Bill before us. Officials said and the Minister indicated yesterday that powers already existed, if we get to the stage of managing that situation in our prison population. The Minister indicated — it is worth repeating — that, at all times, it will be based on public safety. There are some people who should not be released during the crisis, and that needs to be the guiding principle when it comes to any potential release of prisoners.

In evidence, the Department told the Committee that provisions in the Bill would be activated only when it is necessary to do so and on the best available scientific advice and will remain in place for as long as is necessary. In addition, provisions can be extended or amended by regulations, but, in the case of devolved matters, this can be done only with the consent of Executive Ministers. There is a question that I would ask the Minister to give clarity on: is there provision for the Executive to bring forward emergency legislation, if it becomes necessary, that falls outwith the Coronavirus Bill that Westminster has taken forward? Are there provisions that would facilitate that, if it became necessary? I note that there are schedules that give powers to Departments to issue orders, but I am looking for some clarity as to whether those orders relate only to the provisions in the Coronavirus Bill. We do not know what circumstances could arise, and, if it is not covered, I want to know whether the Executive will be able to action those areas through their own emergency procedures.

In normal circumstances, the Committee would have had more time, but these are not normal circumstances. We have seen over the last few days that, while many people are being sensible and adhering to government advice in respect of social distancing, for one example, there are those who continue to disregard that advice and behave

in a way that is harmful not only to themselves but to others. These are extraordinary times; the situation is serious; action must be taken. It is therefore essential that authorities have the necessary powers to keep people as safe as possible.

The Committee sought further details from officials on a range of areas, including powers for the Department to provide in respect of the early release issue and the implications that that would have had for the Probation Board or, indeed, even the health service and for how victims of crimes would be notified if any decisions were taken on early release.

The Committee questioned officials on what powers the police would have to enforce social distancing and on who was responsible for setting the penalties. Committee members appreciate and accept the need for powers in the areas outlined in the legislation, given the times that we are in.

A number of Committee members did, though, express concern at the two-year limit that would apply to many of the measures provided for in the Bill. It was suggested, in the light of widespread concern and with the powers in the Bill being so extensive, that the Government make an amendment to ensure that instead they have to be reviewed every six months. As I understand it, that has been the case.

As well as the briefing on the Bill, the Committee had detailed discussions last week with officials on operational preparation across the justice sector. Undoubtedly, the measures that are being put in place are absolutely necessary, but many are also sensitive, particularly the death management arrangements.

The Committee also took the opportunity to discuss the proposed resilience arrangements to ensure that the Police Service and the Prison Service had adequate resources to carry out the vital work being asked of them, and it sought assurances that the necessary protective equipment would be available for them.

I put on record the Committee's appreciation of the work that is being done, under extreme pressure, by staff across the justice system, in particular the Police Service, the Prison Service, the Courts and Tribunals Service and the Department itself, many of whom will also be trying to manage their own personal situations.

To conclude, in my role as Chairman, I confirm that the Committee formally agreed to support the proposals relating to the justice aspects of the provisions in the Coronavirus Bill relating to Northern Ireland by way of the legislative consent motion.

Mr Speaker, I want to elaborate slightly further on some points in my role as a Member of the Assembly for the constituency of Lagan Valley. I note that the Minister — he is right — said that, when it comes to making decisions, we are not blessed with the luxury of time. How true that is. I know that he will be in the Department looking at all the urgent procedures that are needed to get the testing kits that are available. Members have highlighted that and the personal protection equipment that needs to be taken. We are not blessed with the ability to go through normal procurement processes. These decisions need to be taken in a very abnormal way. We understand and appreciate that. The 600 tests being carried out from

today are welcome, but, when I look at the calls across the police and Prison Service populations and others who have been identified as and deemed to be key workers and their families, I say that we need to do so much more when it comes to testing. Wherever those testing kits can come from, they should be sought. I know that the Minister will press for those decisions to be taken in that context and that normal procurement processes are being set aside to facilitate that.

The public need to listen. So far, the majority have, but, unfortunately, some have not. I took calls about a grandmother who brought her grandchildren into a bank yesterday to open a bank account. The message is not getting through. Parents are having to work and are giving their children to the grandparents, who are taking them out on shopping trips to do things that are not essential. We need to get the message out. That will require punitive measures to be taken, because not everybody is sensible in our society, whether that is through ignorance or flagrant abuse of the circumstances that we face. We are moving to the place where the Executive Office powers that have been taken to close down events will have to be acted on, and the Executive Office will have my support in doing so.

I recognise as well that decisions are being taken outside normal structures, and, as this develops, we need to have a clear, structured approach from the central Government in London, in how we link with Dublin and in how the Executive link with the statutory organisations and local authorities. I know that emergency procedures are being put in place to do that.

In my constituency, Lisburn council has been setting up a structure, because an overwhelming number of people want to volunteer across a wide spectrum of organisations, but, when posts go up saying, "Contact us, and we will provide you with help", and once that contact has been made, those individuals, who are well meaning, are not able to go about actually providing the help. We need to get the structures in place. I know that the council will have a structured way for community groups to link in. It is important that the Executive link in with councils and other bodies that do that.

I commend those who have stepped up and shown unbelievable leadership in the face of such adversity. I commend this Minister. I commend the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, all the Executive members who are at the coalface on this and those who seek to advise them. Now is very much the time when leadership needs to be delivered in a calm but very collected way. I commend those who are doing that. I commend Assembly Members who are doing that. We in Lagan Valley, as a group of five Members, have initiated a process whereby we can keep in contact to act in unison, so that we are not replicating and duplicating our activities. In doing that, Members all have personal issues that they have to manage and to deal with. I heard a broadcast this morning on one of our broadcasters that allowed an individual to tear lumps out of Members. We are all human. A process of dehumanisation of Members has gone on for years. In times like this, people want to blame people. Some people want to look for a vehicle to channel their anger. I commend Members across the House for the resilience that they are showing in the face of difficult times. Often, we do not have the answers, but we seek to give the help that we can, as best we can, in difficult circumstances.

The wives of three of the Members for Lagan Valley work in the health service. Mine has been retrained and redeployed, having to supplement staff in a hospital that has been set up as a COVID-19 front line. She is having to do that. She has changed her shift pattern. She is going in and wants to be in, and we have to put in place the support to make sure that our family has care while she does that. That is the case for colleagues — Lagan Valley MLAs and other Members. On Sunday night, I left off a freezer to my 98-year-old grandmother. It becomes very real when you have to do that. Members have to deal with personal situations, and that is reflected across so many parts of government and for different people who are providing support. We need to do it in a calm and collected way but with an assurance that we are doing the best that we can while we manage all of that. I commend everyone who is stepping up and trying to do that.

Now more than ever, people are recognising what is most important to them. For so long, we have added things into our lives to try to provide fulfilment and contentment. As those structures have been shaken to the core, we go back to the things that really matter to us. It is family and friends and wanting to support them in this environment. I have family who are not in this country; they are abroad. Colin mentioned calls that he had taken from Taiwan and Australia: that goes for many of our constituents and their families. We are not able to provide reassurance in a way that, maybe, we can for our immediate family by making a phone call and getting in contact. That is the same for Members here as for other people. We need to see what support there is with the embassies and trying to have contact and support in place, particularly as other parts of the world go into lockdown.

We look to the Minister for leadership, and that is a heavy burden for him to bear. I know that, like me, he looks above for leadership, and our faith grounds us. Many people are searching for what really gives them support and structure. For me, it is my faith in God. It may not be the case for other people, even in the Chamber. I know that it is for this Minister and for other people. I have taken comfort, as the crisis has developed, from a number of verses in the Bible. "Fear not" is the most common phrase throughout the Bible — "Fear not. Fear not" — because God knows that it is our nature to fear and to be anxious, and so we are constantly reminded:

"Fear thou not, for I am with thee".

There are a number of verses that I want to leave with Members and with the Minister:

"Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness."

"For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind."

12.00 noon

Mr Speaker, I just want to say that I am praying for you. I am praying for our Ministers, as are so many people across the country, at this time of uncertainty, that they will be given the wisdom to try and navigate us through the difficult times ahead.

Dr Archibald (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): I rise to speak as Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy. The Committee held an additional meeting yesterday to discuss the aspects of the Coronavirus Bill that are relevant to the Department for the Economy.

The Committee sought to consider: clauses 7 and 8 and the accompanying schedule 6, that look at emergency volunteering leave, payment and its conditions; clause 35 and schedule 15 that look at the temporary closure of further and higher education institutions; and clause 36 and schedule 16 that look at temporary continuity directions around further and higher education institutions. Unfortunately, due to losing its quorum, the Committee could agree to a view only on clauses 7 and 8 in the accompanying schedule 6.

The nature of the coronavirus emergency means that the normal timescales and processes around bringing a legislative consent motion to the Assembly have not been observed. As others have already acknowledged, this is far from ideal, and members have concerns about that. The Committee has put its concerns on record. Members acknowledge that we live in remarkable times and that the emergency nature of the legislation means that we must accept that that is the way that things have to be done. That said, members do consider that the legislation must be subject to review after six months.

Clause 7 simply directs to schedule 6, which makes provisions for the emergency volunteering leave. Clause 8 sets out how payments will be made to emergency volunteers for their loss of earnings and for travel and subsistence. An emergency volunteer will receive compensation for loss of earnings only if they suffer a loss of earnings that they would otherwise not have suffered.

The Committee is aware that regulations will be brought forward about how the scheme will operate and they should provide more detail. However, members appreciate that the legislation has to retain a degree of flexibility because this is an extremely fluid situation. The Committee's primary concern is that the scheme will work efficiently and effectively, that no volunteers will suffer any detriment, and that they will be kept safe.

The Department of Health here will be the certifying authority and emergency volunteers are only to be deployed in health and social care settings and contexts. The certificate will be for two, three or four consecutive weeks and those must be in the same volunteering period. The period of 16 weeks will begin on the day that schedule 6 comes into force. Further periods of 16 weeks can be specified by the Secretary of State or the Department for the Economy. The Secretary of State cannot make regulations about the volunteering period for the North without the consent of the Department for the Economy.

Any employee who takes emergency volunteering leave will retain the benefits of all the normal terms and conditions of their employment. The volunteer has the right to return to the job that they left prior to volunteering without any loss of seniority. The volunteer will not lose out in any benefits of their employment, including pensions.

The Department for the Economy can make relevant regulations, but it can regulate only when that is within the Assembly's competence and would not require the Secretary of State's consent in an Act of the Assembly.

The regulations made by the Department for the Economy will be subject to negative resolution, so a prayer of annulment can be brought against them. On the basis of this short scrutiny, and without time for further clarifications, the Committee for the Economy is content, in principle, with the aspects of the Bill that deal with emergency volunteering.

I will now offer some brief reflections as Sinn Féin spokesperson for the economy. There will be many people who want to offer their services as volunteers to support the heroic efforts of those in the front line of the health service. Therefore, I welcome the provisions in the clauses on emergency volunteers to protect workers' rights and to offer compensation while volunteers are in that role. There are some good examples of registers of volunteers in the South, and I ask the Minister to reflect whether those types of measures might be considered here.

In terms of the clauses on further and higher education, clause 35 and schedule 15 have mostly been superseded because universities and colleges have already taken steps to protect the health and well-being of staff, students and public. Obviously, there are many things that still have to be worked out in that respect and we are, of course, working to do that. However, at this moment in time, our number-one priority is protecting lives. The continuity plans that are provided for in clause 36 should be undertaken only as necessary in consultation with the governing bodies of the institutions and on the basis of expert medical advice to support our vital services.

Like others have said, normally my reaction would be to oppose many of the measures that are contained in this legislation, but this is an emergency situation and we need an emergency response. Finally, I want to offer my gratitude to all those who are battling on the front line in the health service and other services on behalf of us all. I implore everyone to take seriously the health advice and the measures that are being put in place to protect them and their loved ones and all of our loved ones.

Mr Stalford: I want to place on record my condolences to the families of those who are already suffering bereavement as a consequence of this dreadful virus. This country faces the gravest crisis since September 1939, the commencement of the Second World War. What we heard from the Prime Minister yesterday in his national address was a call to national service. Given what previous generations have endured in the long history of these islands — famine, war, pestilence, the threat of enslavement — a call from our Prime Minister to stay at home, except in certain circumstances, does not seem like too much to be asking people to do.

It is clear that this virus is no respecter of person or politics. This virus does not care where you put your x on a ballot paper on polling day. This virus is coming for all of us. I think it was the Chair of the Executive Office Committee, Mr McGrath, who used the term "special powers". This is probably the most far-reaching piece of legislation to come in front of Stormont since the Special Powers Act. It has a very, very far reach. We are a free country. Any loss of liberty in our country, which invented the concept of parliamentary democracy, is counterintuitive. This is the land of John Stuart Mill and John Locke. The people are the master of government in this country, not the reverse. There are natural rights to life, liberty and property, but the selfishness of certain

individuals has forced the Government's hand. Foolish people, putting others at risk by their actions, have forced the Government's hand.

The Minister is laughing because I sniffed. I can assure you that that is not what you think it is.

I want to pay tribute to our NHS staff. I also want to thank the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and the Executive for the work that they have done and are doing on behalf of us all. I said at the start that this is the worst crisis since the start of the war. In 1940, Mr Winston Churchill, the Prime Minister, said:

"Death and sorrow will be the companions of our journey; hardship our garment; constancy and valour our only shield. We must be united, we must be undaunted, and we must be inflexible."

That was in the darkness of 1940. We all know that it would take another five years for the sun to rise over Europe again. I know that it will not take five years to win this war if we all play our part.

Mr McAleer (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I am speaking today on behalf of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee.

However, before I move to the Committee's opinion on the relevant clauses in the Bill, I take this opportunity to express its sympathies to the families of those who have died, not just here, but across these islands, Europe and, indeed, the world. I express the Committee's appreciation and gratitude to all those working in healthcare: we owe them a huge amount. I also express gratitude to the front-line workers and community-sector organisations who are doing wonderful work at a local level.

Departmental officials briefed the Committee on the clauses relevant to DEARA on Thursday 19 March, namely clauses 23 to 27 and schedule 14, which are about the food supply. Officials were able to provide the Committee with a copy of clauses 23 to 27 at the meeting. We heard that these clauses concern the provision of information about the food supply chain. The clauses provide either the Secretary of State or DEARA with the appropriate authority to require information in connection with disruption, or perceived disruption, to the food supply chain. These clauses apply across Britain and here in the North.

This requirement will apply to any organisation involved in the food supply chain, from producer to processor and on to the retailer. It could, for example, apply to packaging companies or to companies involved in the feed or fertiliser industries. It is meant to apply to companies and businesses that substantially affect, or that occupy a strategically important place in, the food supply chain. However, it will not apply to individuals or sole traders, such as farmers.

To be clear, there is already a voluntary agreement in place between the Government and the food retailers. It is anticipated that the information that might be required would continue to be provided on a voluntary basis. It is only if that voluntary route does not work that the provisions to require information will be activated. Activation of the powers will be subject to a commencement order which is, in effect, the only piece of

secondary legislation in these DEARA-related clauses and schedules.

The commencement of the powers would also require the consent of the devolved authorities, but not the devolved legislatures. The Committee questioned DEARA officials about that and expressed some unease with the approach, but it recognised that it is expedient for the circumstances that we are in. The Committee appreciates that this LCM is not following the normal process for legislative scrutiny. In normal situations we engage in democratic scrutiny of legislation, but the approach now reflects the extraordinary challenges that we are facing.

The Committee was also informed that there will be a memorandum of understanding between the four legislatures on how this will work in practice. If needed, the Committee will of course request briefings on why and how the provision in the clauses was activated. We are also informed that it is envisaged that these powers will be used only in rare circumstances. In fact, officials pointed out that if such circumstances emerged, it would be likely that they will have come to the attention of the appropriate authority. The Committee asked about the type of circumstances in which this could happen, and it heard about one example when commercially sensitive information was at stake. Some businesses might be very reluctant to disclose that type of information.

The Committee heard that, as a sanction, there could be a financial penalty of up to 1% of turnover for either the non-provision or the provision of false information. This is the level set out in legalisation dealing with the Groceries Code Adjudicator.

The Committee also asked about the issue that is on many people's minds: food availability, supplies in the supermarkets and the manner in which some people are hoarding food. It was made clear that these clauses do not deal with that issue.

Members also explored with officials what plans are in place to communicate the provisions and powers in the Bill to the companies and businesses that will be affected. We heard that, because this is predominantly about the national food chains, across Britain and here, communication will be in the hands of DEFRA.

Finally, the Committee explored with officials the two-year sunset clause in the Bill and heard that are already amendments in the House of Commons to include six-monthly reviews, and that is all I want to say in my capacity as Chairperson of the Committee.

I want to add a few comments as Sinn Féin's spokesperson for agriculture and rural affairs. I have been contacted a lot by farmers and their families who are hugely anxious about the implications of this virus for their health and safety, and indeed their futures. I have also been contacted by agents. The Minister will know that we are approaching the 15 May deadline for the submission of applications for single farm payments.

A lot of those are done online, so a lot of our farmers are leaving their farms and going to agents, neighbours or friends to get the forms completed online, requiring them to meet up with other people. Farmers leave these until the last number of weeks, so that is something that causes a great deal of concern for farm support workers and agents. There is also the fact that, in areas like mine, there is very

poor broadband, so it is not even an option to complete the single farm payment application form online, because broadband does not exist in many areas. The average age of farmers is 58, and a lot of them are not from the computer generation and need assistance. That creates extra concerns.

12.15 pm

I have written to the AERA Minister to consider this as a force majeure situation and to look at the range of flexibilities around that 15 May deadline for the single farm payment. Regrettably, we are out of the EU, but the EU requirement will no longer apply to that 15 May deadline. They are challenges, and, again, they are underpinned by the recent announcement over the weekend of the closure of marts, which creates additional financial challenges for our farming community. There needs to be some flexibility and imagination around the direct payments this year, because this is a force majeure situation.

Public health is a big issue as well. Members have already spoken about the need for testing, testing, testing, and that applies to rural areas as well. The Minister will be well aware from within his Department and from his previous role on the ARD Committee of the excellent work that is carried out through the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI) programme and the Public Health Agency with regard to the Farm Families Health Checks. Nurses set up stations at marts and other locations in rural areas and carry out basic checks for farmers, including blood pressure and cholesterol testing. Surely, we have a model there that can be extended into rural areas to carry out COVID-19 testing in the time ahead as part of the ramping up of testing. I note that, in the South, there are 40 test centres and tests are being carried out across the South of Ireland. We have a model here.

The Minister will also know that, throughout rural areas, there is a range of support organisations who are on the ground and doing a lot of work. He will know from his previous role as president of the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster and I know from my role as a GAA member and from the community sector that there is a range of organisations on the ground doing work. They have infrastructure that can be easily utilised at very short notice to turn into test centres to carry out vital testing in isolated rural areas. Those options are there.

There is a range of issues. Yes, we are concerned about the pace at which the LCM has been brought in, but we are in extraordinary situations. I support the motion.

Finally, I will conclude with a wee message that our front-line workers, NHS, shops and suppliers are absolutely crucial. I also want to mention our community sector. They play a fantastic role at ground level, working with vulnerable people and people who are isolated. They are unseen and unheard; they are volunteers. I just want to put on record our deep appreciation of the vital work that they are carrying out at this critical time.

Mr McGlone: As the Minister has said, this is necessary legislation. It is incumbent on us all to send out our message of sympathy to those who have died as a result of the coronavirus and to wish those who are in hospital being treated a good and full recovery. These are difficult times. Legislation is necessary. It is vital, and, indeed, the actions of some have driven us to the point of it being vital.

I do not intend to repeat a lot of things that have been said by others. They have said them very genuinely, and this is a cross-party and an entire community response.

One message that is coming across is "Test, test, test" for key personnel. I will give you an example. I was contacted by a nurse over the weekend. She is at home, and she has a sore throat. She had a bit of a cold, and she feels like she is recovering now. She is heartbroken that she cannot get back in to fulfil her duties in the hospital that employs her. A simple test could confirm whether that nurse is able to go back in and fulfil her duties. She sees colleagues who are off in similar situations, and she sees that that test could lead to her going back in. She is committed and dedicated and wants to do her best for society at this time, but the non-availability of that simple test prevents her from going back into work. Minister, I know that you are doing your best — I sincerely thank you and your Department for your activities at this time — but the test is a linchpin to the success or otherwise of what the health service and other key workers do over the next while.

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

Healthcare workers, front-line staff and medical and domiciliary care workers are deeply valued by all of us, but there is an issue with PPE. Many domiciliary care workers, in particular, have been in touch with me to say that the PPE and hand wipes that they require as they move from house to house, providing important social and community support for people who are at home, are not yet available to them. I was told this morning that that equipment may be on its way to them: I hope that that is the case. I implore the Minister to ensure that that be done ASAP, and I know that he will, because he is grounded in his communities and sees it as it is. Domiciliary care workers are concerned that their views and worries are not being reflected. The sooner that is done, the better for them.

I listened carefully to what the Minister said about a range of vital additional powers for the Public Health Agency. Will the Minister advise us whether those powers will be extended to the likes of environmental health officers in councils? They are probably best placed to evaluate and see what is happening in their locality. I will give an example that, I am sure, the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs may well be interested in, as it relates to the agri-food sector. Last night, a lady contacted me. She said:

"In the past fortnight, the only steps the factory has taken to protect workers is to put up signs about handwashing and installing hand-sanitiser stations. The buses carrying workers to and from work are not practising social distance guidelines and the canteen is also operating with no social distancing being observed."

Enforcement is crucial. That lady is at home; she is the principal carer for her mother; she is the only child; her mother is not well. You can see what she is going through with regard to what her husband might or might not bring into the house.

I ask the Minister to check with other Departments and the Public Health Agency to ensure that contractors who are carrying out work for Departments, including the health estates — I will maybe speak to the Minister one-to-one about that later — do so in accordance with the proper

guidelines. Concerns were relayed to me this morning that some contractors in some instances — most of them are good, effective workers — are simply not complying with social isolation guidelines.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Member for giving way and for raising that point. People from high-profile manufacturing companies across Northern Ireland have contacted me to say exactly what the Member has said: social distancing is not being observed; PPE is not being provided; and touchscreen computers, keyboards and so on are regularly not sufficiently cleaned. They are concerned that there is a real possibility of the virus being spread across the manufacturing industry. That message needs to go out.

Mr McGlone: Thank you for that, Mr Humphrey. It is unfortunate that that is coming back to us, but it is a reality. The enforcement message — I think that Mr O'Dowd mentioned it earlier — must get out: if it is not being done, people have to be compelled to do it, and, if they are not compliant, the necessary rigours of the law must be taken against them.

I see that the Construction Employers Federation (CEF) made a statement this morning about what it defines as important, necessary works. That distils the situation a bit more effectively for us. What is necessary to one person's may not be so necessary in someone else's eyes. I see construction works for the health service, police stations, the Prison Service and others of that ilk as definitely being necessary. I am glad that the CEF has distilled that today.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. That is the experience not just in industry but in some of those governmental jobs that are not as crucial and urgent at this time. I draw his attention to the fact that, in the Infrastructure Department, at the moment, there are traffic wardens who are still on the streets engaging with people as they go about their business, be it going to a pharmacy or getting essential goods. People are also using car park machines to get a ticket to put on their car. That is, again, increasing contact with other people. I have asked the Agriculture Minister to pass on the message to the Minister for Infrastructure that traffic wardens should essentially be stood down at this time. They do not want to put anybody — or themselves — at risk. Does the Member agree with me?

Mr McGlone: Yes. That is useful. I am sure that your colleague will relay that, as I will, to the Minister for Infrastructure. We are working through difficult times, and that will require difficult measures. We are talking about protecting life. The danger of the virus should not be underestimated, and we need extraordinary measures.

My colleague Colin McGrath referred to whether the Minister could tic-tac with the Department of Education. Some areas have very high densities of people who are referred to as “essential workers”. I refer particularly to east Tyrone, where many people who have children in the schools are defined as “essential workers” in the agri-food sector and domiciliary care; indeed, one school has been in touch with me because it has been left in an impossible position, given that upwards of 75% of its pupils' parents fall into the category of “essential worker”. That is just not viable for schools. I contacted the Department of Education over the weekend. I have not heard anything back yet, but there is pressure on it too. A hothouse situation could be created. That is not what the Department of Education is trying to do, but, if the schools

implemented this, that could be the outcome. I would like that to be relayed to the Department of Education.

I do not intend to say much more. Many issues have come up and have been touched on here today, such as the stresses that this will bring about in the mental health system. There will, no doubt, be issues such as domestic abuse and mental health problems in homes, and that will have implications for children. I realise that there will be huge pressures and huge stresses on the Department. Whatever support any of us can give, we are there to provide that. Minister, you can pass on our goodwill to the Departments at this difficult time.

There is one other thing that came up at the Committee for Justice. There is potential on that front for the early release of prisoners, and the Minister of Justice dealt with that yesterday. That may be under consideration further down the line. I want to make sure that, if that programme goes ahead, consideration is given to the many inmates in the prison sector who suffer from mental health problems, addiction issues and such difficulties. I do not want to see a situation where those people, with their vulnerabilities, are dumped out on the street. It is crucial that there be tic-tacking between the health service — the Minister of Justice gave an undertaking to do that — the prison service and the DOJ to make sure that that situation does not happen and that people do not find themselves going from a bad situation to a more difficult situation.

In conclusion, I support, as my party does, the legislative consent motion. I, again, convey our sincere support to you, Minister, to your Department and to the healthcare system for what will be difficult times ahead. We appreciate their commitment and dedication to the entire community at this time.

12.30 pm

Mr Nesbitt: I offer my condolences to those who have lost loved ones to the virus, and I acknowledge the concerns of the broader community at this time.

I will be as brief as possible, and I will focus my remarks and direct them entirely at the new powers to be conferred on the Executive Office. These are extraordinary powers. It would be wrong not to scrutinise them. It would be a dereliction of duty not to place on record that they are very powerful new tools that are being made available to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. We should have reservations about them.

I have reservations in four areas. If that amounts to me saying that my party gives qualified support to the Bill, then so be it. It is a form of, “Yes, but.” I will now work through those four but.

The first but involves liaison between the Executive Office and the Chief Medical Officer or his designated appointee. There are two references in Part 5 of schedule 21 to the Bill to the Executive Office consulting the Chief Medical Officer. They are in paragraphs 35(4) and 40(1)(b). Furthermore, at paragraph 40(1)(a), there is a reference to the Executive Office having regard to relevant advice published by the CMO. This is a duty, not an optional extra. They must do this, and that is to be welcomed. However, there is no compulsion on the Executive Office to react positively to the CMO's advice. You may say to me, “It is inconceivable that politicians would ignore the advice of the Chief Medical Officer”, but it is a joint office, and that

makes decision-making difficult. We know that. Sometimes the Executive Office cannot agree. That is a fact.

I am minded of a time 12 years ago, when I was honoured to be asked by the then First Minister and deputy First Minister to be one of four people to set up the Commission for Victims and Survivors. A senior civil servant, in what was the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, looked me in the eye with a smile on his face and, perhaps, too gleefully to be diplomatic, said to me, "Well, you know, Mr Nesbitt, you are right. You have a statutory right to offer advice to Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness, and, yes, they have a duty to listen to you, but they are not under any compulsion to accept your advice."

There is no compulsion in the Bill for the Executive Office to accept the advice of the Chief Medical Officer. I would be much happier if, on the face of the Bill, it said that the Executive Office's decisions must be "informed by the advice of the Chief Medical Officer". However, in the absence of that, it is important that the advice of the Chief Medical Officer be published immediately and that the results of any consultation between the Executive Office and the Chief Medical Officer are made public immediately. It should not be treated like legal advice, which is never published. We need to be open about this, not just because openness is good for its own sake, but openness and communication means that the public are better educated and, if that is so, fewer lives will be lost needlessly. It is that simple: fewer lives will be lost if we communicate, communicate and communicate.

On the question of communication, a senior civil servant, as the Chair of the Committee pointed out earlier, engaged yesterday. It is not normal to name officials — I believe that it is not normal — but I will, because these are extraordinary times. His name is Chris Stewart, and since he joined the Executive Office, I have found him to be open, honest, communicative, transparent and collaborative. He is not just open to co-design and co-production, he embraces them. Those are values and characteristics in our civil servants that we need today more than ever before. We should acknowledge that and appreciate it. In the same way, we must appreciate our health service, the cleaners, the tea trolley operators, the nurses, doctors and consultants, and the people who looked after my darling mother, in the last three and a half weeks of her life at the Ulster Hospital, who are now at the tip of the spear in the fight against this virus.

The second issue is the type of event or gathering that the Executive Office might prohibit. This is covered in Part 5 at paragraph 37(2), but it is vague. It refers to:

"(a) a specified event or gathering, or

(b) events or gatherings of a specified description."

I called this vague, and the response that I got from Mr Stewart was that this was deliberately drafted to be broad and flexible rather than vague, and the rationale for that was that what was acceptable last week may not be acceptable this week and what is acceptable this week may not be acceptable next week. I think that that is actually fair enough, but I also need to put on record that I think that one person's broad and flexible is another's vague and, therefore, troubling. There has been a lot of talk today about whether building sites should continue to operate. Could a building site be considered under this

legislation to be a gathering? If so, the Executive Office could therefore prohibit it, and those responsible could be liable under the offences, which are covered in paragraph 42(2) of this schedule to the Bill, to:

"(a) on summary conviction, to a fine not exceeding £100,000;

(b) on conviction on indictment, to a fine".

That fine is unspecified, and, therefore, unlimited.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way on that crucial point. Given the vagueness — maybe you have a different wording to that in your email — will you agree that it is that vagueness that is causing a lot of the widespread confusion among many in the workplace? On the one hand, social gatherings are prohibited, but, on the other hand, many of them are gathering in the workplace today, unable to socially distance. Some of them are questioning whether their industry is key. These are questions that are continually coming up, and there seems to be no right and wrong answer.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for his intervention. My understanding, particularly with building sites, is that, if you cannot socially distance, you should not be operating, full stop. I think that that is clear, but I think that the idea of what I am calling vague and what officials are calling deliberately broad and flexible is a two-edged sword. It does give them the flexibility to say that events have moved on from where we are today, but, for communicating clearly to the public, it is not as clear as we would like it to be. I think that we have to accept that that is the situation and that there is no perfect in this regard.

The third of my four buts is in regard to enforcement. Enforcement of prohibitions of these meetings can be carried out, under paragraph 41(1), by either a constable — that is clear; the PSNI — or, less clearly, the alternative is:

"any other person, or description of person, designated in writing for the purpose of this paragraph by the Executive Office."

It seems to me that that is pretty sweeping. Unspecified persons designated in writing by the Executive Office have powers that at 41(2) include the ability to:

"(a) enter any premises;

(b) if necessary, use reasonable force."

Think about that. That means that the next time we gather in this Chamber, one of these other persons or descriptions of persons could enter this Chamber and use force to remove one or more of the Members of this legislative Assembly. We have moved that far from normal democracy. I am not saying that we should not do it, and I am not saying that we should not pass this Bill, but I think we must be aware of the enormity of what we are allowing to become the norm, and probably not only for the next three weeks but probably more than the next three months.

If we are to give these powers to other persons — the response from the Executive Office is that no consideration has been given to this as yet — it could be, for example, that we would want local government environmental officers to have those powers, as they do in England. The question then becomes: will those other

persons be suitably trained and will they be properly resourced, including provided with personal protective equipment? Crucially, will the public recognise them as having that authority, or will they resist through ignorance? Again, communication will be key if we are to empower others beyond constables to enter premises and use reasonable force if necessary.

My final point is that, while there are grounds under paragraph 42(2)(a) for fines of up to £100,000, that appears to apply only to the owner or occupier of premises where an event or gathering has been prohibited, or the organiser of such an event or gathering. In fact, paragraph 39(7) is actually explicit that that does not apply to:

“a person whose only involvement in the event or gathering is, or would be, by attendance at the event or gathering”,

so attendees at prohibited events have no sanction against them. Surely that is a weakness? Think about the gathering on Crawfordsburn beach the other day, which was mentioned. All those who would attend such a gathering would know that there was no sanction against them. It is only if it could be proved, perhaps through social media, that one single source started spreading the news that there should be a gathering at a certain time on a certain day could that person be liable, but nobody else would be.

Surely, with those measures that we will put in place, the inevitably, knowing human nature, is that there will be an underground movement and gatherings. Over the weekend, I watched a documentary about prohibition in America. Al Capone's empire was worth £1.5 billion and his personal wealth £550 million in current money. There are people out there who will aspire to make money out of the virus. Surely, we should do all that we can to discourage people who, perhaps through an innocent enthusiasm to mix and be social, would go to gatherings, yet, in the Bill, there are no sanctions.

I have no doubt that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister did not get involved in politics to have conferred upon them those drastic powers to restrict freedom of movement and association. In fact, yesterday, the deputy First Minister gave us a very personal, graphic and emotional demonstration of why she is motivated to be in politics when she reacted to the news that a 32-year-old mother from North Antrim will have her chemotherapy stopped because, due to the virus, the National Health Service has to make decisions that it was never designed or expected to make.

This system of government is consociational. In other words, we are all in this together. Let us be in this together. Today, I have been reading on social media messages from former colleagues in the media; hardened hacks who have covered it all from Le Mon, Enniskillen, Shankill, Greysteel, Omagh — you name it. They are frightened — frightened as never before. Maybe they are looking to us. Maybe they are looking to us to do this together; to show the community whom we serve that we can serve them together. Let us lead together.

Ms Mullan (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I will speak on behalf of the Committee for Education. First, like others, I want to extend our appreciation to front-line staff and key workers,

including school leaders and staff. I want to pass on our condolences to the families who have already been bereaved.

Yesterday, the Committee for Education considered the relevant aspects of the Coronavirus Bill at an additional meeting, at which a Department of Education official was present. We thank him for attending that meeting. As has been said, these are extraordinary times. Consequently, the Committee agreed to forgo the usual timescales and level of scrutiny for a legislative consent motion.

The Bill permits the Department of Education to close schools and the Department of Health to close childcare settings. Indeed, both Departments will be also be able to provide directions to each kind of setting in order to permit them to provide continuing services for what the Bill calls “specified children”.

12.45 pm

Some principals received clarifying correspondence from the permanent secretary of the Department of Education last week. Despite that, there is still a lack of clarity from the Departments as to how arrangements in schools and childcare settings are going to work during this difficult time. Some principals have communicated that they are unsure about the number of specified children that will be attending their school. I am aware of post-primary schools that opened yesterday with only one or two children attending. The schools are anxiously awaiting guidance on social distancing, protective measures and testing. The childcare sector has also highlighted the same concerns. It is our responsibility to ensure that guidance is clear and that our schools and childcare sector is supported and protected in the time ahead.

The Bill gives the Department quite a lot of leeway in respect of examinations for GCSEs and A levels. This is another area where further explanation will be required for schools, parents and young people. It is important to note that when the situation is resolved, it may then be opportune to give consideration to our examination system.

Notwithstanding any of the concerns that I mentioned, the Committee unanimously agreed to support the passage of the legislative consent motion in respect of the provisions linked to education and childcare. I therefore commend those to the House.

I will now add a few words as Sinn Féin education spokesperson. As Members have already alluded to, these are truly extraordinary times, and, in times like these, it is often necessary to throw protocol to one side and make uncomfortable decisions. That is what we are doing with this legislative consent motion today.

The experiences of countries around the world, in particular the experience of our friends in Italy, in the last couple of weeks are stark examples of the heartbreak and loss that this virus can bring. Those experiences, along with our duty to protect our people, influence our response to this pandemic.

As my colleagues have said, we need the public to work with us and heed the advice and stay at home where possible. In normal circumstances, we in Sinn Féin would insist on the most effective and forensic scrutiny of legislation through the procedures available to us. Unfortunately, however, normality is not something that we

have the luxury of right now. The absolute priority in the time ahead must be to save lives and protect communities. That is why we will support the motion today.

I will finish with a quote from Seamus Heaney:

“If we winter this one out, we can summer anywhere.”

Ms Anderson: I rise to give my heartfelt sympathy to the 10 people who have died across Ireland and to the 17,150 people who have died from coronavirus across the world. I also rise to support the legislative consent motion. I am conscious of other Members’ reservations, and I would like to express some of our concerns in the context of supporting the legislative consent motion. As MLAs who are charged with scrutiny and given the extraordinary circumstances that we find ourselves in when we are interfering with civil liberties, even in extraordinary times, I absolutely concur with the need to bring forward these extraordinary measures. The Minister and others will know that some of us would like to have seen those measures introduced a number of weeks ago.

We are rightly concerned about the number of provisions that have been introduced in the Bill. Like other MLAs, I have concerns about the sunset clause. Looking at that through the lens of international human rights law and at what is appropriate, necessary and proportionate, the Bill as it stands states that those powers would last for two years. Like many MLAs, when I first read that I was somewhat shocked, because even in fast-tracked legislation, two years is somewhat disproportionate and, without doubt, risks extraordinary provisions to deal with this emergency becoming settled law. I was glad to hear many MLAs express concern about that. Without doubt, the sunset clause needs to be shortened. A period of six months is now being bandied about but I still think that that is too long. We need a mechanism for regular reports back to the Assembly and Committees in slower time, so that MLAs have an opportunity to do what we are tasked with doing, which is to scrutinise legislation and measures that are coming through.

I agree that there is a need to have powers to restrict public assembly. A number of MLAs raised concerns yesterday about what was happening in each of our constituencies. I agree that, in order to use the provisions in the Bill, the joint First Ministers must issue a declaration that there is a serious and imminent threat because of the virus. They should not, and I do not believe that they will, hesitate in doing so if there is such a threat. I believe that all MLAs will support them in doing that. Such a declaration, however, can only be revoked by agreement between the joint First Ministers and I am conscious of what Mr Nesbitt said when he was outlining his “buts”. We need to ensure that it does not pass its date of necessity. Many of us would agree that it would have been better had such a declaration procedure had some kind of periodic renewal built into it — maybe every month instead of what we have at the moment.

The Executive Office will also be able to designate any person to use “reasonable force” to restrict public assembly, perhaps without such a person having training in what is reasonable and proportionate force. Any such plans to use those powers must be carefully thought out. There must be some degree of training so that people understand what is reasonable and proportionate. There needs to be a mechanism of engaging with the Committees if that is enacted.

I also want to deal with the issue of the detention of potentially infectious people. My understanding is that the role of British immigration officers will be extended to deal with those who are potentially infectious. Currently, however, that falls outside the law enforcement framework in the North of Ireland. The immigration officers should be fully under the oversight of the Office of the Police Ombudsman and, maybe, the Policing Board as well. That is something that should be examined further in the time ahead without, at all, interfering with the time frame for making sure that the legislative support mechanism is dealt with today. It is about dealing with any potential abuse of such powers.

As other Members have said, we all have constituents and people whom we know who are affected by the situation. I have a brother-in-law whose cancer procedure in Altnagelvin Hospital has been cancelled today. I am sure that many others can give testimony as to how they have been affected personally. Listening to Members, I concur that there is agreement with all that has been said. We need the earliest review of this emergency legislation, and we need these extraordinary measures rescinded when it is appropriate and necessary to do so. Short, sharp action to deal with coronavirus is needed.

The Minister has referred to and looked at the World Health Organization, and I have been following it closely. It says, “Be fast, have no regrets.” Therefore, the call that we have heard for many weeks has been to test, test, test. We need to test, we need to trace and we need to isolate; we need to intensify. We are all, as MLAs, being contacted by people across our constituencies who are doing sterling work, and many of them need that test done to enable them to carry on with their work.

I want to give a particular mention to those carers in our society — unsung heroes — who care for people who have Alzheimer’s and many other illnesses that they are struggling with and who do not even have any mobility to get out of bed. My family could not have coped if it had not been for the care that we got from carers who came into our home. My mother had Alzheimer’s for seventeen and a half years, and we cared for her at home. I want to give a particular shout-out to those people who need to be tested in order to enable them to go into homes where people are lonely, on their own and these are the only people coming in to care for them during this very difficult and dangerous time.

I think all of us would agree that human rights compliance needs to be fully restored as early as possible. We need sharp and decisive action to bring this emergency situation to an end and to return to democratic scrutiny and practice when it is possible to do so.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Business Committee has arranged to meet today at 1.00 pm. I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm, when the next contribution on this item of business will be from Justin McNulty. The sitting is, by leave, suspended.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.57 pm.

On resuming —

2.00 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): [*Inaudible*] consent motion for the Coronavirus Bill.

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Coronavirus Bill dealing with: emergency registration of health professionals in clauses 2 and 4 and schedules 1 and 3; emergency volunteers in clauses 7 and 8 and schedule 6; mental health and mental capacity in clause 9 and schedules 9 and 10; health service indemnification in clause 12; registration of deaths and stillbirths etc in clauses 17 and 20 and schedule 12 (Part 3); food supply in clauses 23 to 27 and schedule 14; inquests in clauses 29 and 30; schools, childcare providers, etc in clauses 35 and 36 and schedules 15 (Part 3) and 16 (Part 3); statutory sick pay in clauses 40 to 42; pensions in clause 45; protection of public health in clause 46 and schedule 17; powers relating to potentially infectious persons in clause 49 and schedule 20 (Part 5); powers relating to events, gatherings and premises in clause 50 and schedule 21 (Part 5); courts and tribunals: use of video and audio technology in clause 55 and schedule 26; powers in relation to bodies in clause 56 and schedule 27; commencement in clause 73; power to suspend and revive provisions in clause 74; expiry in clause 75; power to alter expiry date in clause 76; power to amend Act in consequence of amendments to subordinate legislation in clause 77; power to make consequential modifications in clause 78 and procedure for certain orders made by a Northern Ireland Department in clause 82. — [Mr Swann (The Minister of Health).]

Which amendment was:

At end insert:

“as introduced to Parliament on 19 March 2020; and those provisions made by amendment during the passage of the Bill as they extend to Northern Ireland.” — [Mr Swann (The Minister of Health).]

Mr McNulty: I start by offering my condolences to the four families who have lost loved ones to coronavirus. I also want to pay a tribute to our healthcare workers and to wish them well in the enormous challenge that they now face, and especially those who are literally getting a baptism of fire. I also want to pay tribute to our key workers, including our healthcare teams, our pharmacists, our shopkeepers, retail workers, home care teams, refuse collectors, food producers, council workers, farmers, and the media, who are playing a very important role in communicating the important messages that need to be communicated.

Some workers are able to retreat to their homes, to their bunkers and protect themselves from the invisible bombs that are trying to penetrate those bunkers. It is crucial that as many people as possible stay at home, but we must recognise that others do not have that luxury and are out there on the front line, playing their part to defeat this virus.

I also want to recognise the sports stars who have made important contributions over the last number of days. I am thinking of the likes of Michael Conlon or Rory Grugan,

the Armagh captain, who are telling people, strongly and firmly, to stay at home.

I empathise with families, employees, professionals, business owners, business people, the self-employed and freelancers. There is so much uncertainty. We need certainty come from here and from our Ministers, with robust responses to the queries that are raised. There will be financial pain, but remember, priority number one is staying alive.

In an ideal world, we would have weeks and months to scrutinise a Bill such as this. That is not possible because we are on the brink of an extraordinary crisis. The measures proposed are harsh but necessary. Coronavirus/COVID-19 is a global force majeure.

I am speaking in my capacity as SDLP health spokesperson, a member of the Education Committee and an MLA for Newry and Armagh. I have some observations and comments in relation to the LCM that I would like to put on record, and also some concerns that I want to raise on behalf of my constituents.

I welcome the sunset clause, or as it is more properly referred to, an amendment for review after six months.

I raise once again the issue of personal protective equipment, especially for healthcare workers, domiciliary care teams, teachers, shop assistants, retail workers and food producers. Can councils play their part in providing that equipment?

I welcome that the testing numbers have gone up to 1,100 a day. That is crucial, especially for healthcare workers. We do not need our doctors, nurses and consultants to be quarantined for two weeks because of a head cold.

People who are disabled have expressed serious concerns about the Bill. They believe that the Bill will, effectively, remove their rights to social care, and that could mean the difference between life and death for them. They need reassurance. They need contingency planning to be implemented immediately to put them at ease.

Schools have been repurposed as childminding facilities. Whilst everybody recognises that we must play our part and have a role in defeating coronavirus, teachers need more guidance and certainty, and they need the PPE that I mentioned. We must recognise that our number one duty is to allow our front-line healthcare workers to provide the service that they provide and that will be crucial in the weeks and months ahead. How will they have the 24/7 capability to provide that service if we do not have adequate childcare facilities for their children?

Students want to know whether they will be liable for the next quarter's rent.

It is crucial that we educate and communicate, communicate and communicate at every opportunity. What role does our public broadcasting service have in that regard?

I welcome the emergency registration and re-registration measures to boost our healthcare staff numbers. I wish our doctors, nurses, consultants, porters, cleaners, radiologists, admin and triage teams all the best of luck in the huge challenge that they all now face in the weeks and months ahead. I say this to them: “You are our bulwark and our spearhead. I know that all your force will move in one direction to defeat the virus”.

I challenge us all to innovate and think outside the box in our shared quest to defeat the common enemy of coronavirus/COVID-19. I applaud the examples that we have seen on this island, including the repurposing of GAA stadia as drive-through testing sites at Páirc Uí Chaoimh, Nowlan Park and our HQ at Croke Park. Can sports stadia up here be repurposed in the same manner? There has been the repurposing of the O'Neill's factory, in Strabane, where staff, who would otherwise have been laid off, are now manufacturing scrubs for our healthcare teams. The owners of Armagh City Hotel have offered their premises to help the Southern Trust, if required.

We have huge collective intelligence. In what way can we think outside the box? How can our manufacturing capacity be hacked to produce makeshift ventilators, if necessary?

I applaud Members for their efforts. I applaud our Ministers. We are all under extraordinary pressure. Our healthcare and front-line workers are under extraordinary pressure. That pressure is a privilege. I applaud our Minister of Health, who is under extraordinary pressure. That pressure is a privilege. We all have a duty to play our part in defeating the virus, and I wish us all well in the challenges ahead.

Mr O'Toole: I, too, pay tribute to our healthcare workers and everyone across the range of our NHS who, right now, are doing their utmost to protect us from this appalling virus, to keep us safe, to protect the public and to mitigate the effects of the biggest public health emergency in the lifetime of any of us.

I support the motion, with concerns about its content, as others have outlined, but with, I am afraid, much greater concerns about the consequences of the virus if we had continued as normal, or almost as normal.

The Coronavirus Bill grants extraordinary powers, here and in London, to government and public bodies. They are powers that curtail the freedom of individuals and reduce the legal obligations that certain bodies have towards citizens. To be clear, in anything close to normal circumstances, the legislation would be unconscionable and unacceptable. As, of course, would be the speed with which the Bill was passed at Westminster, and the amount of time that the Assembly has had to consider the enormous implications for our constituents and, indeed, for our way of life.

To take one example, the Bill lessens the duty on care providers in adult social care for people with disabilities. The disabled community is understandably concerned. Not only are many disabled people at higher risk from COVID-19 complications, but the societal restrictions that we impose will place in grave danger the support that many need to live their life. That is why we will hopefully get clearer guidance from social care authorities to reassure them that everything possible is being done to protect disabled people, while limiting the spread of the disease.

There are many other specific and discrete concerns that I, and colleagues in the Chamber, have with the legislation. That includes, but is not limited to, the potential incursion of immigration officials into healthcare provision, and the extremely broad powers of detention that are included in the Bill. Therefore, it is welcome that moves have been made to ensure that the Bill is reviewed after six months. We should all hope that it is repealed as speedily as

possible, notwithstanding our ability to control the virus. It is worth saying that, if this Bill does its job, it will be off the statute book, in Westminster and in its provisions as they relate to Northern Ireland, as quickly as possible.

We cannot pretend that grave and unpleasant choices do not lie ahead of us. The Bill is one of those choices. In the days and weeks ahead, clinicians and staff across our NHS will face far more stark and immediate choices. The Bill, as unpleasant as it may be, is ultimately about giving them the best chance of saving as many lives as possible, but lives will be lost.

Northern Ireland is a small place and it is likely, very soon, that someone known to a Member of the Chamber will be directly affected by the virus. Someone from the Chamber may, very soon, be grieving over the loss of a loved one to the virus. The ability to grieve will, in a sense, be one of the victims of the virus. Funeral rites are particularly important on the island of Ireland, across all denominations and none. Although I am no longer religious, one of the greatest worries that I have is not just that communities are facing death, but that they are facing death without some of the consolations that cushion the force of death. Many people will be unable to be with their loved ones in their final moments. Their ability to hold wakes and funerals may be curtailed. Difficult as it is to face up to, we must be honest with ourselves and, as leaders in our community, honest with the people whom we represent. Even in the best case scenario, we are not only talking about significant levels of death, we are curtailing, albeit for the greater good, the ability of families and communities to say goodbye according to treasured, and sometimes sacred, customs.

When we come through this, and we will, we and all societies will have a period of collective grief to go through, but also, hopefully, relief. Relief that it is over and that we took the hard decisions to limit the suffering that the virus caused. Most of us are still grieving the loss of not just luxuries, but basic liberties: the ability to meet a friend for a pint; to go to the cinema or a football match; and perhaps, most painfully of all, the ability to be close to people whom we love, especially those who are vulnerable and afraid. We are, in a sense, at least temporarily, grieving for a loss of civilisation.

The poet Michael Longley, from south Belfast, in writing about our own Troubles, wrote of the importance of civilisation in the midst of the darkest times. He wrote that the opposite of war, and we are now living through a kind of war, was not necessarily peace, but civilisation. He wrote:

Our cobbler mends shoes for everybody; our butcher blends into his best sausages leeks, garlic, honey; our corner shop sells everything from bread to kindling. Who can bring peace to people who are not civilised? All of these people, alive or dead, are civilised.

Mr Deputy Speaker, we are sacrificing some of our civilisation today, in the hope that we will quickly get it back and with as many of our loved ones still with us as possible.

Miss Woods: We live in extraordinary and worrying times. This is a period of great uncertainty and of the unknown. We have so many questions and so few answers. We now enter a time, with the legislation, that we would never have thought of only months — if not weeks — ago.

2.15 pm

Like others in the Chamber, I pay tribute to the NHS staff, the key workers, the front line, the blue lights, those who go over and above at this time. Just a few short months ago, those people had to take strike action in order for their voices to be heard on equal pay. Now, we are calling on them, and extreme pressure is being put on them. They are literally tasked with saving people's lives. They are the ones coming in on their days off to record powerful social media videos to encourage people to do the right thing. Nurses and healthcare staff are having to be redeployed and retrained in an emergency situation. There have also been great examples across Northern Ireland of community cohesion, with people volunteering their time and services to help the elderly, the vulnerable and those who are isolating. Businesses are offering free services to coordinate help. Community groups are doing the rounds to identify people who need help. There have been offers of dog-walking, shopping or just a chat on the phone. It is heart-warming to say the least, and it will not be forgotten. Our condolences must also be extended to families who have already been bereaved by COVID-19.

I turn now to the Bill. Appropriate and necessary measures need to be taken by the Government and Governments across the UK and Ireland to protect our health and protect our lives, but we have serious concerns about the Bill, most of which have been covered either in this Chamber or the House of Commons yesterday. I will not go over old ground and address what other Members have already spoken about, but I need to highlight some key issues.

The Government wish to have the Bill in place for two years, which is far too long. They want parliamentary scrutiny after one year: again, that is far too long and raises significant concerns over necessity and proportionality. I welcome the six-month amendment, but we have to ask ourselves whether it goes far enough. What we need in the Chamber and Westminster are frequent reviews of the provisions so that they are switched on at the time. We need to ensure that human rights are complied with and that there are proper checks and balances on what government powers are utilised for.

Provisions allow for the detention of people who are potentially infected, with police and immigration officers empowered to use reasonable force to implement the laws, but what of those with mental health conditions? Fewer doctors' opinions are required. There will be fewer certifications and the extension or removal of certain time limits for detention and transfer. In Northern Ireland, it will also remove the need for an approved social worker to carry out certain functions. Timelines will be changed, and people with mental health conditions can be detained longer. We must proceed with extreme caution here. In Northern Ireland, we do not yet have any independent mental capacity advocates. Do unapproved staff have the experience and expertise to make such decisions? Will there be a review after this period to ensure that all those placed under a deprivation of liberty safeguard were placed under it properly?

We heard from the Minister yesterday that the challenges faced by the Prison Service should not be underestimated. We have just under 1,600 people in custody, and we know that many of those suffer from mental health conditions, have addiction issues and have a history of self-harm. Many of those in prisons fall into the high-risk category

in terms of age and medical condition. Given the daily struggles around mental health and attempts to continue some sort of family and social structure, we need to ensure that visits from families and others continue in different forms and that all measures are put in place to facilitate that contact. We must ensure that there is support for our prison staff, many of whom face difficult decisions as regards family and childcare issues and safety in work. If any prisoners, including those who are in for sexual or domestic violence offences, are subject to early release, we must ensure that that does not have adverse impacts on victims. I encourage the Department to ensure that the description that it uses for those categories of prisoners is fully checked, balanced and necessary.

Many of the measures in the Bill raise concerns over human rights and personal liberty by removing individual freedoms. While it is understandable that the Government have serious concerns about the system's capacity to cope, which is inherently true of our health service, that should not result in a lack of scrutiny, oversight or protocol for people's protection and regulation that could lead to abuse of power and unnecessary suffering.

What of the testing levels? I noted the Minister's earlier comments on introducing the LCM, but is it enough? The Bill does not adequately address how to prevent such abuses, nor does it include provisions to protect the most vulnerable in our society, who will undoubtedly be the worst hit during the crisis. I encourage the Government to put all necessary provision in place to ensure that all people are protected at this time.

With the Prime Minister's statement last night, the country is in a state of lockdown. There are some serious restrictions on movement to be enforced, but we do not know what that means for people who need to put food on their tables. We must get detailed information for the people who need it most. How will that be enforced? When? What does the Bill mean about the use of force? Will it be equal across the board? Where is the oversight?

After Boris's statement last night, I got messages from concerned parents asking whether they would be allowed to bring their children to another parent's house. How does it work for family members who care for one another but do not live together? Will they be fined for bringing their kids to their mother's house or vice versa? That, not to mention the fact that we do not know how long this will be in place for, is putting fear into the heart of our society.

Under the Bill, the PSNI will be given new powers to enforce isolation when a transmission control period has been declared. It is presumed that police officers and public health officers will consult before people are taken in for testing, but the lack of a stringent protocol in that regard is striking. There is limited detail on who public health officers are and where people go after testing. Where are the test centres? How are the risks being managed? We have little clarity here on how this will be enforced and no clarity on the legal boundaries.

We also have to be mindful of what is not in the Bill, specifically protections for our most vulnerable and any further clarity that we so desperately need. Where are the protections for those who rent, even if they are lucky enough to receive wages from an employer? What do we do about those who have to continue to pay landlords who are receiving a mortgage holiday and about those already

facing eviction in the private rented sector? How can this be managed to ensure that we do not have people losing their homes in general, especially at this time? How will front-line workers being drafted into full-time work or increased hours pay for increased childcare? Will the childcare even be open?

What are the provisions for those who have no recourse to public funds or those in the precarious immigration system? What of those in poverty, who struggle daily and face the crisis too? What of those currently in an abusive household, as well as those who may find themselves in an abusive household throughout this time? Will someone who lives in a violent domestic situation be forced back into that home by the very authorities that are there to protect them? What about those who are homeless? How will they be supported in a safe, secure and rights-based manner? How can we protect them and ensure that they can be safely isolated? I have been asking, but I still have not received any answers.

Will the Government increase funding for staff workers in refuges and hostel provision and ensure that those front-line workers are also protected in the crisis? Will we have a fully funded and resourced mental health system to deal with the reality of what we face now and in the future? Where is the support for the zero-hours contracts, the agency staff, the freelancers, the self-employed, like my father, the sole earner of his household, who will now have to make the difficult choice not to work with minimal future income to protect himself and my family? I noted the comments made by Mr Nesbitt about the construction sector, but how am I supposed to advise my father when he wonders if he should go to work as a self-employed builder, if he cannot get the materials that he needs? How are they to pay their bills, their rent and buy their food and necessary items? It certainly will not be covered by statutory sick pay. No matter when it can be applied from, it is simply not enough. Could anyone in the Chamber live on £94 a week and meet their financial commitments? Gardeners, builders, carpenters, plasterers, plumbers, electricians, personal trainers, musicians, therapists, counsellors, photographers, yoga teachers, make-up artists, beauty therapists, comedians, suppliers, middlemen and women, the small business owners with no staff, those with no premises: the list is not exhaustive, but it is a taste of the people who have been reaching out for help. Do they get a business loan that they will have to pay back, which is not a wage but just kicks the financial can down the line? MLAs have been inundated with queries, and, of course, we have our own. We have constituents asking what will be in place for them, and we still do not have answers. Why did we not use the opportunity to put in a universal basic income? It was a complete missed opportunity.

As I said in opening, appropriate and necessary measures need to be taken by the Government, but we need to continue with appropriate checks and balances. Ordinarily, I could never support something like this that is so far-reaching and life-changing. I note that Scotland are supporting the LCM, but they are also working to bring their own emergency legislation into play. I welcome the comments from Mr Givan earlier and wonder if this Assembly could not do that too. Are we content to follow Mr Johnson? Never before have we been asked to provide consent to so much curtailment in society. Only in these exceptional circumstances can this happen.

Mrs D Kelly: I will not take long, Minister. There are more questions than answers, but I hope that, in the coming days, the Executive will be able to provide greater clarity than the Westminster Government have.

I declare an interest as a member of the Policing Board, Mr Deputy Speaker, but also put on record our thanks to the police officers who will have to enforce many of the regulations. Where there is an absence of clarity, their job will be made much more difficult. As Members know and, I hope, recognise, the Police Service of Northern Ireland is the envy of western Europe in human rights compliance, and I hope and trust that that will stand them in good stead. They already have to arrest and detain people who claim they have the coronavirus; indeed, we have heard horrendous tales of shopkeepers being spat at or coughed over by people who think it is funny. People are frightened, but they should be frightened, Minister, and I hope that the message will go out. We have rightly concentrated on the people who are most vulnerable and older people, in particular, but many of us already know that there are children in intensive care across these islands who have fallen to this horrendous infection. Therefore, I ask that the public health messaging be stepped up.

Another query that has been raised with me by private nursing home care providers is around testing and how government and the private sector can best work together. We need the private residential sector to look after our older people and those with disabilities who cannot be cared for in their own home. I hope that the Minister can give some reassurance to them.

Like many others, I wish our Minister of Health all the best. I know that people will look to political leaders, but, as Paul Given said, others will also look to their religious and spiritual leaders and we should remember them today. They too will be on the front line, particularly in the most difficult of circumstances, when funerals are restricted to two. All of the things that we hold dear will not be there for us to hold on to in these most trying of times.

Mr Allister: I want to begin by commending the Health Minister for the leadership that he has shown and given in this matter. It is good to have a steady hand on the tiller at this time. Of course, he represents some of the most selfless and committed individuals from across our health service that keep the service going. With others, I pay a heartfelt tribute to them for all that they have done and all that they have yet to do. I suspect that we do not know the half of it at this point. To health service workers and to all who are keeping the machinery of government, particularly health, moving a very big "Thank you".

Some members have referred to the legislation that we are discussing as "draconian" and that is a fair enough description. Although the individual who gives rise to the word "draconian" — Drakon — was a leader in the 7th century BC in Athens who reached considerable notoriety for the harsh penal codes that he imposed — *[Interruption.]* Not quite. I am sure that the honourable Member who interrupts from a sedentary position — most surprising, given his august status in the House as Principal Deputy Speaker — is a well-read gentleman who knows all about Drakon. He introduced various penal codes that, for the most trivial of offences as well as the most serious, decreed that the penalty was death. I do not think that we are quite as bad as that but, make no mistake, these are proposals that none of us, as legislatures, should be at

ease with, because they strip out rights and protections that all of us should value.

2.30 pm

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Earlier in the debate, I referred to the Special Powers Act. The Member will recall that the Special Powers Act was introduced in 1922 and was renewed every year that the Northern Ireland Parliament sat. That being the case, does the Member recognise that there is an inherent danger? I say this as a politician: once politicians acquire power over people, they are often reluctant to return it to the people.

Mr Allister: I absolutely agree. To all intents and purposes, this is a special powers Act, because, by its essence, it is removing the norm and the hedge of protection that is in place and giving extraordinary powers of a summary nature to government. In his speech, Mike Nesbitt articulated some of those points very clearly. None of us, therefore, should shrug and say, "Just let's do this". These are serious measures.

It is notable that the actions that can be taken by government, according to the legislation, have been placed at the lowest possible level with regard to how they can be taken. These matters are to be perfected by statutory rules rather than statutory instruments. As the House knows, a statutory rule can be made pre-emptively without effective scrutiny; there may be retrospective scrutiny, but there is no prospective scrutiny. Therefore, the powers that we are giving away are being given away at the cheapest possible price of mere statutory rules, and we are doing that in legislation that not only can last for two years — which seems longer than it needs to be at this point — but be extended in six-month bites. It is not the case that there is a cut-off point after two years; this is legislation that can be extended incrementally. That can be done in Northern Ireland by a Northern Ireland Department taking these powers and extending them. These are serious matters that we should not be meekly accepting.

I have to say something that I referred to yesterday: I am made even more uneasy about the exercise of these powers by virtue of the fact that, simultaneously, we have stripped out of the House many of the oversight scrutiny powers of MLAs. I refer to the fact that, yesterday, without debate — on a vote on the nod — we removed from the House the right of MLAs to table questions for oral answer or topical questions to any Minister on any issue. That coincided with the moment at which we are about to give those Ministers the most extraordinary powers. Instead of thinking that that might be a time to amplify and increase scrutiny, and to add to the opportunity to question, we go in the opposite direction and, as a House, remove from MLAs the right to ask a question for oral answer, and we actively discourage the tabling of questions for written answer. That is a House that is headed in the wrong direction in circumstances such as these.

Ms Sugden: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes.

Ms Sugden: Is it not the case that the purpose of parliamentary questions — oral and written — is to not only scrutinise, but to inform Ministers and highlight issues? When I ask Assembly questions, I do not do it for an answer; I do it to raise an issue. There are suggestions that the Northern Ireland Executive intend to create a

portal — almost reinventing the wheel of what Northern Ireland Assembly questions are intended for. Whilst I appreciate the concern about limiting questions because of the considerable amount of work that they entail, is the Northern Ireland Executive removing an opportunity to raise issues that those at the Executive table might not find on the ground?

Mr Allister: Yes. The Member makes a valid point. Very often, the question is asked not so much with great expectation as to the answer, because sometimes the answers can be disappointing in just how opaque they are, but in order to put the focus on an issue.

Here we are, heading into territory where we have bestowed on Ministers — yes, in a time of great extremis, it is necessary to give extra powers, but it is not a time when it is necessary simultaneously to remove powers of scrutiny. That is my gripe about this matter: that we are coinciding the — I will not say "excessive" because much of it is necessary — increase in powers to Ministers at a time when we are surrendering and downgrading the right to ask questions in the House of an Executive that — I am going to frankly say — a week ago, could not agree when our schools could be shut and that were pulling in opposite directions. The past few weeks in that regard were not a confidence-building measure. Therefore, to now see that we have bestowed upon those Ministers —. Without Question Time, we are effectively going to have government by press conference. Of course, it is necessary and right to keep the public fully informed, but this is an elected House for a purpose, and the purpose should be that Ministers convey, through the House, as much as they can to those whom we represent.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. I want to bring some clarity to what was agreed. The political parties sought to act in a responsible way by freeing up Ministers to deal with the crisis at hand. People are dying outside here, and we wanted to ensure that Ministers would be freed up by not having to answer lots of questions. The Health Minister alone, at that point, had over 800 questions on his desk. Therefore, an agreement was reached, as the independents ought to know, and Ministers gave a commitment from the Executive to come before the House to make statements and to answer as many questions as needed from Members, so scrutiny will prevail, albeit in a different way.

Mr Allister: The Member makes a valiant effort to dress it up, but the reality is that the facility that existed for MLAs to ask the questions that were on their minds of Ministers about actions that they were taking in their Departments has been stripped out and taken away, and in its place, we have the offer that Ministers may, at their discretion, by and large, come to the House, make a statement and answer or dodge questions as they wish. That is a very poor substitute. It is not something that I believe needed to be done.

The Member referred to the 800 questions to Minister Swann. Those 800 questions were in written form. We are talking about a Minister coming to the House once every two or three weeks to answer maybe half a dozen questions. That is what we are talking about in the scale of things, and yet that facility has been removed. I simply make the point that I do not think that, in these circumstances, that is healthy. It is not a step that should have been taken, but taken it has been.

I wish to make a few miscellaneous points for the Minister's consideration. Under the Bill — somebody already referred to the fact that the powers are expressed pretty vaguely, and maybe there is a reason for that — is there a power to compel a factory, for example, to close?

I have had representations today from constituents, working in factories in my constituency and in Minister's, who, by virtue of the sort of employment that it is, on an assembly-line or a production line, are effectively working shoulder by shoulder. That makes a mockery of all we are told about social distancing. What is the capacity to deal with that situation? The ultimate extreme action is to close such a factory. If such an extreme action were necessary, is there power in the Bill to do it? Does it lie elsewhere? Does it fall within the clause about stopping gatherings and closing premises? Does that extend to closing factories? Maybe it does, maybe it does not, but it is the sort of vagueness that Mr Nesbitt talked about in his contribution. We need some clarity about issues like that.

Where, Minister, does this legislation sit with the Civil Contingencies Act 2004? Is there a crossover? Are we going to be relying on both? Under that Act, there are also extraordinary powers that can be taken. I do not read this Bill as superseding those. Are we going to see a mix and match of those powers? Should it be made clear to the public that it is not just the powers that are in this Bill, shortly to become an Act, but also those in the Civil Contingencies Act?

If it comes to it, and things get as bad as is feared, are we going to be fettered in any way in calling in the necessary support of the army in this part of the United Kingdom? Is there going to be any fetter on that? There certainly should not be. If we get to a point where hospitals, particularly on the border, are being overrun by people from outside the jurisdiction, anxious for help, are there steps we can, would or should take in that regard? Are there powers in the Bill to allow the Minister to deal with that extreme situation?

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes.

Mr O'Dowd: The Member likes to look for areas that might be provocative and cause tension etc — that is his style. Is he seriously suggesting that we should stop cross-border healthcare? What if patients from south Armagh, south Down or Derry, or wherever, go across the border seeking healthcare? Are you suggesting that, if we block the border, the southern authorities should blockade their side of the border? Surely, what he should be seeking at this time is cross-border cooperation in healthcare and looking after our loved ones, rather than trying to create a problem which should be a solution.

Mr Allister: I do not think I am trying to create a problem. I am asking a legitimate question. If we should, in the extreme of this situation, arrive at a point where the National Health Service facilities in this part of the United Kingdom are put beyond breaking point, because of an influx from outside this jurisdiction, is it not a fair and legitimate question to ask? Does the Minister have the powers to deal with that situation and remedy it? I think he should, but the Member thinks he should not — maybe it is the Member who lets his politics override his judgement.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes.

Mr Stalford: Does the Member recall the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease that took place in Northern Ireland in 2001? On that occasion, the army was deployed to help deliver essential supplies.

At that time, I think we had a Government up and running at Stormont that included all parties, so there is no legitimate reason why people could object.

2.45 pm

Mr Allister: I think the Member is right in what he says.

I do not see this as a green and orange issue. This virus is colourless as far as that is concerned, but it does concern me somewhat that, in recent weeks, it was the greenery of some people's view that led their thinking about the schools needing to close: because it had been done south of the border, it had to be done north of the border. I think that it was those people who were allowing their politics to rule their head in this matter. Will that same politics rule their head if it comes to the need for army support? That is a legitimate question to which we need an answer from those who want to make politics out of this situation. Let them tell us. If it comes to it and we need army support in this Province to get through this crisis, are they going to stand behind that and support that or is that trumped by their politics? It is no time for that, and I trust that that will not be the situation. I will leave it there.

Mr Carroll: I want to begin by sending my thoughts to everybody who has been forced to self-isolate, especially those people who do not have family or friends to call. My thoughts are with them at this time, and I extend my condolences to the families of those who have tragically lost their life as a result of this deadly and dangerous virus.

I am incredibly frustrated that, once again, the Executive have had to wait for Boris Johnson to act when international advice was to take action. Two weeks ago, the World Health Organization criticised Boris Johnson's do-nothing, herd-immunity approach. When Europe was dubbed the epicentre of the pandemic, Boris Johnson did not want to act, so the Executive did not. It is worth remembering that the Executive refused to close schools, despite the fact that all around us schools and workplaces were closing their doors in the interests of public health. They were miles ahead in taking action. It is also worth remembering that the Minister of Education snarled at me this day last week when I suggested that schools should be closed down. It has taken two weeks of public outrage, international criticism and pressure from NHS staff to get us to a more serious shutdown, and, still, not enough measures are in place to protect the vulnerable from COVID-19.

Can the Health Minister tell us why we are still refusing to test people in their hundreds and thousands? Drive-through testing centres are being set up in the South, but someone with two or more symptoms here cannot get a test. It simply boggles the mind.

Can the Minister tell me why the Executive have not moved to requisition private healthcare facilities and equipment into public use to resolve the shortages in the health service? As I am sure Members will know, a company outside Belfast is charging £120 for a testing kit and another in the South sells ventilators internationally, but we have shortages across this island. Where is the effort to take over production of personal protective equipment

to make sure that our health service is properly protected? Profit should not trump public health at any time, but especially not at this time.

Finally, where are the wide-ranging financial measures to protect those who have lost their jobs or will be unable to support themselves because of this virus? Neither spending five weeks on a universal credit waiting list nor receiving basic statutory pay is good enough. Rent freezes, mortgage freezes, a ban on evictions and freezing of utility bills are the real emergency powers that should be enacted. Instead of taking these steps, the Executive are quickly moving to emergency powers to simply force people indoors.

We in People Before Profit will happily back the progressive proposals in the Bill — for example, to recruit to the health service — but this legislation does not include real measures that would protect workers, the self-employed and the vulnerable, and this has been a problem all along. Indeed, much of this legislation seems to be aimed primarily at coercing people instead of providing the financial provisions to allow people to stay at home. I share the concerns of Amnesty International about the legislation. It states that the powers that are being granted to public health officials, constables and immigration officers are:

“broad, serious and potentially invasive”.

In the short time that we have had to look at the legislation, I attempted to amend it in order to reduce many of those elements. The People Before Profit Alliance believes that it is wrong to potentially detain people when employers are still able to force people to go to work. In my experience, people want to socially distance themselves and self-isolate in order to protect themselves and their families. However, those people urgently need financial security from the Government, not simply state coercion. Powers of detainment, for example, should never be considered before financial security has been secured. How can the Executive contemplate detaining people if they have not even secured provisions that would allow thousands of construction workers, agency workers or the self-employed to stay at home?

Furthermore, the emergency powers will potentially be conferred for two years. That is a massively draconian shift, which the People Before Profit Alliance attempted to amend so that the Assembly would have to ratify those measures every two months. That is basic accountability to ensure that extreme measures would not remain in place longer than absolutely necessary. It is regrettable and deeply problematic that those amendments did not make it to the Floor. I urge the Executive to bring those powers back to the Floor of the Assembly for regular ratification in order to ensure that there is oversight against any potential abuses of power. If Westminster can look at those powers every few months, why can the Assembly not do that? I think that other Members have raised that issue already.

In order to ease some concerns on the detention aspects in the Bill, I ask the Health Minister specifically that he make a public statement declaring that his Department will not pass on the details of any migrants to the Home Office during the crisis, in line with the recent statement to that effect from the Irish Government, and also that staff receive guidance and updates to confirm that asylum

seekers and those without status here are able to access free healthcare that relates to COVID-19? If he does so, I am sure that it will provide some important assurances to those members of the community who are vulnerable and often marginalised.

Finally, I want to take the opportunity to pay tribute to and thank the incredible, brave, compassionate workers in our front-line services. We will be indebted to them for ever for putting themselves and their families second and the health of the community first. We cannot thank them enough. I can only hope that their important work is, never again, rewarded with lesser wages and conditions than they deserve.

Ms Sugden: I want to begin by thanking the Minister for his work. I remember saying on restoration day that he had the hardest job of all. I do not think that anyone, even him, anticipated how true that would be a mere few months later. I am genuinely impressed by the Minister's candour, professionalism and compassion for all the people of Northern Ireland. I would extend those comments to the wider Northern Ireland Executive. It is about people, not politics, finally.

I recognise that people are scared. They are confused. They are fearful for their health and that of their families. People have died from contracting COVID-19. I offer my sincere condolences to the families and friends of those who have passed. My thoughts are also with those who are receiving healthcare for any illness in all health and social care settings across Northern Ireland, the UK and, indeed, the world. The circumstances that we anticipate place them in the most vulnerable position. I expect that they are very scared right now. I say to all those who are on the front line — health and social care staff, the police, the Prison Service, pharmacy staff, retail staff, and all those who are now working not for themselves but for others — you have my support, compassion and representation. Whatever I can do, I will do it. I am sure that we will do it as an Assembly. That has been apparent today.

To an extent, agreement to the legislative consent motion is academic. I say that not to undermine the genuine concerns that have been raised by many — not least Mr Nesbitt, Mr Allister and Miss Woods — which, in normal circumstances, would be entirely valid and would probably render the Bill unacceptable. I say it to acknowledge the seriousness of the situation. If we are abandoning democracy, we are doing it for survival.

I appreciate the comments from Ms Kelly around removing the burden of Assembly Questions from Ministers. Again, I will reiterate that I do not seek to put any undue burden on an already overwhelmed Northern Ireland Executive, but I seek to raise those queries that I feel will be lost. I am sure that every Member in this House has received considerable correspondence via social media, email and telephone. I go to bed at two in the morning and I wake up at seven and those messages are unanswered. The channel of Assembly Questions is a good opportunity not to expect answers but to raise queries to ensure that some issues that may have been overlooked are being addressed, because when we do that, the people that we represent, all of us, including the Northern Ireland Executive, will benefit.

This is not normal, and I sincerely hope that it does not become our new normal. When this passes, and I think

that we are all praying to God and whoever else we put our hope in that it will, there needs to be global work to understand why this has happened and how we can prevent it happening again.

I will use this opportunity not necessarily to debate the specific clauses in the Bill and legislative consent motion but to seek clarity or, at a minimum, raise issues to ensure that they are not overlooked and that people will not fall through the gaps in the chaos of survival. I will, however, try and keep it in line with the parts of this Bill.

The practical outworkings of the Bill are ambiguous. Even after the Prime Minister's statement last night, they are perhaps even more ambiguous than they were before. One of the key areas that I want to talk about is statutory sick pay, and I know that it is provided for in the Bill. I appreciate the removal of the three-day wait. People should not be financially disadvantaged by these circumstances. Statutory sick pay, as many Members will know, is typically paid up front by the employer on day four, and I will expect employers to also pay employees on days one, two and three directly.

I ask the Minister, and maybe he can come back to me if he is unable to answer today, does the Coronavirus Bill provide a mechanism by which employers can claim the additional three days statutory sick pay that the Bill will enact? How soon will it be reimbursed? I appreciate that this has a short-term financial burden on the employer, but short-term cash flow is the problem that can and has led to many employers making serious decisions that have disrupted their businesses and the lives of their employees, and they may never recover from it.

Also, regarding statutory sick pay, I have been contacted by a number of employees last night and this morning telling me that their employer is requesting a sick note or self-certification to enable them to stay at home. That is, again, after the PM's announcement last night. Previous UK Government advice said that that was not required, but it seems that there remains considerable confusion about the liability of allowing people to stay at home. I will go into that further.

If the employee makes the decision to self-isolate, are they only entitled to statutory sick pay, as per their contract of employment? If the employer makes the decision to send staff home, is he or she liable to pay full pay while not receiving income at the other end? If the Government instruct businesses to close, as we heard last night, are they taking on the liability to pay workers? How are they doing that? Who gets minimum statutory sick pay? Who will be entitled to the coronavirus job retention scheme, which pays up to 80% of wages? Do we advise them to go on to new style jobseeker's allowance, which is not means-tested on savings and partners' income, or the sickness benefit of ESA, which is quite similar, or do we tell them to go on to universal credit, which they may not be eligible for anyway, again, depending on their financial circumstances of savings and partners' income?

I appreciate that this is not entirely your remit, but you are responding to a lot of the concerns in relation to this more widely and I am grateful to you for doing that. We nearly need the whole Executive here because we could talk about every issue that seems to come up with this Bill.

However, it is that confusion that is leading people to continue to work and to employers reluctantly making them

stay. The concern is that that will not delay the spread of the virus, and that is where we are right now.

3.00 pm

Another area of concern is the question of essential workers. If employers who have been forced to close — further to announcements that were made this week and last night — will be able to access the coronavirus job retention scheme on behalf of those workers, that is fantastic. That will have removed uncertainty for those who are nervous about their own health and that of their families. I welcome that and I look forward to more measures specifically for self-employed people, which, we hope, may come today.

The devil is in the detail, however, and I appreciate that the Bill, in itself, may not provide that, but we have to be concerned about the outworkings of the Bill that we are passing via the Assembly and all the other devolved regions but specifically in Westminster. As I expect all Members as well as Ministers are, I am finding that the fast-moving pace of the situation makes it incredibly difficult to provide good advice to our constituents. I am finding it particularly difficult to cross-reference that information with standard employment law and with other laws that are in place. Things are not clear. Many Members have said it, but the point needs to be well made because that is where the correspondence from my constituents is coming from. It is leading to further anxiety and, again, it is leading people to make decisions about their work and their income.

So, what is essential? I know that some have described it as meaning key workers and those employees that support those key workers. I was contacted by the owner of a tyre centre for motor vehicles this morning. That is not really an essential service, or is it? What if a nurse, a doctor or a teacher who is looking after key workers' children gets a flat tyre? Where do they go so that they can continue to travel to their place of work where they are saving lives? That service becomes essential at that point.

I would not really consider off-sales as essential retail but I understand, at this stage, why many might disagree with me. *[Laughter.]* Those retailers have not been given any direction. If we go back to the crux of why the Prime Minister had to make his announcement, its purpose was to limit the numbers of people being in close proximity to one another in order to delay the spread of the virus.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Ms Sugden: Please, go ahead.

Mr O'Toole: I am glad that the Member had the courage to raise the issue of off-sales and I agree that more clarity is needed. Does she agree that it is particularly important — though no one in the Chamber would responsibly describe off-sales as an essential service — that there is also the danger, in these unique circumstances, of creating a kind of black market? It is important that people have clear guidance on what is and is not permissible so that customers and business owners know how to operate within the law.

Ms Sugden: I agree entirely. The lack of detail and clarity is where we are going to find ourselves in difficulty. We do not want to get to a point where people are taking the risk in order that they remain in employment and are,

potentially, spreading the virus. Sometimes, I get frustrated that the message around delaying the spread of the virus is not made entirely clear.

He will forgive me for saying it because I know that the Minister has said this many times: it is inevitable that we will all contract the virus at some stage. The difficulty will be if we all contract it at once, therefore putting overwhelming pressure on the health service all at once. That, then, limits its ability to look after the most sick and vulnerable. When that ability is limited, that is when people will die.

To go back to my point about off-sales, the Prime Minister, ultimately, made his announcement in relation to limiting close proximity. Close proximity can be controlled in off-sales premises in the same way that it can be controlled in supermarkets. So, do they remain open? If they can stay open, will their employees be able to access the coronavirus job retention scheme or will staff who, understandably, want to self-isolate be reduced to statutory sick pay — depending, again, on their employment contract as per my earlier point.

I am genuinely not trying to advocate for off-sales to remain open, but their staff are going to work tonight. Gardeners are asking me if they can cut lawns, because they are outside and not interacting with the people that they work for, but then we are telling family members that they cannot come to each other's properties and premises. I think a lot of this advice is really unclear. Whether you can or you cannot, ultimately no one wants to be at work. We are in a situation now where we want to be at home with the people who we live with, to limit the spread as much as possible. If they can only access statutory sick pay, instead of the 80% of wages, then maybe they will make a choice to go to work.

It is easy for me to say, "If in doubt, do not go to work", but, in doing, so they may not have enough money to put food on their table, they may be at risk of defaulting on bills and they may face legal action. I have a constituent who contacted me last week because they had received a notice of intention to enforce repossession on their home that had been sent last week by the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service on behalf of their mortgage lender. Has this been thought about? Have we thought about the impact of standard correspondence that is triggered when people miss however many payments within their mortgage contract? It has the potential to deeply unsettle, in a context where good mental health is already being challenged.

We are hearing that services are being reduced, and I fully understand the rationale for that in delaying the spread, but, Minister, in some circumstances, are we limiting our response to the next phase by our actions within the delay phase? Let me qualify this. For example, licensing has been suspended. Will this include ambulance workers, needed in the weeks ahead? Will it include HGV drivers, who I understand we have a considerable shortage of anyway?

I do not expect all the details of this to be worked out. The fast pace of this inevitably means that things will be lost, which again means that I see the necessity of my earlier point about being able to correspond with Ministers. I have no way to do that now. If anything, I am chasing down their special advisers or writing to the private office. My method of keeping them informed is much more convoluted and

resource-intensive than submitting a question in the Assembly, which, quite frankly, I do not care whether they answer. I just want them to know.

I make the point again — I made it when I was Minister, and I will make it now — the purpose of this Assembly is to scrutinise, not necessarily on the basis of holding the Government to account, but that is our role. That is democracy, ladies and gentlemen. The Assembly is also there to support Ministers in their work, and we do that to inform them and to be the representatives of the 100,000 constituents of East Londonderry and all the various constituencies across Northern Ireland. It is that representation role that informs them for the job that they have to do, which is right. I implore Ministers to look to their MLAs. We are here to support you and to find out the bits of legislation that you may have overlooked, the policy that might have unintended consequences.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. On her point about unintended consequences, I have been contacted today by constituents who fear for the lives of their elderly, who are in care homes and nursing homes across this country. Some are incapacitated in such a way that it is their loved ones who visit them in these homes whom they really rely on in this time. We have seen recent reports from Spain on the BBC news that suggest a higher number of elderly have now become vulnerable in care homes and, sadly, passed away because they have not been provided with the appropriate care. It has been rightly pointed out that many who work in our care homes are professionals who are unsung heroes at this time, but, sadly, as we have seen in Northern Ireland in the past, that is not always the case. So we have loved ones who really want to visit their elderly relatives whom they sense are in real danger, but are unable to do so at this time because again we have a message of, "Is it safe to go?". Some homes have applied a blanket ban and others have not, but there is no clarity. They desperately need clarity in this time, and it is important that we as MLAs can relay that back to Ministers at a time like this.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I encourage Members to be brief in their interventions. They could add their name to the speaking list if they wished.

Ms Sugden: The point is entirely well made, and every Member has mentioned it in their contribution. The need for information is critical. When the general public are concerned and anxious, we provide them with information to reassure. It is not entirely a criticism; I understand how fast-paced this is. I understand that the resources within the Northern Ireland Civil Service are limited. We had a voluntary exit scheme, which took out a good part of our experience and a lot of our resource and, ultimately, that is why Northern Ireland has stopped its Assembly asking questions, when the other regions have not, because our resource here is limited.

We are into this Assembly mandate for maybe a month, after three years without an Assembly. The secretariat and the Northern Ireland Civil Service were run down; staff were deployed elsewhere. I suppose that we are where we are and we need to try to put our best foot forward in trying to help the people of Northern Ireland and trying to save lives.

I say to the Executive, let us help you. Do not be that Executive that sit behind closed doors and get nervous about the input of the MLAs who hold you to account. You

are members of the legislature as well. Take MLAs' advice, their experience of casework and the comments that they are getting on the ground and let us see how we can make this work for everyone, so that we limit the worst effects of this virus.

Minister, I really could stand here all day and go through every Department and talk about the various remits and the things that we have not considered, but your time is much more precious than mine.

I want us to all spare a thought, maybe more than that, for all those hundreds of thousands of people who are stranded outside the UK and Ireland and who cannot get home. Whilst waiting to contribute, I had messages from Bali, Australia and Turkey, and I am aware of an issue in Peru. They are telling me that there are hundreds of thousands of Britons stranded abroad. My concern for them is where do they go, do they have shelter and food, and do they have access to the rights that we enjoy here, but people do not in the places that they are visiting? I cannot stress strongly enough that, whether they are here or abroad, they are our responsibility if they are constituents of Northern Ireland.

I have limited power or influence on the UK Government, and I appreciate that the Foreign Office falls within the remit of Westminster, but we do have an influence collectively as the Assembly and the Northern Ireland Executive. The Minister attends the COBRA meetings. What are we doing about our people abroad, because that is a concern? If we are anticipating that this will go on longer than a month, for maybe three months, four months, what are we doing to try to get our people home? Maybe it is not a priority right now, and I accept that, and hard decisions are having to be made — we heard that yesterday when Mr Allister talked about his very tragic constituent — but I think that it has to be a consideration. They are as much our responsibility as anything else.

Minister, I wish you and the Assembly well because I see the work that we are doing to represent and put forward the views of our constituents and to assist and advocate on their behalf. The weeks and months ahead will be really difficult, but we will come out the other end. That is what we have to look forward to and that is what I am trying to encourage my constituents to look forward to.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call the Minister of Health, Robin Swann, to conclude the debate on the motion and the amendment.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Thank you Mr Speaker. I thank Members for their contributions and for their acknowledgment of my staff, the health and social care staff, domiciliary staff, pharmacists, doctors, GPs and all those people across Northern Ireland who, as I think Mr Allister said, are working not just for where we are now but for what is still to face us. It is then, Members, that we will look for your assistance, help and understanding.

3.15 pm

I will just update Members. A lot of issues were raised about PPE, and I want to make Members fully aware that, earlier today, I authorised the release of 30% of our pandemic stockpile. That is probably earlier than we would have wished, but it is because of, I suppose, the concerns that have been raised. The additional pressure now comes on those in the trusts, the GP practices and

every other facility to make sure that that PPE is managed wisely. That is the challenge at this minute in time. It is a challenge that I cannot manage. It is a challenge that my Department cannot manage on the front-line level. There is a responsibility there.

Folks, I stood here a fortnight ago and said that sanitiser was being stolen from our hospitals: face masks are being stolen from our emergency departments. The pressure may be on us, as a Department, and the trust to make sure that the PPE is there and is available, but there is also a responsibility on the wider public to make sure that it is available for those who need it, when they need it.

I turn to today's contributions. Members, if you will indulge me, I want to cover as many of them as I can, because I am one of the Ministers who has stopped answering Assembly questions. That is simply because we had nearly 800 of them. Members, if someone looked at some of those questions today in hindsight, they would wonder whether it was really worthwhile to ask them. If some people from outside the House looked at some of those questions, they would ask why they were ever asked in the first place.

I will start with the contribution from the Deputy Chair of the Committee. She raised issues about the well-being and deployment of students and retirees. A number of Members raised that issue. I assure Members that students and retirees and, indeed, the volunteers whom we are asking for, as empowered by the Bill under the VEF scheme, will have the necessary training and support and that their health and safety is paramount. Whilst those measures are being progressed urgently, essential processes for recruitment are still taking place but much faster. As for where they will be deployed, those staff will be deployed as operational needs require, to make sure that we have a balance in the need that is there but matched up with the skills and experience at the level of the people who are supplying them.

The Deputy Chair also asked about indemnity for Health and Social Care activity. The provision of clinical negligence indemnity to healthcare workers and others carrying out NHS activities is a devolved matter. Clause 12 provides powers to provide indemnity for clinical negligence liabilities arising from HSC activities carried out for the purpose of dealing with or in consequence of the coronavirus outbreak where there is no existing indemnity arrangement in place.

The Deputy Chair also asked about the sectors where employees can absent themselves for emergency volunteering. It covers employees and workers who are engaged in COVID-19 volunteer activity, so it includes agency workers, and those eligible will receive compensation for the loss of earnings and travel expenses. The scheme has been designed on a UK-wide basis, but, as for how we manage some of our other volunteers coming forward, I spoke with the Minister for Communities this morning, and she is engaging on how we manage that. This is an Executive-wide approach. Although I lead on the Bill today because it is health-based and health-grounded, the response is across the Executive.

The Deputy Chair also raised the issue of volunteering leave. Emergency volunteering leave will create temporary, unpaid statutory rights for eligible employees and workers, so that they can take emergency volunteering leave. It is a day-one right for employees and workers, and it will be

for up to a period of 16 weeks. An employee or worker may take only one period of emergency volunteering leave in any volunteering period and that must be in a block of two, three or four weeks, so that it is fair to their employer as well. If they take up a volunteering space in the health and social care system, that provides value as well.

John O'Dowd raised a number of questions and made a valid point. Be under no illusions: we will lose businesses and jobs, but my aim, as Minister of Health, is to lose as few lives as possible. That is where our focus must be and should be at all times. He said life would go back to normal. Folks, I do not see the "normal" going back to what we perceived it to be. There will be a new "normal". We will look at life and society differently. Be under no illusion: this will have a profound effect on how we respond to society afterwards.

John O'Dowd also asked about the rationale for the amendment that I moved this morning. The amendment to the legislative consent motion was simply an amendment to capture some last-minute amendments to the Bill and to make sure that those provisions were included in the Bill. They were raised by the Department for Communities to refer to district council meetings, business improvement districts, statutory sick pay, commercial leases and business tenancies. The reason for the amendment was to make sure that we captured in the Bill what we could.

Again, I want to reinforce that, as the Chairs and Deputy Chairs of various Committees said, the contents of the Bill cover the Executive Office, Economy, Communities, Justice, DAERA, Education and Health. They all have input into the Bill. I get the privilege and honour to lead it because COVID-19 is seen as a health matter. Many Members made a point about the six-month clause: a new clause for a six-month review has been added. That allows the House of Commons to express a view on the continued operation of the legislation, and the review clause does not apply to the temporary measures that are being devolved.

As Health Minister, for the parts of the Bill that are within my remit and within the function and action of my Department, I will come back here and give regular updates. I have committed to do that as Minister. I am not averse to taking the criticism of the House, should be it be constructive or otherwise. I have been here too long to let this issue get to me — well, it does get to me personally — to let the challenge of Members in the House get to me.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Executive Office asked about pensions for retired returnees and for the reconfiguration to be temporary. The pensions clause — 45 — exists to remove any pension restrictions as an obstacle, so that has already been covered in the Bill. It is open as something that we can do, as we need to deploy.

On the enforcement of what can be closed, as I said, the Bill provides for the enforcement of measures to close premises and prohibit gatherings. It is important as part of social distancing measures. Those measures and the enforcement powers focus on owners and occupiers of premises and organisers of events; they do not target individual people, however foolish they may be, who may choose to ignore advice and attend events. I recognise that that may not be enough if individual people do not heed the instruction and continue to behave in a way that puts their health and that of others at risk. If additional measures are needed, such as fixed penalty notices, to deal with individuals who behave irresponsibly, with the

agreement of my Executive colleagues, we will not hesitate to introduce them.

I move on to contributions from other Members. My party leader, Steve Aiken, said that, as we face the crisis, it will bring out the best of us. I hope it also shames the worst of us, who cannot see that their selfish actions today, yesterday and tomorrow will cost lives. They will put pressure on our health service that will see it not being able to cope. I think of John O'Dowd's depiction of someone who is irresponsible today not being able to be beside a loved one suffering from the severe ravages that COVID-19 will bring.

Paula Bradshaw referred to those in the community and the volunteers who are stepping up. We cannot allow that spirit of volunteering and contribution to be in vain. We cannot fail those people by not supporting them in doing that. She mentioned another challenge that, I think, Matthew O'Toole raised as well. The Bill will cause us to look at death in a very different way over the next few months. The normal tradition for all sides of the House — a wake, visiting the house and putting out a friendly hand of comfort or a hug to someone who has been bereaved — is no longer advisable or acceptable. That friendly hand of comfort or hug could lead to another death. Folks, this will be tough. We are in a tough few months. We will see the other side, but, if we do not listen to the advice that has been given and follow the guidance in the Bill, not all of us will see the other side. That is as basic and blunt a message as I can give.

The Chair of the Justice Committee, Paul Givan, made a number of comments. I am fortunate that my Executive colleague the Justice Minister addressed some of the aspects of the Bill that are relevant to her yesterday. If the Executive need to pass additional legislation, we can. We can also supplement what is in the Bill with regulations; there is that ability. The Chair of the Justice Committee touched on the human side of what COVID-19 means to each of us as MLAs. It will reach out and hit families. How a family reacts will be a challenge. He said that people seem to be ignorant of or just do not want to comply with the guidance that we are giving on social distancing. Those people may feel that they are immune because they are young. The statistics — Steve Aiken referred to them — show that over one third of those who have tested positive for COVID-19 in Northern Ireland are under 40. The next third fall into the 44-to-65 age bracket, and the other third are older than that. The virus does not respect age. To the young people who think that they are immune, I say, "You will not be immune to the effects of some of the actions in the Bill, nor will your loved ones be able to bask in what, you think, is your immunity to COVID-19". The challenge of social distancing is about stopping the spread in homes, workplaces and our general society.

I thank the Member for his prayers. Many in Northern Ireland rely on prayers and will look to them at this minute in time. Those prayers are valued no matter what they are. If you are in your place of worship — I think that it was Dave Allen who said, "If you have any God or no God" — say a prayer of thanks tonight for our health service and the work that it is doing.

The Chair of the Economy Committee spoke about the volunteer register. I spoke to her colleague, the Minister of Communities, this morning because Communities is leading on that. She also had a query about article 36.

Yes, it will be used only if it is needed and we have to compel colleges, schools or childcare to open to support the children of the key workers who keep our health service running.

The Chair of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee spoke of the support that organisations such as the GAA and the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster can give. They can prepare to support those in our community who face isolation but do not have the family that most of us can rely on, including those who are socially isolated and distant in rural communities. Through the steps and measures that we are taking, we do not want to isolate people from society; we want to shield them from the virus. There is a big difference, and there is a responsibility on other organisations to contact and support those people.

3.30 pm

Patsy McGlone referred to health workers being a key group. Patsy: 100%. The more testing we can do, the better, and, this morning, I stated that we will increase the number of tests to 1,100 per day. As soon as I mentioned that, I took criticism from across the House, with Members stating that it is not enough. It is not enough, and that is why we are pushing on. Three weeks ago, we were doing 32 tests a day. We are now up to 1,100 a day, and the push to do more tests continues so we can ensure that our front-line staff can get back to work as quickly as possible. We want to support their families. We also want to support the other vulnerable groups in our hospitals. We want to make sure that we are not treating non-COVID patients beside COVID patients and putting an additional strain on our hospital facilities. So, if we find a case in a care home or in a facility that looks after people with learning disabilities, we will not keep all those people together. If we find one case, we will test everyone around them. We are focusing the tests. As our capability increases, which it will, we will target and test those who will benefit most.

Mr McGlone asked whether the powers available to the Public Health Agency could be extended to environmental health officers in district councils. The answer is yes. The public health regulation-making powers, under clause 46 in schedule 17 to the Bill, can confer functions on the Public Health Agency or other bodies or persons to help support the public health response to COVID-19.

The powers relating to potentially infectious persons in schedule 20 allow the director of public health in the Public Health Agency to advise or direct others under arrangements to prevent or control the spread of coronavirus. It is about how we ensure that we use people to the best of their ability and skill set.

On supporting people who are subject to early release from prison, my officials are working to ensure that mental health support is there for anyone who is suffering from mental ill-health during this difficult time. Support will include an increased online resource as undoubtedly our workers in this area will fall victim to this virus as well. Mental health is also a major part of what my Department does, but it is also supporting the other work that we do in asking people to socially isolate.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Education Committee quoted Heaney:

"If we winter this one out".

Folks, if we can get through to society to follow this guidance and listen to the simple advice, there will be more of us. We will see the summer. It is as simple as that. Heaney's guidance was right, but we have to follow the guidance, regulations and direction from the Department of Health as well.

Mr Nesbitt asked a number of questions about the prohibition of events and wondered whether, for example, a building site constitutes a gathering. It is not the policy intent behind the clause for public events, but it is something that my Executive colleagues in TEO are looking at. The legislation for powers relating to events, gatherings and premises in Northern Ireland enables TEO to give directions, but, before doing so:

"the Executive Office must—

(a) have regard to any relevant advice published by the Chief Medical Officer or any of the Deputy Chief Medical Officers of the Department of Health in Northern Ireland, and

(b) consult the Chief Medical Officer or any of the Deputy Chief Medical Officers."

Therefore, before making a declaration of the risks of coronavirus in Northern Ireland, to enable the activation of powers relating to potentially infectious persons in Northern Ireland, the Department of Health must consult the Chief Medical Officer, and such a declaration by the Department of Health must be published online and in the 'Belfast Gazette'. Hopefully, that provides the clarity and reassurance the Member was looking for.

As Martina Anderson said, the perception of the joint office of our First Minister and deputy First Minister as they deliver messages to the people of Northern Ireland cannot be underestimated. It shows the unity of purpose that the Executive have in dealing with the challenge of coronavirus.

Ms Anderson also referred to the human rights implications of the Bill. The front of the Bill carries the declaration on the European Convention of Human Rights, and the Health Secretary, Matt Hancock, made a statement under section 19(1)(a) of the Human Rights Act 1998. So, in my view, the provisions of the Coronavirus Bill are compatible with the Convention rights. That is similar and akin to declarations that are made in any piece of legislation in Northern Ireland.

Martina Anderson and Matthew O'Toole asked why immigration officers need these powers and queried what the powers will allow an immigration officer to do. I think that their concerns were over the powers of immigration officers. The powers ensure that immigration officers will be able to support the wider public health effort where they encounter a person who is, or may be, infectious during the course of their normal functions at the border, or while exercising immigration enforcement functions in-country. The proposed powers will allow an immigration officer to direct or remove such a person to a suitable place for the purpose of screening or assessment or to keep that person in a suitable place for a time-limited period before he or she is handed over to the relevant health authorities. That time-limited period is up to three hours but it can be extended by a further nine hours. Immigration officers are

required to consult a public health officer to the extent that that is practicable before exercising those powers.

Justin McNulty talked about how this role was pressurised but, as I said last week or the week before, this role is a privilege. It is an honour to hold the role and to represent an untiring, relentless and dedicated workforce. With regard to how I see the health service in this country at the minute, the health service is more than a sound bite. The health service is more than a headline to be chased because our health service means life itself for so many of our constituents. Let us not get distracted about what the health service could be doing; the health service is doing everything that it possibly can.

Matthew O'Toole stated that it is time to be honest. Since I took up this role, with coronavirus and COVID-19 hitting Northern Ireland, being honest is all that I can be. I have been blunt. I have been frank and, at times, I have probably gone further than some would have wished me to in my public messaging. That 14-15,000 people in Northern Ireland could die if others do not take their responsibilities seriously is a message that I cannot hit home hard enough. Now is the time for people to act.

Rachel Woods' questions about how we look after our homeless people and how we look after the vulnerable are well placed. It is work that is ongoing but probably not fast enough. It was said to me in a passing comment the other night that, when Belfast became so depleted of normal shoppers and normal people, the numbers of homeless in our city became more apparent. That is an issue that we should be tackling anyway outwith this Bill. Most of Miss Woods' questions are outwith this Bill but they are not outwith the competency of the Executive or my ministerial colleagues. Your questions been heard today, and I will make sure that the Hansard report of this debate is shared with all my ministerial colleagues. The issue was also raised by Claire Sugden. Although the focus is now on my Department and what we can do to tackle COVID-19, it has to be on others and how they support the Department of Health's approach.

Rachel Woods also spoke about the removal of liberties. Those who know me and my politics will know that the Bill does not represent my political way or political thought, in any direction, but I see the Bill as necessary because there is no greater removal of personal liberty than the removal of life. If we do not enact this legislation and move quickly enough to take the steps that we need to take, that is exactly what we will be talking about. To remove the liberty of life for more of our constituents than it has to be would be the greatest failure.

I thank Jim Allister for his words of support for not only me but the rest of the Health Department. Yesterday, I said in the media that the measures that were going to come forward were draconian, because we had had an indication of what was coming. Jim Allister described how Draco used the penalty of death for those who failed to comply with his rules and regulations. Folks, it was an apt description; these rules are draconian. If people refuse to abide by the advice and guidance that the Department of Health is giving and the measures in the Bill, it will be to the cost of the lives of others. That is why they are draconian, and that is why they have to be enforced. If we take these steps now, we have the ability to fight back against the virus that is hitting us across Northern Ireland.

He also asked about the civil contingencies legislation. The Bill is to supplement and enforce any gaps in provision that were found in our legislation, Scottish legislation, Welsh legislation and English legislation. I am probably going further in the challenges to the civil liberty that we value and hold dear in our country. It is about supplementing and supporting the legislation that is there, and plugging that in. A four-nation approach has been taken to make sure that those pieces of legislation are encapsulated and consistent across the country.

Jim Allister and John O'Dowd had a challenge with regard to where this was going in some respects. Jim's points and questions were well made, and John's response was equally valid. Will I use the army? Will I call in the army if I have to? If we get to a stage at which the army can provide a service that we cannot, I will use whoever is at my disposal. I will use whatever tool I have at my disposal to tackle this virus. If the Irish Army wants to come up and help us when they are sorted out down there, I would be more than happy to welcome them. Let us not let this issue be politicised. It has not been, to date, and I do not think that it would serve the House or the individuals well if it were to be. I know that that is not where the Members were going; they were legitimate concerns.

I put on record the co-working that we have had east-west and North/South, from our Chief Medical Officers, from the Public Health Agency in Northern Ireland and from the HSE in the South. Northern Ireland's first case was someone who had travelled through Dublin. We were able to sort out the contact tracing because of the established relationships that we have on either side of the border. There is, therefore, the ability to work across all borders and, if we have to use it, we will.

Jim Allister and Claire Sugden asked about definitions of security and social security and raised issues about statutory sick pay. I do not have the detail; there is no point in me trying to find it in this file. I have been leading on the health issues, and I have been left with the delivery of the Bill, but I will get the answers for the Members, because they have asked apt questions. The Minister for Communities has come into the Chamber to make a statement. I do not know whether her statement will cover some of the questions that have been raised.

Gerry Carroll asked for regular updates. I have already committed to coming back and giving updates on the health components of the Bill. He asked about the notification of migrants to the Home Office. No, I will not do it. He also asked about access to free healthcare. COVID-19 is a notifiable disease, so there should be no restriction. There is no restriction in receiving free healthcare in Northern Ireland within our NHS, so that concern should not exist.

3.45 pm

The final contribution was from Claire Sugden. This is about the people. This is about ensuring that as many of our people as possible survive. That is why this legislation is being passed, as well as the legislation on statutory sick pay and all the rest of it. The Minister for Communities will, I am sure, update the House on that at some time.

The Member asked about Assembly questions, and I covered that point earlier. She has been in contact with me about a number of cases, and we will keep working

on those. As regards Executive colleagues coming here to provide regular updates, if I were nervous or frit of Members' input into this debate or whatever I was doing, I would not be standing here, I would not have brought the legislation here. She can be assured by that commitment from me.

Again, I emphasise that the measures in the Coronavirus Bill are temporary and are proportionate to the threat that we face. They will be used only when strictly necessary and will remain in place for as long as is required to respond to the situation. The provisions in the Bill are intended to protect life and the health of the public and to ensure that Health and Social Care staff are supported to deal with the significant extra pressure that is being placed on the health system.

I put on record my thanks to Executive colleagues for their ongoing collaboration and support throughout the process. This has undoubtedly shown how the Executive can work collectively and effectively together with one clear purpose, which is to ensure that we have the necessary legislative measures in place to deal with the COVID-19 outbreak. I express my gratitude to the Health Committee for all its efforts and assistance and to all the other Committees that have taken forward different parts of the Bill. I am particularly grateful to the Committees for taking the time to examine the legislative consent memorandum relating to the Bill, for the pragmatic approaches that they have taken on the issue and for their positive engagement with all officials. I must also add that all those actions were performed within a very demanding timescale, and I thank the Chairpersons and Committee members for their endeavours.

Finally, I pay tribute to our brilliantly selfless Health and Social Care staff, across all professions, who are working tirelessly to care for our friends and loved ones in this unprecedented period. Staff across all Departments, as well as the Assembly, have worked over the last number of weeks with their colleagues in Wales, Scotland and England to make sure that we have a Bill that addressed the needs and requests of the House. I thank the back-room staff who are working tirelessly to prepare for how to flatten the peak but will eventually have to tackle the peak. I also want to personally thank the professionals in my Department, in the Health and Social Care Board and in the Public Health Agency. The worst is yet to come, but, by planning for the worst and working for the best, we will get through this. However, it is important that we all play our part. We must all work together, from businesses prioritising the welfare of their employees to people continuing to do the basic things such as thoroughly washing their hands.

In conclusion, I reiterate that I consider the Coronavirus Bill to be an important and positive measure that will help to ensure that Northern Ireland Departments have the necessary legislative measures available so that we are well prepared to respond in a way that offers substantial protection to the public. In practical terms, I believe that Members understand the importance of including Northern Ireland provisions in the Bill and will give their support to the motion today.

I pass on my personal condolences to the families of those who have already lost someone to COVID-19. There will be more, but, by taking responsible actions in the House, we can reduce that number. I commend the motion to the House.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Coronavirus Bill dealing with emergency registration of health professionals in clauses 2 and 4 and schedules 1 and 3; emergency volunteers in clauses 7 and 8 and schedule 6; mental health and mental capacity in clause 9 and schedules 9 and 10; health service indemnification in clause 12; registration of deaths and stillbirths etc in clauses 17 and 20 and schedule 12 (Part 3); food supply in clauses 23 to 27 and schedule 14; inquests in clauses 29 and 30; schools, childcare providers, etc in clauses 35 and 36 and schedules 15 (Part 3) and 16 (Part 3); statutory sick pay in clauses 40 to 42; pensions in clause 45; protection of public health in clause 46 and schedule 17; powers relating to potentially infectious persons in clause 49 and schedule 20 (Part 5); powers relating to events, gatherings and premises in clause 50 and schedule 21 (Part 5); courts and tribunals: use of video and audio technology in clause 55 and schedule 26; powers in relation to bodies in clause 56 and schedule 27; commencement in clause 73; power to suspend and revive provisions in clause 74; expiry in clause 75; power to alter expiry date in clause 76; power to amend Act in consequence of amendments to subordinate legislation in clause 77; power to make consequential modifications in clause 78 and procedure for certain orders made by a Northern Ireland Department in clause 82 as introduced to Parliament on 19 March 2020; and those provisions made by amendment during the passage of the Bill as they extend to Northern Ireland.

Discretionary Support (Amendment) (COVID-19) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

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

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): I beg to move:

That the draft Discretionary Support (Amendment) (COVID-19) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

The regulations, brought in under article 135 of the Welfare Reform (NI) Order 2015, will amend the Discretionary Support Regulations (NI) 2016. The First Minister has agreed to the legislation being brought forward under urgent procedure. Due to the urgency of making the amendment, the Committee for Communities has not had the opportunity to complete its scrutiny of the draft legislation. The regulations are a direct response to the coronavirus pandemic, and my priority as Minister for Communities is to protect the health and well-being of those who find themselves in a crisis situation as a result of COVID-19.

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

I am determined that my Department will do everything it can to help people who are diagnosed with COVID-19 or are advised to self-isolate. The amendment will be one small but important step in getting much-needed support to many vulnerable people. Discretionary support was introduced as a specific scheme in the North to replace the social fund community care grants and crisis loans. The amendment will go further by enhancing the existing discretionary support scheme. It will ensure that additional financial support is available to the most vulnerable people. That support is not available in England, Scotland and Wales and, alongside the welfare mitigation package, will ensure that people here have access to a more flexible social security system.

The aim of discretionary support is to address the needs of people in extreme, exceptional or crisis situations where there is significant risk to the health, safety or well-being of the claimant or a member of the claimant's immediate family. Awards can usually be made either as a loan or a non-repayable grant to assist with a range of crisis situations. That can include an award to assist with living expenses, where a claimant has no means of meeting immediate costs for themselves or their immediate family. Entitlement is determined by the level of income, rather than entitlement to benefit. That means that people in low-paid employment can access discretionary support. The income threshold is set with reference to the national minimum wage over-25 rate and is automatically adjusted when that rate increases. From 1 April 2020, the income threshold will increase to £18,137.

Discretionary support already delivers emergency financial support to people facing a crisis, but the support that people can access is limited. The Discretionary Support (Amendment) (COVID-19) Regulations will introduce a new emergency payment to help people during this crisis. The amendment will allow my Department to provide non-repayable grants, rather than loans, for living

expenses. The payments will be available to people who find themselves with no means of meeting immediate living costs as a result of being diagnosed with COVID-19 or being advised to self-isolate because of COVID-19.

I want to make it clear that the provision also applies to any member of the person's immediate family. That means that, if one person in a household is told to self-isolate, another will be able to claim discretionary support under the provision. Payments will be made to cover the number of days from the date of the claim until the claimant's next income is due to be received. In recognition of the exceptional circumstances we now face, there will be no restriction on the number of COVID-19-related grants that a person will be able to receive. If they continue to require immediate assistance with living expenses, further payments will be considered.

The amendments that I have announced today will have an impact on the discretionary support budget, which is currently set at £16 million per annum. It is too early to accurately estimate the increased demand, but, assuming a 100% increase in the grant awards, the estimated additional expenditure will be £9.6 million in the next financial year. I can advise the House that anticipated increased expenditure has been shared with the Department of Finance. I can also assure Members that there is already a robust budget management approach in place for discretionary support. If a potential overspend is identified and additional funding is not available, my Department has the legal authority to reduce the amount awarded for subsequent applications. To date, no budget controls have had to be implemented in respect of the discretionary support budget, and I trust that there will be no need to apply controls in the next financial year.

All Members will appreciate that these are challenging times, and I want to reassure people that the legislation will help to reduce the risk to vulnerable people by providing the necessary financial assistance to those who need it. I will continue to examine whether further changes to the discretionary support scheme are feasible, and I am determined to increase the emergency financial support to people at this time of crisis.

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): As the Minister has said, given the fast-moving nature of the health crisis that we are in, the Committee for Communities has not had the opportunity to discuss the regulations. However, I am confident that the Committee would have few objections to the measures that the Minister has taken in order to support claimants who are affected by COVID-19, whether that be themselves or a member of their immediate family. In particular, I have no doubt that the Committee would be fully supportive of the assistance being provided through discretionary grants rather than loans. There is a general view that loans simply serve to place people in debt that they have to pay off over a long time. We have enough anxiety in society today without adding to it by indebting people.

The speed at which the regulations have been brought forward should be seen as positive. We do not want people wondering what support they can expect in a week or two. That support is required now. The policy is, in effect, an extension of the current discretionary support policy. However, unlike the current policy, the regulations ensure that people will be able to make repeated claims within

any 12-month period, and, as long as there is evidence to support the claim, a grant may be provided.

I note that, as the Minister has stated, the additional expenditure would be upwards of £10 million a year, assuming a 100% increase in grant awards. The Department has advised in the accompanying SL1 that it has engaged with the Department of Finance to highlight the anticipated increased expenditure. It is, therefore, not entirely clear whether the anticipated increase in expenditure has been agreed. Can the Minister clarify that in her response?

Finally, while the new policy is welcome, it will be of little help if we do not have the people to process the applications or if the applications cannot be processed in a very short time. Can the Minister shed some light on whether additional resources will be dedicated to aid the processing of discretionary support applications, on whether the application will be short and on what level of evidence will be required to support the application?

When the crisis is over, we will be judged by the decisions and actions that we took to support the people through it. The regulations are just a small part of that support. I urge the House to affirm the regulations.

With your indulgence, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will speak as a Member of the House. First, I thank the Minister for her diligence in her endeavours to help and protect the many vulnerable families and individuals in the communities that we all represent; indeed, I thank all the Ministers on our Executive for their combined effort in steering us through the most fearful of times. At this time, I think of all of the workers who are literally putting their life on the line: the entire Health and Social Care family. I think particularly, of course, of those I worked with when I worked for the NHS.

No words could convey the anxiety that I feel or the gratitude that I have, knowing the wonderful people they are, for the selfless dedication that they are showing not only to our health service but to our country.

4.00 pm

In finishing, I think of all the mums and dads who, like me, are thinking about their children who are at work. As parents, we want, no matter what, to protect and cocoon our children, no matter what age they are. We owe them all a debt of gratitude, no matter what job they are doing today. We, as parents, will continue to worry because it is our job to do so. I say to all those who are not meant to be at work or out on essential business today, "Stay at home. Many of the people who are work today have mums and dads, like me and many others in the Chamber, who are worried sick about them. Please, stay at home and keep our essential workers safe".

Ms Ennis: Like other Members, I pay tribute to our fantastic Health and Social Care staff. I send my thoughts and my solidarity to them. They are navigating us on this nightmare journey. More than thoughts and words, what we need to send them is the tools and equipment to deal with the volatile and dangerous environment that they now work in. I am glad that Minister Swann has announced that he will source additional personal protection equipment for front-line staff.

I, too, welcome and endorse the motion. The regulations will enable the Department to provide a discretionary support non-repayable grant, rather than a loan, for living expenses to claimants who find themselves in crisis as a result of COVID-19, whether or not they have had a previous grant for living expenses in the past 12 months. In short, the regulations will provide a short-term living grant for someone who is infected by the virus or has to self-isolate, if advised to do so, or if a member of their family is affected. That is absolutely the right thing to do.

I take the opportunity to applaud the pragmatic, logical and real-world measures that have been taken by Minister Deirdre Hargey and her Department during this uncertain and difficult time for our communities and our society. She has acted swiftly over the past number of days to ensure that there is flexibility in our social security system so that, as she has said, people will not be punished for doing the right thing. I welcome the £1.8 million, which equates to three years' funding, for the independent advice sector to assist people with benefit changes as part of a mitigations package, supporting and protecting 50 front-line jobs and securing three years' funding for the appeals and representation service.

Our independent advice sector plays a crucial role in assisting people to access their social security benefits and helping them to make appeals. We will need it in the time ahead as we face the challenge of the COVID-19 virus. The Minister has moved to ensure that funding for community and voluntary groups will continue in the time ahead with upfront payments for the next three months. I welcome the commitments that she has made in discussions with the Housing Executive on a homelessness contingency plan. I know that she has also committed to explore measures that could be put in place to protect renters in the uncertain time ahead.

The Minister's actions and those of her ministerial colleagues prove that we do not need to invoke the divine inspiration of some higher power. People who have been impacted on by the pandemic cannot wait for that. What is needed is those in power to use that power now to protect citizens. It is difficult to give out advice in these times. We know that it is a changing picture. It is a changing and evolving situation that will throw up new challenges in the days and weeks ahead. Will the Minister say whether she is considering further changes to discretionary support to deal with the current crisis?

Mr McGlone: Basically, I welcome the scheme. I thank the Minister for taking the initiative to deliver it and to try to get help out to where it is most needed. I am sure that all of us have been inundated via Facebook, email and everything else by people who faced a dilemma this morning and could have nil income — zero — coming into the house.

I want to ask the Minister a number of questions. The first relates to staffing and resource, an issue that was raised by Ms Bradley. Does the Minister feel assured that she has adequate resource to deliver and get the money out there to the people who need it at this time? Previously, discretionary support was a great idea, but, often, there was huge difficulty in getting through on the lines. Secondly, what provision has been made or is being made for people who face that dilemma this morning of having no work? The major announcement yesterday by the Prime Minister has left an awful lot of people with no shop door to open this morning. That falls into two categories: one

is the employees — there is that HMRC scheme — and the second is the self-employed. Thirdly, we have heard that provision has been made for renters and people who are homeless. We have had inquiries in our constituency office from students who live in Belfast, principally, but in other cities as well who have had to return home. They have consequent liabilities in Belfast or wherever their rental accommodation is, and, of course, they are on a low income. I will leave those issues with the Minister, and I commend her on her initiative in bringing this forward, subject to those matters being clarified.

Mr Butler: Thank you, Minister, for being with us in the Chamber this afternoon and for bringing this before us. I want to put on record — I am sure that you will join me — my thanks to all your staff in the different branches who go above and beyond the call of duty at the moment to ensure that some of the most vulnerable people in our society have the support that they so badly need.

These are, indeed, uncertain times, as has been said by nearly every Member so far today. We face many pressures in Northern Ireland, and many people will be adversely affected. It is, therefore, imperative that we collectively in the House support our Ministers to do all that we can to ensure that the physical, emotional and financial support is there to mitigate any hardship that may be faced. The Ulster Unionist Party, therefore, supports the proactive approach of this Minister and other Ministers in their Departments looking to introduce support packages, one example being the SR before us today. However, there is no doubt that we can and should do more. The Ulster Unionist Party will support and work with the Minister for Communities and her Executive colleagues to ensure that every possible measure of support and assistance is introduced.

There is also no doubt that these are exceptional circumstances and, as such, will require an exceptional response with various pieces of new legislation and the amendment of existing legislation that, ultimately, provides the appropriate support for those in need. As highlighted by the Committee Chair, the regulation before us will provide a short-term living grant to someone infected by COVID-19 or who has to self-isolate. I welcome the Minister's clarification for people who are affected and support for those people. All that is welcome. However, it is imperative to ensure that the process to avail of the grant is efficient and properly resourced. We look forward to that clarification today. We support the regulation.

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister for bringing the statement and information to the Assembly today. I rise on behalf of the Alliance Party to support and, hopefully, raise a few concerns. In doing so, I will try to avoid a repetition of concerns already raised. I am mindful of the unique circumstances in which the motion was moved and the urgency that brought the motion to us today. I am hopeful, though, that, as we go forward, more information can be released on the application process for such grants, that bureaucracy will hopefully be kept to an absolute minimum and, therefore, waiting times also can be reduced. Hopefully, the Minister can give us some information that that process may be publicised, at least online, to increase public awareness of that.

I do not intend to repeat the concerns raised around HR resources in Departments at this time. We are all aware of the reasons for such shortages and urgencies in Departments and, indeed, other employers. It might be

worth mentioning that, as recently as yesterday, I heard that some new universal credit applicants were already finding that the verification processes were not coping with demand and applications were being delayed as a result of that. I am hopeful that that can be addressed, especially in the context of the measures being brought forward on welfare mitigations as we approach the 1 April deadline.

I raise those issues as concerns and not as criticisms. On behalf of my colleagues, I assure the Minister and her teams in the Department and its various agencies of our total support in these difficult times.

Mr O'Dowd: I will keep my comments short. I welcome the introduction of the measures today. Last week, in the Economy Committee, I called for the rule book to be ripped up or, at the very least, put in the drawer until we get through the crisis. It is clear that the Executive are working on that very basis. They are bringing forward initiatives from the various Departments to ensure that we do whatever we can to protect the vulnerable in our society and those who are losing their jobs. I accept that there is much more to do and that, every time we make an announcement, more questions come in, understandably so. However, the fact is that the Communities Minister has brought forward initiatives that are about putting food on people's tables, keeping a roof over their heads and lessening the anxiety that many people face. I welcome the announcement today.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for moving the motion. I am sure that she and others will agree that everything needs to be done now to ensure that people are financially supported through this difficult, fast-moving and unprecedented period.

I would like to ask the Minister about the regulations and, going forward generally, ask her to respond to some of the points that have already been raised. Has there been any discussion in her Department about staffing? I appreciate that the situation is, obviously, fast-moving, that some of her staff are self-isolating and that there are health issues to consider. I have heard, as have other Members, that people are having difficulty in getting advice over the phone, particularly with regard to universal credit, employment and support allowance (ESA) and other benefits. Some disruption is expected, at least, this week and possibly next week, but has there been any discussion in the Department about trying to alleviate those pressures to ensure that people are not forced to wait on the telephone line for several hours, which, I know, has been happening in some cases? I am also hearing concerns that information about universal credit is not readily available to people. I would appreciate some answers to those questions.

Ms Hargey: I thank everyone who has contributed. There were a lot of similar issues raised.

Paula mentioned funding, and we have a bid in for £9.6 million extra that we require, but that could change again, depending on what the demand is. We already have part of that in the Department where we are looking at money that has not been spent in-year for this situation. The Finance Minister is looking at that bid at the moment and is aware that that money needs to be made available. The Executive and Members know that there is a definite need for this discretionary support to ensure that families' needs are met. I see that being concluded positively very soon.

The issue of staffing has come up a lot, and I gave an update on that at this morning's Executive meeting. Our staff are trying to defend the basic front line of essential public services. The main one is to make sure that we process benefit payments and pay them out as quickly as possible. Obviously, they are coming under huge pressure, and the staff in our jobs and benefits offices and call centres and our health staff should be hugely commended. They are going into work to deliver that front-line public service, even though the wider advice is to stay at home, and I can see that commitment from them.

There is a strain. We have seen over 10,000 new claims for universal credit since the week beginning 16 March, so that gives a sense of the scale. Yesterday alone, there were 5,000 calls to the universal credit helpline. In the first two hours yesterday, there were almost 10,000 calls in relation to discretionary support.

4.15 pm

That gives you an indication of the magnitude. We have never faced a situation like this before. The system is trying to change and we are trying to respond to that need. Staff have been working round the clock, especially our front-line staff, and we are going to be announcing future policy changes today in an attempt to refocus staff into front-line essential services.

On issues around debt and fraud, people will be redirected, and have been redirected in the last couple of days, to really focus on front-line essential services to make sure that we have the staff there. That is being updated on a regular basis. It is being fed into the Executive emergencies group in case, across the Civil Service, we need more people.

We are also looking at IT issues, and we have made urgent IT requests for those who need to stay at home. Universal credit, for example, is an online digital system. If we have enough IT equipment, people can work from home and still deliver those essential services. The focus therefore falls on the discretionary support, because that is not an automated system. We have to do that manually, and we are making plans to streamline it, looking at a one-page application and a processing time that really takes the bureaucracy out of this — basically, to rip up the existing rule book, because we are not working in normal times.

That is some of the stuff that we are doing, and we will keep it under daily review. I am engaging with the senior team in the Department. There has been ongoing engagement with trade unions and others to look at this, at what we can do to ensure that staff are protected and that we really show our appreciation of those staff, who are defending an essential front-line public service.

Sinéad touched on the independent advice sector. It has been magnificent over the last week or two in supporting us. It was part of a community and voluntary sector emergencies group meeting that I chaired in the Department last Friday, and it is really stepping up to do all that it can in responding to these needs and delivering essential services to people on the ground. We are indebted to that sector for its role and the contribution that it is making.

The regulations that I am putting forward today are only part of a wider package of changes that we are looking to bring about. Alongside the new payment, I intend to

relax other existing rules around the discretionary support scheme to assist people during this period, because we are in the midst of a public health emergency. These changes can be made without the need for legislative amendment; they are policy changes, and as I bring them forward and announce them, I will be doing so publicly. I also give a commitment to the Chair of the Communities Committee that I will alert the Committee to those changes and send weekly updates on changes that we are making, because things are moving at a very fast pace. Something that happened two hours ago may change in another two hours, so we will try to communicate with Members as much as possible. Even in the questions raised here today, and in all of these briefings, the Executive want to give a commitment that we will find a way of getting questions answered for Members, so that they can go out and give answers to their constituents.

Discretionary support awards for short-term living expenses are normally calculated to cover the number of days until the claimant's next payment is due. My officials now have discretion to increase the number of days for which short-term living awards are made, and this should avoid the need for an early repeat claim. I have also instructed officials to increase the benefit rate used to calculate a short-term living expenses award; they will now be calculated at a rate of 100% of the adult daily rate, which is an increase on the existing 60%. I am also looking at options this week to amend the legislation on the income threshold, because there is a concern. The benefit cap is £20,000, and the income threshold falls below that. Is there an urgent need to amend that? I am confident of bringing forward other measures to look at that.

Patsy, you touched on staffing and resource. We are trying to throw everything at this to defend essential services. We are rolling back — or, I suppose, rolling down — other services, and I will be making announcements later this afternoon in an attempt to streamline existing benefit processes. We have already suspended face-to-face, we have suspended the need to come into jobs and benefits offices, and I will be introducing more measures this week and in the coming days about further streamlining to ensure that our staff are paying out benefits and also responding to those who are phoning.

We are also looking at whether the demand for universal credit has dropped since the Chancellor's announcement. A lot of universal credit claims came in last week, before the announcement about 80% of salaries, so we are assessing how much of a drop off there is. We know that people may start to seek discretionary support as we relax the regulations and criteria. We will keep that under hourly, not even daily, review.

Regarding the housing component, housing is a critical issue for those paying rents in the social rented sector. I have had a number of engagements with housing associations and the Housing Executive. They will not start any proceedings for people who are falling into debt. I am also exploring ideas around the potential for discretionary housing support, which would support those in the public and private rented sectors. I will look at issues around evictions and notices to quit and will outline that in the coming days and weeks.

John touched on other issues around the application process. We are trying to streamline it and create a one-sheet application form. Hopefully, over the next 24

to 48 hours, you will see that and it will be on the system. There will also be streamlining for the staff who have to do discretionary support claims individually and manually. We will try to streamline that as much as we can, to make sure that we are getting support and payments to those who need them.

On the verification process for existing benefits, I will announce later today or tomorrow how we are going to streamline and cut back on those, to save time on checking and looking at verifications, and to ensure that staff can be redirected to other essential services.

Gerry touched on the issue of phone lines. I have given you a sense of the demand that is there. I cannot speak highly enough about the staff, who have thrown everything at this. They have been turning up to work every day in really tough circumstances. They have to be completely commended for the essential front-line public service that they are delivering.

As I have said, we will check constantly and it is an hourly review, not just a daily review. We will see if we have too many staff who, rightly, have to self-isolate or take time off and then we will redirect our services where we can, while still dealing with this public crisis. Any time that this gets critical or urgent, it is flagged up to the Executive emergencies group and to the Chair of the Committee, to keep people up to date. We are working with the Department of Work and Pensions, which is dealing with critical pressures in England, Scotland and Wales, and we will continue to monitor this hourly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Discretionary Support (Amendment) (COVID-19) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Ministerial Statement

The Economy in Light of COVID-19

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Speaker's Office has received notice from the Minister for the Economy that she wishes to make a statement. Before I call the Minister to make her statement, I would like to advise Members that, in the light of social distancing being observed by parties, I am relaxing the Speaker's ruling that Members must be in the Chamber to hear a statement if they wish to ask a question. Members will still have to make sure that their name is on the speaking list if they wish to be called.

What I am not relaxing for Members is the need to be short and concise in your question. This is not an opportunity for debate, and long introductions will not be permitted.

I also take this opportunity to remind Members that if they ask the Minister more than one question, it will be for the Minister to decide which question she elects to answer.

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): I am sure that I do not need to remind any Member of the gravity of the situation we are facing. It is, without question, the most serious global health and economic crisis that any of us have ever lived through.

First, and foremost, I place on record my gratitude to all those working on the front line to keep us safe and give medical support to those who need it. I also appeal to people to act responsibly, follow the advice, stay home if they can, and help medical staff by not acting recklessly and adding to the burden on our health service.

Business owners, too, must follow the advice. Non-essential retail is closed, but, if you are outside that category and you are remaining open, make sure that you take the necessary steps to protect your workers and practise social distancing. Workers should not feel forced to work side by side. If a job cannot be done within the Public Health Agency (PHA) advice for social distancing, employers need to let employees go home until a better system is put in place. This is too serious for shortcuts.

The impact of the virus and the necessary measures that have been put in place to contain it have had a devastating impact on economies around the world and Northern Ireland is no exception. Just this afternoon, I heard that Bombardier has been in touch to say that all of its worldwide operations have ceased, for the moment. The impact will not be fixed overnight. The impact of coronavirus will be felt for many years to come. Our economy is suffering; our businesses are under extreme pressure; and people are living under not only the threat of the virus but the threat of losing their job. The impact is on real people and real families. People are concerned about how to put food on the table. People who have spent a lifetime building their business are afraid that it will be gone.

Over the past two weeks, I have had a series of meetings and teleconferences with representatives from the retail and hospitality sectors and from right across our business community. There is fear about the future of their sectors. There is fear about the livelihood of their staff. There is fear about how to get through these challenging months. Our economy will suffer, but we will come back.

I have heard of the many challenges that businesses face, but I have also been inspired by people's determination.

Businesses have offered to help in sourcing things; individuals have offered their help in looking after people or providing vital services; companies have said that they can adapt their production lines to produce ventilators or personal protective equipment (PPE). More than 30 companies have offered to participate in manufacturing consortia to make ventilators. O'Neill's has started to manufacture PPE, and other companies are exploring the same route. A number of individuals and companies have sourced PPE masks from markets across the world. Several companies are in the process of accreditation to manufacture hand sanitisers, and four companies in Northern Ireland are working on providing COVID-19 testing. Business is doing what business does: reacting and innovating.

People who have found themselves out of work have also offered to help and examine how their skills could be used elsewhere, where the greatest need is. I am examining a proposal to develop a holistic solution, with coordination between the Department for the Economy and the Department for Communities. That would include utilising the current online systems, employer vacancy service and JobCentre Online, with some wrap-around support through Careers Service and universal credit. It is that spirit of determination that gives me confidence that we will see this through and that our economy will recover, and I will be ready to assist in that recovery phase.

I also recognise how difficult the current challenge is and pledge to do what I can to help businesses through this period. I met the local banks and urged them to be flexible and to work in partnership with government. I am pleased that, yesterday, we made progress with the launch of the coronavirus business interruption loan scheme and that some of our local banks helped to co-design the scheme so that it works better for Northern Ireland businesses. The coronavirus business interruption loan scheme is a crucial step in getting credit flowing to firms that urgently need it during this difficult period, and I encourage businesses to work with the relevant financial institutions to ensure that the scheme delivers cash to those in need as quickly as possible.

The Chancellor's statement on Friday evening, when he announced an employment support package, is also welcome and is one of the most important measures to have been introduced. We know that we need to keep people on the payroll to allow companies to weather the storm and to pick up quickly on either side. The job retention scheme reflects the calls from the Executive, our business leaders and trade unions, which have seen similar schemes be introduced across Europe to help firms to pay wages and retain their employees.

I am pleased that many companies that had already announced that they had to cut huge numbers of staff have now rescinded those announcements. That demonstrates why the scheme is so important. It is an extraordinary Government intervention, but extraordinary crises require bold action. I am encouraged that the Government have listened to our call

4.30 pm

I urge all eligible firms to take advantage of the measures that have been announced to support their workers. The coronavirus job retention scheme will provide an income of up to £2,500 a month for those employees who are not working, or up to 80% of the average wage. That

will be backdated to 1 March, and I understand that the Chancellor is prioritising that to ensure that it comes forward in April.

The self-employed and sole traders require further help. Those schemes do not cover everyone, so the Executive have asked the Treasury to extend support to that category, either by averaging out the past year's earnings to calculate a figure, or by paying a guaranteed income. Although this is not yet forthcoming, I understand that the Chancellor is considering those parts of the economy.

The increases, by £1,000 per year, to the working tax credit and universal credit will also help to protect the most vulnerable in society.

In addition to the Finance Minister's recent announcement on a freeze of business rates for three months, we have made an announcement confirming that we will pay a £10,000 grant to small businesses and a £25,000 grant to companies in our beleaguered hospitality, tourism and retail sectors. Together those schemes will inject £370 million, to support tens of thousands of our most vulnerable businesses and to help with cash flow. Those grant schemes will benefit 27,000 small businesses and 4,000 businesses in tourism, hospitality and retail.

I understand that time is of the essence, as some businesses have already announced closures. Officials from my Department have been working with officials from the Department of Finance, over the weekend, to ensure that we have a suitable mechanism to make those payments, and that those companies facing cash flow issues are issued payment as expeditiously as possible. The administration of a scheme involving payments of over £370 million was never going to be straightforward. In making that operational as soon as we can, we are ahead of where our counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales are.

Although our immediate focus has been on putting in place a system to process the £10,000 grant, I can assure Members that we are working hard to put in place processes for the £25,000 grant for our hospitality and tourism sectors. I am seeking to identify any gaps in the measures that have been announced nationally and in Northern Ireland. I hope to be in a position to respond further, to meet the particular needs of our businesses here, particularly around self-employed people, clarity for those on zero-hour contracts and for businesses that cannot avail themselves of the other measures that are available.

To return to the issue of small business grants, the eligibility criteria will be for those business that are eligible for small business rate relief. There are 27,000 of those business in Northern Ireland. We have used the LPS system to identify the businesses, but only around 9,000 of those businesses have a Bacs system to allow for initial payments.

I hope to make a written statement tomorrow to indicate that we are putting together a web portal where businesses can register if they are eligible for the small business rate relief grant, but have not supplied their bank details or do not pay their rates through the Bacs process. The rating list that we will use is basically last year's list, but we hope to amalgamate that with a list of those who will come into the category. We will try to expand the new list so that it is as broad and wide and possible. We must support the economy to recover.

All higher and further education institutions have convened a number of measures to manage and deal with the pandemic, such as the establishment of major incident teams and the activation of contingency measures. As the situation develops, all institutions will be in contact with the Department to inform it of any major developments. Each Northern Ireland higher education institution, with the exception of St Mary's, is closed for teaching and social activities. St Mary's remains open but tuition is being undertaken online. All institutions are working hard to facilitate remote working for staff members where possible.

Queen's University has cancelled all exams, and the university will arrange alternative ways to assess students. Stranmillis, a college of Queen's, will operate under the same measures. Ulster University has cancelled examinations and other face-to-face assessments scheduled for the end of the current semester, and those will be replaced by alternative online assessments. The Open University has also taken the decision to cancel face-to-face exams.

Student accommodation at the institutions remains operational. Those students who wish to remain in university and university colleges will be supported to do so. Both Queen's and Ulster University recognise the particular difficulties being faced by their international student communities. Students who are not normally resident in Northern Ireland and who wish to return home as a result of the pandemic will suffer no academic disadvantage. Colleges are distributing technology and equipment to allow the buildings to be closed except for access in the event of a significant technical failure or to allow essential maintenance. Face-to-face delivery will continue remotely using digital learning.

Each college is continuing to work through the ramifications and practicalities of the revised operational areas. We are facing very challenging times. I welcome the positive response of the further education colleges. They have all now closed but are determined to deliver for their students through digital learning and by maintaining college administrative processes to ensure that student support services, including educational maintenance allowance, FE grants and hardship funds, continue to be paid.

College staff have an important job to do and will keep further education operational, albeit remotely, for learners as best as possible. They are working to ensure that we are ready for recruitment for next year; to maintain the IT and estate infrastructure; and make payments to suppliers and staff. Our number one priority is to try to maintain delivery of the best possible teaching and learning to students at this time. College staff will continue to ensure that the most vulnerable students are supported and that arrangements are in place that will lead to the continued payment of a weekly training fee and education maintenance allowance.

The Executive have agreed to the provision of a payment for each pupil or student who is entitled to free school meals, and we are engaging to try to get that money paid directly to those for whom it is applicable.

My officials are liaising closely with the regulators, CCEA, which is working with awarding organisations to establish ways of awarding vocational qualifications. We will do that in conjunction with other UK regulators, awarding organisations and stakeholders. Obviously, for colleges,

there is a greater range of vocational qualifications and those who award them.

There are other areas of my Department that are vital. Officials have been working closely with the critical national infrastructure energy providers. These include: SONI; NIE Networks; the power stations; Mutual Energy; and the gas network operators, Phoenix, Firmus and SGN. We are doing that daily to ensure that their business continuity plans are proving to be sufficiently resilient to mitigate the risk of interruption to services. Officials are also liaising on a daily basis with the Utility Regulator to support its work on maintaining the electricity wholesale and retail markets. Our first priority is maintaining supply, especially to vulnerable customers, in these unprecedented times.

One of our key priorities, over the coming months, will be to ensure that there is food on people's tables. This week I had a teleconference with food producers and retailers. The agri-food sector has proven itself to be extremely resilient in the past, having overcome numerous challenges, and I have confidence that we will be able to put food on our tables. In order to ensure that the Government are best placed to ensure the sustainability of the agri-food supply chain, we will engage regularly to collaborate with those who keep the food chain functioning.

My message to people is simple: our food supply chains are strong, you do not need to panic buy or stockpile. This only hurts other people, mostly the vulnerable and the elderly. Be sensible, our shops will be open for food, and, when you do shop, ensure that you follow social-distancing guidelines. To supermarkets and retailers, please remember your responsibility to protect your workers and shoppers at this time. None of this is easy, but, by working together for a common goal, we can, and we will, get through it.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Minister. We now have an hour for questions. A lot of Members wish to speak so I remind Members of my earlier request that they keep it short and snappy.

Dr Archibald (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): I thank the Minister for her statement. The broad remit covered in your statement really shows the amount of issues that there are in this particular Department. Obviously, so many of them are so important to people's livelihoods. First and foremost, ensuring an income for individuals and families is vital, and the job retention scheme was really very welcome last week. As you outlined, we do need to see support for the self-employed, those on zero-hours contracts and agency workers. It is important that everyone has that same certainty.

There are many issues that we could raise, and I am mindful of the Principal Deputy Speaker's warnings. How do we ensure that vulnerable or elderly people have access to gas or electricity if they are self-isolating or ill? What about income for students and their rental accommodation? These are all issues that have been raised, and we are working to get answers. I welcome the clarification that you have given about the business grant schemes. Can you give more clarification about the time frame for trying to get it out the door? Can the grant be worked out for businesses who pay their rates as part of

their rent? Finally, particularly over the last 24 hours, we have been contacted by many people whose businesses continue to be open and they are concerned about social distancing and having proper hand sanitising facilities in place. What direction is being given to businesses on those issues and also on closures and the enforcement of closures?

Mrs Dodds: That was a considerable range of issues, and I hope that I manage to cover them all in my response.

First, if we look at energy, one of the things that we are very concerned about is that we maintain the network and the generation of power. We have been monitoring that very carefully. Our other aim is to ensure that vulnerable people will have access to power at all times. There is an issue with top-up cards, where people need to go to a shop to top-up their energy. We are asking the companies to look at that because, normally, with Northern Ireland being a small, close-knit community, family will organise the top-up for people who are vulnerable, elderly or have been instructed to stay at home. That is what we do. There are people who may fall through this net, and we would like to have a system in place whereby those people can be catered for. I have asked the Consumer Council and the companies to look at this issue and to come back to me as quickly as possible so we can get some guidance.

4.45 pm

There are two sets of grants. There is the £10,000 grant for small businesses. Those will be eligible to people who qualify for small business rate relief. There are about 27,000 of those businesses in Northern Ireland. That is a lot of businesses. When you look at how to match the data that you have to a payment system, you see that that starts to complicate the issue. We are doing this on Land and Property Services (LPS) data. They hold BACS details — general bank details — for around 9,500 or maybe just over 9,500 of those businesses. There are another 17,000 or 18,000 businesses we need to get details for. The quickest and simplest way is by bank transfer. I hope that, by tomorrow, we will have a portal open where people can register and we can get that money out to them as quickly as possible. Obviously, for those for whom we already have BACS details it is a simpler issue, but we need those whose details we do not have to register. I will give information on that tomorrow. We are aware that that will generate a lot of interest, so we need to make sure that we have built enough strength and security into the system and that it works. We do not want to add to the stress of small businesses. That is our first priority.

Our second priority is looking at the issue of businesses in retail, hospitality and tourism that have been so impacted on by COVID-19. It is hard to believe, but, this time two weeks ago, I was in the States talking to tourism operators who operate the North American market. I was there talking to them about Northern Ireland, the expansion of that market and how we might look at direct flights. We talked to some airline operators. How times have utterly changed. This fast-moving crisis has changed that industry, and I must pay tribute to those in the industry. I have heard numerous people in the industry say, "Look, this is a health crisis. We need to make sure that we deal with the health of our people and our customers", and they will have to abide by that. That will require significant intervention, and that is where the £25,000 will come in.

As an aside to that, when this is over — it will pass — we will need to look at how we help the tourism and hospitality industry to recover. That will also require significant intervention.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Minister, I am sorry to interrupt. The Chair was very naughty about the number of questions. I let it go a bit

Mrs Dodds: Thank you. I am sure there will be plenty more.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am sure there will be.

Mr Middleton: Minister, I welcome your comments around businesses, employees and the support that will be provided. Obviously, we need more support for those who are self-employed and those who are on zero-hours contracts. We also need clarity around essential and non-essential workplaces.

One essential workplace that we are aware of is supermarkets, and you have touched on the fact that supermarkets at the minute struggle to keep their shelves filled due to people stockpiling and panic-buying. Can you ensure us that our supermarkets will be able to cope and that the food supply chains will be able to cope over the next number of months?

Mrs Dodds: That is an important question and, obviously, something that people stress and worry about. Many people ask why on earth people are buying so much food, and some of the supermarkets estimated that there was about £1 billion more food overall bought in the last number of weeks than they would normally expect — a huge spike in panic buying. That reflects that people are afraid and anxious and reflects the critical situation that we are in. I teleconferenced with some of the major supermarkets, the food distributors and those who represent the retail chain just yesterday. We had a very good discussion. They assure me that the food supply chain is strong, that there is no need to panic-buy and that those who do so put the chain at risk because they create such heavy spikes in it. I understand that people are anxious and afraid, but I ask them to consider others, particularly those who are vulnerable. There is an onus on supermarkets to ensure that their stores are safe for their workers and customers, that they practise social distancing and that they create an environment that is not chaotic.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Minister for coming to the Assembly and updating the House. She has given a thorough steer on things. I will try to keep my questions and remarks brief and focused.

The Minister mentioned the various types of support that are available, those that have been announced by the UK Government and by the devolved Executive. I am sure that Members would echo this, but it is important that the point of information — the portal — that business users access, whether they are large employers or small employers, is as simple and straightforward as possible and that the Minister uses Members as signposts, oracles and megaphones for that simple message. Some people are not just accessing government support for the first time but accessing finance of any kind. Those are people who are, perhaps, sole traders who have not needed any form of external intervention in their business for many generations. The simple truth is that we in the Western World — not just in Northern Ireland or the UK and Ireland

— are voluntarily shutting down a large part of society for an unknown period. People need answers and they need public representatives, so use us to help clarify that simple portal to provide information.

The Minister mentioned the importance of self-employed people. That is true; I echo that. We need clarity for hairdressers and taxi drivers — for everyone. They are a fundamental part of our economy, and, often, they are employers too. I will make a specific point that is relevant to Northern Ireland. One of our strong industries, particularly in the past few years, has been the creative industries. There has been a flourishing of film and TV production, particularly in Belfast but also outwith. Someone from that industry contacted me to say that there is an issue in the industry around self-employed people and people who have successive PAYE contracts. Will the Minister focus on that in particular? There is an issue there with people who are not just self-employed but PAYE. Thank you for your indulgence, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker *[Laughter.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: There will be no more of that.

Mrs Dodds: These are extraordinary times, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

Nibusinessinfo is a good source of information for our businesses and communities, and there is, obviously, the Economy website. We will try to get as much information out as clearly as possible at all times. We are all in this together. We all have loved ones who may be impacted on by this, and we all know someone whose work, finances or health will be impacted on by this terrible situation.

With your indulgence, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will reply on the creative industries. I am due to have a phone call with Northern Ireland Screen. I recognise the issues and difficulties, and I will take them up after my discussion with Northern Ireland Screen. It is often about the self-employed and how they can access support, so I recognise the issue and we will deal with it.

Mr Stewart: I thank the Minister for her remarks. I welcome much of the support that is in there, a lot of which has come from Westminster. You say that you will be there when the recovery begins: the recovery begins now. We are, potentially, looking down the barrel of the worst economic crisis in the history of capitalism. Think back to 2008: there was never the closure of pubs, restaurants and bars and the grounding of flights. This will affect everyone in a massive way. The recovery begins now, because the businesses need support to go into hibernation, if needs be, keep money coming in and keep people on the books.

I will touch on the Member for South Belfast's point: information on this is key. I welcome the steps in the employment protection programme that Westminster has introduced. I spoke to one company in my constituency, yesterday, that had spoken to three accountants and had got three different takes on how that will affect their business. They are coming to MLAs and councillors en masse, maybe having never done so before. They need the information from you. They look to you, Minister, and your Department for guidance. I know that it is a fluid situation, but they want somewhere to go.

On the rates scheme — I know that the Chair of the Economy Committee touched on this — if a business pays

its rates directly to a landlord but is one of the qualifying companies, be it in retail or hospitality, and if the landlord qualifies for small business rate relief, will the business get that, or will the landlord get it? Secondly, if a company has three or four premises and ultimately ends up in the higher NAV bracket, having paid four sets of rates to local government, will it qualify for the higher grant?

Mrs Dodds: Thank you for that series of questions. I will endeavour to be very quick on this one. The employment protection scheme is a game changer for the economy. Previous to that, on Friday afternoon, Invest NI companies were lining up to announce that they could no longer continue. The employment support scheme is a game changer for those companies. It allows them to retain workers at 80% of their salary, up to a ceiling of £2,500. There is no limit on the timescale, and there is no limit on the number and the money. That is a game changer for the economy. Having studied similar support schemes in other areas, I know that it is an extremely attractive package. There is more to do, and that is important.

I stress that it is a Treasury scheme, and Treasury is working on getting the details of that scheme to us and setting out how it will impact on the community. As those details become available, I will make them as available as I can through the nibusinessinfo website and our website. If you want, I can write to individual Members. I take the point from Members that we are all inundated with an extraordinary number of queries on the issue, but bear in mind that it is a Treasury scheme. The Chancellor today indicated that he hopes to get it up and running for the end of the pay cycle in April, so it has a little way to go. It is very challenging to run such schemes and to get the information right so that it does not descend into chaos at a time when people need it most.

I am allowed to proceed, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker? On the issue of landlords, for those who qualify for small business rate relief, there is a phrase that "the benefit should go to the business and not to the landlord". I hope that that is the qualifying issue on this as well.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for her update, particularly on the grant situation. I welcome the update that was provided yesterday by the deputy First Minister that the money will be in businesses' bank accounts within days. That is important. It is also important that the portal that goes out tomorrow — this has been echoed by a number of Members — has clear information on it. Lots of rumours have been going around about how the grants will be paid, whether it is by cheque or whatever else, so it is important that there be clarity on that.

I have a few questions. Will the portal clarify who is eligible for the higher level of grant that will be paid? A number of businesses have asked whether they will be eligible for that grant. I think that the criterion is that the business has to be in retail, hospitality or tourism, but I would like a bit of information about that.

It is really important that representations are made to the banks. The job retention scheme will not come in for a while, so it is important that banks provide forbearance for businesses.

We were obviously hoping for an announcement today about the self-employed. That has not happened, so I wanted to get an update from the Minister on the representations that have been made to the UK

Government on the issue, because time really is of the essence.

My last question, which is probably the most crucial, is about who should stay at home. There has been a lot of ambiguity and a lot of queries about who are essential, key workers and about whether the Executive in Northern Ireland will provide more clarity on that. There is a public health element to that in ensuring that staff are aware that they should stay at home.

We also need to ensure that supply chains, particularly in agri-food and pharma, are retained. We must ensure that the staff that are doing that vital work are supported to be able to continue those supply chains and get those goods moving. We need clarification on who exactly should stay at home, and who are the essential or key workers.

5.00 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Minister, before you respond to that, let me say something. Folks, if this continues, Mr Carroll, Ms Woods, Ms Sugden and Mr Allister will not be called. Some might think that that is a good idea. I, personally, do not. It is important that everyone should be able to ask their question. Please, folks, try and keep it more focused than it has been.

Mrs Dodds: I will desist from going through the grant stuff, because I have already answered it. I will address the higher-level grant, though. We have focused on getting the £10,000 grant to a stage where it is virtually ready to go, because it impacts on 27,000 small businesses. We will bring forward the other scheme quickly, bearing in mind that all the information for all those businesses has to be pulled and separated from the LPS database. It is not a straightforward issue.

There is an important issue with the banks. I met with all the principal banks last week and I intend to have another conversation in the next day or so with them. I am getting some feedback that there are issues with mortgages and that trying to switch to paying interest only etc is attracting arrangement fees. I want to bring some of those everyday issues, which are so important to all of us, to the banks and make sure that they are extending credit and forbearance to businesses in this period when the economy is in such a slowdown.

For those workers who should stay at home, the advice last night was extended. All shops that are deemed non-essential should shut. It was also indicated that those who could work from home should do so, but that essential businesses would continue. There has been some attempt, at a UK level, to draw up lists of businesses that are essential and non-essential. I got that first thing this morning and looked at it briefly. It does not reflect the critical importance of supply chains. In other words, a business may make something, but it needs another business to input into the supply chain. That is how supply chains work in manufacturing, so we will need to give a little bit more thought to that, and how we feed that in, at both UK and Northern Ireland levels. It is very important that we get that right.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for all her efforts, and her staff in the Economy Department who have worked tirelessly to try to resolve a number of these issues. You have already mentioned the banks. I came across some cases in my constituency where there is difficulty getting

access to the interest-free loan scheme, because the individual banks are not on that scheme as yet. What will the Minister do to try to resolve those issues? Can she assure us that she will continue to lobby to get further support in relation to the ongoing rates issue, which is a mighty burden for a lot of premises, especially on high streets and in the tourism sector, in these very difficult times?

Mrs Dodds: As I indicated earlier, the business interruption loan scheme was just launched on Monday. Banking institutions from here have been busy making sure that it works for Northern Ireland. I have looked at some of the details of the scheme, and it is not without its problems for Northern Ireland businesses. Those will become more and more apparent, and we will have to work again at modifications. This scheme was set up really quickly. Some of those things, when they are set up quickly, do not cover all the eventualities that the Treasury thinks that they do. Some of the issues are not yet ironed out, although the scheme has been launched. Banks should now be able to give you advice on that. The important thing about the business interruption scheme is that it is now interest-free for 12 months, which is very important.

Mr O'Dowd: I will keep my comments short; I do not want to miss out on Mr Allister's contribution. The Minister mentioned in her opening remarks that Bombardier, an aerospace company with international reach, has suspended operations. I assume that that is for two reasons. One, no one is buying, and, two, it is out of care for the workers. I have an aerospace company in my constituency where the workers are frightened of the conditions that they are working in and they are frightened to go home in case they lose their jobs. Given the fact that the Department, the Executive and the Westminster Government have put in place measures that will secure companies' futures going forward, what advice will the Minister give to companies and employees who are facing conditions in which they cannot provide the two-metre-distance rule?

Mrs Dodds: I am sorry to hear that. It is my firm opinion that companies need to provide safe workspaces for their employees, that they need to follow the PHA guidance on this, that they need to ensure that they have the two-metre rule in place and that they need to have proper procedures around social distancing. We all have a responsibility — each individual in this Chamber has a responsibility — but companies have a huge responsibility to the workers who they employ and the care that they give them. I am sorry to hear that, but I hope that advice will be heeded and that companies very strongly arrange their systems and their rotas so that their employees can work in safe spaces.

Mr McGuigan: I welcome the statement from the Minister and the ongoing work in her Department. I also welcome her clarification on some of the announcements that have already been made regarding the small grants and the furlough payments that have allowed workers to remain at home secure in the knowledge that they will be seen through these times. I note that you mentioned that there is ongoing work with regard to those on zero-hours contracts and those who are self-employed. Time is of the urgency with those discussions. This is a financial crisis that we are discussing here today, but there is a worldwide pandemic, and financial decisions that are slow are having a big impact on people's lives. We are told that this week is the

week where COVID-19 will spread quickly among us, and there are people who are at work today who should not be at work today. They are at work today because they are scared and the Government have not taken a decision with regard to their financial security through this process. I urge you to move quickly on some of these things, and I urge for greater clarification on what are considered essential and non-essential workers. Again, there are workers today who are at work and who should not be at work. My question, which I am getting to now, is in relation to any support that could or should be put in place for businesses that are operating as social enterprises or under charitable status.

Mrs Dodds: To answer that last point, social enterprises are businesses that operate for profit but return that profit to the causes that are dear to them. There are many really good examples of that in Northern Ireland, and the social enterprise sector is buzzing with good things happening in Northern Ireland. Those businesses will be able to avail themselves of exactly the same schemes on the same basis as every other business, private or public. It is exactly the same.

My understanding is that, if you are on a zero-hours contract, you still are within the PAYE scheme. Therefore, you should be able to avail yourself of support as well, with a rounding up of the number of hours that you have worked.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Minister for her detailed response today. I thank her particularly for raising the issue of the self-employed, specifically in regard to the business support scheme. An issue has been raised with me of those who use their homes for business, and I have been asked whether there is an entitlement or an eligibility under the scheme for that. Another issue that has been raised is that of electricity supplies where a business has closed. There are standing charges that still have to be ongoing and paid by that business or it falls on the supplier. Is there any chance that there could be discussions, presumably with the help of the regulator, on derogation of that?

Finally, we have just had a message about staff who, under the furlough scheme, are being advised to go home. The employer is an exceptionally good employer who wants to make sure that agency staff are treated in the same way as the permanent staff who are on site.

Mrs Dodds: It is important that all workers are treated in the same way. If companies bring people in to work for them, it is important that they do that, and that the Government also do that. My view is that agency workers should be treated in exactly the same way on those issues. They, too, are PAYE workers in the same way as everyone else.

We will work with the energy companies. Our first priority is to ensure that there is a robust system to maintain supply and the grid. That is the absolutely overriding issue. We recognise that there is the issue of standing charges. We ask companies to look at some kind of forbearance with regard to those charges at this difficult time, or to get finance to ensure that they cover those particular issues.

Mrs Barton: I thank the Minister for coming to the Chamber to update the House. It is very much appreciated. My question relates to students. As the Minister will be aware, I represent Fermanagh and South Tyrone. Many of the students from my constituency have now come home because of the situation. Many second- and third-year

students live in private rental accommodation. They are expected to continue to pay their rent until the end of their contracts, which is in August. Has the Minister thought about any support for those students, who are now living at home and still have to pay their rent? Many of them would have had jobs to help them to pay that rent.

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for her question. It is, indeed, a good question. Perhaps, I should have included these remarks in my statement. My Department has been working with the Student Loans Company to ensure that the third tranche of the loan is available and will be paid to students, provided that they cooperate with all the qualifying issues that have to be done. Within our power, we have been able to ensure that that will happen. We have been doing that with regard to the payment of EMA and any other grants or funds that are available for further education. Some people have raised the issue of private training organisations. There are a number of those organisations. We have indicated that we will continue to pay the contract even though those organisations may be closed, so that students can continue to be paid their training allowance and to ensure that everyone is covered and will not be penalised in a very difficult situation.

Mr McAleer: I thank the Minister for her statement. I, too, will be brief. To go back to the issue of childcare, I am aware that some businesses are registered as charities. From my reading of the guidelines around the small business grant scheme, I do not believe that they are eligible for that. Can the Minister clarify that? On the same issue, another Minister has issued a number of after-school and day care facilities with guidelines to say that it has been decided that their facilities are not to close, yet there are no children in them. There are big financial consequences for them to continue with their businesses when they are empty. Does the Minister have any advice for businesses in those situations?

Mrs Dodds: The only qualification around the small business grant scheme is literally that the business is eligible for small business rate relief. If a small business is eligible for small business rate relief, it will be eligible for the scheme. We will look at any business that falls through the net as we go through the process. However, we have been focused on trying to provide for that number of people.

The issue of childcare facilities is difficult. I have been contacted by a number of childcare providers who have found it difficult to continue to operate now that parents have been told to stay at home.

5.15 pm

Such providers are generally self-employed, which is why it is really important that we get the Government on board with a scheme for the self-employed and those who are sole traders. That is hugely important.

The scheme that was announced last Friday was a game changer for the economy in Northern Ireland. It will help businesses and thousands of employees right across Northern Ireland, but about 15% of the workforce in Northern Ireland is self-employed. They are some of the most entrepreneurial people that we have, and we want to ensure that they are supported, too.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for her statement. As has been said by a number of Members, there needs to

be clarity on the financial packages for self-employed hairdressers, architects, taxi drivers, mechanics, car valets and washers, music tutors, beauty therapists and driving instructors. Those people need some clarity fast around where their financial support will come from.

I also re-emphasise that some companies have been forced to furlough employees. There also needs to be support for agency staff. Newry library let agency staff go yesterday, and they feel that they have no protection and have been discarded as an outcome of the coronavirus. What advice can you give to McGrane Nurseries who provide plants and gardening paraphernalia to the likes of Lidl and Aldi across the island? A lot of people will be in their gardens over the next number of months because they will have nothing else to do, and I imagine that Aldi and Lidl will still need those plants. What do you advise that nursery to do, given that social distancing can be implemented in that business?

Mrs Dodds: Despite the long list, I have already addressed most of the issues that you raised, so I will not go over those because I do not want to incur the wrath of our Principal Deputy Speaker.

I know that this is tough, and I know that some of those businesses have spent a lifetime investing in and growing their businesses and this is really tough for people. I accept and appreciate that, and I want people to know and understand that I realise how tough this is, but we must be careful that we follow the health advice and warnings in relation to this. So, if your business is deemed non-essential and you are told that your business should close through the announcements that have been made, your business should close. That is for the health and safety not just of you and your workers but for the general public. I am sure that we have all seen the infographics that show how this thing is spread and how it is rapidly spreading in some areas. Just as an aside, the World Health Organization has indicated how rapidly this is growing right across the world not just here in Northern Ireland. This is a global phenomenon. If your business has to close, it should close for your safety and those around you.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for her statement. I, too, have been contacted by a range of employees, including office workers, warehouse workers and childminders. Yesterday, the UK Government produced a six-page document entitled 'Further businesses and premises to close', which is largely focused on the retail and hospitality sector and reinforces the two-metre rule that has been widely talked about. Can the Minister confirm that it applies to Northern Ireland as well so that there is clarity on that issue? Also, can she advise what responsibility business owners and employers have to their employees to encourage home working and, if necessary, close or provide personal protective equipment?

Mrs Dodds: The advice that is on the Government website does apply to Northern Ireland. It is absolutely critical that businesses heed that advice. That is for the safety of the businesses, the workers and people who will come into those businesses. So, yes, it applies to Northern Ireland, and, yes, it is absolutely crucial that we heed the advice.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for her statement. We are so desperately in need of the continuing flow of information from the entire Executive, so I appreciate her being here today. I will get straight to the point with

two questions. I note that departmental officials are working closely with energy suppliers: will anything in the continuity plans for energy suppliers mean that they will be compelled not to cut people off? Secondly, does the Minister have any information on any support that is going to be in place down the line for those who are self-employed, and when does she envision that information being issued by the UK Government, if available?

Mrs Dodds: I have already answered the question about self-employed people. We had heard that the Chancellor was going to bring forward a package today. Last Friday, after the announcement about employee support, Conor Murphy and I wrote to the Treasury to say that that is good as far as it goes, but that it should go further and that we should be looking at support for self-employed people and sole traders. I cannot think of other ways to do it but, as I said in the Chamber, the easiest way is probably to look at tax returns and average those or to use a basic minimum income.

I heard today from some remarks in the House that the Government were not that fussed about a basic minimum income, so I am really interested to see what they bring forward. I would urge them — urge them — to bring it forward with all speed. It is not just employees who are affected by this situation but other parts of our economy. It is very important that that message goes from this House to the Secretary of State, to the Treasury and to the Business Secretary.

It is important to point out that we will work with the energy companies to make sure that they look after their vulnerable customers. They have a register of vulnerable customers — people who are already known to them — and we are aware of the register. We will work with them to make sure that they do not cut off vulnerable customers and that they address the issue of top-up cards. Family is very important in Northern Ireland, and families will look after their elderly folk, but we need to make sure that there is a system in place to catch those who do not have relatives or friends close by.

Mr Allister: May I suggest, Minister, that mixed messaging, particularly around which manufacturing businesses should be open, is an acute problem? We had an exhortation to the effect that if you cannot work at home, go to work. We had an exhortation from the Government; "Go to work if it is absolutely necessary". We had the deputy First Minister saying yesterday on Twitter that all non-essential workplaces must shut. We have had videos that say, "Stay at home". Which is it, Minister? What is the Executive's advice to the manufacturing industry, for example, across all our constituencies?

Speaking of one such industry, Wrightbus, in my constituency, announced today that it is closing for a number of weeks. However, it has gone public to say that it has been unable to get an answer from your Department about whether its agency workers are covered. You have said today what your view is. Why can your Department not convey that to a major employer like Wrightbus rather than it having to go public, saying that it cannot get an answer?

Mrs Dodds: First, I will address the issue around Wrightbus. I was not aware that it had contacted the Department but I will look into that. That, of course, is very important. We have been exceptionally busy, and the Member will know from this Building that we are now

operating in a situation where most of our staff are working from home. Communication is not always the best, and in this very difficult situation, particularly in the Assembly, I hope that you will bear with us. I am thankful and grateful for the way that we have worked together to make sure that we do the best that we can in a difficult situation. I was not aware of that development but I will look into it and I will address it head-on. I have given you my view, and those are the representations that we will be making on that issue.

The Member talked about mixed messaging, but the message is very clear. Last night, the Prime Minister indicated a further shutdown of the economy. I noticed that the Minister of Housing, Communities and Local Government has provided advice today around which businesses are essential and non-essential and about what they should do.

The advice is clear: if your business is not essential, if it is in retail and it is not essential, if it is in one of a whole range of areas and it is not essential — tourism, hospitality etc — then you should not be open.

As for manufacturing, I understand that today has been a more confused picture, but my advice if you are an essential manufacturer is clear. We have many such manufacturers in Northern Ireland, for example in the food supply chain, without which our communities simply could not survive; supermarkets, who are out there doing their best in very, very difficult circumstances; and small, local corner shops that are open for us at all times. Those are important businesses, but the advice is absolutely clear, and it must be heeded. You need to engage with social distancing, and you need to ensure that your workers are safe and protected. That is absolutely important.

I met the supermarkets yesterday, and it was really interesting. One of them said that it had introduced lines at the tills for social distancing. Others said that they had simply calculated the square footage of each of their stores and had security people outside who were allowing only a certain number of people into the store at any one time. People are working quite hard in very difficult circumstances.

Mr Carroll: Thanks for your declaration of support for the smaller parties, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker; it was much appreciated.

I thank the Minister for her answers so far. Two quick questions. Obviously, students have been losing jobs in restaurants and bars that have had to shut down. Are there any conversations in the Minister's Department around specific student support funds or grants or anything like that, or allowing them to access benefits? An update on that would be useful.

The Minister may be aware that the Open University has provided free online courses in this period, so can I suggest that her Department promotes the excellent services that Libraries NI has online, in a bid to provide some comfort to people in this period of social isolation?

Finally, does the Minister know the number of companies that cannot avail themselves of the higher end of the grant? She said that 27,000 companies can, so can she give an indication of how many companies are not eligible?

Mrs Dodds: The 27,000 figure that you quoted is the number of companies in Northern Ireland that are within

the small business rates relief scheme. All of those are included.

In terms of students, as I said in response to a previous question, we have taken steps to ensure that, even though students are not at university, their financial commitments are recognised and the third tranche of their payments via the student loan system is made. We can have a conversation with the Communities Minister around the needs in the economy, although I will say that I was talking to different recruitment companies, and there are huge numbers of jobs out there in some of the sectors that are under most pressure. I encourage people to have a look at what is out there and what is available, because there are temporary contracts available in different sectors of the economy that are very important.

On online teaching, it is my view that, where it is possible and where it is within my remit, online teaching communication should be made. It is really important at this time, when some people are left in their own homes for prolonged periods of time, that we look after each other's mental health and that we keep in contact with each other. If there are people that we cannot keep in contact with, there are tools that we can use that people can avail themselves of.

Ms Sugden: I want to know about accessing the coronavirus job retention scheme. If an employee decides to self-isolate, will they be able to access that scheme through their employer? If the employer sends their employees home, will the employees be able to access that scheme? If the Prime Minister is telling everyone that they have non-essential jobs and they all have to stay at home, can all those employees, through their employer, access that scheme as well?

5.30 pm

I also want to draw something to your attention, and this is not a question. I have a constituent in Portstewart who has lost their job and cannot get home because flights are being cancelled. His private landlord is telling him that if he does not make his payments, he is going to be evicted from the property. That is a really big concern, given the number of students who will be left on campus because they cannot get home. I appreciate that the UK Government are saying to people get home as soon as possible, but that is not realistic any more, because flights are cancelled.

I made a point earlier in relation to people across the world who are not getting back to the UK. The UK Government say to get home but flights are cancelled, it is not happening and we are leaving people stranded. The coronavirus should not leave British and Irish people stranded.

Mrs Dodds: I too have been contacted by people who are stranded in different parts of the world. It is a really difficult issue because the direct flights have been cancelled, and sometimes to take the roundabout route is a hugely problematic issue in terms of the sheer cost and the ability to do it. One lady's flight had been cancelled because of problems with airspace in different areas. I recognise it as a problem. If you want to write to me about that specifically, I can add my list to your list and we can set that forward and try to deal with it, because it is emerging as an issue.

These are huge issues for students. My advice is that, if those students are within the United Kingdom, they would be as well to be at home, but that is me saying that. Again, write to me on that particular issue, because it is very important.

In terms of the job retention scheme, it is UK Treasury scheme. It is for furloughed workers. That furloughed phrase is very important, as far as I know, from what we have read and had communicated to us. If your employer says that your job is no longer available to you because of the impact on the economy of coronavirus, you can become a furloughed worker and be eligible for up to 80% of your pay, up to a ceiling of £2,500 per month. It is for furloughed workers, and that is the most important thing that we need to look at in this scheme.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Minister, that concludes questions on the ministerial statement.

Adjourned at 5.32 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 31 March 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Budget Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform Members that the Budget Bill has received Royal Assent. The Budget Act (NI) 2020 became law on 26 March 2020.

Before we proceed today, I ask Members to note that there are a number of items in the Order Paper today that are designed to assist the Assembly to deal with the current situation, so I want to briefly address a few matters.

First, let me record my thanks to Assembly officials who have put significant time and effort into developing creative ways to manage our business in these times. The seating arrangements in the Chamber, for example, have been further developed over the weekend to follow and allow for strict social distancing. I ask for Members' cooperation in complying with that.

I also want to remind Members that I have relaxed normal expectations about them being in the Chamber for all of an item of business that they wish to contribute to. That should allow a Member who has made a contribution or asked a question to leave and be replaced by another Member who wishes to participate.

There is a motion in today's Order Paper seeking the Assembly's agreement to temporary Standing Orders to make provision for, amongst other things, proxy voting in the Chamber. If the Assembly agrees to approve those arrangements, further guidance on proxy voting will be issued to Members. In the meantime, I ask Members to think very carefully about seeking to force a Division, particularly if the likely outcome is clear. I say that because we do not want to have to call all Members to the Chamber to take part in a Division, as it would be very difficult to ensure social distancing in those circumstances. I ask all Members to recognise the need to show flexibility in our normal procedures in these extraordinary circumstances.

In relation to plenary sittings over the Easter period, the Business Committee will be updated today on whether there is any essential business coming from the Executive and will schedule any required sittings accordingly. In addition, there are, of course, procedures for the Assembly to be convened if the Executive require urgent business to be considered to meet the needs of the community in the current public health crisis.

I will say more if the Assembly agrees to establish the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID response today, but, obviously, if the Assembly approves that, it will give

greater flexibility for Ministers to report to the Assembly as necessary in the weeks ahead.

Finally, let me say again, today, on your behalf and on behalf of the whole Assembly, that we acknowledge the inconvenience to those who are complying fully with the current restrictions by staying at home. We particularly owe a debt of gratitude to those in the health service and all the public services who are demonstrating tremendous commitment and courage, all in the common cause of saving lives in our community. We can probably not say that enough from the Chamber.

Mr Givan: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I want to raise the issue that you will come to in the Matter of the Day. During this crisis, the British Government have enforced upon us a new legal framework, in law, on abortion. A motion that was put forward should have been debated today to allow the House's democratic expression on the issue. Whilst we are operating under urgent procedures, where business relates only to COVID-19, that law is now in place, and, for many people, it is a law that takes life and requires an urgent response. May I seek your guidance, Mr Speaker, as to when there will be an opportunity for the House to give democratic expression, beyond just articulating that in the Matter of the Day that you will come to, so that we can vote on the issue and then seek to take forward our own legislation in respect to it?

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for his point of order. He will be aware, obviously, that the Business Committee will seek to schedule business as appropriate for the House to debate and decide on. I cannot speak for Ministers at this time, of course, so I will liaise with the Executive and will discuss it with the Business Committee. The Business Committee will, in due course, set the normal procedures in place for Members to discuss and debate. OK? Thank you for that.

Matter of the Day

Abortion Regulations

Mr Speaker: Mr Jim Allister has been given leave to make a statement on abortion regulations that fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. If Members wish to be called to speak, they should rise in their place and continue to do so. All Members who are called will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject. I remind Members that I will not take points of order on this or any other matter until the item of business has finished.

Mr Allister: The minds of us all, at this difficult time, are very much focused on the saving of lives. Therefore, it is all the more abhorrent and perverse that, at the very same time, we have regulations coming into effect today that will sanction the killing of the unborn. From today, what should be the safest place for an unborn, namely, its mother's womb, can become, on a whim, one of the most dangerous places, because we will have utterly unfettered, uncontrolled abortion, up to 12 weeks. That is abortion of babies whose hearts are beating, whose blood is pumping round their body, and yet, summarily, they can be killed; their life snuffed out. There is nothing progressive about that. That is regressive for our civilisation. Then, of course, up to 24 weeks, you can effectively have abortion on demand. What has happened elsewhere shows us that there is no qualitative test applied. It is effectively abortion on demand. Even after that, right up to the moment of birth, you can have the killing of the unborn.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: I do not think that I am permitted to.

You can have the killing of the unborn on the pretext of severe foetal impairment.

What is that? It could be Down's Syndrome. That is how shocking it is. I want to place that on record, on behalf of the 79% who responded to the consultation and were ignored. The Assembly, of course, has never been consulted on this issue. I want to place on record how aghast those of us who believe in life are at this wanton, calculated killing in the womb.

I urge the Assembly to find time to reverse this outrageous, obnoxious situation and to find a voice and to give a voice to the unborn.

Mr Givan: I hope that the Assembly will find time, given the issue at stake here, because we are talking about life, and that the Business Committee will reschedule the motion that was tabled to be heard before the regulations to give effect to this were voted on in Westminster.

Of those who responded to the consultation, 79% were opposed to any change in the law on abortion in Northern Ireland. The British Government, once again, rode roughshod over the will of the people in this country.

This matter requires our urgent attention. In effect, it brings in abortion up to 24 weeks for any reason, and up to term for disability. No Member in this House, if they are in favour of this, can ever look at people with disabilities and proclaim that they champion their cause, because abortion up to birth will now be allowed for disability. That is shocking. It is an outrage that that is the case.

The penalty associated with this is a fine of £5,000 if an abortion takes place outside the regulations. It is difficult to imagine that such a fine could be possible, given that the regulations, in effect, allow abortion to occur under any circumstances. In the Republic of Ireland, the penalty is 14 years' imprisonment, but here it is £5,000. The abortion industry must be delighted that, in Northern Ireland, there are the most extreme, radical abortion laws anywhere in Europe. It is a travesty that it has been allowed to happen.

The Assembly needs to take the issue on. It is within our powers to legislate on these issues. It is a devolved matter, and I want the Assembly to voice its opinion. Members opposite have all said that they are opposed to the 1967 Abortion Act, but this is far worse than the 1967 Abortion Act; far worse. I cannot see how anyone is able to justify the regulations that are being imposed on us.

Our society is showing how much we value life, in our response to COVID-19, by taking extraordinary measures to protect life. Let us, with the same vigour and determination, seek to protect the life of the preborn, because they have as much a right to life as those whom we are seeking to protect in our response to COVID-19.

Mr Speaker, for my part, and that of my party, we will bring proposals on this. We want a motion to be heard. We will seek legislative change so that we have a regime in Northern Ireland that reflects what I believe will be the will of the people on this issue: defending both lives, that of the mother and of the preborn.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that if they wish to speak, they need to rise in their seats.

Mr Frew: How did we ever get to this place and this day, where the life of the most vulnerable is now in jeopardy? I got into politics to assist the most vulnerable and to make a positive contribution to society in Northern Ireland, a place that I love.

In one fell swoop, the British Government, and by extension the Northern Ireland Office, have made a mockery of consultation, with 79% of the people who responded, including myself, being ignored; a mockery of legislation and how it should be produced, with time taken to go through each clause to scrutinise it and be accountable for it; a mockery of our healthcare system; and a mockery of how we help and assist the most vulnerable in our society.

10.45 am

It is a shame on the British Government and a shame on the NIO that they would bring in guidelines such as these. I give you the commitment, Mr Speaker, that I will fight with every breath and every sinew that I have in my body to turn these guidelines around and to get to a place where we protect the most vulnerable in our society, where we value people of all ability, and where no one feels that their life is under threat because of disability. The most vulnerable people in our society are people yet unborn but who have a heart that beats and a body that grows. We are failing all those people. I say this to the NIO: what you have done here in imposing these guidelines and legislation on the people of Northern Ireland is shameful when you know fine well what the people think — it has been well-documented throughout the years, even decades, when we have had different legislation from the rest of GB; you know how strong the feeling and mentality is in Northern

Ireland around these issues, yet you ride roughshod over the people's will. We must change this, we must correct this, and we must get into place legislation that protects the most vulnerable and also protects the mother, father and family of the unborn. The business of the House over the next couple of weeks will be about saving lives, yet the Department of Health is now having to deal in death.

Dr Archibald: There is no doubt in anybody's mind that abortion is a very sensitive and emotive issue, but there is also no doubt that the legislation and regulations that we had in place were failing women and that the legislation that criminalised women for having an abortion needed to be repealed and replaced with legislation that was appropriate and modern and provided for compassionate healthcare services. Sinn Féin's party policy on abortion is very clear and has been well-debated amongst our members. It states:

"Abortion should be available where a woman's life, health or mental health is at risk and in cases of fatal foetal abnormality and in the cases of rape or sexual abuse."

It is not possible to legislate for abortion in the case of rape in a compassionate way and, for that reason, our position is that abortion should be available for a limited gestational period in line with best medical advice. What has been brought into play is only right and proper: that women can now access abortion services without having to travel and are free and able to have healthcare in a modern and compassionate way. We will also put on record that we believe that the Department of Health needs to consider the circumstances at the minute in respect of access to all appropriate healthcare.

Mr O'Toole: This is clearly an extremely sensitive subject, perhaps among the most sensitive subjects that legislators can debate.

I am glad that healthcare for women in Northern Ireland has evolved to a place where women can access essential services that people in other parts of the UK, and now other parts of Ireland, can access. I recognise the strength of feeling on the benches opposite and the intense dilemma that abortion presents for families, communities and sometimes individuals.

I do not speak as a spokesperson for my party on the issue. Others will have other views, and they are as entitled to those views as I am to mine. My clear view is that while this is an extraordinarily sensitive subject, it cannot be right that women in this part of the UK, in this part of Ireland, are asked to travel to access one of the most important types of healthcare relating to their bodily autonomy. I welcome the fact that Northern Ireland is now, for the first time, as of today, able to provide those services to women. I agree with the previous Member to speak that clarity from the Department of Health on exactly how the regulations and the law will work for women here will be essential over the next few weeks. We are in a unique situation with COVID-19/coronavirus so it would be good to have clarity on how that will affect women's access to those services.

Let me also say that people have reflected on the importance of preserving life as it relates to COVID-19. Again, I reiterate that I understand how sensitive and deeply held people's views are on this. I have had a huge

amount of correspondence over the last few days, but I restate that many of the people who are placed in that situation — it is a situation that I have to acknowledge that I will never be placed in because I am not a woman — will not take that decision lightly, in my view. It is not a trifling matter for any woman who is placed in the situation of having to consider ending a pregnancy.

I do not take people's moral objections to abortion lightly, but nor do I take lightly the health of women who are sometimes in extreme and dire need. For that reason, it is welcome and overdue that the law here has caught up with the rest of these islands.

Specifically, on the Assembly's powers, it is not for me, today, to make a determination on what the Assembly has competence to do or not. Others will have that debate in the days going forward, but, in broad terms, this is a positive step forward for women and girls in Northern Ireland.

Mr Butler: I rise not as the Ulster Unionist Party Chief Whip and nor am I speaking on behalf of the party. I am speaking as a member of the Ulster Unionist Party who celebrates its position of conscience on the issue of abortion.

There have been many days when each of us, as MLAs, have maligned the day that we got involved in politics. Perhaps we have even regretted it and have had low days when we have been pained with what has happened and what has not happened. My most painful day as a politician of any hue was 21 October 2019. It was a day when I was unable to have my voice heard in the Chamber on something that is so important to me. Other Members have spoken well and given a good account of their positions, and I would like to give mine.

I am a son, a father, a dad and a foster parent. My wife and I have fostered many children, and without disclosing the difficulties of the background that those children come from, many of them come from situations that people will use with regard to abortive rights. I understand the need for parents, women in particular, to have their views heard, especially, as the Member said, on health, but there are two lives that matter here and nothing will shake me from that. We need to be sympathetic in how we deal with the subject, but let me say again, I regret and was angry that, on 21 October 2019, for whatever reason and whoever held us back, the Assembly could not debate issues pertaining to life and death: saving life and protecting life.

We talk about fatal foetal abnormality, and we talk about rape and incest: all those things are important, and the Assembly should have had the ability and the maturity to deal with them sympathetically and appropriately, not through the draconian measures that have been taken by the NIO and the UK Government. As Mr Frew pointed out, there was a lack of adherence to the consultation, which had high levels of response. Probably and, I would say, uniquely, there has never been any other issue that has been responded to by the public of Northern Ireland from all sides of the community.

What really galls me is how we will deal with pregnancies where there are unborn children with disabilities or there are severe foetal impairments. There is no list — right up to birth. If you choose to abort a child because of Down's syndrome, a club foot or a cleft palate, the regulations will facilitate that. What about the staff? What about their

conscientious objection? What about those who could give a loving home to a child like that? What value do we put on that life?

I look forward to the day when I get to say my piece in here and we can legislate like adults and discuss this in an empathetic and sympathetic manner and represent everybody who should have a voice in this country.

Mr Muir: In starting, I will say that I speak on this as a matter of conscience. This is an issue for a free vote in the party, and I speak as an individual. I also recognise that it is a sensitive issue for many people. My personal view, however, is that the change is long overdue and that we have been waiting quite a while for this day to arrive. Women and girls have been waiting far too long for the change that has come about. I pay tribute to the courage of so many people who have campaigned for change in Northern Ireland and brought the issue to the fore. It was not easy, and they stepped forward and brought the issues to light.

Other Members talk about the fact that they are looking for a different regime. The reality is that this place had an opportunity for vote for a different regime and rejected it. The Assembly had an opportunity to legislate on these issues and did not. This place was not sitting, and legislation was passed.

The legislation is now in effect, and it is important that it is given meaning by the Department promptly. There are gaps in the legislation: for example, in the current situation, the inability to travel causes real difficulties. That has been reported today in the media. About 20 or 30 women per week travel to England, and they are being denied that right. There are also gaps in the legislation in terms of the ability to take the two types of medication at home, and that needs to be given effect.

Change has happened. This place had an opportunity to effect that change, and it failed. We are in a new situation here now, and we have to move forward.

Ms Bailey: I thank my South Belfast colleague Matthew O'Toole for giving up his seat to allow me into the Chamber.

The Green Party has long campaigned for equal rights for women across Northern Ireland. We have been denied our rights as UK citizens for 50 years or more, and the Green Party welcomes the fact that access to reproductive healthcare is no longer a criminal matter. We do not think it should ever have been a criminal matter, and we believe that any woman should be able to access an abortion as early as possible and as late as necessary.

Today, the regulations on abortion in Northern Ireland are a good step forward and are to be welcomed. Access to abortion up to 12 weeks in relatively unrestricted circumstances is a positive move; however, many barriers still exist for access after 12 weeks. It is discouraging to see that that will create many more difficulties for women here, so we call on the Health Minister to put a telemedicine service in place whereby the required medication can be posted to a home address after an initial telephone consultation. That would reduce the impact on the NHS and abide by our social distancing protocols and current travel restrictions. Yesterday the Westminster Government reinstated the use of a telemedicine abortion service in England and Wales. Let us do the same here.

We also heard yesterday of a young woman from Belfast who could not travel to England for an abortion because of the COVID-19 restrictions and tried to take her own life. Our Government must ensure that patients and medical staff are not placed in unnecessary risk during the pandemic.

Millions of women around the world have successfully used abortion pills that are on the World Health Organisation's list of safe medicines: they say it is safer than using aspirin. The plight of women and girls requiring access to abortion during this pandemic cannot be ignored and while this is a good day and a good step forward, it is certainly not enough for the women who need to access reproductive health.

11.00 am

Mr Carroll: Yesterday, as was previously referenced, a young woman tried to kill herself as a result of being denied abortion services — she could not travel to England because of the current pandemic. The reality is that the former legislative guidelines had put women at risk for some time. They were guidelines that predated the light bulb and I am glad that they have come to an end. Obviously, during the coronavirus situation when people are following the public health guidance to stay at home, isolate and socially distance, there will still be a need for women to access terminations and abortion services.

Despite some of the previous comments from Members, abortion is fundamentally a healthcare issue. It is not a criminal issue, and I am glad that is coming to an end. Whilst these guidelines introduce provision for some women who are up to 12-weeks pregnant, the reality is that some women will still be placed in dangerous situations as a result of gaps in the guidelines, for example women in domestic violence situations, rural areas and so forth.

I join the call for the Health Minister — I appeal to him — to introduce telemedicine care now so that women who have been forced to stay at home as a result of the pandemic can have access to abortion pills. Those women are doing the right thing by staying at home; everybody is doing the right thing by staying at home in this situation, and people need to be supported in their healthcare decisions.

The World Health Organisation, which we regularly refer to in regard to this pandemic, has said that abortion pills are as safe as paracetamol, aspirin and other regular tablets: we should trust them.

Because of the previous guidelines, women have been criminalised for some time, despite the fact that the termination of pregnancies has happened for many years. The talk of "imposition" by the Members opposite is quite ironic given that they buddied up with the Westminster Government for so long. The truth is that this House abdicated its responsibility year after year when it came to legislating for choice in abortion services, and standing by and trusting women.

We have heard reference made to the public's mood and view on abortion services. The reality is that the majority of people here are for choice. Every single survey shows that people here are for choice, for example the 'Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey'. That report and survey after survey shows that people are for choice. The truth is that the incoming guidelines and legislation go some way

to reflect the public mood for choice, although there are gaps, as has also been mentioned.

The public mood is for choice; the vast majority of healthcare workers are for choice and for supporting women to have access to abortion services. At this time when we are, rightly, celebrating and recognising the role of our healthcare workers, trust them to make the right decision about abortion services and access to such services. That means having a legislative system in place that does not criminalise women, does not penalise women and lets them make the correct decision for themselves.

Mr Lunn: I have supported this type of action over a number of years and I have previously spoken about it in this House. Some of you might remember the occasion when two members of the Alliance Party, myself and Stewart Dickson, acting in our own capacity of course, proposed an amendment to the Justice Bill that would have taken care of the issue of fatal foetal abnormality. It was a pity that that amendment was not passed by the House, and I do wonder where we would be now if it had been. Would Westminster have taken over the issue or would they have not? I do not know.

As far as I am concerned, this is a satisfying day. I am not going to glory in it: it is a good day for women, a good day for women's rights and for a woman's right to choose, which we have long campaigned for. I will have to stop saying "we", Mr Speaker — I have long campaigned for.

On the question of 12-weeks, Dr Archibald is absolutely right: there is no way to legislate for rape and incest situations. We thought about that at the time of the amendment, but we could not come up with wording. One of our other Members did, but actually we even voted against it because it was not satisfactory. The only way to deal with that, in my opinion, is to allow unfettered, if that is the word, termination in the first 12 weeks. That takes care of that issue.

As far as the rest of the legislation is concerned, I am comfortable with it, except for one issue — and I agree with Mr Allister — which is the issue of severe foetal impairment. It never should have been in the Bill. It is disgraceful. It opens doors that did not need to be opened, and if we are going to debate this issue at some stage here, I hope that that will be the first item on the agenda because it is not right. It is immoral, and I hope that we can do something about it.

Mr Buckley: It is with great sadness that I rise in the House today, for two reasons, first, to speak on behalf of the thousands of constituents who have contacted me and other Members on this issue since I became an elected representative. This is an issue that transcends traditional party lines. Traditional orange and green go out the window when it comes to the rights of the unborn.

I also rise to speak for those who do not have a voice: the unborn, and, particularly, here in Northern Ireland because Northern Ireland has enjoyed a pro-life policy in which we can celebrate 100,000 people living today because of the policies that we had in place. No one in this House or, indeed, in Westminster can tell me that those people have not contributed and added value to society here in Northern Ireland and further afield. It is an absolute shame on the British Government and a shame on the NIO that, in the midst of such uncertain times and such crisis that

we are in, these regulations and legislation can come into effect.

I rise as someone who is unashamedly pro-life. I value life from beginning to end, but it seems that while we debate COVID-19 in this place and across this country, many have risen and spoken with great emotion and sincerity about the lives that will be lost as a result of this cursed plague, COVID-19, but, yet, can turn a blind eye while regulations come into place that end the life of the unborn. They operate a policy simply of seeing is believing. What utter shame and contempt on not only the British Government but, indeed, Members who choose to turn a blind eye in this House. We talk about protection of the most vulnerable. I have heard it on every side of this House, but on an issue like this, we turn a blind eye to those who cannot defend themselves. Shame, Mr Speaker. The regulations will allow abortion on request for the first 12 weeks of pregnancy and abortion up to 24 weeks on grounds of continuance of the pregnancy, which would involve risk of injury to the physical or mental well-being of the pregnant woman or girl. This legislative Assembly has been held in contempt, and it is high time that we recognise that.

It is sad that, in these circumstances, we cannot debate or put forward legislation or amendments to this very issue, but I take cognisance of what my friend Mr Givan has said that, when that opportunity should come, this party will not be found wanting, and I place on record to my constituents who have lobbied me on this issue and to the unborn that I will never be silent on the issue of the unborn.

Assembly Business

Committee Membership

Resolved:

That Mr Andrew Muir replace Mr Trevor Lunn as a member of the Public Accounts Committee. — [Mr Blair.]

Assembly Members' Pension Scheme: Trustees

Resolved:

That this Assembly appoints Dr Caoimhe Archibald, Mr Pat Catney and Mr Andrew Muir as trustees of the Assembly Members' Pension Scheme. — [Mr O'Dowd.]

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I rise for the third successive week to express regret that, in the setting up of the new Committee, we are about to make significant change to the processes of the House without the opportunity for debate. It may well be a meritorious suggestion. At this point, I do not suggest otherwise. However, it is a fundamental flaw in the manner in which we approach those matters that we do not facilitate and allow debate on them. The Business Committee, which brought the motion forward, could, at the same time, have brought forward a motion to suspend Standing Order 12(7) in order to allow debate, but chose not to do so. That is most inappropriate and regrettable.

Can I ask one specific question? Can you tell us, Mr Speaker, whether the absolute privilege that applies under section 50 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 will apply equally to an Ad Hoc Committee, such as this one, in the House? Will the same absolute privilege that applies to every Member when he or she participates in the Assembly, as the Assembly, apply to that intended Committee?

Mr Speaker: The matter will be considered further. If the Assembly votes to approve the motion that has been tabled by the Business Committee — and I would make the point that the Business Committee did consider whether to enable debate, and decided that it was satisfied that debate was not required given the extenuating circumstances that we all face with the current, unprecedented health crisis — further guidance will be issued. I will make some remarks on that later.

Ad Hoc Committee on COVID-19

Mr Speaker: The next item in the Order Paper is a motion on the establishment of an Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 response. The motion will be treated as business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That, as provided for in Standing Order 53(1), this Assembly appoints an Ad Hoc Committee to receive oral statements from Ministers on matters relating to the COVID-19 response and to question Ministers on such statements.

Composition: All Members of the Assembly shall be members of the Committee. The Chairperson of the Committee shall be the Speaker or, in his absence, a Deputy Speaker.

Quorum: The quorum shall be five members, including the Chairperson.

Procedures: The Committee may not meet on days when the Assembly is sitting. The procedures of the Committee shall otherwise be such as the Chairperson may determine. Any report of the Committee shall be limited to its minutes of proceedings together with the minutes of any evidence taken before it.

Time Frame: Unless the Assembly previously resolves, the Committee shall exist for a period of 12 months.

The establishment of this Ad Hoc Committee does not prevent Ministers from continuing to make statements to the Assembly in line with the provisions of Standing Order 18. — [Mr O'Dowd.]

Mr Speaker: I will make a number of comments about the Ad Hoc Committee that which has just been set up by the Assembly. I did not want to refer to it in my earlier remarks until it was approved by the Assembly. I will comment briefly now on the establishment of the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 response.

The measure has arisen from discussions that I have had with the Executive, about which I informed Members previously, in order to ensure that Members could continue to scrutinise Ministers on the most significant challenge with which the Assembly has ever dealt. The Ad Hoc Committee will provide a more agile means by which to enable Ministers to update Members and answer their questions on those issues beyond the days when the Assembly sits, and should involve less resource pressure on Departments than preparing for general questions sessions. Aside from the perspective of my procedural responsibilities, the proposal also has the significant advantage of requiring fewer Assembly staff to be here to support meetings of the Ad Hoc Committee than a full plenary session would require. I therefore appreciate the cooperation of the Executive and all parties on the Business Committee in supporting that particular development. As I said a moment ago, I will issue further guidance on the procedures of the Committee, and will address the matter to which Mr Allister referred in his point of order.

Ministerial Statement

Budget

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Finance that he wishes to make a statement on the Budget. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members that, in the light of social distancing's being observed by parties, I have, of course, relaxed the Speaker's ruling that Members must be in the Chamber to hear his statement if they wish to ask a question. Members must still ensure that their name is on the speaking list if they wish to be called. I remind Members to be concise in asking their questions. It is not an opportunity for debate. Long introductions will not be allowed.

11.15 am

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I am announcing the Executive's 2020-21 Budget. Development of this Budget began before the onset of COVID-19 and has been overshadowed by the unprecedented public health crisis that we face — a health crisis that impacts on every area of our lives.

Protecting lives and livelihoods from the pandemic is now our number one priority. In that regard, many Members will want to know how the Budget will help in our response to COVID-19. While we have been able to incorporate some COVID-19 measures within the Budget, legislation prohibits us from including the majority of the COVID-19 funding that we have received. That legislation requires me to announce a Budget at least 14 days after I have confirmed to the Assembly the level of funding available from the Secretary of State. I did that on 16 March. In normal circumstances, that would pose no difficulty, but we are not in normal circumstances. Since then, the world has changed dramatically. Only the initial £120 million of the funding provided for the COVID-19 response was included in my statement on 16 March. Therefore that is the amount that can be included in the Budget that I am announcing today. We have subsequently received a further £792 million to help tackle COVID-19.

Some Members may ask whether the 14-day legislation has hindered our response to COVID-19. I categorically state that it has not. Whilst we cannot include funding in the formal Budget announcement, that does not, and will not, mean that we will delay in any necessary intervention. Indeed, a number of announcements have been made and measures introduced in advance of the Budget. Personal protective equipment has been ordered, car parking fees have been removed and public transport has been made free for key healthcare workers to help those leading the fight against COVID-19; funding has been made available to ensure that the 97,000 children who are entitled to free school meals do not experience hardship as a result of schools closing; and £370 million has been made available in grants to support some 30,000 businesses so that they can continue to pay workers.

I will turn to the Budget I am announcing today by, first, setting out my approach to rates. We have relatively low rates for domestic properties and strong protections for households on low incomes. To ensure no additional burden on households during this difficult and uncertain time, I am freezing domestic rates. Whilst domestic rates are relatively low, business rates are extremely high.

Our SMEs have long cited the cost of rates as a key difficulty. That was strongly reflected in the business rates consultation. I can announce today that the Executive are reducing the non-domestic regional rates. The regional rate has been adjusted downward to offset the change in the total rateable value due to Reval 2020. In addition, I have made a further 12.5% cut. Today's reduction will effectively see an 18% reduction on the 2019-2020 figure. That will benefit all business ratepayers. Although I had decided to reduce business rates in advance of the COVID-19 threat, the reduction will help with the economic recovery needed on the other side of the pandemic. The regional rates reduction is being funded from the Executive's existing resources.

As previously announced, I am also providing a three-month business rates holiday to help all business rate payers — the majority of whom are SMEs — with the significant cash flow difficulties they will face following the COVID-19 health crisis. That means that businesses will see an additional 25% discount to their annual rates bill. That will cost around £100 million and will be funded from the £120 million of COVID-19 funding included in this Budget.

In addition, I am renewing the small business rate relief, providing almost £20 million of relief to 27,000 small businesses.

Mr Givan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Murphy: If the Member does not mind, I will finish my statement, and I am sure he can ask a question on the other side of it.

I am also restoring the rural ATM scheme, which helps to sustain cash flow in some of the most isolated rural areas. That is important at the current time.

Finally, I am delaying rates bills for households and businesses until the last possible moment, with the first bills to be issued in June. That will defer expenses as we await the payments due, in June, under the job retention scheme and the self-employment income support scheme. The Executive will keep those measures under review and we will take further steps should we deem it necessary.

About £20 million of COVID-19 funding included in my statement of 16 March has not been included in this Budget outcome. That will be added to the other COVID-19 funding and will be used as part of the Executive's response to the pandemic, which is separate from this Budget. The Budget announced today sets budgets at departmental level, and Ministers will now look to allocating their budget across individual spending areas. Once those decisions are made, I intend to produce a Budget document for Members with that detail in advance of the debate and vote on the Budget in May.

Turning to the Budget itself, the resources available to the Executive remain constrained. In real terms, our block grant remains some £360 million below pre-austerity levels when comparing like-for-like funding. Over that time, pressure on vital public services has increased. Public expectations were raised considerably by the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, but the British Government did not provide the funding necessary to deliver these priorities. However, I am able to deliver a Budget that, compared to last year, provides real-term increases to all Departments.

In 2020-21, £12.2 billion of resource DEL will be allocated to Departments, with a further £278.6 million to be allocated to the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for farm support payments that will replace the EU common agricultural policy payments. In addition, a further £70 million of centrally held funding will be allocated to Departments during the year.

On the capital side, the Executive intend to spend some £1.6 billion next year on a wide range of projects and programmes. More detail on these allocations is provided in the tables accompanying the printed version of this statement. There is also some £195 million of financial transactions capital available to the Executive, which will be allocated once departmental proposals are at a more advanced stage.

Going forward, the Executive intend to bring forward multi-year Budgets, which will provide greater certainty to public services and facilitate longer-term planning. In that process, we will engage in full consultation, which has not been possible for this Budget. In difficult circumstances, this Budget delivers additional funding for our citizens, our workers and our businesses. I commend this Budget to the Assembly.

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): I thank the Minister for earlier sight of his statement today, and for meeting me as Chair of the Committee to discuss it.

These are indeed unprecedented times. While we deal with this crisis, it will be appropriate for us to welcome the additional £912 million of funding. I also take the opportunity to thank our national Government for taking decisive action to help our workers, both employed and self-employed, and to support our economy to allow, hopefully, a swift recovery from the current predicament.

It is also important that we, as an Assembly, take time, even in this crisis, to continue to scrutinise the allocation of our Budget. Despite some of the necessary measures that we are taking, I can assure the House, on behalf of the Finance Committee and other Committees, that we will continue, to the best of our abilities, to make sure that the moneys entrusted to us are appropriately spent.

However, we have several specific questions, firstly on Budget allocations. Whilst we note that you stated that the block grant is some £360 million below pre-austerity levels, Departments are largely seeing an uplift in their Budget allocations. The Executive Office alone will see an increase of over 70%. Perhaps the Minister can set out the reasons for such a significant increase.

On rates, the Minister stated that domestic rates are relatively low, whereas business rates are extremely high. Does this indicate that the Minister, as part of a wider review of the rating system, is intending to keep the scale of domestic rates under review?

We welcome the support being afforded to businesses, especially during the current circumstances. However, is the Minister considering extending the COVID-19 mitigation measures beyond the current three-month period to the same length of time as the rest of the United Kingdom? On COVID-19, the Minister has indicated that an additional £792 million, as well as the previous £120 million, is being made available. It will be interesting to see how these funds are being distributed in order to ensure that the necessary

resources are instantly available to respond to new or emerging pressures on those most in need.

Related to that issue, the Minister indicated that the Executive have agreed to allow Ministers to set aside the current in-year de minimis rules in reporting any flex in their budgets of over £1 million. Can the Minister please undertake to write to the Committee Chairs, giving details of the decision of the Executive and any guidelines on reviewing the decision as the pressures of COVID-19, hopefully, recede?

Mr Murphy: I thank the Chair for that. I was happy to meet him this morning and to brief him and the Committee Clerk on the Budget. He raised a number of issues that I will try to address.

The additional spend in relation to the Executive Office that he mentioned is primarily due to the inclusion of £37.5 million for historical institutional abuse payments in 2020-21. I will now look to the institutions involved to meet their obligations in respect of contributing to the cost redress scheme.

Domestic rates, as the Member highlighted, have been frozen. Of course, we will consider the broad rating policy, and we intend to look at that as part of the multi-annual Budget process that we expect to occur beyond this year. We have no plans around that at the moment, but, in freezing domestic rates, we recognise that, although, relatively speaking, our domestic rates are low, people are very challenged — not just in business but in meeting household payments. We have not only frozen the rate below the level of inflation but we have deferred the collection of those rates until June to try and assist households as well. In discussions with Treasury, I have asked that they do the same with regard to other bills, particularly utility bills, so that people are not pressed at this time when a lot of people are not able to work or are suffering a reduction in income.

With regard to the rates relief that was part of the COVID-19 package, some of that will involve the money in this Budget and some will be beyond that. We wanted to get out a significant package that would take us over the first three months and would apply to all businesses. Unlike the British scheme, which applies to certain sections of business, the scheme here applies to all businesses. Of course, we are anticipating further interventions as this rolls on and depending on the length of time that it takes to deal with the pandemic. If we get further interventions, perhaps we can consider tailoring a scheme so that we can focus more on the businesses that have suffered most as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Others may have been able to continue on, largely as they had before — in some cases even more, depending on what they manufacture. The food sectors are continuing on as before.

On the distribution of COVID-19 funding, we have allocated £639 million out of the £912 million. We have asked Departments for bids on COVID-19-specific responses, and we look forward to getting those. Whether it be through statements to the Assembly, depending on how the new Ad Hoc Committee works, or written statements, we will ensure that Members get sight of that so that they can scrutinise and ask questions in the appropriate manner.

I will make a final point around flexibility. As I said earlier, this Budget was designed and drafted only a short number of weeks ago without any foresight of what we were really facing. We have tried to add a degree of flexibility for Departments. Although they have allocations against spending that they have asked for, as part of the process that built up over a number of months, it is quite clear that some Departments will not be able to spend money because certain functions are not happening and they will not spend money as they had planned. We have allowed for a degree of flexibility that was agreed at Executive level. I can write to the Member and to other Committee Chairs to outline the process whereby Departments do not have the same requirements around the level of spending and the approvals required. We can be flexible and agile in our response across all Departments to, perhaps, unforeseen challenges that may come our way in the next number of months. The Executive will review that as time goes on. If we consider that we have moved beyond the pandemic response phase, we can stop that process and bring it back to the normal process of capped levels of accountability mechanisms and bring those back into play again. We want to ensure that all Departments had the flexibility to react quickly to the crisis and that is why we included, with Executive agreement, this flexibility for the period that the pandemic lasts.

Mr Frew: I welcome the Minister's statement today and the further funding that we have received from the Government. I also welcome the Minister's statement on the 18% reduction in rates on the 2019-2020 figure. Although you have given this reduction, if businesses are not in a position to pay their rates or do not exist, that rate base will not exist. I ask the Minister to consider extending his three-month holiday for industrial rates and to match other devolved regions of the UK.

We welcome the small business rate relief grant of £10,000. I know that some of those businesses are starting to receive that support, as we speak.

However, as inevitably will be the case, there will be people who fall through the cracks, including new start-up businesses that are on our high streets and small businesses that maybe fall below the £15,000 for NAV and maybe were getting the industrial derating. It may include artists in small shops who manufacture frames and sell prints and artisans. Those people will not be able to avail themselves of the £10,000 but will still have massive cash flow problems and bills to pay. There may well be 2,500 of those businesses in Northern Ireland, and it may well cost in the region of £25 million, but I ask the Minister to consider a mop-up exercise so that those people could maybe be supported in the future and to consider further mitigations and recovery measures that will aid businesses to crank up on the other side of this horrendous crisis. I ask that the Minister takes those on board.

I add now, Minister, that I am deeply worried when I hear reports of intimidation by republicans and activists from his party of businesses, employers and CEOs of manufacturing plants who are striving to stay open and on whom the Assembly may well call on to redirect resources and make things for us that will save lives. I am deeply worried that I have heard reports of activists from his party intimidating and harassing businesses to close completely. Can the Minister please address the House on that issue?

11.30 am

Mr Murphy: On the last point, it is a matter of regret that you bring accusations without any substance to them. Of course, if you are aware of accusations that are, essentially, of criminal behaviour, you have an obligation to report those to the police. I hope that you have, rather than simply bringing them here for publicity purposes.

In relation to the rates holiday, the scheme devised in England and Wales is different from the scheme here in that it applies to certain sectors of business only. It does not apply to all businesses. Replicating that scheme in full here is way beyond the Executive's means, given the nature of our business make-up here and the nature of our rates. We took a decision to apply a three-month break for all businesses, and, should we get further interventions or other money available to us, we can consider further schemes in relation to that and, perhaps, more tailored schemes, certainly in relation to businesses that are particularly suffering as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

On the £10,000 grants, I appreciate that the interventions, including the employee retention scheme, the self-employment scheme, the £10,000 grants and the £25,000 grants, will not cover every person. As I said this morning, someone in manufacturing told me to get to 80% quickly and then try to mop up the rest. There are microbusinesses and other people who operate from their home who do not have the ability to access the small business rate relief scheme. Clearly, we are hearing from all of those who have not fallen into the schemes, so it is our responsibility and that of the Department for the Economy, which manages the business grant scheme, using the rates base, to see whether there are further schemes that they can identify and cost to try to catch the businesses that have fallen through the cracks in relation to some of the interventions to date.

The Member mentioned recovery measures and identifying how to support the economy coming out of the pandemic. That is clearly a matter for the Department for the Economy to identify, and I hope that it is doing work in that regard. Of course, we face an awful lot of unknowns and, perhaps, unforeseen consequences, but, certainly, in the time ahead, there will be a need for recovery measures. Clearly, measures on support for business will be identified and brought forward by the Department for the Economy.

Ms Dolan: I thank the Minister for his statement, and I really commend him and his officials for the bold yet necessary steps that have been taken over the past few weeks. Can the Minister outline the flexibilities that have been given to Departments to allow them to deal with the immediate impact of the coronavirus?

Mr Murphy: As I said in response to the Committee Chair, the Budget was devised and planned over a period of months when we had no idea of what we currently face with the pandemic. As it was being finalised, perhaps, the full realisation of the unprecedented and unique circumstances that we now find ourselves in was becoming more apparent. Specific funding requests and pressures identified over many months by Departments were not necessarily related to the current crisis that we face. As well as allocating the specific coronavirus money that has come across from Treasury to us and to Departments to meet that challenge, we tried to allow

Departments some flexibility in the normal constraints they have, such as caps on the amount of money they can shift within Departments, and in the accountability measures. The Executive have agreed that we needed to allow some flexibility for a period until we deem that it is no longer necessary.

We have allowed people to be agile. That is what the public would expect of us: to be as agile as we can, to be on our toes and to recognise that what we had previously planned for no longer counts. Services have to continue and spending has to continue in Departments, but there are much greater challenges that immediately face us, so we have to have the agility and resource, even within the limited and constrained resources that we have, to meet this as best we can. We have allowed for that.

I have undertaken to the Chair of the Finance Committee that I will write to Committee Chairs so that they have a clear understanding, when they scrutinise spending by the Department that they hold to account, of the arrangements. However, let me make it clear: the Executive will, if we deem in the time ahead or over the course of the year that that situation is no longer required, bring back the arrangements that we normally have for moving around money within Departments.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Minister for coming to the Assembly to give us that update. Every time he comes to the House, we seem to say, "It is extraordinary times", but it really is extraordinary times now, and we are completely focused on dealing with the public health emergency. I have a few specific questions, but, before those, it is worth saying that it is important that, later in the year, when, we hope, we are through the worst of this and have minimised the loss of life, the Assembly gets to scrutinise the budgetary process properly, as we keep saying we want to. However, we accept that these are extraordinary times.

Will the Minister update me on a few things? He talked about the reprioritisation of spending from certain departmental budgets towards coronavirus and talked about flexibility for budgets. Will he give a little more detail? Does it mean that the thresholds for underspend will be raised or that budgets will be pushed forward to the next year? Which Departments is he talking about?

The Minister was on the radio this morning speaking about the personal protection equipment (PPE) that we have, we hope, procured on an all-Ireland basis. Will he give a bit more detail? Is it Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) in the Department of Finance that has procured it? Exactly how much has it procured? When will it be here in the North? What are we getting? Who is responsible for dispersing it throughout the trusts?

We all know that health workers are doing an extraordinary job and making extraordinary sacrifices on our behalf and on behalf of our loved ones. Will he and the Department of Health give thought to how that can be recognised in a pay award? We are all realising what is actually important and valuable in our society and our labour force.

Mr Murphy: The Member rightly recognises the circumstances that we are in and that, in many ways, the rule book does not apply on a range of measures.

This morning, I met the Chair of the Finance Committee and we agreed this. We recognised that most of the people in the Departments who do this work are working remotely.

Usually, when we bring the Budget to the Assembly in May, it is as a printed document. That might be difficult to do this time. However, the intent is to get people in the Departments to provide detail of the spending plans as best they can and that we collate a document. The intention is to have it published, but, if we are unable to do that, perhaps it will have to be delivered electronically to Members so that they can study it. We will do it in advance of 4 May, so that Members will have the ability to properly scrutinise the Budget and what has been spent.

Hopefully, in the time ahead, we will get into the process of multiannual Budgets and proper scrutiny. Even without the circumstances we find ourselves in today, we did not have sufficient scrutiny in advance of the Budget, because the Assembly was not sitting. We hope, that in the autumn, we get back to a much more normal scrutiny process for the entire Budget.

At the moment, we are trying to identify what is required in response to COVID-19. Obviously, we have identified business support and the necessary health support. That may change and develop as time goes on. As others have outlined, the business support measures have captured a lot of people but left out some people as well, and we need to be flexible about how we approach that. However, as I say, that reduces the cap in how people can shift money about within Departments, and it reduces the accountability mechanisms. That does not mean that there is no accountability for that — the Department of Finance will want to know how people spend their money — but all of the approvals that might, perhaps, have slowed up the process in the short time ahead will be set aside so that Departments can be flexible. That applies to all Departments, and it will apply to the response to this situation. It is not simply about meeting other pressures and priorities that they already had; it is specifically to allow people to have the flexibility to deal with the circumstances that we find ourselves in.

When it comes to PPE procurement, the Member will know that the Department of Health is responsible for its own procurement. What we undertook to do initially, because there was significant demand from other services — the blue-light services, including the police, ambulance, the Fire Brigade, forensic scientists — was to procure PPE for all outside the Department of Health. As of last week, we have a joint approach to PPE procurement, the one that is identified in the joint order with the Government in Dublin.

We are ensuring that the appropriate people are on the ground to make sure that that order is secured, that it is the equipment that we need and that it meets the specifications that are required. There is no point in importing it if we find that it is not what we need or not what we ordered. Before we get into the detail of the exact quantities, which are significant, we want to ensure that we have the right order secured and on its way home. Then, we will be able to release it. I am glad that we are now working on the Department of Health's PPE procurement, because that puts us in a stronger position.

I take the opportunity to pay tribute to the Department's procurement team: they are in the Department working strongly every day on this. I know that other civil servants are working remotely from home and are applying themselves very diligently as well. However, the procurement team has been working flat out over the last number of weeks, reaching out to other supply chains,

because we always have the concern that our existing supply chains will go down as a result of unforeseen consequences. The realisation in America and India that they face a big crisis could, if you like, corner all the available PPE supplies, so we have been reaching out to local manufacturing to make sure that we establish some supply chains on the island in the event that international supply chains go down so that we have some cover.

The Member knows that one of the first actions of the new Executive was to make the pay award to nurses. Of course, I agree with his recognition of the sterling work that front-line health service workers and a range of public service workers are doing in response to this. Ironically, it is those who were worst paid and had the worst conditions who have come to the forefront to fight on behalf of our entire society to keep all of us safe. I hope that, as society changes and re-examines its priorities in the time ahead, we will recognise those whom we rely on most.

Mr Muir: I echo the Minister's thanks to the officials for the work that is being done. We get replies to emails late at night and at weekends, and officials are working night and day not only on the Budget but on many other things. I thank them for that.

As the Minister said, we live in a rapidly evolving situation. The challenges to our public finances were immense before COVID-19 arrived, and now we are in a situation where we face not only a public health emergency but an economic crisis. As has been outlined, this is something of an interim Budget, and I welcome the Minister's agile approach. It is important that we provide as much funding as we can to the health service.

My question is about how we can provide sufficient funds to ensure that the economy recovers. It is likely that we will enter a recession, if not a depression. There are reports today that one in six people could be out of their job. Particular sectors have been badly affected as a result of the current crisis. We know what they are: hospitality, hotels, leisure and non-food retail. There is a list, and they really need assistance to recover. I echo the concerns about businesses that do not pay rates, such as microbusinesses, which have been developing but cannot avail themselves of any support. Will the Minister consider further measures to assist the sectors that have been badly affected by the current crisis or those that are not able to avail themselves of any grants? Will he consider using borrowing powers to assist those businesses? If we do not start planning for the recovery now, the economic damage from the current crisis will be much more severe.

11.45 am

Mr Murphy: I recognise entirely that turning our minds towards recovery is essential, and, as I said to Members who spoke previously, I will rely on the Department for the Economy to identify what it thinks is vital.

Our first priority was to try to keep people afloat; to keep wages paid, doors open, lights on and roofs over people's heads. The interventions on rates and business support grants — the £10,000 and £25,000 ones — were key to getting support out the door, as quickly as we could, to try to keep people in business, because we will require those people to come back into business on the other side of this. Of course, the intervention packages from the Treasury on employee retention were key, particularly for

the hospitality industry, which did not want to make people redundant. If it had had to do that, our social security system would perhaps have been overwhelmed by the pressure on it. While the self-employed scheme and all the schemes have certain flaws in them, we have to bear in mind that, with those schemes and with our schemes, we are now doing things in the space of days that we would have previously taken months to do, with consultation, planning, engagement and testing various things. We are having to do work, which would previously have taken six months or perhaps even longer for schemes like these, to get them out the door and turned around in days, in order to intervene as quickly as we can. We have had conversations with the Comptroller and Auditor General about some of the schemes to say that we are doing things that normally he would be coming after us for, and, I think, he understands, as well, the need to respond very quickly with the measures.

Of course, we need to look beyond this, then, as we hopefully start to see light at the end of the tunnel, to recovery and at what that looks like and what needs support.

I will make a general point for all of us and for anyone who happens to be listening. We should, if we have not considered it before, support our local businesses. After this is over, we should look particularly to businesses that have behaved responsibly. In the village where I live, businesses have behaved so responsibly as part of a community network of supporting local people by delivering grocery services to them and acting responsibly in how they open their doors and do business and in closing ahead of being required to close. Many in the hospitality sector closed their business before they were told to close. We know local businesses and perhaps have taken them for granted for many years. If we have money to spend on the other side of this, as individuals as well as a Government, we should look to support local businesses and ensure that the ones that supported us during the crisis, in turn, enjoy the benefit of our spend on the other side of it.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Minister for his statement on the additional funding allocated and, in particular, the £639 million for COVID-related activity in the Departments. That is most welcome. It is, indeed, good to see that, in a time of crisis, we have prioritised those issues as a matter of concern, and that will be a very welcome signal to many of our constituents across Northern Ireland.

I welcome not only the particular schemes put in place by the Assembly for the freezing of rates etc but those from the British Government that will help to alleviate some of the immediate concerns facing many businesses today.

I echo the point made by my colleague Mr Frew about looking at particular measures to extend the industrial rate freeze for the industries particularly affected by COVID-19. That would be a very welcome step. I also want to press upon the Minister to press further for the self-employed. They welcome the new funding package that they can access, but the delay in getting that to them could effectively mean that a lot of self-employed people cannot even put bread on the table. I know that the Minister will take up that point at the Executive table.

A particular point that I would like the Minister to address relates to the creative way in which PPE has been secured

by the Department, which was mentioned by Mr O'Toole. Does the Minister have any indication of how quickly that PPE will essentially get out on the ground to organisations outside the health service that are much in need of it?

Mr Murphy: In relation to further rates measures, I said previously that we have tried to use quickly the business support packages that are available to us and tried to get them out quickly. The LPS rates base is a quick and accurate way to get money to businesses. We know what the businesses are, what they are paying and what they paid recently, and that they are still viable businesses and still exist, because they are paying rates. It is a very accurate tool for getting that. It also leaves some gaps.

The quickest way to deal with that and to get support out on the ground quickly was to try to cover all businesses. That is not the same as the scheme in England and Wales, which targets certain sectors. If there are further initiatives to be taken, as time goes on, we will get a clearer understanding than we had even two weeks' ago, when this measure was done. We will have a clearer understanding of the impact on certain sectors and perhaps a lack of impact on certain sectors. It is a challenging exercise to differentiate businesses, but we will see if it is possible to get a more tailored support scheme.

The self-employed scheme came from the Treasury. It was only announced last week. Following the announcement of the employee retention scheme, there was a very significant focus on the self-employed, who had been left out, and this scheme came in. Last Friday, I spoke to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury about it. As with the employee retention scheme, the delay in introducing the self-employed scheme is placing people in a real crisis in the intervening weeks, particularly the self-employed. Whatever about the ability of larger industries to absorb that delay, many of the self-employed do not have the same levels of income and turnover to try to absorb that delay. I raised specifically the delay to June in paying the self-employed. I argued that it should come quicker because quite a number of our people may be put out of business in the intervening period, so that needs to happen.

In relation to PPE, as I said to Mr O'Toole, we previously were responsible for trying to secure that for all other services. We are now working with the Department of Health to secure supplies for it, as well. We are talking to local businesses about what they can do. We are also talking to local businesses that are not functioning and which have PPE supplies for what they were doing previously, to try to get some of that. There are different standards and specifications that are required for different services. We are not sure where we can fit that, but we have put out a general call to businesses, and some of the universities and others hold stocks of PPE. We are trying to have those released into the centre so that we can distribute them, hopefully, perhaps, to domiciliary care workers, who seem to have been left particularly short.

The PPE that is required for our health professionals who are at the front line must be very specific to their needs. We need to ensure that it is properly procured and that it meets the requirement. We need to ensure that those who are who are going out at the front line are confident that the resources and tools that they need to fight this pandemic are available to them, that the Executive are focused on supplying them with all the tools necessary to do the job, and that we have their back.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the next Member, I urge Members to curtail the number of questions. We have used well over half the time available to us in this session and six Members have been able to ask questions. The multiplicity of many of the questions means that we now have 11 Members in the queue. There is no question of getting to all those Members. I ask other Members, when asking questions, to keep them to a minimum and to reduce their commentary around the issue.

Mr McAleer: In the light of the COVID-19 crisis and the closure of many food outlets and livestock marts, will the Minister advise whether farmers, the vast majority of whom are self-employed, are able to avail themselves of the recently announced self-employed income support and job retention schemes and the other schemes that have been put in place to support employees and employers during the crisis?

Mr Murphy: The way that these schemes work is that HMRC will contact those that they deem to be eligible. If they deem farmers to be eligible, they may do that. Of course, it will be people, I imagine, whose businesses have been very adversely affected as a result of the crisis. It might be considered that people in food production, which has a broad range, have not been adversely impacted. I do not doubt that farmers, like everyone else, are struggling in the current circumstances. If they are entitled to the scheme, they will hear directly from those who are organising it.

Mr Givan: I welcome the 6.3% uplift in the Department of Justice's baseline. The Justice Committee supported the Minister's call for it, and we look forward to scrutinising how it will be delivered.

I welcome the Minister's initiative to procure PPE, initially on behalf of all of the Departments except Health, and I welcome that Health is now on board. However, he is right that there is a need for people to have confidence that they can do the job. That need exists right across the public sector and private sector, including in health, where people who are being asked to carry out important roles still do not have confidence that they can do that in a way that protects them and their families. What PPE has been secured as a result of the procurement exercise that he initiated? When will it be delivered to those people in Northern Ireland?

I echo the remarks that we need a more flexible scheme for the cash grants, because it is missing a significant number of businesses.

Mr Murphy: As he says, part of this is about giving confidence. Even in the documentation that we have received, the Health Department recognises that it is about morale as well as protection. One of the key lessons from the Italian experience was that, if people did not have appropriate PPE in the hospital setting, they actually became transmitters of the disease and the outcome was much worse. We have to learn the lessons from international experience. We have to make sure that our health professionals are properly equipped to protect themselves because they are the front-line workers in all this but also so that they do not become transmitters of the disease.

What I want to do in respect of the major order for Health that we placed alongside the Dublin Government is to make sure that we have all that we have asked for, that it is the standard that we require and that it is on its way

back, rather than announce something and find that there is some interruption to that. There is such a huge demand going into China from all nations that we want to be certain. There are people from Invest NI and IDA Ireland on the ground in China to do that work for us, and we are also using embassies to make sure that we have that. We want to give people confidence that we have it.

As I said, we have also begun a procurement exercise in relation to other services. I know that the Police Service, in particular, is satisfied that its initial concerns are now being met. We want all public services that need to be appropriately kitted out to meet their challenge in this pandemic to have confidence that they have the material that they need.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Minister for his statement and for his work and that of his team in responding to this crisis.

The schemes that have been introduced to support workers so far have been really welcome, but there is a lack of clarity and some gaps in those. In particular, there is a lack of clarity around whether all non-essential businesses will be able to avail themselves of the job retention scheme. There are businesses that are very keen to close and allow their workers to stay at home for their health and peace of mind but that are unsure whether they will actually be able to pay those workers. You then have companies like Easyjet that are able to pay out hundreds of millions of pounds in dividends to their shareholders and, at the same time, avail themselves of public funding to pay some of their employees. It seems somewhat immoral that companies on a tiny fraction of those profits are uncertain if their employees will be covered by this scheme.

I am sure that the Minister would agree with me that workers are the backbone of our economy and that their livelihoods need to be protected in all of this. Could you give us an update on the discussions with Treasury to try to get clarity on eligibility for the job retention scheme?

Mr Murphy: I have acknowledged the fact that schemes have been devised and put out through the door within 48 hours when, normally, schemes of this magnitude would perhaps take years to be consulted on, devised and properly structured, with all the potential gaps and downsides looked at. We have to recognise that these things are being done quickly. The Treasury has come back with further clarification on the job retention scheme. Quite clearly, there are people who are deemed to be non-essential but who were advised that they could continue to function. However, if they cannot put proper social distancing practices in place in their workplace, they are clearly contradicting health advice. So, in some ways, the health advice from the British Government contradicted the economic advice, which has left people uncertain. We have pressed and pressed to ensure that there is as much clarity as possible. The health advice is that you should not be out of home unless you absolutely have to be; for me, that can be defined as essential. We cannot say that on the one hand but then say to other businesses, "You can stay open if you like". That has caused confusion. As I said, I accept that these schemes were done in a very rapid fashion. Undoubtedly, the speed with which they have been devised and got through the door means that they do not cover every single base that needs to be covered. I also acknowledge that the support that they have provided to employers to retain workers has been absolutely vital.

12.00 noon

In relation to people who have availed themselves of those schemes and, perhaps, not done the right thing — I am not being specific about any company — the Finance Department, which has responsibility for procurement, put out a statement a week or so ago in which it said it would ask all Departments to make sure that there is prompt payment to people who are providing services. We will ensure that we do not delay in getting firms the money that is owed to them. However, in doing that, we expect those firms to pay subcontractors and employees. We do not expect them to put that prompt payment on to their profit margins and profit lines. If we find that firms do that with the money that we are getting out to try and support the community, then they will not be considered for future public-sector contracts. We will monitor how the prompt payments are spent by the firms that receive them. Similarly, I think that if the British Government find that firms take advantage of job retention schemes and behave in a way that is unethical in the circumstances that we find ourselves in, then those firms should feel the weight of disapproval on the other side of the crisis.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his statement and also for his efforts and those of his Executive colleagues in getting a safety net in place for those impacted economically by the crisis that is engulfing us. That safety net still has holes, and we have heard a bit about them today. We all have a responsibility to identify those holes with a view to mending them so that nobody falls through.

In terms of the financial impact and the resources going towards that safety net, will the Minister give an assurance that they will not impact on another safety net that the Assembly has agreed is essential to protect our most vulnerable people, and that is welfare mitigations? Will that impact on our ability to extend and strengthen the mitigation package?

Mr Murphy: I can assure him no. As part of the Budget, we have allocated additional resources to the Department for Communities to specifically meet the welfare mitigation challenges. Those are in relation to the bedroom tax scheme and ongoing support. I am just trying to find the figure — I will get the figure to him. As part of the Budget, we have additional resources for the Department for Communities for welfare mitigation, the bedroom tax scheme, other mitigations and for welfare advice, so resources are being dedicated. We recognise, of course, that when we are trying to protect businesses, to protect workers and their incomes, and to protect families, we also have a significant duty to protect the most vulnerable, who are perhaps most in need of our support at this time.

Mr Nesbitt: The Minister has already explained why the resource DEL for the Executive Office is up over 70% from baseline; that is to advance the redress for the victims of institutional abuse, and I am sure the whole House welcomes that. On the Minister's theme of being agile, will he inform the House whether there are other budget lines across all Departments, such as the budget for establishing the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression and the associated commissioners, that could be, with agility, re-profiled to help fund the fight against COVID-19?

Mr Murphy: Departments and the Assembly have been tasked with bringing forward and dealing with essential business. That means that, as I have said about the

flexibility that we have provided to Departments, some of the business that they had, quite rightly, planned for three weeks ago, is perhaps no longer deliverable because of what the Assembly is able to legislate for and process. All Departments will have to reconsider their spending in the immediate time ahead in terms of how the Assembly can support the delivery of that spending and how the Departments can deliver it with the personnel available to them and the programmes or the areas of work that they were targeting the spending. That is a general approach across the Executive. Of course, we have asked Departments to be as flexible as possible. Obviously, if any programmes or projects are interrupted or delayed, I do not doubt that Departments will want to pick them up very quickly on the other side of the pandemic.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Seán Lynch, I remind Members to focus on limiting the number of questions that they ask.

Mr Lynch: Will the £1 million allocated this year for people who have been affected by the blood contamination scandal continue next year?

Mr Murphy: Yes, I was very pleased that one of my earliest acts when I took over as Finance Minister was to find in the January monitoring round £1 million for the Department of Health for this scandal, which was going on for far too long. The Department of Health, through ongoing discussion, has satisfied the request from the people affected. In next year's Budget, we have provided an additional £1 million to meet that cost.

Ms Mullan: I thank the Minister for his statement and for his Department's work so far. Minister, I welcome the increase that you have made available to the Department of Education, in particular confirmation for the Education Minister and the Communities Minister that the parents of children who are entitled to free school meals will receive direct financial payment. Will the Minister provide some further detail on the flexibility that he has introduced for procurement? If the Department of Education could follow that flexibility, along with increased funding, that would go a long way to make schools' core budgets sustainable.

Mr Murphy: Yes, as part of the COVID-19 response, we were very glad to allocate £18.9 million to try to support that to ensure that kids who are not able to access school and free school meals do not suffer as a consequence. We know that holiday hunger is a very real factor in the life of an awful lot of children.

The flexibility is really to try to meet challenges that might arise as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. We have said to Departments that it is not simply about shifting funds to meet other pressures. Departments understand that we are in unprecedented times. They understand that we have reduced relaxations that would never otherwise apply, but they also understand that we are doing this to meet a particular challenge, not the normal challenges of Departments. I appreciate that every Department is challenged. While we managed to give a real increase to every Department, it nonetheless does not meet all the pressures that they all experience. This is not about shifting money about to try to meet existing pressures; it is about trying to meet the challenge that they have with the crisis that we are facing.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for his indulgence today. Can he give any update or information on asking either

electricity or gas providers to freeze bills for up to six months?

Mr Murphy: As part of the conversations that I have had with Treasury, we have talked about what we could do with rates reduction and deferring rates bills, including domestic bills, for a number of months to try to see how households get over the current crisis. We also raised utilities with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and asked that the British Government intervene — they obviously have more authority to do that — with some of the companies, which may be based over there as well. I think there is an onus on all sides, public and private, to act, and that is why it is important for the public side to take the lead on prompt payments to ensure that those down the chain are paid and that there is an ethical approach to the next number of months and to the times that we face. If the public side takes the lead, I hope that the private side will follow that and understand that households are very hard-pressed and that almost everybody has had their income reduced. People are not able to get out, and there are real pressures building on households. All companies need to recognise that in the time ahead.

Ms McLaughlin: Thank you, Minister, for your statement this morning. I appreciate that it was not the statement that you envisaged making to the House. That is very difficult, and it is difficult for us as Members to give any type of statement or Budget due scrutiny at this time.

My question is similar to the one that the Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy asked about the communication between the Finance Department and the Economy Department and how you get the messages out to businesses about exactly what schemes have been put in place and what support mechanisms are there for them. There is a real confusion out there about what is an essential business, what is not and social distancing in the workplace, and that is really hurting the economy. In a way, it is demonising businesses, unnecessarily at this time. I know that whilst it is not part of your Budget and statement today, it is certainly part of the Department of Finance's work. I want to see better communication to the business community, and it needs to start immediately. There have been questions asked, and they are not being answered.

Mr Murphy: I accept that there has been confusion, but a variety of packages have been introduced very quickly. Some packages are directly from London and some we have devised ourselves. On the schemes that we have devised, we have tried to use the rates base as the most accurate tool to get the finance to businesses. We recognised, in doing that, that certain businesses would not come in under that umbrella, if you like. On the basis that we could get money out quickly, we had to use the most readily available tool. Of course, what we have been doing since is fielding the queries from all businesses. I hope, and am confident, that the Department is trying to turn around that advice. I know that other Members have referred to the fact that the officials are getting back to them very promptly with a range of advice.

Equally, as I outlined, some of the other schemes that have come from London, which would normally have been the product of a lengthy consultation process, have been turned around within 48 hours and got out the door. Similarly, they have prompted confusion among businesses as to who is able to apply for the job retention

and who is able to avail themselves of the self-employed scheme.

The issue of which business should be open and which business should be closed continues to cause confusion because, on the one hand, the Prime Minister in London listed a series of essential businesses and workers, and then said that, basically, any business can stay open if it wants to. That contradicts the health advice, which is that businesses should close unless they absolutely have to be involved in work.

Yesterday, I listened to the First Minister and deputy First Minister's press conference. I thought there was a very clear message about the requirement that any business that is retaining employees must put in adequate measures for social distancing. The reason for the formation of that forum, which is under the control of the Department for the Economy and involves the Health and Safety Executive and the Labour Relations Agency among others, is to ensure that there is at least a forum for businesses to come to and get clear advice. There is an area of enforcement within that, so, if workers are concerned that they are being forced into circumstances that are endangering them, they will also have a channel through which they can raise issues and ensure that it is consistent.

I appreciate that when you turn things around very rapidly, it causes confusion. We have to make sure that there are channels open for those who are uncertain in the time ahead to get answers quickly. The Executive have been trying to ensure that we get proper information put in place and a quick turnaround response time. The forum that has been set up specifically in relation to who should be in work and who should not, and also what the conditions in work should be, needs to get going very quickly to provide those answers to people.

Mr Speaker: Again, I ask Members to keep their contributions as minimal as possible?

Miss Woods: Very quickly, I have two points. Is there any indication of how the £20 million of COVID-19 funding, not included in the Budget outcome here, will be spent? Secondly, I note in the statement the information about the domestic rate freezes and non-domestic rates issues. I also note that previous civil contingencies grants and supports for councils were through the Department for Communities, but what support measures are in place through this Budget today for our local councils that are facing financial difficulties now?

Mr Murphy: When I made the statement on 16 March, we had an additional £120 million identified as part of the COVID response, of which we used £100 million. The additional £20 million will go into the subsequent money that we received, which is £700-odd million, and be added to that.

Part of that has been spread across a range of areas. In total, we received £912 million. To date, we have spent £639 million. That includes the small business grant schemes, grants for those in the hospitality and tourism sector, free school meals, the business rate break that we have announced, money for the Department of Health that involves getting equipment, community pharmacy, car parking charges and testing kits. There are a range of measures.

12.15 pm

Of that, £639 million has been spent, so there is still money available. We have asked Departments to bid for support. What the councils will lose through our rates approach we will make up back to them so that they do not lose out as a result of us reducing rates or giving a rates holiday. We have asked Departments to make a range of bids to us for specific projects. The Department for Communities is using the councils to generate community support and community activism, which is already happening on the ground, with people looking after neighbours and trying to do things for other people. The Department for Communities is keen to generate money through the councils to support that and guide it and make sure that it is doing the right thing but also to provide some financial support to it. A range of schemes will be done through councils and working with councils to make sure that money becomes available not just for business support but for the community response and that it is harnessed in a way that is productive and can achieve a significant outcome, and it is given a level of financial support to do that as well.

Mr Allister: Is this the first time that we have entered a new financial year without an approved Budget? In regard to our present transformed circumstances, we will obviously, going forward, have huge demands on health and the economy. How far, therefore, has the Minister advised or instructed his Executive colleagues to strip out non-priority resource spending? In the light of that, will he agree that it would be unconscionable in the circumstances to devote further millions of new spend to items like Ulster Scots and the Irish language? Should those projects, which were intended under 'New Decade, New Approach', now be parked for this year?

Finally, I think that the Minister said to Mr O'Toole that the Comptroller and Auditor General was relaxing his oversight. Is that what he said? What are the ramifications of that?

Mr Murphy: The Budget is approved: the Executive approved the Budget yesterday.

Mr Allister: The Assembly.

Mr Murphy: No. This Budget comes to the Assembly for votes on the Estimates in May, when you will have a chance to vote across the entirety of the Budget proposition, but we are legally required to have a Budget through the Executive and a Budget statement to the Assembly by the end of the financial year, which we have done.

In relation to flexibility in Departments, right up to three weeks ago, Departments were working on the basis of what their pressures were and what they wanted to spend in the period ahead, and the Budget debate that we had a number of weeks ago gave the allocation into the early months of the new financial year on the basis of what Departments thought they would be spending at that time. Clearly, I recognise that the situation has changed. We have asked Departments to look very clearly at what they cannot spend as they had intended to, some of which is because the Assembly will not be able to give the necessary approvals because it may not be functioning in a way that can legislate for some of those things, and there are some areas where the provision of services will no longer be possible over the next number of months. They

should use that flexibility not to move it to other areas of pressures but to respond to the crisis that we are in. We will continue to work with the Departments and talk to the Departments about how they achieve that.

I am, perhaps, somewhat heartened that the only issue that the Member ever finds spending problems with is in relation to Ulster Scots and the Irish language. In the entirety of the range of spending across the Executive's budgets across all Departments, those are the ones that he focuses in on that perhaps require some revisiting. If that means that the rest of them are OK, that is not too bad.

We do not have the full result of NDNA that we had wanted. We are still talking to the British Government in relation to all that. All projects fall into the same broad category: if it is not possible to spend in the time ahead, people need to look at what can be spent in responding to this crisis. If, beyond that, it has not been possible for a variety of reasons — some of which may be because the construction side is not there to do the jobs that we want to get done in the immediate period ahead — people will need to look again. We will reallocate as the year goes on. The Executive will take collective decisions as the year goes on to try to spend the Budget in the best and most effective way possible.

In relation to the Comptroller and Auditor General, the particular issues related to the £10,000 scheme and getting that out the door quickly. As part of the discussion between the Department of Finance and the Department for the Economy on trying to get that scheme done quickly, we consulted the C&AG. We told him that some things were not as we would normally do them but we faced circumstances that were not normal. That is not to say that he will not scrutinise — of course, he will scrutinise all Departments — but he had an understanding that Departments here and, obviously, across all Governments are trying to turn things around and get them out the door, measures on which they would normally take a lengthy time to consult, discuss, test and analyse the costs that are attached to them, involving various sectors. There is an urgency to be responsive to the crisis that we face. He understands that. It was just in that regard. It was not a general "Do what you like" approach; it related specifically to that scheme.

Mr Speaker: I call Gerry Carroll. I will just say that time is, more or less, up.

Mr Carroll: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I appreciate that. Quickly, can the Minister justify to people who are worried about their health and putting food on the table at this time why there is not enough of an economic spending shift to face the pandemic? It is unjustifiable that we are not talking about nationalisation, the requisition of private facilities, the mass production of PPE and bonuses for front-line staff, to name just a few of the issues that need to be addressed.

Mr Murphy: There were a range of measures in the Coronavirus Bill, which was approved by the Assembly last week. If people wanted to amend those provisions, that was the time to do it. If the Member wanted to bring in additional powers to nationalise industries or force manufacturers to make certain products at certain times, that was the place to do it, because that is where the power is. Some people have argued that the powers are far too sweeping and draconian. Obviously, we wanted to

ensure that they were compliant with human rights and that there was an end point to the adoption of the powers. I am afraid that the Budget cannot afford those measures, but the Coronavirus Bill could have. The Member should have attempted to amend it appropriately.

Executive Committee Business

Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill: First Stage

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): I beg to introduce the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill, [NIA 03/17-22], which is a Bill to create a course of conduct offence and a sentencing aggravation concerning domestic abuse and make rules as to procedure and giving evidence in criminal cases involving domestic abuse; and prevent cross-examination in person of certain witnesses in particular circumstances in family proceedings in the civil courts.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be published.

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

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

Agriculture Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I beg to move

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the Agriculture Bill, as introduced in the House of Commons on 16 January 2020, and consents to the Agriculture Bill being taken forward by the Westminster Parliament.

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

Mr Poots: The Agriculture Bill is a UK Government Bill containing some UK-wide clauses, some of which are reserved and some of which touch on devolved matters. It also contains a small number of provisions that are specific to Northern Ireland. Before I get into the detail of those provisions, I want to explain the rationale behind Northern Ireland being included in this UK Government Bill in the first place.

The main body of the Bill is intended primarily to provide the legal basis for a future agriculture policy direction for England and reflects ideas that were shared with stakeholders a couple of years ago in DEFRA's 'Health and Harmony' document. There are also elements of the main body of the Bill that have a UK-wide reach, as they are related to reserved matters. I will come back to those in a few minutes. Legislative consent is not being sought for either of those components — the UK-wide reserved matters or the clauses that relate only to England. Five remaining elements of the Bill are UK-wide in remit but cover devolved matters. Again, I will come back to those. I seek legislative consent to those elements.

Northern Ireland's and, hence, my primary interest in the Bill relates to schedule 6, which has three main objectives. The first is to provide in domestic legislation the legal basis for the full suite of CAP, pillar 1 and pillar 2 options that we had prior to the EU exit. Without that, we would not have the basis to continue direct support to farmers after this calendar year, nor would we have the option of continuing to make new commitments under current or modified pillar 2 schemes. It is vital that we have those powers in place. Secondly, the schedule will enable us to modify, simplify and correct the framework carried forward out of the old CAP. It provides additional flexibility, should we wish to use it. Thirdly, it gives us certain keeping-pace powers to enable us to ensure that we can respond to changes that might be brought forward elsewhere in the UK and that could cause difficulties if we did not have the option. Schedule 6, therefore, is not designed to set up a new policy agenda. That is not its purpose. It is designed to provide certainty and stability whilst we develop our new policy framework. It is also to provide a degree of flexibility in the implementation of the rolled-over regime that we are carrying forward, as well as the ability to keep pace with the changes needed to ensure the functioning of the UK internal market.

The Bill was originally drafted in the absence of an Executive and Assembly in Northern Ireland but was developed so as not to constrain the ability of an incoming Minister, Executive and Assembly to decide the long-

term direction and nature of future agriculture support in Northern Ireland. That is an important point.

I turn now to the detail of the UK-wide provisions that touch on devolved matters: the Secretary of State's duty to report to Parliament on UK food security, which is addressed in clause 17; the regulation of fertilising products, which is in clause 31; the identification and traceability of animals, which is in clause 32; the regulation of organic producers, which is in clauses 36 and 37; and the UK's compliance with its obligations under the World Trade Organization's agreement on agriculture, which is in clauses 40 to 42. I will deal with each of those in turn.

Clause 17 places a duty on the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to lay a report before Parliament on UK food security at least once every five years. While food is one of the UK's critical national infrastructure sectors and is reserved on national security grounds, it also relates to food and drink supply, which is devolved. Analysing the statistical data falls to DAERA.

Clause 31 allows the UK to continue to legislate in respect of policies contained in EU regulation 2019/1009 on fertiliser products. It provides for the continuation of the current regime, which applies to the whole of the UK. A joint approach allows for clearer and simpler legislative powers.

Clause 32 amends the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 to enable the Secretary of State to make secondary legislation allowing the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board to undertake a new statutory role in managing a new livestock information service in England. Some of the functions that could be assigned to the board include:

“(a) collecting, managing and making available information regarding the identification, movement and health of animals,

or

(b) the means of identifying animals.”

Those are devolved functions, and the UK Government have indicated that they will table an amendment to the Bill to require the Secretary of State to seek consent before making regulations for Northern Ireland.

Clause 36 provides the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the devolved Administrations with the power to make regulations:

“in relation to the certification of—

(a) organic products;

(b) activities relating to organic products;

(c) persons or groups of persons carrying out activities relating to organic products.”

12.30 pm

Clause 37 sets out who can regulate organics under clause 36. This will be DAERA where it falls within Northern Ireland's devolved competence. As with clause 32, the UK Government have indicated that they will table an amendment to the Bill requiring the Secretary of State to seek consent before making regulations for Northern Ireland.

Clauses 40 to 42 provide the Secretary of State with powers to ensure the UK's compliance with its obligations under the World Trade Organization agreement on agriculture, and to make regulations that require Northern Ireland to provide information which is a devolved and, more particularly in Northern Ireland, transferred matter. The UK Government's initial view was that the provisions in clauses 40 to 42 were outside devolved competence. However, the Government have recently changed that position and, as a consequence, I have laid an amended legislative consent memorandum in the Assembly.

Clause 45 is quite straightforward; it makes provision for schedule 6 to the Bill to apply in Northern Ireland. That brings me conveniently to the small number of provisions that apply specifically to Northern Ireland, which are contained in schedule 6. It has been deliberately set out in that way in an effort to be as transparent as possible. Put simply, schedule 6 provides powers that will enable maintenance and modification of CAP direct payment schemes; modification of retained EU law relating to the financing, management and monitoring of payments to farmers, and the technical aspects; ongoing support for rural development; collection and sharing of data, and appropriate data collection; intervention in agriculture markets; and setting of marketing standards and carcass classifications. I will deal with each in turn.

Part 1 of schedule 6 provides my Department with powers to modify retained direct EU legislation governing direct payments and support for rural development following the UK's exit from the EU. Importantly, it does not provide for the phasing out of direct payments or for a transition period, which is the position in England.

Part 2 of schedule 6 allows my Department to give, or agree to give, financial support to agriculture producers in Northern Ireland. This would be the case where incomes are being, or are likely to be, adversely affected by exceptional market conditions.

Part 3 of schedule 6 relates to the collection and sharing of data. It introduces a requirement for those in the agri-food supply chain to supply information about the supply chain.

Part 4 of schedule 6 provides my Department with the power to make provision about marketing standards in relation to specified agricultural products in Northern Ireland and to make provision about the classification, identification and presentation of bovine, sheep and pig carcasses by slaughterhouses in Northern Ireland.

Part 5 of schedule 6 preserves the status of existing data protection legislation, including the General Data Protection Regulation. Any exercise of data will be compliant with those regulations.

That sets out the provisions in schedule 6. As I said, they are few in number but nonetheless vital. Before I move on, I want to draw Members' attention to the fact that the powers contained in schedule 6 are mainly subject to the affirmative resolution procedure, so their use is entirely a matter for this House. Members will, quite rightly, have an opportunity to scrutinise any regulations.

I turn now, briefly, to part 5 of schedule 7. This part provides details of any consequential amendments to the CMO regulation in relation to marketing standards and carcass classification in Northern Ireland. It disapplies the

relevant articles for products marketed, or slaughterhouses situated, in Northern Ireland.

To sum up, it is my view that the Bill's provisions should extend and apply to Northern Ireland, and I commend the motion to the House.

Mr McAleer (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): The Agriculture Bill was introduced to the House of Commons on 16 January and had its Second Reading on 3 February, moving to Committee Stage on 11 February. As already outlined by the Minister, the purpose of the Bill is to provide a legal framework for the transition out of the EU and to replace the common agricultural policy, as well as providing financial support after leaving the EU. There are provisions within the Bill that require legislative consent as they relate to devolved matters, and they are outlined in the LCM and in the Committee report. The Bill also extends a number of provisions to this region in schedule 6, for which legislative consent is also sought.

I will briefly outline how the Committee undertook scrutiny of the Bill. This is important, and I want to emphasise that we had very little time to do this scrutiny — about three meetings in total. The time frame was further stressed because we were doing a similar amount of work for two other Bills that require legislative consent, namely the Environment Bill and the Fisheries Bill. In fact, all three Bills overlap and are interlinked, but time was against us in exploring the extent and practical impacts of that overlapping and interlinking.

The Committee took oral and written evidence in an all-day meeting on 20 February. We heard from a range of stakeholders, and their evidence can be found on our website, but we just did not have time to hear from all of the stakeholders that are going to be affected by this Bill — for example, the hill farmers, horticultural growers and poultry and egg sectors, as well as many of the rural community groups and local action groups (LAGs). The Committee also commissioned a briefing paper on the Agriculture Bill from the Assembly Research and Information Service. The paper was very informative and again it can be found on our website.

The Committee wishes it to be clearly understood that, due to the complexity of this Bill and the limited time that it has had to consider and scrutinise the Bill, it has been unable to fully explore and understand the potential impacts and implications to the local agricultural industry, agri-food sector and rural communities. We were able to identify a range of questions that we have not got straight answers to as yet. Those questions have enabled us to identify some important issues that we want to bring to the attention of the Assembly. It is those issues that I will focus on in the remainder of my speech today. Before that, I want to outline that the Committee deliberated on and agreed not to take a Committee position on the draft Legislative Consent Motion.

The first issue is around the interaction between the Bill, the proposed common frameworks and the Irish protocol. It appeared to the Committee that the protocol means that agricultural produce will have to comply with a range of EU rules and regulations and that, over time, Britain may move away from those rules and regulations. This has created concern around the regulatory divergence between this jurisdiction, Britain and the EU.

Some of the witnesses who presented to the Committee indicated that regulatory diversion could ultimately mean increased costs. There is a lack of clarity in this area and a large degree of uncertainty. The Committee does not expect that this lack of clarity and uncertainty will be addressed in the short to medium term and is concerned about the impact that this may have on farmers, rural communities and agri-food businesses. In light of where we are now with the COVID-19 crisis, it is highly unlikely that clarity and certainty will be provided to our businesses anytime soon.

Furthermore, members of the Committee also expressed concern about the impact of the protocol and balancing of trade North/South and east-west. The Committee is aware that there may be different levels of preparation for the protocol across various Departments. That has caused concern to some of our members, and I expect that they will address that concern during today's debate.

The second major matter that the Committee draws attention to is the sunset clause for the DAERA provisions in the Bill, specifically schedule 6. This is similar to that provided for the Welsh in clauses 43 and 44. The Committee is aware that, in the absence of a sitting Assembly, DAERA was unable to bring forward primary legislation to the Assembly as is the case in Scotland. In order to address the potential legislative and governance gap created because of EU exit, DAERA took the tactic to deliver this via a Bill, an option-based approach, based on the roll over of the existing regime with the ability to deliver some modifications and simplifications.

DAERA officials told the Committee that the schedule 6 provisions are not a new policy approach but provide breathing space, so as not to prejudice or constrain the ability of an incoming Minister, the Executive or the Assembly to decide the long-term direction and nature of agricultural support policy here. However, one of the disadvantages of this approach is that provisions are enacted by decisions of the Minister and the Assembly using the statutory rule approach. If the Minister does not want to enact a provision, he does not have to. While most of the provisions are enacted using the affirmative method, which allows for a higher level of scrutiny, statutory rules generally provide less opportunity for scrutiny and less opportunity for the Assembly to amend and change than would be the case with primary legislation.

The Committee indicated that it would endorse a sunset clause on the provisions in the Bill, similar to that in Wales, which is 2024. Furthermore, the Committee recommended that the DAERA Minister bring forward local policies, followed in due course by primary legislation tailored to the needs of the agricultural sector, agri-food and rural communities, within a similar timescale of the Welsh sunset clause.

The third issue that concerns the Committee is clarity on the future of rural development, specifically the availability of a ring-fencing of funding for rural development. Rural development is largely funded from CAP pillar 2 and other EU sources. It is envisaged that the replacement for EU funding for rural development will come from the shared prosperity fund (SPF). Stakeholders from rural communities indicated that, while work on a new rural development policy framework has begun, they had major concerns regarding the funding for rural development. It was understood that the SPF would be the

mechanism to replace all EU structural funds, including rural development, but no details of the SPF have yet been put forward by the British Government, nor is there any guarantee that such replacement funding will be ring-fenced. This is creating a degree of concern and uncertainty about the future for rural communities. The Committee is very concerned about the lack of clarity and information on the shared prosperity fund.

I also wish to draw attention to some of the provisions in schedule 6. These are enabling provisions and allow options for the DAERA Minister to bring forward by secondary legislation a number of provisions relating to issues such as financial support after EU exit; intervention in agricultural markets; the collection and sharing of data; marketing standards and carcass classification; and data protection.

Part 1 of schedule 6 provides provisions for the DAERA Minister to make, amongst other payments, payments for ANCs and for coupled support. The Committee noted a range of different views from stakeholders and from political parties on the two issues in particular. I will not rehearse these now, as most Members will be well aware of them and they are also outlined in our Committee report.

I will move on to some of the clauses in the Bill, focusing on some of those that the Committee had issues with. Clause 17 sets out a duty to report to Parliament on food security, placing a duty on the Secretary of State to produce a report to lay before Parliament on food security. This report will provide a broad understanding of what food security is and the challenges and risks to food security in a global context. It is to allow a current assessment of the state of food security to inform policy thinking on the resilience and security of food supply. This is something that is perhaps even more appropriate in current circumstances. The key provision is that the report is to be laid once every five years, and the clause also covers a number of themes such as global food availability and resilience of the food supply chain. The Committee's major concern is that it would like to see these reports produced more frequently than every five years, particularly in the initial transition years. It considers that one such report per parliamentary term is insufficient and that an annual report with specific reference to the devolved Administrations on any local issues would be more appropriate.

I will address the concern that the Committee had with clause 31, dealing with fertilisers. This is one of the areas where the impact of the protocol comes into play. This clause will amend and create a broader definition of what constitutes a fertiliser. What it means is that the framework of regulations governing fertilisers across Britain can vary from that currently established by the EU Commission. For example, this clause enables the amendment and potential repeal of the EU regulation that currently regulates fertilisers. However, that EU regulation is referenced in annex 2 of the protocol, which means that this region must adhere to the EU regulation, with no variation except as agreed by the EU, while Westminster will be able to create variations and differences. That could lead to variations in fertiliser regulations between this jurisdiction and Britain. As our industry keeps telling us, variation inevitably leads to cost differences, sometimes in favour and sometimes not.

I already outlined the Committee's concerns on the interaction overlap with the provisions of the Bill and the protocol, and, again, due to lack of time for proper

scrutiny, the Committee has not been able to explore the possibility that such variation will or could occur. Likewise, we were unable to explore the implications and impacts of variation on our local industry, for example the potential that it could create an uneven playing field. There are also issues around the supply of fertilisers and of whether this potential variation will pose any problems for supply and cost of supply in the future.

I will move on to clause 32, which deals with the identification and traceability of animals.

The clause provides for a new statutory role for the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB) to manage a new livestock information service in England. It entails using animal ID information obtained from all the devolved Administrations. Various stakeholders had concerns with this clause and felt that it should not apply here. There were concerns that, under the protocol, we would have to adhere to EU regulations and standards for animal identification and traceability. This clause allows Britain to have its own system that creates a complexity of divergence.

12.45 pm

Due to lack of time, the Committee has not been able to explore the questions raised around clause 32. However, in a late submission from DAERA, on the day that the Committee approved its report, we received some clarification on the policy intent behind the clause. It included that DAERA livestock traceability systems will not be subsumed into the wider system, and that we would continue to adhere to EU standards and the requirements of the protocol. It also clarified that we will continue to approve our own identification tags, and that AHDB will not perform a role in livestock identification. It is expected that the animal and public health information system (APHIS) will continue to interface with the British systems.

In that late submission, DAERA provided some clarification on the consent provisions in clause 32. Minister Poots has written to the DEFRA Minister, seeking provision to be included to the effect that DAERA's consent would be required with regard to the assignment of certain functions. DAERA indicated that DEFRA was now seeking collective agreement to a British Government amendment being tabled to clause 32, to the effect that consent provisions would be included. We expect to be kept up to date with developments on the matter, including the role for the Assembly in that consent provision.

The Committee would like to emphasise that both it, and the industry, are very proud of our traceability systems. The Committee wishes to receive regular updates on how our identification system interfaces with any new systems arising in Britain from the provisions in the Bill.

Clauses 36 and 37 deal with organic products. In a late submission to the Committee, on the day that it approved its report, DAERA provided some clarification on the consent provisions for clause 37. It noted that Minister Poots had written to the DEFRA Minister seeking clarification to be included, to the effect that DAERA's consent would be required, should the British Government wish to make organic regulations under clause 36 in relation to devolved matters. It further indicated that DEFRA is now seeking collective agreement to the Government's amendments being tabled, to the effect that

consent provisions would be included. We expect to be kept up to date with developments on this matter, including a role for the Assembly in that consent provision.

Clause 35 relates to provisions for the North and enables schedule 6.

Clauses 43 and 44 provide similar provisions for Wales. It is interesting that the Scottish Government have confirmed that they intend to bring forward a separate Scottish Agriculture Bill, rather than have a schedule in the Westminster Agriculture Bill. Clause 44 of the Bill provides a sunset clause, at the end of 2024, for some of the provisions that apply to Wales. I have already outlined the Committee's provision on the sunset clause, and I will not rehearse it again.

However, as we have noted, the Minister is seeking amendments to the Bill in connection with organic products and with animal identification systems. I therefore ask the Minister to indicate whether he intends to seek a sunset clause for schedule 6.

Schedule 6 enables DAERA to continue to make payments to farmers and land managers after EU exit and ensures that the Minister has the flexibility to develop policy here. The Committee's report outlines the issues raised by the various stakeholders, and I have already outlined some of the major concerns with schedule 6. I will not go over them again in detail, but I can summarise the Committee's concerns as follows: the lack of a sunset clause; the lack of clarity around funding for rural development and payments to farmers; major policy issues will be brought forward by subordinate legislation; and it is entirely at the Minister's discretion whether he brings them forward.

I now look at the WTO clauses. At the last possible moment, on the day that the Committee agreed its report, DAERA informed us of a change in its position on clauses 40 to 42, which deal with the WTO agreement on agriculture. Those clauses include power to set financial ceilings, to the level of agricultural support paid in the four jurisdictions. The WTO agreement on agriculture sets limits on how much domestic support can be provided by a country, and it is categorised into different boxes, depending on the extent to which support distorts trade in the agricultural markets.

DAERA noted no concerns with this matter, as it felt that there was plenty of headroom that would not interfere with the ability to make financial support to farmers. In a late submission, DAERA informed the Committee that there had been a change in the Government's position on the aspects of those clauses that were outside devolved competence. Previously, the British Government's view was that provisions in clauses 40 to 42 were outside devolved competence. However, clauses 42(4) and 42(5) confer a power on the Secretary of State to make regulations that may require a devolved authority, which includes DAERA, to provide information to the Secretary of State. The Government's view is that that, arguably, amounts to an alteration of the Executive's competence and of Ministers here, and that those specific subsections, therefore, engage the legislative consent process in the Assembly. The Department's view remains that those clauses will not impose any constraint on policy decisions on agriculture support in practice. Based on the caveat that the Committee had very little time to consider that

change in approach, the Committee expressed no major concerns on that matter.

I will now turn to the final section of the report, concerning matters that are outside the provisions of the Bill that will have a massive impact on its operation and implementation. The first of those is funding. The amount and method of distribution of CAP funding between the four regions, including that it should be ring-fenced, has been in place for some time. What it will be replaced with in the amounts of funding, its distribution between the regions and possible Government centralisation of subsidy levels is still unclear. Many of our stakeholders make reference to the Bew review and the possible adverse impacts of its recommendations, which may see reduced amounts of funding in the North for farm support.

We know that the British Government have committed to working with the devolved Administrations on funding allocation, including that the current annual budget for farmers would be guaranteed for every year of the Parliament, namely until 2024. However, what happens beyond that is not guaranteed. That is a major area of concern for the farming community and the wider rural community and it is something that the Committee intends to follow up on in due course.

Another area of concern is future trade deals and the possibility of allowing in food that is of a lower standard. That has caused considerable public and media concern, given the British Government's approach to new trade deals with countries that have lower animal welfare standards. Many have called for the Bill to be amended to protect standards and prevent imports of food that is cheaper because of lower food standards. The Committee discussed an amendment that was laid in the House of Commons by Simon Hoare MP that sought to protect our food standards. We agreed with that amendment and we were disappointed that it was not considered by the Public Bill Committee for the Agriculture Bill. The Committee noted that the amendment was resubmitted for the debate at Report Stage and would like to see it made by the House of Commons.

Another major issue for the Committee is the agri-food sector's access to migrant labour. Our agri-food industry is heavily reliant on migrant labour and it has expressed concerns about the British Government's policy position on the UK's points-based immigration system. We are aware, from the evidence that we gathered, that on average, 60% to 70% of those who work in meat plants were European economic area workers whose roles varied from so-called unskilled to semi-skilled and skilled jobs. There were concerns that if the points system was applied to the processing sector, 80% of the staff that had been brought in over the last 10 years would have got only 20 points. That presents a massive challenge for the industry.

Concerns were also expressed about the potential movement of capital to where labour is. In essence, we could have free movement of goods across the island but not have free movement of labour. The Committee is aware of the considerable concerns that have been raised by the agri-food sector that the policy does not appear to take account of the unique circumstances of this jurisdiction. That, again, is an issue that the Committee will be following closely in future.

The final matter that I wish to raise is compliance. We are concerned that there is little or no information in the Bill or its accompanying documentation on what the new system of compliance, offences, enforcement and penalties may be. That, again, is an area that deserves to be explored further and the Committee is disappointed that it has not had the time to do so.

I will now add a few comments in my capacity as Sinn Féin's spokesperson on agriculture and rural affairs. There are a number of key issues, one of them being the lack of time that we have had to scrutinise the LCM. It is a serious piece of legislation that deserves wider and deeper scrutiny and the SR approach is not the best way to do things. We are not content about the lack of a sunset clause. Certainly, from our position, we propose that 2024 would be reasonable for a sunset clause, similar to that in Wales. That would give us a couple of years in the new mandate to thrash out our own agricultural policy, tailor-made for the North.

We share concerns about the lack of clarity on rural development issues. The Minister will be aware that, from the current multi-annual EU budget, £80 million is set aside for the Rural Development Programme's priority 6 schemes to support rural communities. We can see, in the fight against COVID, how vital rural communities are. The prosperity fund must replace the lost EU funding for communities.

All this, unfortunately, is the product of Brexit. Whilst the world is focused on battling the global threat of COVID-19, the British Government and, by association through the LCM, here are burdened with developing new legislation. We have been taken out of the EU against our will. The rest of the world must think that we are crazy. In the middle of this crisis, we are trying to thrash out a new agricultural policy.

I note that the British Government have parked the Fisheries and Environment Bills, and I appreciate the fact that we are at a very advanced stage with the Agriculture Bill. I think that the Minister needs to look at parking the LCM process until we can, hopefully, all get to the other side of the pandemic. Members from other parties have contacted me, in my capacity as Chair of the Committee, to express their similar, very strong views on this, and, no doubt, they will raise them today.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm. I, therefore, propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be the continuation of the debate on the legislative consent motion and the next Member to speak will be Sinead McLaughlin.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.56 pm.

2.00 pm

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

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the Agriculture Bill, as introduced in the House of Commons on 16 January 2020, and consents to the Agriculture Bill being taken forward by the Westminster Parliament.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order, Members. We return to the legislative consent motion for the UK Government Agriculture Bill. .

Ms McLaughlin: Before I begin my remarks, I want to join Members across the House in extending my most sincere condolences to the families and loved ones of those who have already, sadly, lost their lives as a result of COVID-19. In the midst of a pandemic such as this it is easy for those deaths to become mere statistics, but we must remember that behind each and every one of them there is a grieving family. We must do all that we can, as elected representatives, to try and save as many lives as possible.

It feels unusual, and perhaps maybe surreal, that we in the Chamber are talking about something that is not directly related to COVID-19, as, justifiably, the bulk of our attention has been focused on fighting that deadly virus. We have talked a lot about the importance of essential workers, our heroes on the front line, but it is crucial that we do not forget our farming community.

Across the North, farmers are working tirelessly, often in the context of grave financial difficulties and uncertainty, to provide food supplies for all of us. I say to farmers that we in the SDLP understand the financial challenges that they are working under and are currently facing, with reduced orders for their produce and lower incomes. Recently, we have been told of farmers who are getting further squeezed in the marketplace because of the pandemic. That is just not good enough. They are another essential part of our economy and they are facing serious difficulty.

That is why I welcome this opportunity to speak on behalf of the SDLP and to support the motion. Given all that our farmers are doing in challenging circumstances, supporting this motion and giving them some financial certainty, even if it is limited to this year, is the very least that we can do.

Colleagues will be aware of the importance of direct payments to farmers across the North. Those payments have gone some distance to improving environmental, public health and animal cruelty standards. Crucially, those payments make up a significant proportion of the income generated by our farmers. They have been a lifeline for our farmers in these difficult months and are worth more than £250 million in income. As soon as the referendum result in 2016 became clear, SDLP representatives consistently pressed the British Government to make clear their plans to replace that vital income. Those payments and the millions more that we receive from the EU are part of the reason why the SDLP was resolutely opposed to Brexit.

It is clear that the uncertainty caused by Brexit over the past three years has impacted negatively on many different sectors, not least farming. We have the opportunity today to finally provide some clarity to farmers across the North

and to support the continuance of single payments over the next year.

Given the urgency of the issue, resulting from the absence of legal powers needed to continue making direct payments to farmers across the North in the 2020 scheme year, it would be appropriate to deal with these provisions in the UK Bill.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. I listened to the Member's concerns about farmers in Northern Ireland. Could she explain to me how farmers were shackled by the bureaucracy of the European Union? It cost farmers in Northern Ireland millions of pounds in added regulations that they had to abide by, when the rest of Europe paid no regard. Our farmers have always been good, responsible caretakers of the land and the environment, and yet they were penalised by the bureaucracy of Brussels, when others in the rest of the European Union paid absolutely no regard. We are glad that we are unshackled from Brussels. Our farmers deserve all the freedom that they have to do what they have always done, and that is to produce the best possible product in the best possible circumstances for the people of Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom.

Ms McLaughlin: Thank you. To be honest with you, I have spoken to quite a few farmers in the last few weeks and that is not what they are expressing to me, so I will move on. There is a great deal of fear out there within the farming community, and our party fully supports them in these circumstances. It is not a time for playing politics with that sector.

Given the urgency of this issue, resulting in the absence of the legal powers needed to continue to make direct payments to farmers across the North in the 2020 scheme year, it is appropriate to deal with these provisions in the UK Bill. As the party of devolution, it does not come naturally to us to support legislation coming directly from Westminster, but these are the circumstances that we face. I ask Members to join me in supporting the motion.

Mrs Barton: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate on the legislative consent motion for the UK Agriculture Bill. The national, indeed world, crisis that we are in demonstrates the importance of the agricultural sector from the farmer, who is the primary producer, right through the processing aspects and to the retailer. It highlights the need for a successful agri-food sector. I certainly hope that we do not have food shortages before this crisis is over. We have heard terrible stories in the past of dairy farmers pouring the milk from their tanks down drains due to quota restrictions. We hear of the burying alive of chickens and ducks in other countries due to a movement ban. We need to ensure that unnecessary restrictions do not create situations in which perfectly good food is destroyed. We must ensure that our farmers and producers can continue to provide a high quality product to the marketplace.

Much of the Agriculture Bill is for England only or is UK-wide legislation, and none of that needs approval from the Assembly. It is mainly the Northern Ireland provisions that we need to deal with. The Bill will give us the powers to support farmers when the current EU mechanisms come to an end. This is an important element in that it gives farmers support to produce a quality base product that continues to be affordable for the consumer. The Bill

does not provide any policy or long-term strategy for the agricultural industry; it is merely enabling legislation to allow for further provisions to be made.

There will be much more scrutiny and debate when the future policy and direction is brought forward to this place, whether that is direct support to farmers, changes to EU regulations like the nitrate action plan, required standards for imported products or anything else. I support this legislative consent motion and look forward to our discussions on the future plans for the industry.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister, all those in the Department, Business Office staff and indeed all the staff of this House for their work in what are very challenging circumstances in the Province. I wish you all well in the days and weeks ahead as we get to grips with COVID-19 and the challenges that it is presenting. Our thoughts and prayers are with the families who have lost loved ones to the virus.

I welcome the motion. I will not labour further many of the points that I have already covered in contributions in the House in the last few weeks. Suffice to say, this unprecedented current crisis has highlighted just how important our local food supply chain really is. We are seeing, each and every day, just how vital our farming community is in producing food and in ensuring that we have enough food to last through the difficult days of restrictions.

Much has been said of our medical teams operating across the province, and rightly so. They are standing in the line of fire, fighting the virus right at the coalface. Our gratitude and words are simply not enough to express just how indebted we are to all those brilliant staff. However, there are others. I think of those involved in agri-food production, processing and retailing, who are all also at the sharp end of the fight. We are indebted to them for keeping our supply chains open and working through production in the processing sector, and we salute all those involved in direct retail to the public.

Focusing on the issue at hand in this debate, I welcome the extension of the Bill to Northern Ireland and the important support measures that it permits, in the short-term, such as payment continuity that will give our industry some clarity and stability in the immediate future; that is widely welcomed. The fact that parts of the Bill will be shaped locally through our devolved Administration to reflect our circumstances in Northern Ireland, is vital. I know that having a Minister who has an acute knowledge of the industry will be of importance and, indeed, significance as we move through the process of creating a system of support and regulation in the months ahead.

Agri-food is one of Northern Ireland's greatest economic assets. It has 71,000 jobs and creates an added value of almost £1.5 billion to the Northern Ireland economy. I believe that the process that we will be involved in in post-Brexit Northern Ireland and the post-Brexit United Kingdom will unlock many opportunities. Of course, there will be challenges ahead, of that I have no doubt, but I believe that the work that will be undertaken in creating the support management and monitoring structures for industry should harness and bring the potential for growth, profitability and sustainability. That will be a debate and a process that I look forward to taking part in through our Committee structure.

As someone with a lifetime's involvement in the industry, I will put forward the views of the farming community at each and every opportunity. I want to see a system that tries, where possible, to right many of the wrongs of the EU's structures that have, in many cases, had a stranglehold on agriculture and have been a massive burden on farmers. That opportunity will present itself in the coming weeks and months. I support the motion and the Minister as he works through the detail and I look forward to playing my part in the weeks ahead.

Mr Blair: I start by associating myself, and my colleagues, with the condolences expressed to the families of those that have already lost their lives in these sad circumstances. There are also those who are deserving of our thanks for their efforts in these sad and challenging times. I want to thank those working in the agricultural and agri-food sectors who are doing their best, in the most challenging of circumstances, to ensure that we have food on our tables. Members across the House will know that, from the farm to the local butcher, from production plants to the excellent voluntary contribution and effort that has been made in our rural communities, there are a lot of people outside the House who are deserving of our recognition and thanks.

I also thank the Minister for the information he brought here today and the DAERA officials, including his direct staff, who are doing their best to provide us with answers and information. I have received that information in the most timely way in recent days and I am grateful for that. I wish to put that on the record.

On behalf of the Alliance party, I support the motion and its continued passage, if nothing else. However, there are some concerns on outstanding and unresolved issues that I must mention. I raise those concerns not to rehearse previous discussion on what brought the Bill here, but as an expression of support for our vital, valued and quality agricultural and agri-food sectors.

Evidence from the crucially important sectors that I have mentioned was given to the AERA Committee and has provided us with a list of concerns that warrant continued scrutiny, review and, if necessary, a further legislative response for the greater economic and community good.

2.15 pm

Overshadowing all discussion on the Bill is, of course, the continued uncertainty over the Northern Ireland protocol, coordination of preparation for that protocol and lack of clarity on the implications of any future regulatory divergence in these islands. I hope that, when he responds, the Minister will address and provide some clarification on that.

The AERA Committee has considered and expressed a preference that has also been referenced for a sunset clause that would, as we have seen, for example, in Wales, facilitate a future bespoke Bill that would work best for Northern Ireland, our rural industries and our rural communities. We must also at this stage seek more clarification of rural development funding, which was also referenced and for which there is no concrete proposal, as I understand it, or guarantee that future funding would be ring-fenced. Food security also remains a concern for the sector and, I suspect, for many customers. Given the current commitment that the GB Minister would report

every five years on these matters, there is surely good reason to seek more regular and more localised updates, especially during any transition period for trading and agricultural support.

Not dissimilar to that is the remaining uncertainty over the traceability of animals and whether any diminishing of local DAERA control could impact negatively on competitiveness, especially in that regulatory divergence scenario. It has been referenced as well — I apologise for any repetition, but there are matters that have been referenced that are important to me, my colleagues and those we engage with on a regular basis — that the Minister will be aware of concerns raised about Northern Ireland's reliance on migrant labour and about the perceived threat of the proposed points system to that workforce and the impact that could have on a region where, in 2017, for example, 20% of agricultural and 43% of agri-food workers were from a non-UK background. I hope that the Minister will address those matters in his response and in forthcoming discussions so that the importance of Northern Ireland agriculture not only to the economy but to everyday life will be at the forefront of the outworkings of the Bill and of any future replacement or enhancement that comes before us.

Mr Harvey: I support the motion. As much of the Bill is not applicable to this region, I will limit my remarks to the provisions that are. The Agriculture Bill, alongside the provision for direct payments under the direct payment regulations, which were previously before the Assembly for consideration, will provide certainty in the short-to-medium term until such times as the Department brings forward further legislation. I will briefly address a number of issues in the NI-applicable provisions.

First, I welcome clause 17. Food security was not provided for in the 2017-19 Bill, which, of course, fell with the last Parliament, so I am pleased to see it in this Bill. The measures will, hopefully, increase transparency and fairness in the supply chain for farmers and food producers. However, further work is required in that area; for instance, the requirement to report on food security once every five years is a time frame that I do not believe is sufficiently frequent, especially in the short-to-medium term. Given the current context of uncertainty and change for the agri-food sector, it would be beneficial to have more frequent reporting. Similarly, tailoring that to the devolved regions would be of benefit, particularly for Northern Ireland, given the unique challenges that we face.

Secondly, clause 31 deals with fertilisation, which is an area that acutely flags the difficulties that could present themselves further down the track with regard to overlapping with the Northern Ireland protocol. It is essential that we are treated equally to the rest of the United Kingdom, our largest trading partner. We cannot be placed in a situation where we are at a disadvantage in trading terms to the rest of the UK as a result of additional burdens placed on us by the EU. Such difficulties, in any event, remain an unknown quantity at this stage.

Finally, in respect of rural development, I have concerns about the SPF policy and how it will operate and shape rural development provision beyond CAP. Rural development has always been a profitable element in the past, and, indeed, in my constituency, many projects have benefited from the local action groups (LAGs). Unfortunately, no firm policy proposals have so far been

put forward by Westminster, and there is little reference in the Bill to rural development. There is no guarantee, as yet, that replacement funding will be ring-fenced. However, I hope that that is an area that will receive the necessary consideration in due course.

I welcome the flexibility provided for in schedule 6 for Executive Ministers to develop policy moving forward. Whilst I note the absence of an applicable sunset clause, I know that the Department will not be found wanting in its efforts to bring more tailored legislation to the Floor in the future.

Ms Bailey: I join everybody who has spoken to offer my sincere sympathies to the families who have lost loved ones to the coronavirus and to the many more facing the devastating reality of what lies ahead with many more people set to lose their lives here. I know that everyone here will do all in our power to mitigate the number of deaths that we could see here.

Brexit has changed the landscape for many. The Bill sets out a new road map for the decades to come, and, for that alone, this needs to be taken seriously and scrutinised at every stage. So far, we have not had that full opportunity. Over the last three years, we have had no Executive, no Assembly, no Committees, and the newly appointed EARA Committee has not been able to fully scrutinise or hear evidence on the Bill. What I have heard to date raises more questions than it answers, particularly given that the Bill is so closely interlinked with the Fisheries Bill and the Environment Bill, which have yet to come. Many contradictions become apparent when you start to unravel the three Bills. It is for that reason that the Green Party would like to see a sunset clause similar to that being worked on in Wales to address their needs. In Scotland, they are drafting their own primary legislation to deal with their future agriculture industry and sector. The Committee Chair has already raised in the debate many issues that the Committee have listened to and taken on board already, including the Ireland/Northern Ireland protocol and the potential impact of the Bill given our Prime Minister's threat about regulatory divergence, if need be.

For the purpose of this Bill, it is schedule 6 that applies to Northern Ireland. In schedule 6 we are allowing for "Business as usual". We know that "Business as usual" in our agriculture sector causes damage to our environment and to human health, due not least to our disproportionate over-reliance on the livestock sector, which is a huge contributor to the continued and scandalous levels of ammonia in Northern Ireland, as well as to greenhouse gases.

We hear, during this time of crisis, that non-essential business puts people at risk and flies in the face of government messages and legislation compelling people to stay at home. If "Business as usual" has ended, I call on the Minister to please pause the bringing forward of more legislation and LCMs, if they are non-essential at this time. Allow us the opportunity for proper scrutiny, because these Bills, as they sit, will change the direction of travel and can set a new scene. We need to get as many people on board and behind the Bills as possible. I know that the Agriculture Bill was much more developed than the others, and it is for that reason that we will support the LCM today. I will, again, implore that, if it is not essential in dealing with the coronavirus and COVID-19 measures in place at the minute, please allow us the time to scrutinise and do essential work only.

Mr Carroll: Obviously, the Bill was put together before the coronavirus situation developed, but its content is directly connected to that issue and the development of zoonoses more generally. When we understand that the coronavirus development is being attributed to practice in food production, how we obtain our food in the period ahead will be an essential question to grapple with. The question we have to ask of the Department is this: how can we ensure that everything possible is done to ensure that we are protected from a similar virus developing? What measures are we taking here around food production to protect everyone in our communities? On that basis, we have to scrutinise this Bill and any other measures introduced down the line.

It is worth saying that, in the 1990s, as part of its economic transformation, China ramped up its food production systems on an industrial scale. One side effect of that, as various anthropologists have stated, was that small farmers were pushed out of the way. Eventually, more wild animals were introduced, and the edges of forests became rapidly explored and overcultivated. As a result, dangerous viruses began to spread. Ecosystems that were previously untouched or undisturbed globally are now being up-ended with the need to constantly push the limits for profit, which, in turn, causes an adverse reaction. In this case, it has been the coronavirus, but, previously, we have seen SARS, H1N1, Ebola and the Zika virus, to name a few. The H5N1 avian flu was linked to migratory birds getting too close to factory poultry farms. Several studies have suggested that H1N1 swine flu is linked to the movement of pigs and poultry between North America, Asia and Europe. It is clear to people who are far more qualified than me that factory farming and, in particular, poultry factory farming is at the heart of the development of so many zoonoses and is causing untold death and suffering across the world. The powers of intervention in food markets brought in with the Bill should be used to ensure that a high level of food safety is put in place.

I recognise that, due to time constraints, the Committee did not have enough time to look at and scrutinise in detail the LCM, so I think that it is important to offer points on it, to scrutinise it and to flag issues that may arise going forward. I share the concerns of others that there is a lack of mention of food in the Bill, which covers a massive area of agriculture. We have a massively fragile, just-in-time supply chain for food that could easily collapse. We are at the mercy of international markets, and, when we understand that just eight companies control 90% of our food supply, we should recognise that we are in an unsustainable situation. For example, of the six million hectares of cultivatable land in Britain, only 168,000 hectares are used for fruit and vegetables. We see, therefore, a reliance on importing vast amounts of crops into our country and into here as well.

The emergence of the coronavirus should urgently focus minds on how we need a food system that is primarily based on providing local, sustainable produce, to ultimately minimise the possibility of dangerous and deadly viruses developing and spreading. Additionally, we cannot have a scenario where we ship food hundreds of miles across the globe, increasing our carbon footprint massively, and suck produce from other parts of the world. I remember as a child the prevalence of fruit shops across my constituency, but they are practically non-existent there

now, with food being funnelled primarily through large corporations, which is very worrying indeed.

Obviously, going forward, the common agricultural policy payment will be replaced by a new mechanism of payment to support farmers, and, whilst it is still unclear what that will look like, we need to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. At this point, I pay tribute to the work of Nature Matters NI and share its concerns that:

“the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) has driven agriculture down an unsustainable path, with many of the declines in our natural capital (clean air, water, soil and biodiversity) attributed to agricultural intensification.”

Those are concerns and mistakes that we should not repeat.

I note the Minister's comments previously about support for moving farming and support for farmers away from solely maximising production, and I hope that he will support all measures possible to ensure that farming is sustainable and friendly to the environment.

That will be key going forward.

2.30 pm

I share the concerns that have been raised by other Members that, down the line, there could be regulatory divergence, North and South, on food safety and production. We need to avoid maximising confusion for farmers and food producers, and not have a situation where farmers in Donegal abide by a set of guidelines that are different to those for their counterparts in Derry. If the coronavirus has taught us anything, it is that there should be one approach across the island.

I note that clause 17 places a duty on the Secretary of State to produce a report on UK food security to lay before Parliament. That report has to be produced once every five years. That is simply not good enough. There needs to be regular updates on food availability and safety, especially in the current period. I hope that the Minister will agree that it is not good enough to have a report every five years, and that he will commit to provide much more regular updates to the House, hopefully, at least, annually.

We are at the mercy of large corporations when it comes to our food supply. We are beholden to price fluctuations and the whims of the market when it comes to food. Not only is that ecologically unsustainable but it is totally unfair. We cannot have a situation in which companies can make massive profits, yet their workers are paid low wages. That is despite their providing essential services at this crucial time; supplying us with food throughout the coronavirus situation. In the short term, we should nationalise those massive corporations and reroute the profits into the pockets of the workers and community at large. Ultimately, though, we need to break up the big conglomerates and have a much more democratic form of food production and planning, one that includes a bottom-up approach and has the voice of workers, producers and the community generally at the heart of it.

Finally, I want to pay tribute to our migrant workers. Without them, our food production would stop. Without them, the NHS would not be able to operate at all. I will leave my remarks there.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call the Minister to make his winding-up speech, I want to ensure that everyone who wishes to speak in the debate has actually spoken. In keeping with the new social distancing rules, people are not able to approach the Table. As no other Member wishes to intervene, I call the Minister to make his winding-up speech.

Mr Poots: The Agriculture Bill is a UK Government Bill. The rationale for extending the limited number of provisions to Northern Ireland has always been to ensure the continuation of a legal basis that provides for the current suite of agriculture support payments, Northern Ireland having exited the European Union; to provide the Executive with maximum flexibility to develop future agricultural policy in Northern Ireland; and to ensure that no constraint is placed on the Executive's ability to continue the current schemes and options that are available. Without those powers, there could be problems with making payments to farmers beyond the 2020 scheme year or responding to changes elsewhere in the UK. We see this as a necessary piece of legislation.

With regard to a Northern Ireland agriculture Bill, I am focused on ensuring that policies are in place that will be good for local farmers and provide the basis for an environmentally sustainable future. That is likely to require primary legislation in the Assembly, which I will introduce at the appropriate time, subject to the Executive's agreement. Good policies and systems are a priority to ensure that the agricultural industry is sustainable and that all farmers are supported equitably. It is that objective which will make a Northern Ireland agriculture Bill more likely.

The Chairperson and others raised the issue of direct payments to farmers post-2020. I am seeking to ensure that our future share of the UK agriculture budget will reflect Northern Ireland's current combined CAP pillar 1 and pillar 2 share. I have already raised the issue of future support arrangements with the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and, indeed, with the Secretary of State. My Department is liaising closely with the Department of Finance in order to ensure that the future needs of the Department are identified clearly and that future funding is maximised.

With regard to future years, the Conservative Party manifesto stated that funding for farm support would be maintained at existing levels until the end of this Parliament. While the schemes themselves may change across the UK, I am hopeful that the funding levels will be maintained until at least 2024. That is a longer period than it would have been had we stayed in the European Union, as it is currently looking at addressing funding. That will almost certainly mean cuts to the funding for the larger countries and those that have been in the European Union for a longer period. The accession countries will almost certainly have theirs raised and, consequently, the countries that are more established will have their support for agriculture cut. I want to ensure that, in having a sustainable agriculture industry, we have equity.

Moving forward, it is important to ensure that Northern Ireland farmers can compete with English, Irish, Scottish and Welsh farmers as we develop our own future agriculture policy. We need to ensure that we have the ability to design something that is fit for purpose for us, for the place that we live in and for the people whom we

serve. I will also be keeping a close eye on the future CAP arrangements to ensure that Irish farmers do not gain a significant advantage over their Northern Ireland counterparts. Given the nature of our all-island supply chains, in particular, it is important to ensure that Northern Ireland businesses can remain competitive and are able to operate on a level playing field against competitors, whether it be Ireland, the European Union or elsewhere.

The future agriculture policy was raised by a number of Members. An agriculture Bill will provide the Northern Ireland Executive with maximum flexibility to develop future agriculture policy in Northern Ireland. I am committed to ensuring that, moving forward, we have an agricultural policy framework that meets the future needs of the local industry, makes farms sustainable and protects and enhances the environment. In that proposed framework, my officials, in conjunction with key food, farming and environmental stakeholders, have identified four desired outcomes and long-term visions for Northern Ireland agri-food industry: an industry that pursues increased productivity in international terms, closing the productivity gap which has been opened up with our major suppliers; an industry that is environmentally sustainable with regard to its impact on guardianship of air and water quality, soil health, carbon footprint and biodiversity; an industry that displays improved resilience to external shocks, such as market volatility and extreme, evermore frequent, weather events to which the industry has become very exposed; and an industry that operates within an integrated, efficient, sustainable, competitive and responsive supply chain, with clear market signals and an overriding focus on high-quality food and the end consumer. Those four outcomes complement each other, and they are broadly supported by stakeholders. Our focus needs to turn on how we can deliver them.

I have no plans, at this stage, to introduce a sunset clause with respect to the Northern Ireland provisions in the UK Agriculture Bill. Introducing such a clause could leave me with no legal authority to make agricultural support payments, moving forward, and it would remove powers for DAERA to give aid in exceptional market conditions. That is something that we are currently looking at, given COVID-19.

Markets are changing very quickly. We have lost all of the restaurant and hotel trade and all that goes with that. The consequence of that is that meat processors are reporting that mince and forequarter meat, for example, are flying out the doors, but steaks, which account for a third of the value of the carcass, are not. Previously, those cuts were used extensively in the restaurant trade. Already we see a distortion in the market.

The dairy sector is reporting pressures on prices; lambs are not being exported to the extent that they were previously, as a consequence of the current situation; and our fishing sector has been badly affected, as it is heavily reliant on exports and their markets are not available at this time. We see how we need to have the flexibility to do such things. Therefore it would be foolish of the Assembly to introduce something into the Bill that would hamstring the Department and Minister in bringing forward proposals to the Assembly which would be to the benefit of the people they represent, whether they be in farming or fishing. For that reason, we need to be very careful about going down such a route.

I am also determined to ensure that the UK's internal market functions effectively when it comes to the protocol, which was also raised by Members, and that Northern Ireland's ability to have continued and unfettered access to and from Great Britain is maintained. That accounts for over 50% of our trade, each way, and it is critical that we do not allow ourselves to be hamstrung by the protocol in receiving goods from and delivering goods to our main market. We are continuing to assess the impact of the protocol; clarification is still required, and detailed arrangements will be subject to discussion between the EU and the UK Government through the specialised and joint committee structures outlined in article 165 of the agreement. This detail will very much depend on the precise nature of the future trading relationship between the UK and the European Union. As agriculture policy is a devolved matter, I am very aware of the potential impacts that there could be with regulatory divergence between GB and the EU. This is not an issue which is unique to the UK Agriculture Bill and its provisions.

In terms of environmental schemes, the Bill will help ensure that we can put agriculture policies in place that will be good for farmers but, at the same time, provide the basis for an environmentally sustainable future. Mr Carroll, I think regrettably, talked about sustainable farming and then brought in the issue of these diseases that we have been hit with over the last number of years. Let me just make it absolutely clear: there is no comparison between anything that happens in this country and the diseases that have been brought to our door by people who have the most awful practices. The wet markets in China are a disgusting practice, and that is what has brought this horrible coronavirus to our door. The avian bird flu allegedly started with people who were cockfighting in the Far East and who actually sucked the saliva out of the roosters after the cockfight. That is how that was spread. Awful, horrid practices that should not be compared with any farming practice in Northern Ireland, because we uphold high quality standards.

We will seek to ensure that what we do on our farms makes them better environmentally, while being sustainable farms that can deliver good-quality food going forward. I think coronavirus has been a wake-up call. Just a month ago, there were two senior officials in Downing Street who were saying, "We don't really need Britain to produce food any more." What fools. What absolute fools, as we are going into the circumstances that we have over the next number of months. Never before has there been a greater need, since the Second World War, for us to have good-quality food on our own doorstep that we know has been produced to the highest standards. It is absolutely incumbent upon us to ensure that that continues to be the case.

That brings us to the issue of food security. Quite a number of Members raised the issue of the five-year check. I will raise this with Westminster. I do not believe that reporting every five years is often enough, as the Assembly has also indicated. Food security has to go very, very high up on our agenda. There is a population of some 65 million here. We can feed around 10 million of them from Northern Ireland. Ireland feeds a lot more. It is absolutely essential that the high-quality food that is produced in these islands is utilised in these islands, and that we rely less on imports from other places that do not produce food to the same standards, either in

animal welfare, the environment or, indeed, the welfare of their employees. We should not be in a position where supermarkets or anybody else are drawing in produce from these places that does not meet the same standards and then setting that as the bar for prices, making people who are working at home, here in their own country, work at a loss to compete with those people who are not operating to the same standards.

The issue of fertilisers was also raised by Members. The fertiliser clause will amend the Agriculture Act 1970 and provide for the continuation of the current regime, allowing the UK to continue to legislate on fertilising products. It was said that it is important that we do not allow regulation to drive up the costs, and I absolutely support that.

2.45 pm

I will respond to a couple of other issues that were raised. Some people have referred to parking the Bill. I have made it very clear that we cannot park the Bill and we will not park the Bill because that would lead to non-payments to the farming community in 2021. It would be a fundamental and gross mistake — an error of judgement — to go down that particular route.

Mr Carroll also mentioned food being local and sustainable and moving away from the large supermarkets. Whilst that might be desirable, it would be dependent on the public. It is good to see a lot of farm shops springing up and shops that are more closely linked to where the food comes from. Those shops will survive on the basis of people buying from them. I remember, as a young boy, going down to a wee shop close to where my grandmother lived — about 10 miles from home. Mum would have a list and there were three ladies who were in and out of the back, bustling around, getting the sugar and all the different products. We did that, as a ritual, on a weekly basis, and I remember it so well. However, the supermarkets came in and they took over. That wee shop is gone, and numerous wee shops like it are gone, as are the people who ran them. Whilst it might be desirable, it is not something that we have control over, other than supporting local shops and supporting local businesses. Again, the message from coronavirus is that we need to look at local, we need to look at how we sustain and support the people who actually work in our own country, who are providing jobs in our country, who are doing things to a standard that we like, as opposed to importing from the cheapest place. We need to forget about importing all these goods from various countries in the world based on price alone. We need to look at the quality and sustaining people who actually pay taxes in this country.

I welcome the fact that most Members indicated that they will support the Bill today; we cannot afford any further crises. It would be an unacceptable outcome if we did not put this Bill through today and we would have to explain to the farmers why we are not acting to protect their interests. They are flat out at the minute, and I want to pay tribute to the people in the food industry. There are around 100,000 people who are continuing to work. We have had some issues, and I welcome the fact that, for a lot of the issues that were raised last week, we are in a better place around them. There may still be some to be ironed out, but we are definitely in a better place. We need our food industry because, if we do not have our food industry, we will not have the food on the tables. If we do not have the

food on the tables, that will create a whole new problem. If we do not take the food off the farms, we will create an animal health crisis that will develop into a public health crisis, and we will also have a financial crisis. So in all of that, it is not necessary — it is critically important — that these businesses continue. They cannot be done without. We need to ensure that the food continues to come off the farms and onto the tables for people's forks. That is absolutely critical. I want to pay tribute to everybody who is involved in providing the food at this time when others are not able to work.

We cannot indicate that we have insufficient time. The House needs to apply itself to business. When coronavirus is gone — and it will pass — we need to have an economy and we need to have a Northern Ireland that we can pick up on. There is not much point in surviving a nuclear bomb if, when you come out, there is nothing left. When it comes to coronavirus, we want to save as many lives as possible. That has to be our first and primary focus — saving lives. However, on the back of that and having done that, we need to ensure that Northern Ireland has an economy, jobs, opportunities for people, schools that can pick up once again and that our hospitals can go back to normal and start to tackle the waiting lists and all the problems that were so evident before coronavirus.

It is absolutely critical that we focus in the Assembly not just on coronavirus — it goes without saying that we will have to do that — but on other issues. For Northern Ireland to progress beyond coronavirus, we must be prepared and ready and doing work on those things. I commend this legislation to the House. I believe that it is positive and will help us to keep moving forward even after coronavirus is gone.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the Agriculture Bill, as introduced in the House of Commons on 16 January 2020, and consents to the Agriculture Bill being taken forward by the Westminster Parliament.

Discretionary Support (Amendment No. 2) (COVID-19) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That the draft Discretionary Support (Amendment No. 2) (COVID-19) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved. — [Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities).]

Motion not moved.

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I wish to inform the Assembly that discussions are ongoing and are continuing with my Executive colleagues. There is support for these proposals, and those discussions are continuing, including with all of the Executive colleagues and the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I will continue to progress this and will hopefully bring this to the Assembly next Tuesday.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I thank the Minister for that point of order. She has put on the record the circumstances. I think that it was a courtesy to the House to come and explain why the motion was not being moved. Thank you very much, Minister.

Committee Business

Standing Orders

Mr T Buchanan (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures): I beg to move

After Standing Order 109 insert

110. Temporary Provisions

(1) Unless the Assembly previously resolves, Standing Orders 110-116 ('the temporary provisions') apply in the period from 31 March 2020 - 30 September 2020.

(2) A resolution under paragraph (1) shall require cross-community support.

111. Voting – General

(1) The temporary provisions of this Standing Order supersede those in Standing Order 26 (and see Standing Order 114).

(2) The Speaker, or a Deputy Speaker when in the Chair, shall not be entitled to vote on any decision.

(3) A vote shall not be taken on any matter if a quorum is not present.

(4) The Speaker shall judge whether a Question is carried or not in accordance with Standing Order 113.

(5) Except where paragraph (6) applies, every decision of the Assembly shall be taken by a simple majority.

(6) This paragraph applies to any decision where these Standing Orders or any statutory provision requires a decision to be taken with cross-community support or other form of enhanced majority.

112. Voting by Proxy

(1) This Standing Order contains temporary provisions for proxy voting.

(2) A Member may vote in person or by proxy.

(3) A Member who wishes to vote by proxy must give notice in writing to the Speaker.

(4) A notice under paragraph (3) must contain—

a. the name of the Member who wishes to exercise the proxy vote (M);

b. the identity of the Member who will vote on M's behalf (P) – see paragraph (6);

c. confirmation that P is willing to vote on behalf of M; and

d. details of the period for which P will vote on behalf of M - see paragraph (7).

(5) A notice under paragraph (3) may include confirmation from M that P is authorised to nominate another Member to carry out P's functions.

(6) P shall be—

a. the Whip or deputy Whip of the party of which M is a Member;

b. another Member; or

c. where—

(i) M has identified a person under subparagraph (a) or (b);

(ii) that person is for any reason unable to act for M; and

(iii) *M* has provided confirmation under paragraph 5 such other Member as that person may in writing to the Speaker identify as voting on behalf of *M*.

(7) *M* may authorise *P* to exercise *M*'s vote in the Assembly—

- a. in respect of one or more items of business;
- b. in respect of one or more sitting days; or
- c. until further notice.

(8) Notice under paragraph (3) must be given to the Speaker's Office not later than 9:30 am on the sitting day (or as the case may be the first sitting day) on which *M* intends *P* to vote on *M*'s behalf.

(9) *P* shall exercise *M*'s vote in the Assembly by communicating *M*'s name to the Lobby Clerks and Tellers and *M*'s vote shall be included in the numbers counted.

113 Voting - Divisions

(1) The temporary provisions of this Standing Order supersede those in Standing Order 27.

(2) The Speaker shall first seek to judge whether a Question is carried by collecting voices.

(3) In collecting voices under paragraph (2), the Speaker may take account of the number of proxy votes exercised by any Member.

(4) Subject to paragraph (5), the Speaker shall direct that the Lobbies be cleared and the Division Bells sounded if—

- a. the Speaker is unsure whether or not a Question is carried following the collection of voices under paragraph (2); or
- b. the Speaker's judgement as to whether a Question is so carried is challenged.

(5) Where a Question is put immediately after the result of a previous Division is announced, and paragraph 4(a) or (b) applies—

- a. the Speaker may direct that the Lobbies be cleared and the Division Bells sounded; or
- b. the Speaker may direct that the Lobbies be cleared and proceed immediately in accordance with paragraphs (7) to (13) and in deciding whether to direct that the Lobbies be cleared and the Division Bells sounded under this paragraph, the Speaker shall have regard to any representations made by or on behalf of any party Whip.

(6) Three minutes after a direction under paragraph (4) or (5)(a), the Speaker shall put the Question again, and if paragraph (4)(a) or (b) still applies, he or she shall proceed as set out below. Otherwise he or she shall judge whether the Question be carried in accordance with paragraph (2).

(7) The Speaker shall call for the nomination of two Tellers for each side of the Question but, if within a reasonable time after this call—

(a) two Tellers for one side but not the other have been nominated, the determination of the Assembly shall be that of the side which has nominated the two Tellers;

(b) two Tellers for each side have not been nominated, the Question shall not be carried.

(8) After Tellers have been nominated, the Speaker shall direct the Assembly to divide, "Ayes" to the right and "Noes" to the left, and that the Division Bells be again sounded.

(9) Four minutes after this direction, the Speaker shall direct that the doors from the corridors to the Chamber and Lobbies are secured.

(10) When all Members in the Lobbies have voted, the Tellers shall bring the Division lists to the Table Clerks who will announce the result.

(11) In a Division, a Member—

- a. is not obliged to vote;
- b. may vote although he or she did not hear the Question put; and
- c. may vote by proxy (see Standing Order 112).

(12) If the votes in a Division are equal the Question shall not be carried.

(13) If any Member is present within the precincts of the Assembly and is disabled by infirmity from passing through a Lobby, his or her name may be communicated by his or her party Whip to the Lobby Clerks and Tellers and may be included in the numbers counted.

114. Financial Acts

(1) This Standing Order makes temporary provision equivalent to Standing Order 26(1)(b).

(2) A vote, resolution or Act which—

- a. appropriates a sum out of the Consolidated Fund of Northern Ireland or increases a sum to be appropriated; or
- b. imposes or increases a tax shall require cross-community support (within the meaning of section 4(5) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998).

115. Temporary provision for Statutory Committees

(1) This Standing Order contains temporary provisions relating to Committees established under Standing Order 48, and supersedes paragraphs (3)-(6) of Standing Order 46 and paragraphs (5) and (7) of Standing Order 49.

(2) A Committee may meet on any day.

(3) Any member(s) of a Committee, including the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson may attend a meeting remotely, for example by video-link or telephone attendance.

(4) Decisions taken by a Committee shall be taken by consensus, and in the absence of consensus following a vote.

(5) A member of a Committee may vote in person, by video-link or by telephone.

(6) A member of a Committee who is for any reason unable to attend in person, or by video-link or telephone may delegate authority to another member of the Committee, including the Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson, to vote on his or her behalf.

(7) The minimum number of members required for a decision, whether by consensus or vote (including delegated votes under paragraph (6)) shall be five.

(8) A Committee may agree to make decisions (including a decision not to meet) without meeting.

(9) This paragraph applies where a Committee has agreed, or proposes to make, a decision without meeting:

- a. Before a decision is to be taken, the Chairperson must:
 - (i) inform members of the subject matter of the decision;

(ii) provide members with such supporting information as the Chairperson considers relevant;

(iii) allow a reasonable time for members to consider the subject matter and supporting information; and seek consensus among members on the decision.

b. Where—

(i) there is no consensus on the decision; or

(ii) any member of the Committee requires a vote to be taken on that decision the Committee shall vote on that decision.

c. Committee members may communicate their views under sub-paragraph (b)(i), and their votes under sub-paragraph (b)(ii) to the Committee Clerk by telephone, video-link or e-mail.

d. A member of a Committee who is for any reason unable to participate in decision-making under this paragraph may delegate authority to another member of the Committee, including the Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson, to act on his or her behalf.

e. The minimum number of votes required for a decision shall be five.

f. Where the Chairperson is for any reason unable to exercise functions under this paragraph, those functions may be exercised by the Deputy Chairperson, and if the latter is for any reason unable to exercise those functions, they may be exercised by a member of the Committee determined by the Committee.

(10) Votes under this Standing Order shall be carried (or negated) by simple majority.

(11) Notice of a delegation of authority under paragraph (6) or (9)(d) shall be given in writing to the Committee Clerk.

(12) A general record of the proceedings of a Committee shall be maintained by the Committee Clerk.

116. Temporary provision for Standing Committees

(1) This Standing Order contains temporary provisions relating to Committees established under Standing Order 51, and supersedes paragraphs (5) and (6) of Standing Order 52, and that part of Standing Order 58(4) relating to quorum.

(2) Standing Order 115 shall apply to Standing Committees as it applies to Statutory Committees, subject that:

a. The minimum number of members required for a decision of the Audit Committee, whether by consensus or vote, (including delegated votes under paragraph (6)) shall be two.

b. In its application to the Business Committee—

(i) A reference to a member of a committee shall include, where appropriate, a substitute member attending in place of a member and a reference to a Deputy Chairperson shall include a nominee of the Speaker;

(ii) The quorum shall be five members attending in accordance with Standing Order 115, except when no decision is taken or Question put, when the quorum shall be four; and

(iii) Paragraph (10) shall not apply to votes (and Standing Order 55(7) will continue to apply).

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that an hour should be allocated for this debate. Ten minutes will be allowed to move the motion and 10 minutes will be allowed for the Member who is

making a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr T Buchanan: On behalf of the Committee on Procedures, I am pleased to bring before the House this motion to amend Standing Orders. On behalf of the Committee, I wish to convey my sincere thanks to the Assembly officials who were involved in drafting these amendments. This was a huge task, given the short period of time that they had to produce the draft Standing Orders. Normally this amount of work would take weeks rather than days, and it is another display of the exemplary support that is provided to the Assembly during these difficult times. I am sure that every Member will agree with that and recognise that.

We are facing far-from-normal times. It is clear that, to allow the Assembly to continue to carry out its business while adhering to public health advice and keeping Members and staff as safe as possible, there is an urgent requirement to make changes to usual Assembly procedures. Therefore, the Committee on Procedures was asked to urgently consider and bring the motion before the House this afternoon.

I will provide some background to the motion. At the beginning of the plenary sitting on Monday 16 March, the Speaker of the House reflected that business as usual could not continue in the Assembly during the current period. Following further conversations with party Whips, the Speaker wrote to MLAs on 18 March, setting out some initial changes. He went on to explain that the Business Committee would give further consideration to future business and that ways in which the Assembly operates might change to accommodate social distancing. Significant changes have already been agreed by the Assembly insofar as temporarily suspending Question Time and private Member's motions not being scheduled. Members have also been asked not to table questions for written answer in the usual manner. Furthermore, the Business Committee recently identified a number of potential issues that may arise during the current circumstances and considered several solutions to them. The agreed way forward informed the proposed Standing Orders 111 to 116, which are set out in the Order Paper today.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

In the light of current circumstances in relation to COVID-19, the Chairpersons' Liaison Group met on 24 March to consider a number of proposed changes to Committee procedures. Those changes are designed to allow for the continued operation of Committees when several Committee members may be unavailable or it is not possible for a physical Committee meeting to take place. Both the Business Committee and the Chairpersons' Liaison Group were content to bring draft Standing Orders to the Committee on Procedures for their assessment. At its meeting on Wednesday 25 March, the Committee on Procedures agreed the draft Standing Orders, which subsequently brings us to the debate.

That provides a short background to these amendments, and I would like to take the opportunity to thank the Speaker, the Business Committee and the Chairpersons' Liaison Group for bringing these changes to the Committee on Procedures at such a crucial time.

I will briefly cover what these proposed changes will mean for ongoing Assembly and Committee business. Regarding plenary sessions and Assembly business, it is imperative that Members maintain social distancing at all times during the current period. That includes in the Assembly Chamber and especially during Divisions. Social distancing cannot be maintained should a Division be called. We are all aware that under current Standing Orders, all Members who wish to vote must pass through at least one of the Lobbies in the Chamber. That is extremely problematic in the current circumstances and the situation we find ourselves in. However, the Assembly already has limited provision for proxy voting under Standing Order 27(11), which provides that:

“If any member is present within the precincts of the Assembly and is disabled by infirmity from passing through a lobby, his or her name may be communicated by his or her party whip to the lobby clerks and tellers and may be included in the numbers counted.”

Consideration has been given to whether that principle could also be applied in the current circumstances to allow votes to be cast on behalf of Members so they do not have to physically be in the Chamber to go through the Lobbies. Currently, Standing Order 55(7) provides for each party delegation present at the Business Committee:

“to cast a number of votes equivalent to the number of members who adhere to the whip of that party.”

The same applies for the collection of smaller parties and independent Members.

The proposed Standing Order 115 provides for a similar model for plenary sittings. Notice must be given in writing to the Speaker where a Member allows their vote to be made by another Member. This should result in a much smaller number of Members being present in the Chamber, and also for fewer Members to pass through the Lobbies.

I will briefly cover the proposed changes to Committee business. The proposed Standing Orders 115 and 116 cover Statutory and Standing Committee business. In relation to Committee quorum, the Chairpersons' Liaison Group agreed that it would remain at five when a decision needs to be taken. However, the proposed new Standing Orders allow for any member of a Committee, including the Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson, to attend a meeting remotely, by either video-link or telephone, and still contribute to quorum. The proposals also allow for a member of a Committee to vote by video-link or telephone. Further to this, the proposed Standing Orders provide for any member who is not able to attend a meeting in person, to delegate authority to another member of the Committee to vote on their behalf.

Finally, regarding decision-making, the proposed Standing Orders provide for a Committee to make decisions without meeting at all, using a procedure whereby the Chairperson could provide members with the detail surrounding the issue, and then gather views and seek consensus from members via correspondence.

During its deliberation of these proposals, members of the Committee on Procedures were generally content. There was some discussion around how proxy voting would work for smaller parties or independent Members who wished to show their opposition to a particular Question in

the Chamber. Members also queried whether it would be possible to designate the named person only once, and not before every plenary sitting throughout the current situation, which would, in turn, be much more efficient for the Business Committee.

Discussions were also held around whether there should be more than two named persons when it comes to proxy voting — whether it should be two, three or more.

3.00 pm

In concluding its deliberations, the Committee agreed to introduce the new temporary Standing Orders and committed to working with the Speaker in future to facilitate any further measures. Incidentally, the Committee also agreed to write to the Assembly Commission to ask it to explore the facilitation of videoconferencing in all conference rooms. The measures in the motion will apply only until 30 September 2020 and can be reviewed, if necessary, prior to that date. On that basis and on behalf of the Committee on Procedures, I commend the motion to the House.

Mrs Barton: While the motion on Standing Orders is temporary and applies from 31 March to 30 September, the Ulster Unionist Party has reservations about some of the measures contained in it. Because of the health crisis that we are in, the House has already consented to emergency legislation that undermines democracy and reduces scrutiny. While, indeed, given the present situation with COVID-19 and the reduction in the number of Members permitted in the Chamber, an alternative method of voting must be found for all Members to register their vote, one cannot have voters lining up in the Lobbies and, at the same time, observing social distancing.

With regard to Standing Order 112, on sitting days one would expect that the great majority of Assembly Members would be here in their offices in the Building. Therefore, they should be able to vote without the need for proxies. Were we not all elected to speak and cast our votes for our constituents? The method proposed in Standing Order 112 certainly does not allow for that. Therefore, I suggest that an alternative method for Members to cast their vote in person needs to be further investigated.

Through the Committee on Procedures, the Ulster Unionist Party will proactively seek to amend today's motion. We seek confirmation that the proposals are agile enough to embed improvements and a robust mechanism to protect an individual's mandate vote. Having assessed the voices in the Chamber today, we do not support the motion but will not force a Division.

Mr Carroll: We are, obviously, living in unprecedented times in which all the old certainties no longer apply. The health pandemic that surrounds us is the greatest crisis that I and, I am sure, many others have lived through. It has destroyed too many lives, and it threatens to destroy many more. I offer my sympathies and thoughts to everybody who has been affected at this time.

For that reason, it is necessary for the Assembly to give the utmost priority to tackling the pandemic and its far-reaching repercussions. That means scaling back on other areas of work and, at this time, the normal functions of the Chamber. For that reason, many of the proposed changes to Standing Orders are justified in the context that we face. However, it is crucial that we demand the maximum

democracy, accountability and scrutiny at this time in order to ensure that the crisis is handled in a way that prioritises the needs of the great majority of people and not the interests of the powerful and the wealthy.

We need a shutdown of society, but we cannot, in any circumstances, allow a shutdown of democracy — quite the contrary. Now is precisely the time to fight for an expansion of democracy in politics and economics, generally speaking, in the interests of ordinary people. The changes to Standing Orders and the functions of the Assembly must recognise that, in order to ensure maximum space for democracy throughout this unprecedented time.

I recognise that normal procedure cannot resume, in terms of speaking arrangements and other items relating to the Chamber, but should it not be the case that the valuable and important workers in our canteen should be allowed to self-isolate with their pay and terms and conditions protected? Whilst canteens and restaurants rightly close across the country, should we not practise in the House what we are enforcing elsewhere? It dawned on me only today that we should not put workers in this Building or their families at risk.

Already, the rich, the powerful and the wealthy are trying to shape the response to the crisis in their interests. Governments across the world have faced a basic choice throughout the crisis between defending profits or saving lives, and, too often, they have chosen the former. Already, employers are forcing workers into dangerous conditions, risking their lives in order to shore up the profits. Other workers have met with widespread job losses where closures have taken place, and bosses have threatened to stop pension payments for the duration of the crisis. Billionaires continue to lobby Governments for bailouts to the rich. We will see more of that, no doubt, unless there is an urgent shift in how politics functions generally.

People Before Profit thinks that we need to see urgent intervention from the Executive and the Westminster Government to ensure that all workers on the front line are protected with personal protection equipment (PPE). That means health workers but also other front-line services including retail workers and many more. Moreover, government must ensure that no worker loses their job because of the crisis. A decade ago, the Government bailed out their banker friends to the tune of at least £500 billion overnight: now is the time to bail out workers. The state must step in to secure wages for all workers and the self-employed, and we must see an immediate freeze on mortgages, rents and utility bills.

Obviously, some changes to procedures have to take place at this time, but I want to make the case that these points should be aired and heard throughout the crisis and this period.

Finally, I pay tribute to all the front-line service workers who are out there risking their lives for us all: the health workers, the public-sector workers, the retail workers, the cleaners and everybody else. This crisis shows that we need to rely on them, and, despite them previously being described as “unskilled workers”, they are very much skilled and essential to the functioning of our society.

Ms C Kelly: First, I offer my sincere condolences to the families across Ireland who have lost loved ones to

COVID-19. My thoughts and prayers are with them at this time.

The motion, which seeks to amend Standing Orders, is unprecedented, but we face unprecedented times. The amendments ensure that MLAs can meet their obligations as political representatives and Assembly Members. They ensure that the Assembly can operate efficiently and effectively, but equally important is the fact that they enable all of us to play our part in thwarting transmission by adhering to social distancing and introducing remote working practices. Finding different ways of working is imperative if we are to delay the spread of this deadly virus.

The motion will enable MLAs to vote by proxy and Committee business to be conducted remotely by video or audio link. That is not just about protecting the lives of MLAs or the people who support their role, although that is important; it is about protecting the lives of others. It is about supporting our health service workers: our doctors and nurses and all the people who support them — the paramedics, administrators, cleaners, drivers and others. It is about supporting all the people providing vital services that support our communities: the shopworkers, warehouse and delivery workers, postal workers and others. It will take a determined effort by everyone to halt the spread of the pandemic by minimising transmission. The measures are temporary with a six-month reconsideration limit. I urge Members to support the motion.

Mr Speaker: As no other Members wish to contribute, I call Gary Middleton to make a winding-up speech.

Mr Middleton: I welcome the opportunity to conclude today's debate on the motion to amend Standing Orders. First, I thank all the Members who contributed.

As outlined, the motion has come to the House today following requests from the Business Committee and the Chairpersons' Liaison Group to introduce urgent temporary provisions to allow Assembly and Committee business to proceed over the coming weeks and months. As the responsibility for amending Standing Orders lies with the Committee on Procedures, the Committee agreed to consider the matter.

The proposed amendments will make fundamental changes, albeit temporary ones, to the plenary and Committee business of the Assembly. We are all too aware of the current circumstances that we are in, and it is imperative that we, as the Assembly, do all that we can to protect one another, the staff and Building users as well.

As explained by the Deputy Chairperson, the changes will allow for wider proxy voting in the Chamber. That will allow for social distancing in the Lobbies, should a Division be called. For Committee business, the proposals will allow any member of a Committee, including the Chair and Deputy Chair, to attend a meeting remotely by video link or by telephone. They also allow for a member of a Committee to vote by video link or by telephone. The proposals go further, by allowing Committees to make decisions without meeting, using a procedure whereby the Chairperson will provide members with the detail surrounding an issue and then gather views and seek consensus from members via correspondence.

Throughout the debate we heard from a number of Members. The Deputy Chairperson outlined his remarks on behalf of the Committee. Rosemary Barton gave her

comments on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party. She referred to the need for alternatives to be looked at, such as alternative ways for Members to vote. Of course, the difficulty with that is that all of this is under review, and we need to be mindful of that and of the temporary nature of the measures to be put in place. Gerry Carroll talked about the unprecedented times that we are in and the merits of the Assembly looking at measures but demanded maximum accountability and scrutiny. He stressed that there cannot be a shutdown of democracy: I think that we would all agree with that. Catherine Kelly also talked about these being unprecedented times and said that the amendments were needed to ensure that MLAs can meet their obligations as elected representatives but would also enable us all to play our part in tackling the emergency and crisis that we face.

Before I conclude, I reiterate what the Deputy Chairperson said in thanking all the Assembly officials involved in drafting the measures at very short notice. They have worked night and day to bring the provisions to us today, and I thank them for that. I thank everyone for contributing to today's debate, and I commend the motion to the House.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

After Standing Order 109 insert

110. Temporary Provisions

(1) *Unless the Assembly previously resolves, Standing Orders 110-116 ('the temporary provisions') apply in the period from 31 March 2020 - 30 September 2020.*

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a. the name of the Member who wishes to exercise the proxy vote (M);

b. the identity of the Member who will vote on M's behalf (P) – see paragraph (6);

c. confirmation that P is willing to vote on behalf of M; and

d. details of the period for which P will vote on behalf of M - see paragraph (7).

(5) *A notice under paragraph (3) may include confirmation from M that P is authorised to nominate another Member to carry out P's functions.*

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a. the Whip or deputy Whip of the party of which M is a Member;

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(i) M has identified a person under sub-paragraph (a) or (b);

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a. in respect of one or more items of business;

b. in respect of one or more sitting days; or

c. until further notice.

(8) *Notice under paragraph (3) must be given to the Speaker's Office not later than 9:30 am on the sitting day (or as the case may be the first sitting day) on which M intends P to vote on M's behalf.*

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(1) *The temporary provisions of this Standing Order supersede those in Standing Order 27.*

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(4) *Subject to paragraph (5), the Speaker shall direct that the Lobbies be cleared and the Division Bells sounded if—*

a. the Speaker is unsure whether or not a Question is carried following the collection of voices under paragraph (2); or

b. the Speaker's judgement as to whether a Question is so carried is challenged.

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a. the Speaker may direct that the Lobbies be cleared and the Division Bells sounded; or

b. the Speaker may direct that the Lobbies be cleared and proceed immediately in accordance with paragraphs

(7) to (13) and in deciding whether to direct that the Lobbies be cleared and the Division Bells sounded under this paragraph, the Speaker shall have regard to any representations made by or on behalf of any party Whip.

(6) Three minutes after a direction under paragraph (4) or (5)(a), the Speaker shall put the Question again, and if paragraph (4)(a) or (b) still applies, he or she shall proceed as set out below. Otherwise he or she shall judge whether the Question be carried in accordance with paragraph (2).

(7) The Speaker shall call for the nomination of two Tellers for each side of the Question but, if within a reasonable time after this call—

(a) two Tellers for one side but not the other have been nominated, the determination of the Assembly shall be that of the side which has nominated the two Tellers;

(b) two Tellers for each side have not been nominated, the Question shall not be carried.

(8) After Tellers have been nominated, the Speaker shall direct the Assembly to divide, “Ayes” to the right and “Noes” to the left, and that the Division Bells be again sounded.

(9) Four minutes after this direction, the Speaker shall direct that the doors from the corridors to the Chamber and Lobbies are secured.

(10) When all Members in the Lobbies have voted, the Tellers shall bring the Division lists to the Table Clerks who will announce the result.

(11) In a Division, a Member—

a. is not obliged to vote;

b. may vote although he or she did not hear the Question put; and

c. may vote by proxy (see Standing Order 112).

(12) If the votes in a Division are equal the Question shall not be carried.

(13) If any Member is present within the precincts of the Assembly and is disabled by infirmity from passing through a Lobby, his or her name may be communicated by his or her party Whip to the Lobby Clerks and Tellers and may be included in the numbers counted.

114. Financial Acts

(1) This Standing Order makes temporary provision equivalent to Standing Order 26(1)(b).

(2) A vote, resolution or Act which—

a. appropriates a sum out of the Consolidated Fund of Northern Ireland or increases a sum to be appropriated; or

b. imposes or increases a tax shall require cross-community support (within the meaning of section 4(5) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998).

115. Temporary provision for Statutory Committees

(1) This Standing Order contains temporary provisions relating to Committees established under Standing Order 48, and supersedes paragraphs (3)-(6) of Standing Order 46 and paragraphs (5) and (7) of Standing Order 49.

(2) A Committee may meet on any day.

(3) Any member(s) of a Committee, including the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson may attend a meeting remotely, for example by video-link or telephone attendance.

(4) Decisions taken by a Committee shall be taken by consensus, and in the absence of consensus following a vote.

(5) A member of a Committee may vote in person, by video-link or by telephone.

(6) A member of a Committee who is for any reason unable to attend in person, or by video-link or telephone may delegate authority to another member of the Committee, including the Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson, to vote on his or her behalf.

(7) The minimum number of members required for a decision, whether by consensus or vote (including delegated votes under paragraph (6)) shall be five.

(8) A Committee may agree to make decisions (including a decision not to meet) without meeting.

(9) This paragraph applies where a Committee has agreed, or proposes to make, a decision without meeting:

a. Before a decision is to be taken, the Chairperson must:

(i) inform members of the subject matter of the decision;

(ii) provide members with such supporting information as the Chairperson considers relevant;

(iii) allow a reasonable time for members to consider the subject matter and supporting information; and seek consensus among members on the decision.

b. Where—

(i) there is no consensus on the decision; or

(ii) any member of the Committee requires a vote to be taken on that decision the Committee shall vote on that decision.

c. Committee members may communicate their views under sub-paragraph (b)(i), and their votes under sub-paragraph (b)(ii) to the Committee Clerk by telephone, video-link or e-mail.

d. A member of a Committee who is for any reason unable to participate in decision-making under this paragraph may delegate authority to another member of the Committee, including the Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson, to act on his or her behalf.

e. The minimum number of votes required for a decision shall be five.

f. Where the Chairperson is for any reason unable to exercise functions under this paragraph, those functions may be exercised by the Deputy Chairperson, and if the latter is for any reason unable to exercise those functions, they may be exercised by a member of the Committee determined by the Committee.

(10) Votes under this Standing Order shall be carried (or negatived) by simple majority.

(11) Notice of a delegation of authority under paragraph (6) or (9)(d) shall be given in writing to the Committee Clerk.

(12) A general record of the proceedings of a Committee shall be maintained by the Committee Clerk.

116. Temporary provision for Standing Committees

(1) This Standing Order contains temporary provisions relating to Committees established under Standing Order 51, and supersedes paragraphs (5) and (6) of Standing Order 52, and that part of Standing Order 58(4) relating to quorum.

(2) Standing Order 115 shall apply to Standing Committees as it applies to Statutory Committees, subject that:

a. The minimum number of members required for a decision of the Audit Committee, whether by consensus or vote, (including delegated votes under paragraph (6)) shall be two.

b. In its application to the Business Committee—

(i) A reference to a member of a committee shall include, where appropriate, a substitute member attending in place of a member and a reference to a Deputy Chairperson shall include a nominee of the Speaker;

(ii) The quorum shall be five members attending in accordance with Standing Order 115, except when no decision is taken or Question put, when the quorum shall be four; and

(iii) Paragraph (10) shall not apply to votes (and Standing Order 55(7) will continue to apply).

Adjourned at 3.13 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 21 April 2020

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Stalford] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before we proceed to today's business, I want to record at this sitting, as it was at the first meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 response, that all Members will have received a letter from Mr Speaker on 7 April informing them that, due to his medical history, he is among those in the community required to conduct his responsibilities from home for 12 weeks. Although he cannot be with us to conduct business in the Chamber, he will continue to deal with all the normal preparations behind the scenes, such as taking procedural decisions on issues such as questions for urgent oral answer and amendments, and will be contributing to the Business Committee and the Assembly Commission remotely. If Members have any issues that they wish to bring to the Speaker's attention, they should send them to the Speaker's Office in the normal way.

At recent sittings, Mr Speaker has started our proceedings with remarks on the current situation, so let me begin this morning by expressing my deepest condolences on behalf of every Member of the Assembly to all those who have lost their loved ones due to coronavirus. Whether their names and stories have been made public or not, we recognise that they each represent a loss to family, friends and our community in the most difficult of circumstances that words cannot adequately express.

I also repeat the thanks of the Assembly to everyone who is working in the health service and all vital services at this time, as well as to everyone who is observing the requirement to remain at home. All are playing their part to save lives, and I know that that will be the focus of Members' minds as we do our business today. The virus will pass. We will defeat it. The dawn will come again.

In relation to the practicalities of responding to COVID-19 in the Chamber, I ask Members that, when entering or exiting, they do so via the door closest to their seat, whether that be the main doors, via the Lobbies or the doors by the officials. That approach will also help us to uphold social distancing in the Chamber. I also remind Members that sanitisers are available at the doors.

Committee Business

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I advise Members that the nominating officer of the DUP has notified the Speaker that Ms Joanne Bunting has been nominated to fill the vacancy of Deputy Chairperson of the Audit Committee with effect from 16 April 2020. The Speaker is satisfied that the requirements of Standing Orders have been met in relation to the matter.

Executive Committee Business

Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill: First Stage

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): I beg to introduce the Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill [NIA 04/17-22], which is a Bill to make emergency modifications in connection with coronavirus in relation to notices to quit to be given by landlords of private tenancies.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be published.

Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Mr Kearney (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member has to say, "I beg to move".

Mr Kearney: Sorry, I was just about to say that.

I beg to move

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Is rún dúshlánach atá os ár gcomhair ar maidin. I move the motion with mixed feelings. Until very recently, I did not think that, as a Minister, I would propose regulations such as these. The regulations are designed to be preventative. They are being put in place to protect people. Ní mór go mbeidh cosaint an phobail mar phríomhchuspóir dúinn go léir. Supporting measures to close businesses and protect people's livelihoods, while restricting mobility, is a necessary cost that we must all pay to get through this health emergency. We must all put the needs of our citizens first. Important as economic reconstruction will be, economic interests at this time cannot take primacy over public health. The ravages of this terrible disease have dictated the need for legislation to close churches and cemeteries and empty our high streets the length and breadth of the island. Over 2,500 of our fellow citizens have been affected, and, tragically, over 200 have lost their life. Families bereaved in the most trying of circumstances are unable to comfort loved ones who are dying or to mourn them as they would wish. Our health and social care colleagues are heroes who risk their lives daily to win the battle against the pandemic. That is why the regulations are a vital necessity: without them, the battle against COVID-19 would be lost.

The regulations were made and came into operation on the 28 March in the knowledge that democratic scrutiny by the Assembly would follow. Glactar go bhfuil scrúdú na rialachán seo an-tábhachtach. It was not a decision taken lightly. Nor do we take today's proceedings lightly. Through scrutiny, the Assembly must satisfy itself that they are necessary, proportionate and sound.

Regarding the content of the regulations, the approach is very similar to that in other jurisdictions. There are three main sets of restrictions. First, many types of business, particularly those with a retail focus, have had to close or change to a takeaway or a delivery-only mode of operation. Secondly, there are restrictions on gatherings of more than two people, other than for exceptions such as funerals or providing emergency assistance. Thirdly and, perhaps, most profoundly, there are restrictions on movement, and no one is allowed to leave home without a lawful purpose. There are provisions for enforcement by the PSNI and penalties ranging up to £5,000 on summary conviction.

I will now clarify some of the things that the regulations do and some of the things that they do not do. First, the regulations do not contain a list of essential businesses; rather, they list businesses that must close and types of businesses that must repurpose. For everything else, the Executive's message is reflected in guidance and communications, and our message is clear: where people

can work from home, they must; and, where people must come to work, they must be able to work safely.

The restrictions on citizens' movements are also very tight — some might even say, “draconian” — but, for the most part, the intention of the restrictions has been clearly understood and levels of compliance in society have been good. However, there is one aspect that is worth clarifying, and that is the question of whether it is lawful to drive in order to take exercise. The answer lies in the wording of regulation 5, which refers to “the need ... to take exercise”. If someone needs to drive to take exercise, they may do so. The PSNI will apply a test of reasonableness to that. A household that has young children or an elderly relative can drive to the local park to exercise safely, or a person with a disability such as autism who needs to drive or be driven to take regular exercise can do so lawfully. However, a long, leisurely drive to a resort or beauty spot must be off limits for this time.

The delayed scrutiny of the regulations has one benefit: we now have evidence to assess how they are, in fact, working. Crucially, we know the answer to two key questions: are the regulations needed, and do they work? To answer the first question, we must look to the modelling work carried out by the expert group led by Ian Young. The modelling group now expects the peak of the outbreak to be less severe than previously expected, but there are still many difficult weeks and months ahead, right across these islands. We need maximised North/South common approaches adopted as well as on an east-west basis. The progress achieved through the restrictions will be lost very quickly if we relax the restrictions that have helped to achieve this compliance. Teip orainn a bheadh ann dá dtarlódh sin. We would fail ourselves and each other, if we did so at this time. The World Health Organization has warned Governments of the dangers that easing restrictions would raise of the spread of further infection. At all times, we should be guided by international best practice and advice. The regulations are still needed. Ní mór dúinn go léir cloí leis na rialacháin ar bhonn leanúnach.

On the second question, the daily situation reports tell me that the regulations successfully promote social distancing. That compliance is producing tangible results. Confirmed cases and deaths so far are fewer than we feared. The regulations are working, and that credit belongs to all of us who are making sacrifices at this time. Ach bigí cinnte de seo.

There are citizens alive today who would otherwise have died. Consequently, our health service is more than holding its own in this battle. So, yes, the regulations are indeed working.

10.45 am

Aithnítear ualach na n-fobairtí seo. From personal experience, I know very well how much hardship and anguish is being caused to family and friends. The Executive recognise the resulting distress, anxiety and economic harm, but all parties in our power-sharing Government support maintenance of the restrictions at this time. I and Executive colleagues understand how extremely difficult it is that members of our families, individual friends and our community are being denied the solace that moments of reflection at gravesides and places of worship can provide, but that is the price that we must pay because the coronavirus pandemic is an emergency. The fact is that we have not beaten COVID-19. No other

interest or priority can take primacy over our public health. There is no room for complacency. We face the possibility of new surges of this pandemic, but, equally, we must be vigilant for mutations of this virus and/or new pandemics. Members, the scourge of lethal pandemics is no longer a reality confined to the outer reaches of Africa or Asia. We are prepared to do all in our power to help businesses, workers and citizens through this. Those efforts will not stop. This battle must be taken forward with a whole-government and a whole-society approach.

This is a very important debate. The regulations require very careful scrutiny. I trust that, having done so, the Assembly will agree with me that they are necessary, proportionate and sound. Dearbhaím do na Comhaltaí anseo go gcoinneofar na rialacháin faoi scrúdú trédhearcach go rialta. I also assure Members that the regulations will be subject to regular reviews, and the second is due by 9 May. There will be ongoing consideration on the potential of the scope for ending any of the individual restrictions where possible. All Ministers in our Executive agree that these restrictions ought not to be removed a single day before it is safe to do so but, equally, that they should not remain a single day more than is necessary. In the meantime, we must continue to give united political and civic leadership. Molaim na rialacháin don Tionól. I commend the regulations to the Assembly.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I thank the junior Minister for his statement. The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit in this debate. I advise Members that the Business Committee has agreed that, under the current circumstances, Members are entitled to rise in their place if they wish to be called to speak during this debate and any other debate today. The usual ways of getting your name on the speaking list, informing the Business Office or approaching the top Table, are also valid options for Members to use.

Mr McGrath (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I echo your earlier remarks offering condolences to the families of those who have passed away. I also offer our continued best wishes to our brave and formidable forces in our health service sector, who work tirelessly day and night to help to protect our community and care for them.

The Committee for the Executive Office did not have lead responsibility for the scrutiny of these regulations, but I want to outline the very important link that there is between the role of the Executive Office and that of the Department of Health in the fight against coronavirus. The Coronavirus Act gives the Executive Office powers to make directions to compel the closure of certain premises and to prohibit mass gatherings. However, it also gives the Department of Health powers to make regulations to enforce social distancing on people, and that is what we have before us today. Giving the Executive Office the power to make the directions reflects the cross-cutting, sensitive and far-reaching nature of the measures that we have, and it will help to continue to have these rules and will have a considerable impact on how we live our everyday lives for the foreseeable future.

The deliberate overlap in powers between the Executive Office and the Department of Health allows for directions to be made quickly to deal with the most pressing issues, followed by a more considered development of regulations to deal with ongoing issues. In this case, the regulations

impose restrictions on people who are not allowed to leave home without a lawful excuse, on gatherings of more than two people and on businesses. The Health Committee, which has responsibility for the scrutiny of these regulations, considered the statutory rule at a meeting in early April, and I am sure that the Chairperson of the Health Committee will share with us the details of those deliberations.

Due to the timing around the laying of the rule, the Committee for the Executive Office did not have an opportunity to consider the regulations before today. However, the Executive Office provided a comprehensive briefing to outline the background to the making of the regulations and their relationship to the powers of the Executive Office under the Coronavirus Act 2020, and the Committee will consider that at its meeting tomorrow.

I will make the following remarks in my capacity as an MLA. Coronavirus has presented us with massive challenges. Nobody, when they first heard of the virus, could have understood or appreciated the impact that it would have. Certainly, words like "surreal" and "unimaginable" are regularly used to describe the situation that we are in. Who would have thought a few months ago that we would be on lockdown, restricted in what we can and cannot do and in when and where we are able to do these things? The legislation is scary. Ordinarily, it would be bad. It is draconian and anti-human rights, but we are not in normal times. The response to this virus needs to be mammoth, restrictive and even feel at times as though it is anti-democratic, with no normal time to be able to debate or discuss these massive changes to the rules.

The rules are harsh, and, in places, they are somewhat cruel. To cause loved ones to have to die alone, then not permit a funeral, restrict who can attend the burial and then not let the family visit the graveyard is cruelty. However, it is necessary in order to stop the spread of the disease, and that will save lives. It is cruel, but it is necessary.

People are still dying in our communities. The threat from coronavirus is as serious as ever, and if we let our guard down, we will be opening ourselves to the unnecessary loss of loved ones. In recent days, I have certainly seen a lot more movement in our community, and many people are calling for parks, cemeteries and recycling centres to be reopened. Any decision to relax the restrictions that we are operating under or to change the interpretation of those restrictions has to be underpinned by medical and scientific evidence. When Ministers are appearing on radio shows, on television or at press briefings, they need to explain the rationale for those decisions, including any change that there is to medical advice. The Executive must ensure that they appropriately communicate with the community and let people know why things are happening and why things are not happening. If closing recycling centres is saving lives, let us explain that. People will listen to reason, but they need to hear it, and there can be nothing wrong with clarity. Decisions cannot be taken on the basis of simple lobbying; they need to be underpinned by scientific fact.

There also needs to be a road map for us to get out of the clutches of this virus. It is not a tap; it cannot be switched off. It is not seasonal; spring and summer weather will not reduce the impact, and the virus certainly is not going to be going away on its summer holidays. It is here until

we manage our way out of it, and that will require the Executive to have a detailed plan, to communicate that plan and to make sure that everybody stays inside with that plan.

I know that people are finding lockdown extremely difficult. I understand those concerns, fears and anxieties, because we are all feeling them, but the cost of loosening the restrictions cannot be the lives of the people whom we care about. In the absence of clear medical advice, we cannot change the guidance because people do not like being cooped up anymore. We all have that feeling but it must be underpinned by the scientific facts.

Successful countries, such as New Zealand, Germany, South Korea and others, have common traits: testing, community tracing and working out who has, who has not and who has had this virus. When we know all of that, we will contain it better. When we get the vaccine, we will control and eradicate the virus, and all the rules and regulations will not be needed any longer. I cannot wait for that day, and I know that many people feel the same, but patience is needed. Sticking to the rules will save lives. It is better for us all to stick to the rules for a while than be one of those family members who loses a loved one and cannot go to the funeral, or worse still, be the one who is being buried. Let us stick to the rules, plan for the way out, communicate it to everyone and be prepared if this should happen again.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, we accept and support these rules but we wish that we did not have to.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health):

Ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá ar dtús mar Chathaoirleach an Choiste Sláinte. I would like to start my contribution by expressing my sincere condolences to those who have lost a loved one during this difficult time. I know that is shared by party colleagues and all members of the Health Committee. It is not easy to lose a loved one at any time but it is, perhaps, particularly difficult at this time of social-distancing and lockdown measures.

The Health Committee considered the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations at its meeting on 2 April. The Department advised the Committee that, due to the serious and imminent threat being posed by the incidents and the spread of coronavirus, the Department was unable to submit an SL1 policy proposal, and that, to allow public health measures to be taken, the regulations were made without a draft being laid and approved.

We heard evidence from the Chief Environmental Health Officer in the Department of Health. The Department advised that the regulations cover three main areas: restrictions on businesses permitted to remain open; restrictions on the movement of people; and restrictions on social gatherings. Committee members raised a number of issues, including the importance of comparative information on similar measures in the South of Ireland and effective and ongoing North/South cooperation. I welcomed, in this respect, the memorandum of understanding that has been signed by the Chief Medical Officers, North and South, which aimed, where possible, to ensure cooperation and harmonised messages, and highlighted that cooperation is important to ensure that regulations do not present barriers or blockages in dealing with the COVID-19 crisis.

Committee members also sought assurances that the regulations would not disrupt the manufacture or supply of essential products and goods, especially medical and other supplies. We were advised that, subject to advice on maintaining social distancing, the rule did not require the closure of manufacturers. We discussed enforcement powers being given to the PSNI and were assured that the police have powers to disperse gatherings.

Concerns were also raised about the safety of employees in businesses that remain open and members asked whether those businesses that fail to put in place social-distancing measures would be required to close. Members flagged concerns that some businesses are reported to be operating without social distancing or PPE. The Committee was advised that it remains the responsibility of business owners to ensure the health and safety of their staff, if their business remains open, and the need for all workplaces to strictly adhere to guidance from the Public Health Agency and the Health and Safety Executive.

Members were further advised that the Health and Safety Executive and the environmental health departments within councils each have responsibility for different aspects of this and that. Complaints may be made to the relevant body. We were also informed, however, that under the rule, only the PSNI are given relevant enforcement powers but that designation of other bodies was under active consideration. I would be grateful for an update from the junior Minister on this matter.

11.00 am

Members raised the important issue of communicating the regulations to ethnic minority communities, for example in the form of leaflets in other languages. The chief environmental officer undertook to feed that back into the system and to act upon it.

Finally, the question of procedures at ports and airports was raised in terms of addressing the risk of further transmission of the virus from cargo or passengers — another issue that has come to prominence recently as flights are carrying seasonal workers from eastern Europe. The Committee was advised that airports would be treated as workplaces when it comes to social-distancing requirements, but I think that questions remain over the approach to individuals arriving on flights from elsewhere.

Due to the urgency of the situation, the Committee was unable to take the views of other Committees with regard to the cross-departmental elements of the regulations, as it would normally do. The Committee therefore agreed to consider only the health aspects of the regulations.

Members acknowledged the unusual nature of the regulations and the restrictions contained therein, but broadly supported the need to implement such measures in the current circumstances. The Committee noted that the regulations provide that the Department of Health must review the need for the restrictions and requirements imposed by the regulations at least every 21 days, with the first review being carried out by 18 April 2020, and that the regulations will cease to have effect after a period of six months.

It is crucial that we learn and implement the lessons from the start of this outbreak. We must do that swiftly to ensure that mistakes are not repeated and to prepare for further phases or surges of this virus. The Health Committee will

continue to play its part in that process. The Committee agreed that it was content with the health aspects of the regulations.

I will now add some remarks as Sinn Féin's spokesperson for health. It cannot be said enough that we live in unprecedented times. The scope of the provisions within these regulations shows the extent of the measures deemed necessary to tackle COVID-19. They say that a week is a long time in politics, but it appears to be an absolute age during this pandemic.

There are many parts of the regulations that I could discuss at length, whether it be the make-up of the list of underlying health conditions or the provisions on public gatherings, especially the needed changes around funerals and wakes, which have a special place in our community life in Ireland, both in the towns and, perhaps especially, in rural areas like my own. However, I will focus on the key aspects of the regulations: the powers to restrict movement and travel.

The need to reduce unnecessary travel and social interaction is a key response that is backed up by international evidence from the World Health Organization, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control and many others. Restrictions on travel and movement are one of the most noticeable measures to reduce social contact. The WHO indicates that these measures are effective but have a cost. They also lose their benefit if they are not coordinated across the entire island. Effective implementation and coordination across the island is essential, especially as part of a future review of the regulations.

I believe it is worth noting that the measures were already largely observed in the North ahead of the Executive, with many schools effectively closed, events cancelled and families already self-isolating. We are only now starting to see the benefits of that. Essentially these measures are designed to keep the public safe, but they are also — and this is an important point for the public to remember — vital in keeping front-line workers and staff safe. It is brilliant for us to clap for health and social care workers on a Thursday night, and very well deserved, but we are hearing ongoing concerns about access to PPE and difficulties in testing, so one of the best things that the public can do at this time is to stay at home in order to protect and not overburden our health service. I look forward to the time when these measures are no longer necessary, when we have the testing and contact tracing systems in place to do as the global experts say — to test, isolate and trace — but we are not there yet.

In a recently published guidance document, the World Health Organization advises a number of steps that need to be in place to deal with the situation. The first is that transmission is controlled. The second is that capacity is in place to detect, test, isolate and treat every case and trace every contact, and that outbreak risks are minimised in special settings like health facilities and nursing homes, about which we are all gravely concerned.

I want to quote a clear message from the WHO guidance that is important to remember:

"To prevail against COVID-19, we need an approach that unites in common cause every individual and community, every business and non-profit, every department of every government, every non-

governmental organization, every international organization, and every regional and global governance body, to harness their collective capacity into collective action. Everyone has a crucial role to play in stopping COVID-19”.

There is a saying that night is darkest just before the dawn, but let us be very clear: we are not through this yet, and, for that reason, Sinn Féin supports the regulations. Bígí slán uilig ag an am seo. Be safe and take care.

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): I join other members in the House this morning in offering my sincere condolences to the many families out there who have lost someone that they love dearly. I also join the Chair in his remarks that death at any time is very difficult, but given the numerous restrictions that we have at the moment, it is most certainly an awful lot more difficult at this time. I also offer my heartfelt thanks to all those people in health and social care who are doing an absolutely wonderful job and also those essential workers who, behind the scenes, are carrying out many aspects of daily living in Northern Ireland that go unnoticed, so a massive thank you to them.

I rise to speak on behalf of the Committee for Communities. While the Committee has not formally discussed the regulations, its members have been aware of those aspects that relate directly to the Department for Communities and the nature of my comments as Chair of the Committee.

The restrictions outlined in the regulations undoubtedly curtail the normal activities associated with everyday life. In effect, these regulations put an end, temporarily, to those activities for the majority of people. However, it is reassuring that the people of Northern Ireland have responded with great understanding of the crisis we are in and the actions we must take collectively to emerge from the crisis as soon as we can with as few fatalities as possible.

It is not an understatement to say that adherence to the regulations will save lives, and the Executive have gone to some lengths to emphasise that. However, people need to be reassured that the restrictions in the regulations are not just essential but proportionate and that there are clear criteria and processes in place that will allow for those restrictions to be relaxed at the appropriate time. Therefore, it would be helpful if the Minister would clarify how the process of review takes place and against what criteria. That will be increasingly important as the public health impact of the virus in respect of decreasing infections and deaths appears to decline and the focus turns to restoring greater normality to all aspects of our lives. That will be particularly important to our economy, so we need clarity on the evidence required to support a decision to terminate a restriction or requirement. Perhaps the Minister can shed some light on that.

The economy has been significantly impacted, perhaps none more so than the hospitality industry, which plays a huge role in the wider tourism industry. Indeed, that is evident under schedule 2, which lists the businesses subjected to restrictions or closure. My party colleague the Minister for the Economy has taken decisions to support those businesses and that process is now under way. So, while the regulations are extraordinary in the extent of the restrictions, we should remind ourselves and wider society

that the Executive have tried to balance those with support for industry and the individual.

The Committee for Communities also notes regulation 5 — restrictions on movement — which provides a reasonable excuse for a person to leave their place where they are living. The regulations state that a reasonable excuse includes:

“to access critical public services, including—

(iii) services provided by the Department for Communities;”

The junior Minister will be aware that those services have been significantly curtailed in order to minimise the need for a person to leave their home, but given the wide range of services provided by the Department for Communities, it would be useful if clarity were provided on what services the Minister had in mind when including that reference in the regulations.

We all look forward to the day when the restrictions and requirements imposed by these regulations are lifted, but it is important, as progress is made towards that goal, that we are cautious, that we do not take action too early and set back the achievements that we as a society have made together.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for the statement, which offered much-needed clarity on the regulations and some of the rules that apply to them; for example, the circumstances under which it is permissible to drive to a venue for exercise and when it is not.

However, I think there is still some inconsistency, and I invite the Minister to address, for example, rules on visiting cemeteries.

For some time, I have observed how a supermarket near here has been applying social distancing, beginning with restricting the number of shoppers in the supermarket; making sure that those in a queue maintain social distancing by marking the pavement in two-metre lines; and having a one-way system up and down the aisles. That is all very good, but it is not being enforced, and I do not see how it could be enforced.

What if a shopper is half way down an aisle, turns and goes back because they have forgotten a good? Nobody is saying, “You can’t do that”. Other people are going down the aisle the wrong way and nobody is preventing that. If a shopper stops to load their trolley, do the shoppers behind them all stop, each two metres apart? No, they overtake, passing each other, on all those occasions, much closer than two metres, and yet we permit that, every hour and every minute of every day, while we do not allow people who are grieving to visit the grave of their loved one. The testimony of those people is heart-wrenching; the impact on their mental health is clear. We say, “Go to a park, because it is good for your physical and mental health”, but when it comes to someone who is grieving — the most natural human condition — we say, “I’m sorry”, as the Minister said, and I believe I quote him:

“that is a price that we must pay”.

I do not think that it is. I know that I could visit my father’s grave at Roselawn Cemetery and the Roselawn authorities could ensure that social distancing is maintained in a way

that is not maintained in our supermarkets daily, hourly and minute by minute.

While I welcome the Minister's statement, I think that we could do more to be consistent, be empathetic and to recognise our common humanity, and I would welcome his addressing that point.

Ms Bradshaw: Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I very much concur with your sincere words regarding our collective sympathies and thanks to those working to fight COVID-19.

On behalf of the Alliance Party, I will make a few remarks about the health protection regulations. I support them, though naturally with the reluctance that many of us in a liberal democracy feel. I want to emphasise that the aim is to stay home and stay safe.

The powers conferred allow our Ministers to respond proportionately to deal with all public health aspects of planning for and dealing with COVID-19. They are far-reaching and go beyond what we would normally be comfortable with, but the evidence clearly shows that they are necessary. The regulations are fundamentally about enabling social distancing, and we can say with some certainty that they are starting to work. That demonstrates that the vast majority of people are not only adhering to the rules but are respecting the urgency and severity of this pandemic that we are all living through.

I would, however, like to take a moment to recognise that there are many in our society who are legitimately struggling with the lockdown. I want to make it clear that these regulations are designed to help them. Prime among those struggling are those who are suffering abuse at home — children, women and men — and despite the PSNI, Victim Support and many voluntary organisations standing ready to intervene, communication with the outside world may be virtually impossible. These regulations are about staying at home, but they are also about staying safe. If people are not safe in their home, they are entitled to seek support and to move somewhere safer under regulation 5(2)(m), which clearly states that a reasonable excuse for travel is:

“to escape a risk of harm.”

I also want to include in this group children who are being denied access to one of their parents. There is evidence that some people are exploiting the pandemic to frustrate court contact orders.

However, again, the regulations very clearly and very rightly state at section 5(2)(j) that there is a reasonable excuse for travel for:

“children who do not live in the same household as their parents, or one of their parents, to continue existing arrangements for access to, and contact between, parents and children”.

Some parents have contacted me — and, I am sure, others in the Chamber — who are in complete despair that their court contact orders are being frustrated. It is essential for children's well-being that the situation is not used as a legitimate mechanism by which to damage loving parent-child relationships.

11.15 am

We should also be aware that the regulations exist in the context of guidance from the Government which allows people with disabilities to travel for the purpose of exercise, as junior Minister Kearney said earlier, where there are specific requirements, including more than once a day. We must also recognise, however, that, for many residents who are still stuck at home, outside exercise is not suitable. They are missing their normal, structured daily activities. Unfortunately, their lives are being so negatively affected during the pandemic. We in the Chamber — I hope that Members will agree with me — give thanks to them and their carers for adhering to the stay-at-home regulations.

Lastly, the regulations are also clear that people should not have to leave home to work except where it is really necessary. Sometimes, that is the case, but even if someone cannot stay at home, they must be able to stay safe. Be they healthcare workers, shop workers or factory workers, their safety must be paramount and relevant adjustments made to their workplace and equipment in order to make that so.

Like others, I look forward to the day when we debate how we step down and move away from these regulations and lockdown. For now, we have to stick with the guidance. It is essential, therefore, that we ensure that the regulations are about both staying home and staying safe. That is our aim for us all.

Mrs Cameron: First and foremost, I want to take the opportunity, like others have done, to express my deepest sympathy to the families of all those who have lost their lives to the coronavirus in recent weeks. To lose a loved one at any time is very difficult. In these circumstances, it is all the more traumatic and difficult to process. It is also appropriate to recognise those who have lost loved ones through conditions that are unrelated to COVID-19, as their grief is no less in these most trying times. Of course, we think of all those who are mourning today. They are in our thoughts and prayers at this time.

The regulations that have been brought in by the Executive have been largely proportionate and justified in the battle that we all face against COVID-19. These are not normal times: these are exceptional times that demand exceptional measures from the Government. The regulations demand much of the people of Northern Ireland. It is very important to state that. They make the trip to Granny's on a Sunday impossible. They close the family business that has been passed down through generations. They make the farewell to a loved one through the normal process of grief — a funeral or wake — impossible for family circles, friends and communities across Northern Ireland. Life has changed for this period, and changed utterly, yet the price is worth paying so that more families are not grieving today and tomorrow, and so that the incredible health service and the heroes who deliver it can save lives.

I want to commend the people of Northern Ireland for their response to the regulations. In recent weeks, we have seen the collective will of the community to beat COVID-19 by staying at home, practising social distancing and being good neighbours. The response has united people young and old, from the schoolchild who misses their friends and is missing class — or maybe not — to the

care home resident who is missing that cherished family visit. We must also commend all those who have kept Northern Ireland moving. I have already mentioned the heroic healthcare workers. I must also pay credit to many others, including retail workers, farmers, postmen and postwomen, refuse collectors, the PSNI, prison officers, and delivery drivers. They are heroes all.

I wish to raise several specific issues on which I would encourage action. Many in the House will know that an issue close to my heart is that of the rights, well-being and care of those living with autism. Lockdown poses huge challenges for those with autism and their families. I urge the Executive to build on last week's initiatives by making clear the regulatory provision that specifically meets the needs of those with autism. I am glad to have received communication from the Department of Health saying that clarity will be given in the coming days.

Another issue that I wish to raise relates to the regulations around funerals. Funerals are a part of the grieving process. As I said earlier, for many, the opportunity to attend a funeral or service of thanksgiving is being denied at this time. That sacrifice is being made. Sadly, we have witnessed a small number of people ignoring the regulations by being part of funeral gatherings that go well beyond what is permitted in the regulations. It is important that the unified voice of the House tells those people that they are not above the law and that they do not have the right to do that which families grieving as a result of COVID-19 have sacrificed. I urge the PSNI to bring to justice those who flout the rules, for everyone's benefit.

While we ought always to have these regulations under review as the situation evolves, they are necessary. Let us continue to stay home, protect the NHS and save lives.

Mr Sheehan: From a political perspective, I would never want to introduce such restrictions on people's freedom of movement. However, as many colleagues have stated, we are living in extraordinary times.

On a personal level, as someone with young children — two daughters, aged eight and four — we are involved in the GAA as a family, we enjoy our walks on the beaches and in our parks and forest parks, and the idea of having to continue to stay at home as the evenings get brighter brings many challenges. However, those challenges pale in comparison with the challenges that our healthcare workers currently face, and would face to an even greater extent if we were to relax the restrictions now. We are told that we are in the surge period. Ceasing the restrictions that facilitate social distancing at this time would be, in my view, irresponsible.

The economic challenges that we face as a society will undoubtedly be huge as a result of this global pandemic, and we will need to support workers and business to rebuild in the time ahead. However, we need to keep our eye on the ball. This is a public health crisis, first and foremost. Early, decisive action, as recommended by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control and by the World Health Organization, such as closures and the cancellation of sporting and other events, has been effective, but we still face challenges.

We need to increase testing in the community and in vulnerable settings such as care homes. We need to ensure that front-line workers have the PPE that they need to carry out their vital work in a way that protects

patients, their families and themselves. We need to carry out proper contact tracing. Test, trace, isolate. The first of three criteria set out by the World Health Organization for lifting the restrictions is that transmission is controlled. The second is that the capacities are in place to detect, test, isolate and treat very case; and to trace every contact. The third is that outbreak risks are minimised in special settings such as health facilities, nursing homes and anywhere where there are groups of vulnerable people. We need to build our capacity to meet World Health Organization criteria before we ease restrictions.

On 12 March, the British Government and Public Health England decided to end all contact tracing, and a similar decision was taken here. Yet the countries that have been most successful at combating this virus used that combination of measures: testing, tracing, isolating and social distancing.

I understand that many feel apprehensive about the severity of the restrictions being placed on society. However, before we begin to ease these restrictions, we have to ensure that we build the capacity to continue to fight this virus. If we do not know where it is through community testing and contact tracing, how are we going to be able to fight it? There have been many commentators — and I am not talking about barroom commentators, or barroom epidemiologists or experts in bars on infectious diseases. I am talking about well-respected experts in their field, such as Gabriel Scally, who has been commenting regularly in the media and is an expert in public health. We need that combination of measures: of testing, widespread community testing and contact tracing, and then, isolation and social distancing. Until then, these restrictions will continue to save lives and that must be everyone's priority.

Mr Buckley: Like others, it is only appropriate that I begin my paying respects to those who have lost loved ones at this time, both through the tragedy of contracting COVID-19, but also those that have lost loved ones as a result of natural causes at this time. They are being denied the right of the basic grieving process. It is only right that this House recognises that and thinks of them in our deliberations here today.

I also want to put on record my thanks to the medical professionals for the way in which they have dealt with this public health crisis. They are, indeed, a credit to us all. They are a credit to our health service and, as time goes on, we will learn to value that service and those people in a way that is befitting of what we have been through.

I welcome the opportunity today to review these regulations. It is important that this Assembly has the opportunity to debate them, given the quick pace at which they came through the House. There has been limited scope and time for Members to have their say on how this pandemic has unfolded throughout our community, and indeed how these regulations have affected our community. That being said, given the time that we have had, there has been much reflection on what has been successful — the Junior Minister made reference to that — and other areas that perhaps need further work.

I want to focus particularly on three key elements. I listened to the Chair of the Committee for the Executive Office, Mr McGrath, who said that the regulations that are in place are cruel but necessary. While I agree, for a large part, with the sentiment of that, some particular references

and restrictions are both cruel and unnecessary, and perhaps, in part, counterproductive.

I talk in broad terms, but I want to cover the scope of mental health and the cause of those who are suffering at this time, which is something that the Assembly has really taken to its heart since its reconstitution and re-establishment. The omission of mental health conditions in the definition of a vulnerable person in the regulations, at 1.(2), is something that gives me great concern. Mr Nesbitt has rightly outlined one of the key restrictions that has had a devastating impact on mental health — and it is something that needs urgent review — namely that of access to graveyards, and particularly urban cemeteries. For many, the most basic form of grieving is to visit the grave, whether that be to place flowers or for quiet times of reflection. For many, it is a private, dignified act of remembrance. I feel that the regulations that are in place are cruel and unnecessary in that regard.

Mr McGrath: Will the Member give way?

Mr Buckley: Yes, I will in just a moment.

I want to bring to Members' attention the recent media reports that talked about an elderly gentleman from County Antrim who wanted the opportunity to go and place flowers on his loved one's grave. She had passed away a year ago, and it was coming up to the anniversary. The gate was locked, so he attempted to climb the fence, impaling himself on the railing as he attempted to place flowers on his loved one's grave.

I am sorry, but I do not see how that regulation is necessary. If we can place and society can place social restriction measures on shops, as has been alluded to, or on walking space, surely to goodness we can place adequate restrictions in a graveyard. Let us remember that people go to visit loved ones at gravesides not for mass gatherings but for quiet times of personal reflection. Yesterday, I had an email on that very issue. It was from a gentleman who, quite briefly, got to the point:

"Please, sir, show some compassion and reopen our cemeteries. I had a bad breakdown last week. I am ready to end it".

That is getting to the point. While we put regulations and restrictions in place to save life — I recognise that in its entirety — we run the grave risk of taking life through the restrictions that we have put in place, if we do not act sensibly.

11.30 am

Mr McGrath: I thank the Member for giving way. Like others, from my family perspective, I have more immediate family members in a graveyard than out of the graveyard and know its importance. Does the Member accept that we do not want this to become divisive? We are all looking in the same direction, which is to get the cemeteries open. We are all in the vein of looking for that, and we have been stating that it is about getting the scientific evidence to say that it is OK. That could, I feel, be sorted out by today or tomorrow. It is about underpinning. If you start to change rules, people get confused. Scientific evidence is the way forward. If we could get that open, I do not see it taking any great length of time.

Mr Buckley: I concur with what the Member said about graveyards. I have no doubt that, if Members reflect on the point, there should be unanimity in the House about how we deal with the matter. Let us face it: I take your point about scientific evidence, but, if we have a situation where, for example, off-licences can be open and people can queue in a socially restrictive manner to access that service, common sense alone would tell you that the same rules should apply to a cemetery. That is logic. Nobody should be against the principle, if it is done in the correct manner. Let us face it: those who attend cemeteries do so with the right frame of mind — personal, quiet reflection. I ask the Assembly and the junior Ministers to please take that point on board.

The next point that I will raise is about parks. The junior Minister clarified a point about travel for immediate exercise, and I welcome that clarity. That is important and needed at this time. I want to focus on parks that are in an urban setting. It goes back to my point about being cruel, unnecessary and, in some ways, counterproductive. Those who live in the countryside have access to some beautiful rural roads in fine weather and can walk the roads with less traffic in a quiet, peaceful manner and socially distance, but, for those who live in urban settings, it is quite different. What we now have is people taking to the high street to walk up narrow streets, much closer to one another than if they were able to access the green, open space in their town centres; in this instance, I think of Lurgan Park, for example. I realise that it is the responsibility and remit of the council, but the point stands: while the gates are closed on Lurgan Park, we force people to move in restricted places on our pathways and streets, while closing the open space that could provide them with an opportunity for daily exercise at social distance. My friend Mrs Cameron raised a point about autism. I pay tribute to her, because I know that it is issue on which she has lobbied heavily. She has been a champion in the House for those with autism. For children with autism and their parents, having access to urban parks is essential to the mental health not only of the child but of the parent. That point should be taken on board.

Lastly, I want to talk about waste management, because it is an issue that, reflecting on the regulations in place, we need to explore. It deserves further discussion. We have an increase in fly-tipping and an increase in waste lying in our streets and in our backyards. For those who have no access to refuse disposal, we are creating another public health emergency. There is an increase in vermin and in the potential risk to individuals and young people. That is something that the Assembly and Executive really need to bear witness to. It is important to have a unanimity of message across the board. We see now that some councils are adopting a different approach. I go back to the principle that, if council staff or, indeed, any other staff can apply social distancing measures, they should do so.

Those are simple elements of the regulations that I wanted to highlight. Getting back to my litmus test, I feel that a lot of the restrictions have been cruel but necessary. That is without doubt. I welcome them. I voted for this legislation and the restrictions, but I now look in further depth at specific regulations that have been counterproductive. I have highlighted three of them. I appreciate the junior Ministers' time and ask them to reflect on those points.

Ms Anderson: I speak in favour of the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations.

When I last spoke in the Chamber on the regulations, I sent my sympathy to the 10 people who had died across Ireland and the 17,000 who had died across the world. Here we are, only a few weeks later, and I send my deepest sympathy to the 894 people who have died across this island and the 170,000 who have died across the world. Even as we let all that sink in, no-one in the Chamber — I have listened to all the MLAs thus far — is enthusiastic about having to support such restrictions on our society. In normal circumstances, I would speak loudly against such restrictions at every opportunity, in Committee and in the Chamber. Ideally, this is not how we should or would legislate. However, as my opening remarks show, these are not normal times, and extraordinary measures are required to tackle a deadly global pandemic.

The public health crisis has resulted in having to put the economy to sleep in order to save lives. Had the restrictions not been introduced, the human cost at this stage would be greater. We cannot become complacent, and we must listen to the best scientific advice. We should reflect on the advice of the director-general of the World Health Organization last week at the COVID-19 briefing. He set out the criteria for lifting restrictions, and we simply do not meet them yet. We need to continue with the restrictions in order to break the chains of transmission. I commend all those in places like my home town, Derry, who continue to abide by the public health advice and adhere to the restrictions. They have kept the death toll down. Without doubt, a small number all over the North are ignoring the restrictions. They put others in danger. My appeal to all of them is, "Please stop it. Stop it".

This is an incredibly hard time, particularly for our amazing healthcare and front-line workers. They put themselves in harm every day in every way. The best way in which we can show our appreciation is staying at home and respecting the restrictions. It is, however, not the only way we can show our appreciation. This deadly virus has infected every level of society, regardless of age or sex, but the evidence shows a stark reality: we are not all in this together. Low-paid workers such as bus drivers, nurses, agency workers, domiciliary care workers and shelf-stackers are those most likely to become infected, because they are more exposed. The pandemic has shown that many of the lowest-paid workers are society's key workers. They are our front line in responding to the deadly pandemic. Without them, it would be impossible to enact these regulations to save lives. Those workers deserve a fair, decent and enhanced salary; they deserve union representation; and they deserve secure employment. We do not have to wait until all of this is over to give them that and more.

As I said, the measures are draconian but necessary. People accept having their civil liberties stripped away in the expectation that politicians such as us will do everything in their power to save lives. On that note, I have been dealing with a family in Derry: the father is critically ill with COVID-19, the mother has been infected and they have three children. The father is in an ICU. The family sought the life-saving and specialist treatment of an extracorporeal membrane oxygenation (ECMO) machine, a state-of-the-art oxygenation treatment. When I raised the possibility of purchasing a machine for the North, which

the family offered to crowdfund, I was told that there was a specialised unit in England that provided the service. I say that in the context of our civil liberties being removed and the expectation that people have of us politicians to save lives. When I challenged how COVID-19 patients could travel on a plane to England with nurses, who would, undoubtedly, get infected en route — the patient would probably die — I got a more substantial reply to confirm that the trust was looking at how people in the North could access that life-saving ECMO treatment in the South of Ireland. Nothing has yet materialised. Whilst it may be too late for that Derry father, it is not too late for others.

Most reasonable people do not understand why, on this island, we do not have an all-Ireland human health strategy to deal with this deadly pandemic, given that we have an all-Ireland animal health and welfare strategy. The pandemic neither knows nor cares about borders. We should trace, track and isolate on an all-island basis. I leave it there.

Mr Blair: I thank the junior Minister for moving the motion. I associate myself with the remarks of sympathy that have been made for those who have been bereaved and those who suffer. I also offer our support to our excellent and valued front-line services.

11.45 am

The Minister convincingly described the terms of the regulations and, understandably, outlined some of the frustrations around them. He, then, rightly, reminded us of the fact that those regulations are in place to save lives. Further to that, perhaps, I will reflect a little more on the Chair of the Executive Office Committee's remarks, in which he mentioned the need for consistency of messaging in relation to the regulations and the public health and public safety relevance of that messaging and how we put that out. I want to concentrate on that messaging and the consistency of its delivery across our public services.

It might be possible to find restrictions in every aspect of the regulations that cause difficulty for an individual, for a sector or for a group. If we take, for example, the restrictions laid down by local councils on their services and the difficulties that that creates for ratepayers, we must immediately relate that to consistency of messaging so that ratepayers understand the link between those restrictions to restrictions on movement and the generally accepted, publicly important issue of social distancing. There are signs, at this stage, that social distancing is having an effect, though it is far too early to be confident, let alone complacent, in that regard. We need to be very careful about conversations in the House around the relaxation of regulations.

We have already mentioned cemeteries today. I am very mindful of the sensitivities and the real grief of people in and around that issue. I include in that some Members of the House who have been bereaved recently. That subject was also being broadcast on the airwaves as I travelled here today, so I accept that that is in the news. Access to parks was on the news over the weekend. As we entered the weekend, recycling centres were a news topic. We have to be aware that the mixed messaging that is emanating from those conversations is not conducive to clear guidance. It creates grey areas and uncertainty, and

has the potential to put already stretched public services under further pressure.

For those reasons, while I support the motion, I ask that the Ministers who are present take with them today if they can, first, a request for consistency of messaging that is steered, of course, by professional health and scientific advice and, secondly, full explanation, whenever possible and as regularly as possible, as to the reasoning behind the restrictions and the regulations. Thirdly, I ask them to make every effort to ensure consistency in delivery across government and different levels of government and in local government. If that requires liaison with the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) or the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) or any other body, so be it. In supporting the motion, I make those requests.

Mr Allister: None of us are particularly comfortable with the regulations, nor should we be. They are in the main necessary, though they are not perfect. As time goes on, we will need, proactively, to address the imperfections.

Mr Nesbitt and Mr Buckley have put their finger on one of the most poignant inadequacies in the regulations, which is the quite distressing situation that people are forbidden by law to visit the graves of their loved ones in a cemetery. Mr Buckley pointed out that the regulations preserve the rights of people to go to an off-licence but they prohibit a citizen to go to a graveyard. You can go to the enclosed space of an off-licence, but you cannot go to the open space of a graveyard. How preposterous is that? Yet, that is what these regulations provide for. Graveyards are not the gathering places of large numbers — outside of funerals, which are separately taken care of. They are solitary places where people go, often individually. On the radio this morning, we heard a former Member of the House, Kieran McCarthy, talking about being unable to go to visit the grave of his daughter. They are solitary visits in the main. They are not rowdy, rumbustious situations that get out of hand. They are singular, but they are critical to the grieving process and indeed to the mental health of many. Though, apparently, we have passed the first review of these regulations, they still maintain this outrageous restriction on any member of the public going to the grave of a loved one. If there is any compassion, that needs to be addressed. Yet, we are told that, on Friday, the Executive could not agree on that. My goodness. The junior Minister finished his remarks by talking about united leadership. If we cannot even get leadership on an issue as elementary as that, what hope is there for us?

When I read the regulations, I have a query for the junior Minister, presumably Minister Lyons, to respond to. Within these regulations, who has the authority to change that? I read in regulation 2(3):

“As soon as the Department of Health” —

not the Executive Office, the Department of Health —

“considers that any restrictions or requirements set out in these Regulations are no longer necessary to prevent, protect against, control or provide a public health response to the incidence or spread of infection in Northern Ireland with the coronavirus, the Department of Health must publish a direction terminating that restriction or requirement.”

The restriction or requirement that I am referring to is that which is found in regulation 4(8), where it says:

“A person who is responsible for a crematorium or burial ground” —

and it is burial grounds that I am talking about —

“must ensure that, during the emergency period, the crematorium or burial ground is closed to members of the public, except for funerals or burials.”

That is the restriction that is giving the difficulty. If I read regulation 2(3) correctly, the Department of Health could remove that restriction. Can the junior Minister specify whether it is correct that the Department of Health, and therefore the Minister of Health in his own right, could remove the restriction affecting burial grounds in 4(8) and that it does not require Executive permission? If that is so, I urge the Minister of Health to do it and do it now, because it is most grievous to many. If the Minister of Health cannot do it and it requires the Executive, it will be a test of the humanity of that Executive as to whether or not they do it. It really is beyond belief that that restriction exists while you can queue up and mingle in the closed environment of an off-licence or supermarket, but you cannot go to the open environment of a graveyard. That issue really needs to be addressed and to be addressed quickly.

I will make a few other comments. Some parks have reopened, and I do not take issue with that. Again, they are open spaces where social distancing applies. The People's Park, in Ballymena in my constituency, was opened. The throughput has been 15 people an hour. What is wrong with that? Some of the medical experts say that being out in the open air is the best possible provision that you can make for respiratory problems, so why should people not be in parks and why should they not drive to be in a park? I noted that the junior Minister said in his opening statement that there was nothing to stop you driving, within reason, to a park. I hope that the PSNI were listening, and I hope that we will not have a repeat of an Assistant Chief Constable making a fool of himself on the radio by blatantly misinterpreting the regulations. Anyone who reads them would surely know that, in regulation 5, there is no restriction on driving to a park for exercise. It is quite clear:

“For the purposes of paragraph (1), a reasonable excuse includes the need—to obtain basic necessities, including food”.

You can walk and you can drive. To take exercise, you can walk or you can drive. To seek medical assistance, you can walk or you can drive, and yet, we have had the folly of a senior police officer telling the public that you cannot drive to take exercise. It does not say that and it does not do anything for public confidence when an Assistant Chief Constable cannot adequately read the regulations, so I am glad that that matter was spelled out today.

Other issues that still require definition and refinement are the important issues related to the opening of manufacturing and other factories. It is still opaque. It is still whatever you want it to mean and it should not be like that. Three weeks ago — more now — the Executive feuded over what factories could be open and what factories could be closed. To try to square that circle, the Economy Minister established a stakeholders' forum. For three weeks, the mountain laboured and, at the end of it,

it brought forward a mouse. We are no further forward. Again, take it to mean what you want it to mean, and that is a lamentable failure of the Executive. The junior Minister need not talk about united leadership if Ministers in the Executive cannot agree that if a factory can operate social distancing, it can and should be open. At the end this, we have to have an economy. Therefore, the common sense that is so often missing needs to be applied.

The danger with the regulations is that, in some ways, we get used to their abnormality. They are abnormal restrictions. We must not, as politicians and as a House, get used to them as the norm. We must re-establish the rights of people to go about their daily business as they see fit. We must lift the hand of government from oppressing in that manner. Yes, we must do it when it is safe to do so, but there are some things in here that I, Mr Buckley and Mr Nesbitt have referred to that are utterly oppressive and utterly unnecessary and should be removed forthwith.

12.00 noon

Mr Carroll: We are weeks into this crisis, and it is scandalous, to say the least, that the Executive have only now put out legislative guidelines on which businesses can and cannot open. Once again, the Executive have followed the Tories' snail's pace, waiting for them to act while leaving small businesses and their owners in limbo; allowing big businesses such as Bombardier to do what they like; and, worst of all, putting the lives of workers at risk. So slow have the Executive been to act that we have seen workers forced to walk off the job because of a lack of PPE or a lack of social distancing in place. They were forced to take action because Ministers would not.

I raise the deeply concerning issue of Bombardier in particular. This new law sets fines and provides for potential prosecutions for people in gatherings of more than two. Can we expect that, for forcing non-essential workers to gather en masse, Bombardier will receive hefty fines for putting workers at risk? I doubt it, yet I see nothing in either the Government's specification or in the legislative changes that indicates that building aeroplane parts is an essential service at this time.

Why therefore does Bombardier feel that it is able to announce that it will reopen very soon? Is it the case that a Minister on the Executive has given Bombardier the go-ahead to reopen and designate its work as essential? If that is the case, we urgently need the Executive to come clean. The Minister will be responsible for risking the health of our communities in favour of a quick buck for Bombardier bosses. Much was said about the actions of individuals during the debate, but there was not a single comment about Bombardier.

I want to speak too about construction sites, which have been publicly shamed for opening and forcing workers on-site while the Executive have turned a blind eye. It is shameful that profit margins and the economic interests of bosses here seem to be elevated above the health and needs of our communities. Every day it seems that I am contacted by workers or employers who are totally baffled by the guidance here; who have no idea what their rights are; and who are terrified that they are bringing this virus home to their family. They needed protection from the Executive for months but have been left in limbo. They deserve better.

Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): I welcome today's debate and the thoughtful and sincere contributions from the Members who spoke. This is the first time that we have had to take legislation through the Assembly on behalf of the Executive Office. Just a few weeks ago, it would have been unthinkable that we would be introducing regulations that have such far-reaching consequences for almost every aspect of the lives of our citizens.

The regulations are detrimental to our economic well-being, restrict our civil liberties, and separate us from our friends and our families, but they save lives. In ordinary times, these restrictions would be abhorrent to all those who value the freedom to get on with our lives in the way that we want, without interference from the state, but, sadly, they are necessary as we fight this invisible and deadly enemy. Thankfully, people have been adhering to the rules put in place, out of respect for one another and our NHS.

I thank everyone for doing their bit and helping us to stop the spread of the virus. I know that it has not been easy. I have heard the stories of the heartache that people are facing. From those who cannot be with their elderly relatives. From those who have had to miss out on attending the funeral of their loved ones. From those who are fearful about their economic security or their businesses that have had to close. I know that it is not natural for us to stay apart from each other in this way. We are, mostly, social beings who thrive on interaction. However, I hope that people will be able to take some comfort in the fact that their sacrifices are helping to keep people alive, and that is why we have to stick to the rules that we have: we need to maintain social distancing, as difficult as that may be.

I want to turn to some of the points that Members made. It is clear that there were recurring themes woven through many of the contributions. Those included: the unprecedented nature of the regulations; the courage and selflessness of health and social care staff and the many others working in public services and businesses to keep things going; the importance of supporting the bereaved and the vulnerable; and the need to turn our minds to recovery.

The Chair of the Committee rightly pointed out the cross-cutting nature of the response to COVID-19 and the need for a joined-up approach across all Departments. I can assure him that the Executive Office and the Department of Health will continue to work closely on the matter. He talked about the possible relaxation of the restrictions. Obviously, the first review was considered by the Executive, and no changes were made at that time. The next review will start to look at the timescale for easing some of the restrictions to get more of the economy working again and to ease the burden on citizens. The decision obviously calls for careful judgement. Easing the restrictions too early risks a resurgence of the outbreak, while prolonging the restrictions for too long would damage the economy and civic society. We will be guided, as ever, by what the science tells us about our success in tackling the outbreak and the level of risk. The Member is right to say that we need an evidenced-based, carefully communicated strategy when that time comes, and I can assure him that work on that is under way.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyons: I will give way to the Member.

Mr Allister: What does the science tell the junior Minister about it being OK to utilise the closed space of an office but it being wrong to singularly utilise the open space of a cemetery? Can he expound on that science, please?

Mr Lyons: I am going to come to that point when I address the comments that were made by Mr Buckley, Mr Nesbitt and Mr Allister.

In response to Colm Gildernew, regular reviews of the regulations will, of course, include looking at best practice in other areas. He referred to businesses operating safely. The engagement forum that was established by Minister Dodds produced a code of practice in relation to that.

Mr Gildernew also referred to enforcement by district councils. That will be kept under review. There are no plans to designate councils. However, if and when the Executive conclude that some of the restrictions can be lifted safely — for example, more retail businesses and public services being allowed to open — the need to involve councils will become stronger.

Paula Bradley, speaking as Chairperson, asked how and when the relaxation of the restrictions will take place. As I have said, that will call for careful judgement and ensuring that guidance from the scientific advisory group on emergencies and the modelling group is taken into consideration. She also referred to the classification of essential or critical services. Now, this is not defined. As you will be aware, the regulations do include some that would be considered essential services; it is not a fully comprehensive list. However, if we believe that the provision needs to be broadened, we will bring forward an amendment.

I want to come to the comments made by Mike Nesbitt, Jim Allister and Jonathan Buckley about cemeteries and graveyards. They made very powerful points in their contributions on this issue, and we do recognise the sensitivities around it. I have been contacted by a number of constituents, and, indeed, by people outside my constituency, who are having an incredibly tough time as a result of this regulation. I am well aware of the pain and the suffering that some people are going through. This is not just people who have been recently bereaved — we all know that the pain of bereavement can remain acute for many years after a death.

I was contacted by the father of a four-year-old girl who died a number of years ago. Her mother is a nurse in our health service, and some of the only comfort that she can get is by visiting her daughter's grave on her way to and from work, so I have huge sympathy for that family. I heard of somebody else, who, for the past 50 years, has visited the grave of her mother on her birthday, and she is finding it exceptionally difficult that she cannot do that. I do not want people to think, for one moment, that I am not aware of the sensitivities around this. I am extremely sympathetic to the points that were made.

Mr Allister asked about the scientific advice that is available. Obviously, we will be asking the Chief Medical Officer, and others, about their advice. However, we need to ask ourselves some common-sense questions as well. Can social distancing be maintained? Is it likely that this will increase the spread of the virus? We also need to look at the number of people who might be expected to be in a

cemetery or at a grave, and we can assume that that would be a very small number.

We also have to take into consideration the health, including the mental health, and well-being of individuals. All those things will be taken into consideration. I promise Members that we will look into this and that we will take all those things under consideration. Ultimately, however, it will be a decision for the Executive to take.

Mr Nesbitt: Will the junior Minister give way?

Mr Lyons: I will give way to the Member.

Mr Nesbitt: I appreciate not only your comments but your tone. I am not a scientist, but, respectfully, if you give me a scale map of, for example, Roselawn cemetery, I will show you a way to ensure social distancing not of two metres but of 20, how many people can access the cemetery at any given time, and a one-way system that guarantees that people do not overlap and cross as they do in a supermarket aisle. I think that that could be done today.

Mr Lyons: That is, obviously, what we will be taking into consideration as well. I thank the Member for his comments. I realise how sensitive this is, and I know that nobody in the Executive wants to cause undue harm or pain at this time.

I want to move on to —

Mr Allister: Will the junior Minister give way?

Mr Lyons: I will give way to Mr Allister.

Mr Allister: The junior Minister says, "We will do this; we will do that. We will take all these things into consideration". Have the Executive already discussed this issue and decided to make no change? Can the junior Minister be forthright with us on that? If the Executive have decided to make no change to the regulations on cemeteries, could he please explain it to us?

Mr Lyons: Obviously, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, such discussions are internal to the Executive, and it is not appropriate for me to talk about them at this time. However, not only have the regulations to be reviewed every three weeks, but they can be reviewed at any time.

12.15 pm

I agree with Paula Bradshaw about the difficult situation that many find themselves in as a result of domestic abuse or the difficult circumstances that they might find themselves in because of having to stay at home. I fully agree with the Member that it is right that those people can leave home if they need to get help. I was also reminded of the comments made yesterday by the Health Minister in relation to the need for people to continue to access medical help if they need it. That is really important. We are obviously seeing a huge reduction in the number of people accessing health services at this time — for example, in emergency departments — but people should go to get support and help when they need it. That should not stop simply because of COVID. I also agree with what the Member said about parental rights or responsibilities and the rights of children to have contact with their parents.

Pam Cameron made the key point that it is not the regulations that save lives but the fact that our citizens are observing them and, in addition, the courage and the

professionalism of those who work in our health service. I want to put on record once again our thanks to all of those in the health and social care sector who are doing so much to look after us and to protect us at this time. I also pay tribute to our pharmacists. Our pharmacists can often be forgotten about, but they are just as much on the front line as many others in the healthcare sector. I also pay tribute to all of those key workers out there who do so much, including our farmers and all of those in agri-food and processing and those in haulage and transportation. They do so much to make sure that we continue to have food and all of the other supplies that we need. I also thank Mrs Cameron for her work on autism and reassure her that the PSNI have assured the Executive that they will take a reasonable, proportionate approach to enforcement and one that recognises the particular needs of people with autism or, indeed, other conditions.

Mr Sheehan spoke in some detail in regard to the need for PPE, and that is absolutely right and appropriate. He spoke about the need for testing and resumed contact tracing. Of course, winning the war against COVID-19 will require winning more than one battle, but planning for that future phase is now under way.

Mr Buckley made comments around cemeteries, and I have addressed those issues. He made comments in relation to parks, which are not covered in the regulations. It is up to those who operate parks, but we have heard his comments. Additionally, he made comments about household recycling centres. Councils have taken different approaches to that. We recognise the need for commonality, but the DAERA Minister intends to bring forward more information on that later this week.

Martina Anderson rightly emphasised the stress and difficulty that this causes an awful lot of people. She raised a matter specific to one constituent. I am sorry to hear of the suffering that that family faces at this time. It is not a matter for the regulations, but I will ask the Health Minister to reply to her in relation to that.

Mr Carroll raised an issue around Bombardier. I think that the Member has not understood the regulations in that regard. There is no restriction on manufacturing companies such as Bombardier operating; however Bombardier, like all companies, must ensure that its employees can work safely and that the enforcement of statutory duties in health and safety legislation is maintained. That is already there in current legislation, and that needs to be adhered to.

I think that I addressed the issues that Mr Allister raised in relation burial grounds. On the matter of authority to change regulations, the Member is correct: the Department of Health can terminate any restriction in the regulations. However, the Minister of Health, recognising the cross-cutting and sensitive nature of the regulations, had referred the matter to the Executive for consideration.

I apologise to Mr Blair. I had not forgotten about him; I just left him to last. He made an important point about the need for consistent and clear messaging: I completely agree with that. Certainly, we say that the regulations need to stay in place. Of course, there will always be reviews, and, of course, there may always be things that we need to tidy up or clarify. However, I hope that the message goes out from here very clearly today about the need for the regulations

and their importance. I assure the Member that there is regular and ongoing dialogue with SOLACE at this time.

If any Members feel that there are points that I have not addressed, I assure them that I can, of course, respond in writing in the days ahead.

Making such regulations, by any standard of normal democracy, is a necessary but deeply uncomfortable course of action for us to take. Today, in the Assembly, we must do this uncomfortable thing. The alternative is far worse, for it would involve the needless death of thousands of our fellow citizens and overwhelm our fantastic health service and the first-class staff who work in it. We need to have the courage to do that which is unpalatable to prevent much worse consequences, and that means that I am in the strange position of seeking the approval of the Assembly for legislation while longing for the day when it can be repealed. The regulations will be repealed at some stage. Let us remind ourselves that this is only temporary; we are asking people to adhere to the restrictions not for ever but simply for a period that will end. That is why it is so important that we adhere to them and that we remember that it is only for a short time. We will be able to look forward to a time when the restrictions will be lifted and citizens can once again enjoy the freedoms that we cherish. We can look forward to a time when we can support the vulnerable, comfort the bereaved and properly mourn the departed, and we can look forward to a time when we can celebrate the heroes who have done so much for us. In short, we can look forward to a time of normality.

Be under no illusion that, when normality returns, we have a lot of work to do. First, we must rebuild our economy, learning the painful lesson that our economy can be shaken up very easily in a short time, so building future resilience must be central to that. Secondly, we must rebuild our health and social care service. The response of that service and everyone who works in it has been truly magnificent, so, in return, we must nurture and transform it, investing in its capacity and its resilience and, above all, investing in its people to show how we value them. Until then, we need the regulations in order to protect that service and to protect us all. Therefore, I commend the regulations to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Any Parliament or Assembly worthy of the name takes a serious view of a Minister misleading it, and it is such an episode that I want to draw to your attention. On 23 March, the deputy First Minister, no less, told the House that the Executive had signed a contract for PPE, implying that it was with China and causing great hope and expectation amongst our hard-pressed National Health Service workers. It turned out there was no such contract. I say that on the basis of what her colleague the Finance Minister, Mr Murphy, told the Finance Committee on 8 April, which was that no contract had been signed. He did not know why the deputy First Minister had claimed that and, I say, misled the House. Yet, today, we had a debate where there was an opportunity for the deputy First Minister, under Executive Office business, to come to the

House to correct, withdraw and apologise for misleading the House, but it is clear that she has not done that. That is why I left it to the end of the debate to raise the issue that, on 23 March, in response to Mr McNulty, she said

“Just this morning, we signed a contract that will see additional PPE brought in.” — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 127, p179, col 1.]

She had previously told Mr McGrath,

“At a meeting this morning, we were told that, through Finance, we have been able to secure a contract”. — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 127, p173, col 1.]

None of that was correct. The House was misled by a senior Minister. I ask you, as the person occupying the Speaker's Chair today, to take action on that. I respectfully suggest that the appropriate action would be to refer the matter to the Standards and Privileges Committee.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I thank the Member for his point of order. Matters relating to conduct in the Chamber are covered in Standing Orders 65, 69A and 70; in particular, 69A relates to the power of the Commissioner for Standards, who has responsibility in this area. I suggest to the Member that he should write to the Speaker's Office and seek a ruling on the matter. I am sure that it will be issued to him in a very short time. I hope that that satisfies the Member.

Mr Allister: Further to that point of order, if you are suggesting that the matter could be referred to the Commissioner for Standards, I have to respectfully suggest that it could not.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: There isn't one.

Mr Allister: Well not only because there isn't one but because his powers are restricted to the actions of MLAs, not Ministers. Indeed, now that you have given me the opportunity, I hope to bring legislation before the House that will plug that lacuna. The actions of a Minister — it was a Minister acting as a Minister who misled the House — cannot be investigated by the standards commissioner. I certainly think that the Standards and Privileges Committee is the right place for this to be inquired into. If you require me to write to the Speaker's Office and put in writing what I have said here — it will appear in the public record, so it seems a bit unnecessary — I will do it, nonetheless.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member is very obliging.

Discretionary Support (Amendment No. 2) (COVID-19) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): I beg to move.

That the draft Discretionary Support (Amendment No. 2) (COVID-19) 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.

Ms Hargey: The regulations are brought in under article 135 of the Welfare Reform (NI) Order 2015. They will amend the Discretionary Support Regulations 2016.

As Members will be aware, my Department recently introduced enhancements to the discretionary support scheme. They included the introduction of a new living expenses grant payment to help people who find themselves in a crisis situation as a result of COVID-19. I am pleased to advise that my Department has moved quickly to introduce that new element of discretionary support. The first living expenses grants for people affected by COVID-19 were made on 25 March. That was a day after the amendment to the regulations was approved. I thank Members for moving so quickly to ensure that support could be provided to vulnerable people. I can advise that almost 1,300 living expenses grants for COVID-19, for approximately £219,000, have already been issued. That indicates £175,000 awarded to more than 1,000 households in the week ending 17 April; indeed, in the past month, my Department has awarded over £1 million in emergency financial support to more than 5,000 households.

12.30 pm

I have previously explained that I am determined that my Department will do everything that it can to help people who have been diagnosed with COVID-19 or have been advised to self-isolate. This includes considering further amendments to the discretionary support scheme that will have immediate benefit and can be introduced quickly. The amendment that I am bringing forward today in the Discretionary Support (Amendment No. 2) (COVID-19) Regulations 2020 will achieve these aims. It is a relatively straightforward amendment that will immediately allow more people on low incomes, including people who are subsisting on social security benefits, to access discretionary support.

Entitlement to discretionary support is determined by the level of income that a person has. This means that people in low-paid employment may be eligible to receive support. The amount of income received must be below the annual income threshold, which is a prescribed amount set with reference to the national minimum wage's over-25 rate and automatically adjusted whenever the rate increases. Under the existing legislation, the income threshold increased to £18,137 from 1 April this year. However, even with the planned increase, the annual income threshold will be below the level of the benefit cap for couples or people with children, which is £20,000. That means that many people, particularly families, who have their total benefits reduced by the benefit cap, cannot receive help

from discretionary support, which is unacceptable. I am therefore proposing that the annual income threshold be increased to more closely align with the level of £20,000. In the crisis that we are all facing, this means that more people on low incomes will be able to access emergency financial support. This will include the new living expenses grant for people affected by COVID-19 that the Assembly recently approved.

The new income threshold is considered to be appropriate as it is the maximum level of benefits that the Department will normally pay. Aligning discretionary support to this amount will mean that more people in receipt of income-related benefits will be able to access emergency support. However, I will seek to allay concerns that some Members may have that we are allowing unrestricted access to grant payments that may be seen by some as a drain on public-sector finances. I can provide an assurance that, while these regulations will mean that more people will be eligible for discretionary support, that does not mean that they will receive payments. This scheme is there to provide emergency support in a time of crisis for an individual or any member of their immediate family. These conditions must still be met before a payment will be issued.

The legislation that Members are asked to approve today will amend the formula update to calculate the annual income threshold. Rather than using the current calculation of 40 hours per week over 52 weeks, it will be changed to 45 hours per week over 52 weeks. I believe that this approach is preferable, and it will increase the income threshold to £20,405 from 1 April 2020. It will more closely align to the £20,000 benefit cap level, while retaining the link with the national minimum wage. The effect of this will be that any future increase in the national minimum wage will automatically result in an increase in the income threshold. The introduction of this amendment to discretionary support, alongside changes introduced recently, will undoubtedly maximise the emergency financial support available to people on low incomes, and I firmly believe that it is the right approach to take at this time.

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): I will make a few comments on behalf of the Committee. The Committee considered the SL1 for these regulations at its meeting of 6 April and was supportive of the regulations' being made. The Committee is actually scheduled to consider the statutory rule tomorrow, so has not had the opportunity to come to a formal Committee position on them. However, I have contacted the members of the Committee and they have agreed that they are content to support these regulations as long as the Minister can give assurances that the policy has not changed since the Committee's consideration of the SL1. Notwithstanding that, it is worth noting that the Committee recognised the necessity of helping as many people in need as we possibly can during this crisis. Raising the income threshold to just over £20,000 brings it in line with the benefit cap, which the Committee views as a reasonable approach to ensure that more low-income households can access support. Discretionary support has been one of the Department's key mechanisms to provide that support, and the House has seen a number of regulations directly relating to discretionary support.

It is worth reminding the House that a previous set of regulations provided a non-payable grant to successful applicants for short-term living expenses where they or

any member of their family has been diagnosed with the condition or has been advised to self-isolate, and repeated applications can be made.

Given the nature and extent of the crisis, it seems almost impolite to ask about cost, but scrutinising the cost of such proposals, even under the current, difficult circumstances, is necessary. The Committee asked about costs relating to the regulations under consideration, but the Department advised us that it did not have reliable estimates for the cost of implementing the regulations. It is, however, logical to state that when you increase the income threshold and, therefore, widen the eligibility for discretionary support, the cost will go up. We do not know the number of claims that will be made, and, therefore, we do not know what the overall costs will be. The Committee, therefore, noted the need to monitor the number of applications for discretionary support so that, where necessary, further bids for funding can be made to the Department of Finance. I thank the Minister for her update on some of those figures today.

While not directly related to the content of the regulations, it was also reassuring that the Department is redeploying staff to discretionary support and universal credit to ensure that payments are made as quickly as possible to those people in need.

The Committee also raised concern about how information about the range of grants and loans under the wider umbrella of discretionary support will be conveyed to applicants to ensure that they apply under the scheme most appropriate to their needs. On that issue, the Department agreed to consider how best to disseminate that information to applicants, other than indirect, and how to make that information as clear and understandable as possible to applicants and MLAs. Perhaps the Minister can advise whether progress has been made on that.

Lastly, I pass on the Committee's recognition of the immense amount of work that our officials on the policy and legislation side and on the operational side have carried out to ensure that people are getting the support that they need. I should also add that we thank the staff of the arm's-length bodies who come under the remit of the Department. The Committee wrote to the Minister on that issue last week, but I think that it is important that we put it on record in the House. With that, the Committee for Communities is content to support the motion that the House approves the regulations.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call the next Member to speak, I remind Members of the convention that maiden speeches are heard in this House without interruption.

Ms Ennis: This is not my maiden speech.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: According to the Speaker's Office, it is. I beg your pardon. I was supplied with a list by the Speaker's Office. You cannot get the staff these days. It is desperate. I apologise.

Ms Ennis: What is the world coming to? I am sorry to disappoint. You will have to wait a little longer.

A Member: So we can intervene. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am sure that it will be grand.

A Member: Will the Member give way? *[Laughter.]*

Ms Ennis: It will be worth waiting for, I assure you.

I concur with the sentiments expressed by the Committee Chair and welcome the decision to bring forward this additional enhancement to the discretionary support fund in response to the COVID-19 crisis. The Minister is again to be commended on her swift and decisive action and for utilising all means in her Department to support people during these very challenging times.

Increasing the income threshold for eligibility to the fund to £20,000 will enable more people on low incomes to access the fund if they are experiencing financial hardship. I urge the Minister to make sure that the opportunity to apply to the discretionary support fund, along with the new criteria, is communicated clearly and repeatedly for those who need to hear it and that award decisions can be made quickly to ensure that the financial support can be got to people without delay. I know that the Minister will do her utmost to ensure that that happens, notwithstanding the serious challenges that we face in the current environment.

I also commend the people working in the Department in the jobs and benefits offices, on the telephone lines in the independent advice sector, to name a few, who are managing calls from people who find themselves needing advice and support at this very difficult time. It is up to all of us to do what we can and to do it as quickly as we can to help reduce risk to vulnerable people.

These are indeed unprecedented times, and there is an onus on this Assembly and particularly on Ministers to bring forward any and all measures that will support people, particularly vulnerable people, at this time. I support the motion.

Mr Durkan: I echo the remarks made by the Committee Chair and Ms Ennis. I welcome this and other moves by the Minister throughout this crisis. The Minister thanked Members for allowing this to happen so quickly. I thank the Minister for her effort in that regard. She has demonstrated not only great effort but great empathy, which is evident in many of the aspects of her and her Department's response to the crisis.

The points have already been made by the Committee members and others, and I think it is vital that, although the Minister has outlined statistics that demonstrate that there is awareness of the support and accessibility to it, I think that we need to do more to increase awareness of it and ensure that there is signposting to it when people in desperate circumstances are having other doors slammed in their face.

The resource issue is also very important, and I am glad that the Department is sending troops to that aspect of the service to ensure that there is sufficient staff to respond to demand. However, it is vital that the staff who are deployed to that area are sufficiently trained and informed so that they are able to deal with this in an expedited and sensitive fashion. This is an extremely difficult time. There are many vulnerable people out there, and this has made them even more vulnerable. There are people who would never have classed or thought of themselves as being vulnerable who are now vulnerable, and it is important that they know that there is support available and that they are able to get it as quickly as possible.

Ms Armstrong: I thank the Minister for bringing forward the amendment to the discretionary support regulations.

As the Chair said, the Committee has already agreed that it is important and needed. So many in our society have found themselves in financial difficulty due to this pandemic. Discretionary support was set up, as we know, to help people who live in Northern Ireland with additional short-term financial support for living expenses. The amendment is very welcome, as it will increase the income level, allowing more people to access discretionary support, especially those, for example, couples with children, who have been affected by the benefit cap.

However, as Mark Durkan MLA said, this will bring a greater number and different types of people into the realm of claiming support. The Northern Ireland Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE) 2019 bulletin by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) states that the types of people who will be brought in to this category are: skilled tradespeople; plant and machine operatives; administration and secretarial staff; staff in caring, leisure and other service occupations; and sales and other customer service staff. As I know, from having been Infrastructure spokesperson, there are quite a number of self-employed taxi drivers and people in the building trades, so we can expect an influx of people who can now apply because their average annual earnings will fall into the qualifying levels.

We are expecting this increase to happen because, as we know, for self-employed people, the HMRC online application is not yet open, and payments for those people will not be made until at least June. So, many people across Northern Ireland who never thought that they would be in receipt of benefits are finding that they have no option but to apply and seek that support. I ask the Minister to enable joined-up working by ensuring that self-employed people now applying, or who could apply, for discretionary support are advised by the Department for the Economy through its website, nibusinessinfo.co.uk, that this is now available to them, because, when you are not used to dealing with benefits, you would not even think of going to the Department for Communities' website. I want to make sure that people who have been innovative and have set up their own businesses are not left behind and their families are not left in severe financial hardship because of something that is outside the control of all of us.

12.45 pm

I would also like to note that, while it is not clearly stated in the legislation, it states on the website that students can now avail themselves of discretionary support. I want to thank the Minister and her Department for that. Many students lost the jobs that they needed to help them to meet their living expenses. Previously, benefits were available only to a few students who met an exception. Now, access is being given to support at a time when there are very few options for students to earn an income.

We know that there will be an influx of people who seek that support. As others have mentioned, the cost of the amendment will be quite large. It is expected to be so because people need help. Can the Minister ensure that the figures are included in the budget that will be presented to the Committee in the future?

I want to take the opportunity to thank her and her staff. When we talked about the coronavirus, of course the people who provide care such as the nurses, doctors and everyone in the health service were being recognised.

However, we knew that the second wave of people who would be under pressure would be the Minister's staff and the people who look after the money and benefits in society. I must pay tribute to them. They have been under enormous pressure and have dealt with it with dignity. I want to thank them for that.

As others have said, it is important, at this stage, that we ensure that all those wonderful pieces of help that the Minister is bringing forward are communicated clearly to people, so that they know what is available, how to apply and how to ask questions about it. It is discretionary support. Can the Minister explain how she will ensure that her staff are supported to make fair and transparent decisions throughout this difficult period on a scheme that will be needed by an awful lot of people in Northern Ireland?

Mr Buckley: I welcome the Minister's opening remarks. By and large, I concur completely with Committee members' remarks. Indeed, the Chair has outlined some of our broad concerns. We are all acutely aware of the dangers of the virus and, indeed, the extreme nature of its transmission. In these times, I want to salute the emergency services, who continue to play a vital role in reducing the risk to citizens across the country.

I also want to put on record my thanks and appreciation to the many staff in the Department for Communities who play such a crucial role at this time. I extend that to the many other key workers, particularly the council workers who continue to carry out essential services. In the Department for Communities, I am thinking in particular about the many dedicated workers, as has been outlined, in jobs and benefits offices across Northern Ireland. They face their biggest challenge to date in dealing with the many worried and anxious workers who fear for their families' safety in these grave times of economic hardship.

There is a need for urgent support and guidance now and, equally, when this period of destruction is over — and it will end. The community will need the Department more than ever before. Recently, I read with some alarm that a local economist had estimated that a potential 132,000 jobs could be lost as a result of COVID-19 in Northern Ireland. We may not see that coming through now, but there will come a time when the pressure on the Department and, in particular, those staff will be quite considerable. It is up to us, as the Committee, to support them. I know that the Minister will continue to do that in her role.

We know that the Department for Communities has carried out schemes to provide people with essential non-perishable goods. I also want to pay tribute to those who are not within the broad remit of the Department and have also provided food; many people in the community, from farmers to those who work in delivery and transport, food production, factories and, indeed, food retail. From the farmer to the truck driver, we are for ever thankful for their work in these hard times. Communities are indebted to those people. I ask that we continue to show them patience and understanding throughout this period. Front-line essential workers face the most insurmountable pressure. It is crucial that we support them as best we can.

I support the discretionary support regulations that have been brought to the House by the Minister, albeit in far-from-ideal circumstances, as was outlined by the Committee Chair. As a member of the Committee for

Communities, I, along with other members, have been afforded little to no opportunity to scrutinise the regulations that are before the House. I know that these are the times in which we live, and I welcome the essential asset of speed in getting that targeted help to the people who are most in need. However, I must say that, as an elected representative, operating in such a fashion goes very much against the grain.

I am relieved that the Assembly can still meet, that we can still put questions to the Minister and that we can help to improve the situation that we face. That said, as I mentioned before, I am on record as stating at the Committee my desire to work alongside the Minister in these deeply uncertain times. Extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures. For that cooperation to happen — this has been mentioned as one of the Committee's key concerns — I urge the Minister and her Department to continue that ongoing engagement with the Committee. I welcome the fact that we had a conference call with the Minister and her departmental officials. I found that a particularly useful way for Committee members to feed into the process our key concerns, many of which have been addressed in what the Minister has brought forward. I know that Committee members will continue to put their concerns on record.

In essence, for all those who are eligible, these amendments are to be welcomed. They will go some way to easing the fears and concerns that the vulnerable in our community face. However, on the back of the regulations, I have a number of questions, which, I trust, the Minister will, potentially, address. Some have been mentioned. As the Chair stated, we do not easily mention cost in these times. We understand that many people need support, and need it now, but it would be wrong of us, as Members, not to think of the economic impact of the measures. I recognise what the Minister said about the cost, and I urge her to keep it under constant review. We have, it is fair to say, widened the net for discretionary payments, but we and the Department are uncertain of their total cost.

I also want to put on record my concern about the administration of support and the pressure on staff. Will the Minister outline how this discretionary payment can be swiftly applied in the most appropriate manner? Maybe officials from other places in the Department could be directed to help, given that we expect a huge influx of applicants for the payment.

My thoughts are primarily with those who have lost loved ones. I cannot begin even to imagine the pain that they have been going through having, as mentioned, been denied such basic functions of life. In the past two weeks — the Minister will recognise this — I have been moved by the charitable nature of our community that has been manifest by neighbours, sports clubs and various organisations that fall under the Minister's remit. As this crisis unfolds, the Minister will have to give considerable attention to those organisations. I recognise that, in many cases, there has been some movement on providing payments. We must, however, explore how we can reach those organisations that, essentially, are not being reached. I want to mention two of them.

I welcome the coronavirus community fund that the Minister released. It is an essential tool to enable community groups to access funding in order to help those in need in their community. However, the Minister

will recognise, as indeed will other Members, that, over the course of COVID-19, we have seen a massive influx of those who have been involved in community activism. They are not joining the normal community groups that are already constituted and in place. They have set up their own groups, which are much more targeted and, in some cases, much more effective at reaching those who are not within the remit or grasp of constituted community groups. They have been unable to access grant funding because they are not constituted community groups and do not have bank accounts. I ask the Minister to look at ways in which we can reach such organisations, specifically those that were set up specifically with COVID-19 in mind. I think that, if we can reach them, and they, in turn, can reach their community, we can lessen the impact that many face at this time.

I also want to mention charities, many of which face a devastating loss of income. I think particularly of the good work that is going on with a lot of charities in our communities, and I have taken the example of Portadown YMCA in my constituency. It has led from the front, collecting perishable and non-perishable goods to deliver and distribute to the community. Has the Minister given any consideration to a form of hardship grant that could help to alleviate the pressures that charities face at this time? They are still providing a valuable service. We are indeed, quite rightly, targeting those that we know are vulnerable, but there are also others that are particularly vulnerable at this time who, perhaps, do not fall under the specific discretionary support that was mentioned. Nonetheless, it is important that we, as Members, raise this with the Minister, and perhaps we can look at a broader remit for the support package. That being said, I support the regulations.

Mr Carroll: I have no doubt that everybody will support this motion today, but I must point out that it does not go far enough. I also draw attention to how the Executive, in my view, are dragging their heels on announcing serious, wide-ranging measures to help the unemployed, those on benefits and those who are most vulnerable in our society. Across Europe, indeed even across the water and south of the border, where we are governed by dangerous Tories in Britain, and Fine Gael, who are practically Irish Tories, we have seen Governments forced to take measures, which are out of step with their economic thinking, to support workers and the unemployed. However, there has seemingly been little to no independent thinking or action from the Executive.

This crisis has seen thousands of unemployed people joining the queue for universal credit. I do wonder if the parties in this Chamber that voted through universal credit now regret their support for welfare reform, while thousands of their constituents, and mine, turn to food banks and community food parcels for support.

This legislation was due to come to the House a few weeks ago, but the Minister removed it from the agenda. It is now back and, from what I can tell, without wide-ranging changes or changes that, in my view, are good enough. The reality is that the real obstacles for people accessing discretionary support are issues like the amount of debt they have and whether they can claim it when they first apply for universal credit. Discretionary support is very restrictive, and while it seems to me that the increase in income thresholds will extend to those workers who have

been furloughed, I cannot see who else it will benefit, such as those trying to survive this crisis on meagre universal credit payments.

While I welcome the fact that those who are self-isolating can now access a grant three times in a twelve-month period, that does not go far enough, in my view. There needs to be a greater emphasis and moves towards paying the unemployed, increasing universal credit, increasing housing benefit as well as scrapping the benefit cap and other draconian measures.

I want to highlight to the Minister the issue of loans. Because they are deducted from benefit payments, some people find themselves crippled with discretionary support loan repayments and other repayments. Debt repayments should be cancelled immediately for people struggling, in this current environment.

Finally, will the Minister tell the House the breakdown of grants and loans that have been awarded by her Department since this crisis began some weeks ago?

Ms Hargey: There are a couple of issues that have been picked up, all of which are important. First, the issue of finance, which I covered a couple of times in Committee and during a ministerial statement a couple of weeks ago. There was an underspend, initially, in contingency fund arrangements that we had within the Department. Therefore, the contingency fund, along with a bid of £5 million that we have made to the Department of Finance for this financial year, means at this point we are confident that we can meet the need that is there and there are mechanisms in place. This is a discretionary grant and it will be monitored on a regular basis by our staff. I have a weekly meeting with social security staff to ensure our staff resources, to make sure we are protecting those most in need and to make sure that the system is functioning. So, this is kept under constant review.

I will echo the words of those in the Chamber who have thanked the staff. We have one of those people here — not to redden David's face — who, amongst others, went above and beyond. In fairness, they normally do because they really believe in meeting the needs of people at the grassroots. Therefore, I just want to reiterate those words about our essential front-line staff who are delivering essential front-line services. The public have seen that, as have those people who are availing themselves of the support.

1.00 pm

As for the process itself, discretionary support is a manual system, and that is one of the difficulties — information has to be physically put in manually. In some ways, that slows it up. We have redirected staff in the Department. Again, I touched on that a couple of times at the Committee and in the Chamber. We have come away from other duties around collecting other payments and stuff and have redirected people into universal credit, in particular, because of the massive influx of over 50,000 new applications. We have also redirected people into discretionary support.

We have broken down the processes that are needed, so that not everybody needs to have the full training in discretionary support. We have broken down how the process is managed to ensure that we are speeding up the processing times. There is now also an online application, so that people can fill in and return the application online.

All the new changes have been introduced over the last couple of weeks, and, indeed, the online application form is available on nidirect as well.

I go back to the financing. Those who were in employment or self-employed can avail themselves of this. I will look into the communications issue more broadly, but particularly for those who maybe have not interfaced with the social security system before. I will look to see what we can do about ensuring that people in the business community also have the relevant information, where they now have to engage.

We have seen social security measures introduced to the business community, as well, of up to £400 million in support so far. Looking at £1 million in financial support has to be taken in that wider context. I think that we are putting the money here, through discretionary support, to those at the bottom end and the coalface who really need it the most. If we can de-risk or give social security protections to business, we can certainly do it for those who are most vulnerable and need it the most.

It was touched on again and again, and I read this in the Assembly a couple of weeks ago: students can avail themselves of this. That is because I have declared this an emergency. That, therefore, allows students to be included. Again, from that meeting, I asked for that to be communicated to the unions, over the last couple of weeks, as well.

The criterion for this part on COVID is that it is for those in crisis. It is important that it is not just a one-off grant. Applying for the grant is not limited to three times. You can apply for this grant more than once, on multiple occasions, if you are in crisis and display that you are in crisis and need the help and support.

There is also regular contact with the independent advice sector. There are weekly engagements with them, because they know. Obviously, we do not want anyone not to have the information about the support. We are trying to get the information out there as much as possible, through our own jobs and benefits work and, importantly, through working with the independent advice sector. Again, I commend that sector's work. The COVID community helpline, for example, is being managed by Advice NI, with many of the independent advice organisations that, again, are going above and beyond their normal duties to respond to the health emergency that we all find ourselves in.

There is an issue about those who have come onto the social security system and where they go to next. What will come of the unfolding situation? Indeed, as well as responding to the direct emergency and trying to deal with people in the here and now, staff in our security team have already started to put plans in place to look at interim, next steps and what we need to do beyond that and, importantly, at trying to get people back into the job market, particularly those who can move quickly enough.

We will continue to update the Committee and the Chamber on those next steps, as we start to move through that. I am committed to going back to the Committee and having engagement with it. I meet Paula, the Chair, or speak to her on the phone weekly, and we spoke yesterday. I am keen that any written questions from the Committee are responded to as quickly as possible, because it is a fast-changing situation and I see the importance of updating the Committee and the Chamber.

The issue of the community and voluntary sector is an important one. As somebody who is a community activist herself, I see that. We have established the community and voluntary sector emergencies leadership group, which includes regional organisations such as NICVA and those at the grassroots such as neighbourhood renewal areas. I know that work has been done and they will be looking at how we can support the sector as we move through the crisis and out at the other end. Indeed, we are looking at that, but I moved quickly in March to ensure that we paid their grants upfront. I did all I could, and used the economic levers in my Department, to make it easier for people to avail themselves of those grants, ensuring that cash flow could continue. However, no doubt, there will be a job of work beyond this.

I will look at the issue of unconstituted groups to see what we can do. Money from the COVID community support fund has primarily gone through the local councils. Maybe there are flexibilities that can be looked at. Perhaps, if it is not financial transactions, some of the services or resources could work with those groups. That is on the understanding that safeguarding and protecting procedures will have to be in place.

The amount of activism has been unbelievable. Not surprising, but unbelievable. Church groups, Gaelic clubs, rugby clubs, football teams, or just residents of a street getting together and really looking after one another. That has been really good, and I imagine, and hope, that that will continue beyond this crisis. How we support that type of activism at the grassroots will be important. As we develop strategies around anti-poverty and tackling inequality, we want to be able to rely on those people to work with us in the time ahead. We will be looking at that.

I worked with the AERA Minister on the initial funding that we put through Community Foundation NI (CFNI). There was a restriction on the religious groups, for example, which could apply to that fund because CFNI do not fund religious organisations. We have tried to look at flexibilities that we can build in. DAERA put funding towards that, particularly in rural communities. That is something that we continue to work on.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Minister for giving way and welcome her desire to look at some element of flexibility within the Department. I suggest that there is potential room for flexibility within that scheme. At the moment, you are right. If administered through councils, only "constituted community groups" may access the funding. They can work in conjunction with another group, but sometimes that is where barriers start to come up. They are not always connected in the same way or they may have a different remit or focus. Potentially, a way in which this might be accessed is through businesses, for example. In my constituency, rural businesses have worked alongside some of those groups to deliver groceries and essentials. Potentially, they can access this funding and use the community, albeit not a constituted group, to get involved in the delivery of those goods. That is the type of creative thinking that I would like to see from the Department.

Ms Hargey: No problem. We are willing to look at all options. The important thing is that the resource and need is met at the grassroots. Obviously, that would take different solutions in different areas, depending on the local need. That is the importance of working with

councils, those organisations and individuals at the grassroots, to ensure that we are meeting that need. I am more than happy to look at all those issues in the time ahead.

The issue of charities is not directly related to discretionary support, but I thought I would answer it. Obviously, additional moneys will be coming in. My officials are in discussion with Finance as to how we best support charities in this period. In particular, there will need to be attention given to hospices, so that those who have end-of-life caring responsibilities are supported. It is an extremely sensitive issue. I hope that there will be a conclusion to those discussions as soon as possible, and then that will be released.

There are other issues regarding broader welfare reform changes. As has been rehearsed, I am not a supporter. We can get into a broader political debate on the constitutional issues on the island, the fact that we are in power-sharing arrangements and that we get a block grant and do not have our own fiscal levers, but I do not think it helpful to get into all those issues today.

My remit, in bringing forward the legislation is to do all I can to protect the most vulnerable. I come from a working-class community and I am acutely aware of the issues within those communities. I want to bring more changes in looking at those issues, not just in the midst of this crisis, but looking at this more broadly. We are talking about discretionary support, now, in the context of COVID-19, but a review of discretionary support within the Department is ongoing. I will be bringing forward broader changes to reflect that in the time ahead.

I say again to Members: if you have suggestions or ideas, my door is always open. You do not have to wait until you are in the Chamber to come to me to make a point. You can always come to speak to me; I am more than willing to sit with anyone. If there is an unmet need, and we can change the system to respond to that, I am more than willing to engage with anyone to attempt to meet that need in the time ahead.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Discretionary Support (Amendment No. 2) (COVID-19) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm today. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be a motion on accelerated passage for the Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill.

The sitting was suspended at 1.11 pm.

2.00 pm

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Beggs] in the Chair) —

The Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill: Accelerated Passage

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): I beg to move

That the Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill proceed under the accelerated passage procedure.

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

Ms Hargey: I welcome the opportunity to address the Assembly on this motion. The use of accelerated passage is not something to be sought routinely, nor do I take it lightly. When taking forward draft legislation, my preference is to have full Committee procedure to enable clause-by-clause scrutiny of the resolution and of any issues there and then to the Committee's satisfaction. However, in the case of this proposed legislation and the current public health emergency, there are compelling grounds for a departure from the normal procedure and the use of accelerated passage.

The Bill is necessary in order to extend the notice to quit period from four to 12 weeks before the date at which it can take effect during this unprecedented public health emergency. As Members will be aware, mortgage lenders have provided buy-to-let landlords and homeowners with the ability to apply for a three-month holiday on their repayments. The Bill intends to ensure that tenants in the private rented sector are also provided with some protections during the crisis. It will also reduce the movement of people between households, allowing shielding of vulnerable people, self-isolation and social distancing in line with the Chief Medical Officer's recommendations.

I will now explain to the Assembly, as required under Standing Order 42(4), why I am seeking accelerated passage and the consequences of it not being granted. I am asking Members to agree to accelerated passage of the Bill because the crisis has happened quickly and we need to respond. The Bill is required as soon as possible in order for it to have any tangible benefit for those who are living in the private rented sector. That sector is the fastest-growing type of housing tenure, with around 18% of the total housing stock and approximately 134,000 properties. Without accelerated passage, there is a risk that the Bill will not be enacted before the summer recess. As I have said previously, that could cause an increase in homelessness, undue stress and worry for tenants. It would totally negate the reason for bringing the Bill were it to be passed after the worst of the crisis was over.

In accordance with Standing Order 42(3), I appeared before the Committee for Communities on 6 April to explain the need for accelerated passage for the Bill and to outline the consequences of it not being granted. I thank the Chair and the members of the Committee for their recognition of the need to expedite the Bill and for their support in seeking Assembly approval for accelerated passage. Members will have the opportunity to raise issues around the detail of the Bill during Second Stage. In the interim, I seek the support of the House for the use

of the accelerated passage procedure. I look forward to hearing Members' comments.

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): The Committee for Communities was briefed by the Minister at its meeting on 6 April on why the Bill was required to proceed under accelerated passage. Members recognised the urgent need to put measures in place that would ensure that tenants in the private rented sector are protected, at least in the short term, from the possibility of eviction. The impact of the crisis on the economy has left many people with a significant reduction in income. That causes an immediate concern for people in the private rented sector as to how to pay their rent while they seek to obtain financial support through the benefits system or other means, such as the furlough scheme.

Accessing support takes time — sometimes longer than we might consider to be reasonable. In addition, the Committee accepted that the possibility of an increased number of evictions was contrary to the public health advice to stay at home and restrict movement. Committee members accepted that it was necessary to have the legislation in place as soon as possible to provide a breathing space for tenants in the private rented sector. I am sure that we will go into more detail at Second Stage on those and other issues. However, while never the procedure of choice, the Committee supports the motion that the Bill should proceed by accelerated passage.

Ms Ennis: I, too, thank the Minister for her fast and decisive action so far in providing the utmost support for housing providers and the community and voluntary sector. Amongst other things, that has resulted in a significant reduction in the number of people sleeping rough on our streets. As the Minister said, homeowners and landowners alike have availed themselves of financial protections such as domestic household rates having been frozen for a period of three months. Many banks have issued mortgage holidays whereby mortgage repayments have also been frozen for three months.

Minister, this was mentioned in the earlier debate — and I appreciate that it is not your remit — but you will recall that, at the last meeting of the Communities Committee, members' main concern was the continuing millstone of students having to pay for student accommodation that is not being used, while letting agents and landlord enjoy a rates holiday. Quite frankly, that is a disgrace. I urge the Minister for the Economy, if she has not already, to work with you and Executive colleagues to find a solution for students and their families. I thank the Minister, on behalf of the hundreds of students and their families, for raising the issue of student rents and, having highlighted the need to use the hardship fund for students, ask you to address this in the same way that you have regarding supports for people who are already vulnerable and struggling.

I welcome the Minister's decision to increase the notice-to-quit period for private tenants from four weeks to 12 weeks through the use of accelerated passage. That will ensure that private tenants will be protected from becoming homeless in the most critical period of this health emergency. Government guidance states that no one should move home in this period as it may assist the spread of the virus and put undue pressure on our public services.

In normal circumstances, we would, of course, scrutinise the Private Tenancies Bill in the Committee. However, we all recognise that these are extraordinary times, which puts an onus on political leaders to act and to act fast and urgently. It is for that reason that I support the motion.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for coming back. I will save my commentary on the intention behind the Bill for the debate on the Bill itself. I echo the Chair's sentiments that the use of accelerated passage is far from ideal, but it is fair to say that the circumstances that we find ourselves in are even further from ideal. Failure to get the legislation through in an expedited fashion could be disastrous. Therefore, Minister, you have the support of the SDLP.

Ms Armstrong: While the Alliance Party will absolutely support the Bill, I will say, as others have, that accelerated passage is not something that we would have wished to have happened. There are certain things missing from the Bill. If there had been more time and more scrutiny, we might have been able to do something with the retrospective aspect of the Bill, for instance; as we know, people who have been notified of evictions are outside the Bill. Accelerated passage is not the way that we would prefer to go on this, but time is of the essence. I thank the Minister for her work in taking this forward quickly. Here is hoping that it gets passed and that we have it in place before the end of April.

Mr Allen: To echo the comments of my Committee colleagues, the Ulster Unionist Party does not support accelerated passage routinely or lightly. However, given the nature of this, the exceptional circumstances that we find ourselves in and the fact that the Bill will not take effect until it receives Royal Assent, there is a necessity to deploy the Bill by accelerated passage, so we will reluctantly support that. We would have liked to have had more time in the Committee to scrutinise the Bill and, indeed, as my Committee colleague outlined, other measures could have been included in the Bill to safeguard others. However, we will support the motion.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill proceed under the accelerated passage procedure.

Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill: Second Stage

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of The Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill be agreed.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Second Stage of the Bill has been moved. In accordance with convention, the Business Committee has not allocated a time limit to the debate. I call the Minister to open the debate on the Bill.

Ms Hargey: Thank you very much, and thank you to the Chamber, given the urgency of the unprecedented public health emergency.

The Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill responds to the coronavirus outbreak here. The public health advice is clear: stay at home, protect our key workers and save lives. Responding to the public health advice requires people to have a secure home to reduce the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, for themselves, their families and others. This is a fundamental necessity to allow the Government to properly manage the emergency situation. Although social distancing, shielding of vulnerable people, self-isolation and quarantine are key ways to stop the spread of infectious diseases, vulnerable people who have been told by their GP to stay at home for the next three months to protect themselves, could get a letter through their door today, and some of them have, telling them to leave their home in four weeks' time. That is just unacceptable. The difficulties that it would cause them are unacceptable. The stress that it would cause them is unacceptable. The risk to their lives is completely unacceptable.

I consider the Bill necessary to prevent the spread of coronavirus and to provide private tenants and renters with additional support during the COVID-19 period. As was stated earlier, the private rented sector has around 18% of the total housing stock, with approximately 134,000 properties. Private renters continue to be a group facing significant concerns and anxiety during this period, particularly due to the loss of employment.

There has been support to allow buy-to-let landlords to avail themselves of a three-month mortgage holiday, and I have announced that private renters can get assistance to pay their rent through universal credit and discretionary housing payments. There are also various economic support schemes, such as the furlough scheme, and those will take time to make payments. Tenants need to know that they cannot be evicted while waiting on those payments to be made. In these extraordinary times, where a number of people will temporarily struggle to pay their rent, through no fault of their own, they need certainty in the meantime that their homes are safe and that their landlords cannot move to evict them. The legislation will mean that no renter in private accommodation will be forced out of their home during this difficult time. This emergency legislation has urgent priority so that landlords will not be able to start proceedings to evict tenants for a 12-week period and, as a result, no renter needs to be concerned about the threat of immediate eviction.

It might be helpful for Members if I take a few minutes to outline the Bill's key provisions. The Bill has six substantive clauses and it temporarily modifies article 14 of the Private

Tenancies (NI) Order 2006 that prescribes the length of notice to quit period by reference to the duration of the tenancy. It applies a 12-week notice to quit period for all tenancies during the emergency period. The effect of that is that for tenancies of fewer than five years, the notice to quit period has been increased by eight weeks to 12 weeks. For tenancies that are between five and 10 years, the notice to quit period has been increased by four weeks to 12 weeks. For tenancies of more than 10 years, the notice to quit period remains the same. The Bill clarifies that the extension of the notice to quit period will only apply to landlords.

Due to the uncertainty surrounding how long the coronavirus pandemic might last, the Department wishes to protect tenants from eviction during the emergency period. That ends on 30 September 2020 and is considered a reasonable period of time. The Bill gives the Department discretion to specify a shorter or longer period for the end of the emergency period, by regulations and subject to negative resolution for up to two years. The legislation will mean that no renter in private accommodation will be forced out of their home during this difficult time.

The legislation will help reduce unnecessary pressures on the healthcare, social care and local authority systems that are caused by homelessness. It will ensure that tenants are protected, particularly in these times, when their income stream may be vulnerable and they will be worried about their health and well-being and that of their loved ones.

2.15 pm

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): I will make a few comments as Chair of the Committee for Communities.

Prior to the current crisis, one of the most important issues that our society faced was how to solve the homelessness problem. One element of an effective response to the problem of homelessness is prevention. The impact of the current COVID-19 crisis is wide-ranging and includes the potential to put many more people at risk of homelessness, particularly those in the private rented sector who may have lost their job. The Minister has introduced the Bill to make sure that that risk is minimised. It is also important for Members to note that 18% of the population live in the private rented sector, in 134,000 properties, so many thousands of individuals and families are potentially at risk of eviction if support is not forthcoming. Of course, it is also the case that everyone has been told to stay at home in order to restrict movement and therefore the spread of the virus. The Bill will ensure that people in the private rented sector can stay in their home for longer. It will allow people to self-isolate where necessary, thereby adhering to public health advice.

It is worth clarifying that existing legislation in Northern Ireland does not contain grounds for eviction but rather requires landlords to give tenants notice-to-quit periods. That provides context to the approach taken by the Minister. Extending the period of notice to quit from four to 12 weeks is therefore a proportionate response to the crisis and is comparable to the three-month mortgage holiday of which buy-to-let landlords and homeowners can avail themselves. However, introducing the concept of proportionality also raises the question of how we determine when the provisions are no longer

proportionate. For example, if the three-month mortgage holiday is not extended, will it be proportionate to extend the notice-to-quit period? That is of particular relevance to landlords whose rental income is their income. In addition, the Committee recognises that there is a range of options in place to support income levels. They include the furlough scheme, where people will receive 80% of their salary; the self-employed scheme; access to universal credit; the discretionary housing scheme, whereby people who apply for and receive universal credit will have their rent paid for 13 weeks; and the recently enhanced discretionary support scheme. It is therefore important, as the recent guidance for private rented landlords and tenants issued this week highlights, that tenants engage with their landlord and come to an agreement on the payment of rent. Where tenants are able to pay or partially pay their rent, they should. The legislation is to protect people in actual need, not to provide an excuse for private tenants to stop paying their rent altogether.

The principles underpinning the Bill — preventing evictions and ensuring that people adhere to public health advice — are welcomed by the Committee. The Bill will provide a breathing space specifically for tenants while they work through the process that will allow them to access financial support. It will also give space to all those involved in the private rented sector to allow them to get a sense of how big an issue this is and to put in place measures over the coming months to address it. On that point, it is important to bear in mind that, at the end of the crisis, some tenants may be in significant rent arrears. That raises the possibility, even though the legislation postpones evictions in the immediate term, of there still being the potential for an increased number of evictions to take place in the next year, as the crisis subsides. The Committee was advised that the Department is continuing discussions with the Courts and Tribunals Service on the issue so that there is not a default to landlords seeking court orders to evict tenants, thus increasing the number of homeless in Northern Ireland.

The Committee therefore recognises the need for the Bill and the need to progress it through the House as quickly as possible. That is why we agreed to accelerated passage. That is important, as there is no retrospective element to the Bill. Its provisions will come into operation only the day after the Bill receives Royal Assent. The Committee expects the Department to continue to monitor the impact of COVID-19 on tenants and landlords in the private rented sector and to respond with policy and legislation on the basis of evidence and discussions with relevant parties as the crisis progresses. The Committee, as ever, stands ready to assist and advise the Minister.

Ms Ennis: Social tenants residing in Housing Executive or housing association tenancies have been given assurances of no eviction due to COVID-19. Therefore it is only right that tenants in the private rented sector are not the only section of society to be excluded from protection of shelter. To exclude them, as the Chair said, is to exclude 134,000 households and families. I ask Members to consider how many in those households have family members who are at high risk and are shielding and how many members of those families have lost their jobs or earnings, possibly forcing them into rent arrears through no fault of their own.

An extension of the notice-to-quit period will make a real difference to families under stress who are worried about losing their home. The Assembly must ensure protections for all citizens during the crisis, including those in the private rented sector. Every Minister should use the power afforded to them at this time to mitigate the hardships that people face as a result of the global pandemic. Every Minister should think about how they can use their Department to make life easier for citizens and to give people a break at this time. Some are doing that and leading by example; others hide behind the need for legislative amendments and an unwillingness to stretch themselves and meet the crisis head-on. This Minister — the Minister for Communities — has shown that it can be done.

In order for the Bill to have any use for those it is intended to help, it needs to pass and it needs to pass quickly. It is in that context that I ask Members to support the Bill.

Mr Durkan: I too support the Bill. Members will be all too aware, some more than others, of the scourge of homelessness and of the devastating impact that it has on families and individuals financially, emotionally and psychologically. The threat of homelessness, therefore, is at any time unpalatable, but the threat of homelessness at this time is completely unacceptable. I take the opportunity to commend the great work of the Department, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and, most of all, the homelessness sector, which has been most hands-on in its approach to tackling the crisis. We have seen the tremendous results from their work, and they deserve all our praise.

Clearly, the intention of the emergency legislation and its accelerated passage through the Assembly is to mitigate the threat and to give tenants in private rented accommodation one less thing to worry about at a time when people have so much to be worried about. The legislation is not perfect. That is not merely a political view; it is a view shared by some of the most empathetic experts in the field of housing. They have looked, I suppose, at measures in other jurisdictions. In the Republic of Ireland, for example, issuing notices to quit has been banned altogether. I think that there is a similar approach in Scotland. Therefore, I would like to hear from the Minister — I have already heard — some clarification, for the benefit of the House, of how or why that cannot be done here.

There is also the question — Kellie Armstrong touched on it in the previous debate — of the retrospectivity element of the legislation. There is a fear that, even now, some landlords may — I know that some already have — try to issue notices to quit in advance of the legislation receiving Royal Assent.

At the other end, it is vital that the legislation have the flexibility to extend beyond the specified date in the Bill. Should we need to, we must be able to go again, in the event of another deadly wave of the virus.

The communication of what the Bill does and what it means for tenants and landlords needs to be clear and concise. I appreciate the guidance that was issued by the Department last week. However, without willing or wishing to sound overly critical — I am certainly not criticising the Minister — I think that it is fair to say that it was pretty clunky.

Some will see what is in the Bill or, rather, what is not in the Bill as an opportunity to make amendments that, if

successful, would catch some of those who have fallen through the various safety nets that the Executive have thus far put in place. Students, for example, were referred to. Many students are tied into tenancy agreements that they are no longer availing themselves of. Most of those who had part-time jobs have lost them due to the ongoing crisis, and many will have moved back home to their parents, who themselves are experiencing hardship. The returning students will have put an additional financial burden on those households as well. I appreciate that the Department for the Economy has responsibility for universities and Minister Hargey told us in Committee of her efforts to work with Minister Dodds's Department on the development of the existing student hardship fund, but we need to hear more about that. Those affected need to see the fruit of that labour and collaboration, and they need to see it soon. If there is none, we must look to the Department for Communities for either a new mechanism of support or to allow students to access existing support from which they are currently excluded. I recognise that the discretionary support that we spoke of earlier is open to students, but, despite efforts to get it out there, awareness remains low. I am not sure that people are being signposted to it before having other doors closed on them or as they have other doors closed on them.

While the temptation will certainly exist for Members and parties to use the Bill as a catch-all or, at least, a catch-more, soundings suggest that any attempt to do so could well delay the legislation going through and, ultimately, defeat its purpose of helping people to keep a roof over their head at this extremely stressful time. It would be most useful, therefore, if the Minister could give insight into what other work is being done and assurances that it will be done, so that Members do not feel the compulsion to amend and, in doing so, do not inadvertently delay or even jeopardise this extremely important legislation.

While the focus of today's debate is clearly the need to protect tenants, we must also consider landlords. The Chair of the Committee touched on that; I also raised this in Committee. The vast majority of our landlords are small or single-property landlords; they are not all big, bad Ebenezer Scrooges. The vast majority of landlords are responsible and reasonable, and this situation has caused them headaches and considerable heartache as well. Yes, they do have hearts. Many can and will avail themselves of the mortgage holiday, but that option is not open or available to all for whom rental income is their only source of income. Landlords need to know what support they can avail themselves of. I know that work is being done with the Landlords Association (LANI), and we would like to hear a bit more about that. It has been said before in the House that we cannot allow the perfect to be the enemy of the good. The legislation is not perfect, but it is good and it will do good. We support the Bill.

Mr Allen: I declare an interest as a private sector landlord. My Committee colleague across the way has raised a number of important matters that I was going to raise too, but I will not rehearse them.

I welcome the intention of the Bill and, indeed, the fact that the Minister came before the Committee on 6 April to engage with us, as she outlined earlier. I thank the Minister for her extensive engagement with the Committee and, indeed, all Assembly Members throughout the course of the pandemic. She has kept us updated, and she has worked

constructively with Committee members to ensure that we safeguard and protect the most vulnerable in our society.

As has been outlined by Members and the Minister, the intention behind the Bill is to increase the notice-to-quit period from four to 12 weeks for those in the applicable category. At this worrying time for us all across society and across the world, individuals should not be worrying about whether they have a roof over their head. It is imperative to do this; in fact, it is the right thing for us to do to ensure that we take every proportionate step to make sure that tenants have a roof over their head and do not have that additional stressor over them.

As the Minister alluded to, support packages have been announced by various Ministers and, indeed, the UK Government that will potentially support landlords.

We hope that that will be commuted in most cases to tenants, but, unfortunately, as with everything, there will always be those bad apples and there will always be those who will be affected by that.

2.30 pm

It is important to note that the vast majority of the private sector landlords — 18% of people here live in 134,000 private sector households, which was outlined — are very good and very responsible, and, in most cases, they carry out their duties as they should — but there are those who do not. The Bill is required to safeguard those who may be at risk of eviction during this period. It is proportionate and reasonable, and, indeed, I look forward to continuing to engage with the Minister should there be a necessity to extend the Bill, although I hope that there is not. Thank you, Minister, for your engagement, and we support the Bill.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you very much, Minister. As I said in the previous debate, Alliance certainly supports the Bill going forward. Yes, it has not gone forward in the way we would like; we would like more time for consultation. That is one of the things that I would like to raise, and others mentioned it. We have good and bad landlords in Northern Ireland. We also have good and bad tenants in Northern Ireland.

Through this bill, the landlords, will be required to ask for at least 12 weeks' notice before they can evict someone from a home, so the notice to quit period has become longer. However, the Bill will not become an Act for another couple of weeks; it will be six to eight weeks from the start to the finish of this process. I think there was a little bit of time for consultation, and I would love to hear whether there has been any feedback from the Landlords Association of Northern Ireland on this.

I note, Minister, that you included clause 2(3)(b), which states that there will not be an extension to the period for those people who engage in:

“serious anti-social behaviour after this Act comes into operation.”

I think we need that protection. It is for not just the landlord so that they can evict bad tenants, but for the other tenants who are living with and near the people who are causing such difficulties. I am sure many of us have had reports from citizens and residents who have been in contact during the lockdown period to report the house parties and different things that have happened when people

have assumed that this is a holiday period as opposed to a killer pandemic. So, we need to hear from the Landlords Association.

I would also love to see this being not just for the pandemic period but for longer. In that, I would also love to see not just the 12-week period but other criteria for landlords to consider before they choose to evict someone. For instance, how many weeks are outstanding for that person? How much do they owe? Has any partial payment been made? Has there been any formal negotiation between the landlord and the tenant before they get to this stage? There are other things that we could have brought in, but I appreciate that we are where we are at this stage.

There are some tenants, like the students we talked about, who are on fixed-term contracts, and it is not so much that landlords are asking them to leave their property; they are demanding payment. That is one of the things that the Bill does not cover. It is the pressure being put on some landlords by bad tenants and the pressure being put on some tenants by bad landlords. That lack of relationship is causing so many problems.

As others said, we have very good landlords in Northern Ireland. Eighty-four per cent of landlords have only one or two properties, so they may well be availing themselves of other business supports; for instance, the rate relief was mentioned, as was the mortgage break. They may even access the small business loans. You would not know what they are all getting, but for a landlord to attack, bully and put pressure on a tenant so that they pay up money that they do not have because they are out of a job, have been furloughed or have not got their payments yet is very sad to hear.

I know that the 12-week period was chosen because that is the original shielding period. I am hoping that I am completely wrong on this, but if the shielding period has to be extended, and I really hope it does not, we will have to see an amendment to the Bill. I know that the ability to do that is in the Bill for you. I am hoping that, come 30 September, we have a period when this is no longer needed, but at least it will be in place.

There are many landlords who are under pressure. Those landlords cannot afford to pay their bills, as my colleague Mark Durkan MLA highlighted. We have to remember them too. In order to keep them and to help them to be good landlords, it would be good for them to know that they are getting support. So, I ask you to speak to the Minister for the Economy to see whether that £10,000 small business support grant can be extended to those landlords who are providing good houses and good homes.

I would also like to pay tribute to the fact that our homelessness figures in Northern Ireland have completely collapsed. With a will, there is a way and our homelessness situation is being resolved. I ask that you, Minister, and your Department, do all that you can to continue that, as a good news story, to make sure that people no longer have to sleep rough or live without a home in our country.

Mr Buckley: I will be brief, because the Committee Chairperson has already outlined many of my points. I understand the context of this Bill with regard to the provisions that have already been put in place for some landlords with the three-month mortgage holiday and, as outlined by Mrs Ennis, provisions for those in Housing

Executive properties. Given the fact that the courts are not processing evictions or repossessions, it makes sense that this supporting legislation is in place.

Mrs Armstrong, quite rightly, pointed out something around landlords that I also want to refer to. It is very easy, when legislation such as this comes before the House, to demonise landlords. I understand that and I also understand that there have been some landlords who, in the past, have acted in a totally unbecoming manner to vulnerable tenants and others, but we have to recognise that there are many landlords who are helping people. They have already, before legislation came into place, entered into agreements with their tenants to enable payments in these difficult circumstances.

We also have to note that, as has already been said, for many private landlords this is their only source of income. While they have had access to a three-month mortgage holiday, it does not mean that the financial pressure goes away; it is put on hold.

One of my primary concerns around this legislation is the potential for abuse. The legislation is there to prevent overzealous landlords from acting in an unbecoming way, but it places more liberties at the hands of some residents that, potentially, could abuse the system. The Department outlines that, if landlords are facing problems with tenants around anti-social behaviour, the only form of redress is to approach the PSNI. That may not result in any action but it would put a lot of pressure on communities that are, potentially, seeing people not abiding by social-distancing practices, neighbourhood parties etc and the landlord has no actual ability to deal with it.

I welcomed the conversation at the Committee on this Bill; I thought it was most helpful. We raised a lot of concern around how to communicate this. Since then, I recognise that there has been communication with the Landlords Association, a wider remit of tenants and with the Committee. That is important because communication is essential. Landlords must be provided with the relevant information so that they know that they are providing and operating within the law.

Another point to bear in mind is that the Department's approach seems to allow for a reasonable period of time for a landlord and a tenant to come to some sort of reasonable agreement with regard to payment. As you and I know, Mr Deputy Speaker, in a lot of these delicate circumstances where the tenant and landlord relationship has broken down, the ability to find reasonable agreement may be reasonable to one party and wholly unreasonable to the other. That can work both ways. I would appreciate it if the Minister could go into a bit more detail as to how we can ensure that there has been reasonable agreement.

The potential need for extension to this measure was mentioned, depending on how the public health emergency progresses. I also have some concern around that because the three-month mortgage holiday may extend to cover that period and then this legislation will mirror that in subsequent action.

Mr Givan: I appreciate the Member giving way. He is right, as are other Members, in highlighting a range of potential scenarios. It is important, and I am sure the Minister can address this, that built-in to this legislation is an ability to bring forward regulations if circumstances subsequently transpire that will not require further primary

legislation. The spirit behind this legislation is good and commendable; it is to address those people who have fallen into the cracks. We know people who are in that type of situation, and this Bill will help them. However, it is important that where there is abuse of the system, whether by tenants or landlords, that that can subsequently be addressed by the Department, and that the Minister has the necessary legislative authority to do that.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member and agree entirely with his comments. It is important that the flexibility is there to mirror and match the situation that unfolds. My point was to reiterate that, if this public health emergency continues and the three-month mortgage holiday continues, it is literally a pause in payment. The money still has to come when this period ends. I think there is a plethora of consequences, no matter what way you look at this, but I welcome the point that the Member has outlined. That flexibility, and the ability of the Minister to intervene and make changes as needed, is essential in dealing with the fast-changing environment in which we find ourselves.

Mr O'Dowd: I support the Bill and the measures that the Minister has outlined. They are necessary, and this is yet another piece of legislation, policy or initiative from the Minister during this period to help protect those workers, families and other people who have found themselves in significant financial difficulties as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. At the outset of the crisis, I said that the main priority was to save lives, but we also needed to keep food on people's tables and roofs over people's heads. This is certainly one of those pieces of legislation that will keep a roof over an out-of-work worker's head, as well as those of their family and those who find themselves in difficulties.

It has been said time and again that the social housing sector — the Housing Executive and the housing associations — have already put measures in place, and it is only right and proper that the private rented sector also be covered by legislation to protect tenants, and landlords as well. However, it does flag up an issue. For me, it flags up the issue that social housing should not be a commodity that is traded on the open market. We need to go back to a situation where social housing is provided by the Housing Executive and/or housing associations.

There are lots of lessons to be learnt from the COVID-19 crisis. Certainly, there is how to deal with a pandemic in health terms, but there is also how we as a society govern, manage and look after some of our most vulnerable and some of our lowest-paid workers, who we have now found out are essential front-line workers. What this highlights to me is that, in the future, social housing should be provided by social housing providers other than the private rented sector.

I can use communities in my own constituency as an example. We have communities whose social cohesion has broken down over a number of years. There are a number of factors in that, but one of the factors I often trace it back to is that many of the properties in what once would have been Housing Executive housing estates have become privately rented. I am not disputing that there are many, many good private landlords, but they are not as good as the Housing Executive. They do not have the same social skills and social conscience, in many cases, that the Housing Executive or the housing associations have.

In the past, when a society or a community started to break down, one of the key actions in the past was that you

would have brought the housing authority into the area and worked with them and helped with initiatives. You cannot do that with five or six or 10 or 20 private landlords. So there is a lesson for us; another lesson to be learned from this terrible time that we are going through. Social housing should be provided by a statutory body — the Housing Executive, or possibly housing associations.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. While he points out that this may be a lesson to be learnt, we cannot get away from the simple fact of demand and supply.

Without the supply of housing from that private rented sector, a lot of our community who are in need — in particular, social housing need — could end up homeless, as was outlined earlier by some Members. We cannot get away from the reality that the demand and supply is simply not there in the Housing Executive or housing associations. The private rented sector plays a crucial role in supplying housing to those who are in need.

2.45 pm

Mr O'Dowd: I agree with the Member, but we have to create a new reality. That is the argument that I am making, and that is the debate that needs to start. We need to create a new reality. Policy decisions were made in the 80s and late 90s that brought to us to where we are now with social housing. Those policy decisions need to be reversed, and the Executive need to invest significantly in a social housing building programme, which allows for the need to be met by a different sector.

The point that I want to go on to is that some are seeking retrospective legislation. It is very difficult to introduce retrospective legislation and enforce it, but tenants who are facing eviction should be aware of their rights. A landlord simply cannot put you on the street. A landlord cannot go into your house and change the locks. A landlord cannot hand you a letter and say that you have to leave. Tenants should know their rights. Each and every one of us run constituency services, there are housing rights organisations out there and there are many people who can give advice to tenants who find themselves in that position now. There is a legal process that has to be gone through and followed before any landlord can put any tenant out on the street.

Some tenants have found themselves in financial difficulties at this time — and I accept that landlords also face financial difficulties at this time — but they should not be put out on the street during this period. It is inexcusable for that to happen. Landlords should realise that they will not get any new tenants at this stage. No one is moving properties at this stage, so it is best to work with your tenants and find a solution.

Finally, I want to touch on the issue of students. There is a crisis for students in housing and rent and agreements that have been signed up to, but this is not the Minister to solve that problem. That problem needs to be solved by the Department for the Economy or the Executive. There have to be collective roles in a whole lot of those things. As someone else said, we cannot overly delay the legislation. We could table many amendments. I am sure that all the political parties, never mind the Minister, would like to add different bits and pieces to it, but we have to try and solve this problem now and work through other problems as they arise. I support the Bill.

Mr Carroll: It goes without saying that the COVID-19 crisis has been a very worrying time for lots of people in our society; first and foremost, those who have been directly affected by the illness whose health has suffered. This crisis has exposed various sections of our society and the lack of rights and security that exists for them. It has been brought to light as a result of this health pandemic. One of those groups is renters, who are often ignored and disregarded by institutions such as this. We need to ensure that they have cast-iron support and strong rights at this time, as others have mentioned.

While there are some welcome measures in this Bill and moves that we would not oppose, ultimately, it does not go far enough. The notice-to-quit period should be extended beyond four weeks, but, surely, that should be the state of play already. Too often, we hear stories of renters rushing around trying to find another place to live without adequate time, as, legally, their landlord has to give only four weeks' notice that a property has to be vacated. In many cases, people who have been paying rent on properties for years have been left with little support or leeway when it comes to trying to find a new property. Tenants who enter into a 12-month contract, legally, have to live up to that no matter what, while a landlord can break that term with only four weeks' notice. How is that fair in any way? If the Assembly has the power to stop that, should we not do it permanently? Surely, a suspension of that unfair measure should exist in so-called normal times and not merely be a temporary measure for a pandemic.

There are some specific questions that I want to ask the Minister, and I hope that she can answer them today or very soon before the debate recommences next week. In relation to exemptions, I think we need more clarity and concrete detail about what is required from the landlords' end. Under the exemptions to the granting of the 12-week extension, it refers to:

“a landlord who needs to live in the dwelling-house”,

but there appear to be no criteria as to what the landlord needs to present to support that. Will it automatically be allowed on the say so of the landlord, or will there be a process that they will have to complete? I would appreciate a reply on that. Surely if no mechanisms are in place to protect tenants, this process is open to abuse. If a landlord takes umbrage towards a particular tenant, what exists to protect them from this action being used against them? I appreciate that the courts are not currently sitting to enforce evictions, but they may soon be back, and, if so, this legislation could potentially present loopholes.

We also ought to mention what has not been done so far, not only by the Minister but by the Executive as a whole, in relation to housing and supporting tenants at this time. Students have been mentioned. They are correctly following the medical advice and are practising social distancing by staying at home with their families. Surely people here would agree that it is totally unfair and untenable that those students still have to pay their landlord for the remainder of their tenancy. The Minister, in a previous debate, said, or certainly intimated, that she did not have the power to suspend rent payments in the private sector. Does she support such measures being taken?

We are living through a pandemic, and, surely, we should welcome people following the medical guidance and cast

scorn at those who are profiting from the situation. We have a mortgage holiday for landlords, why is there not a rent holiday for private renters. It is especially unforgivable when students who have lost their job are hit with a bill of several hundred pounds every month for rent — what a kick in the teeth for those people. Surely the Executive should bring in measures swiftly to ensure that people are not out of pocket or up to their eyes in debt because they are doing the right thing to protect themselves and their family and correctly following the medical advice.

Additionally, surely we should have a suspension of rent for all Housing Executive tenants as well. Housing Executive tenants are often among the people most struggling to afford the cost of living, which has obviously been aggravated during the COVID-19 crisis, with job losses, salary reductions and some families seeing a great increase in spending on food, electricity, gas and so on.

Mr Givan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Carroll: Briefly, yes.

Mr Givan: I just want to tease out the point that he has made. I have every sympathy with and I agree with helping those who are in real need, facing financial difficulty. Is the Member saying that there should be a universal suspension of all payments of Housing Executive rent, irrespective of the situation that you deal with, as in those who are not impacted financially as a result of what is happening? Should they also get a universal freeze and not have to pay anything?

Mr Carroll: Most Housing Executive tenants are financially impacted by this crisis in one way or another. I gave the Member scenarios where they have been affected. I think measures should be put in place to make sure that they are protected and not financially penalised at this time.

Given that this legislation is not backdated, we need a bit of clarity on, for example, what the position would be if a tenant were to be issued a notice to quit before this legislation comes into force. Again, I appreciate that the courts are not sitting, so tenants cannot be legally evicted, but once the courts sit again, would a landlord have a case to say that a tenant ignored a notice to quit, potentially affecting their renting future? We need more clarity around that and other issues that have been raised, and I would appreciate it if the Minister could give that clarity today.

Ms Hargey: There have been a lot of questions asked and points raised. Again, I thank Members for that. We are using accelerated passage; it is not the normal timescale. I find that I say that every time I come into the Chamber, but that is obviously due to the circumstances that we are in and the way that I have had to respond to the public health emergency.

The concern around the legislation being retrospective is something that I have looked at, and it is an issue that I want to move on. The concern is the timescale, because there are implications of competing human rights, and there are arguments and debates about whether it is up to the Attorney General or others. We know that it would definitely be open to judicial review. The concern is about the undue delay that it would cause to a bigger number of people who would, then, have those eviction notices looked at. When we have looked at other jurisdictions and devolved institutions, we have seen that they have moved in the same vein to look at the legislation from the point at

which it reaches Royal Assent. It is the quickest way that we can find to do that. Of course, we will still look at other ways in which we can support people.

In the interim, I am conscious that people have already been issued with notices to quit. It is disgraceful that a landlord would do that in the current scenario and situation, when, clearly, the public health, political and community message is that people need to stay at home, and should stay at home, in order to save lives. That is why the guidance has been issued. We are saying that there should be no evictions at this point. Even outside the legislation that is being brought forward, the guidance says that clearly. The guidance can then be used in court proceedings. It was touched on that a landlord cannot simply put somebody out: a landlord has to go through due process and legal proceedings. The judge can look at the guidance that has been issued by the Department when he or she deliberates on those issues, notwithstanding the fact that, at present, courts are not sitting for everyday hearings, and will not be over coming weeks.

Those are some of the issues. I wanted to move on the legislation. It is already taking a bit of time because it has to go through different hoops. I want to thank the Speaker's Office for allowing the two stages to be moved on the same day. I know that that is a first. It shows the seriousness with which people will look at the issue.

We have spoken to LANI and there has been engagement with estate agents and others. Whilst some landlords may not agree with the Bill, people recognise the public health emergency that we are facing and that we have to protect tenants. The fact is that if a landlord were to make somebody homeless and put them out on the street, not only would that impact on the tenant but the landlord would not get a new tenant into their house in the interim. Therefore, I ask all landlords and letting agents to show compassion and flexibility on the issue. The guidance sets out clearly that they must show reasonableness with regard to repayments. They cannot force somebody to pay arrears that they may accrue in this period within the next three or four months: it will take a longer time to do that. Again, for an eviction to proceed, a judge would have to look at what is reasonable and what is not.

The question was raised about Scotland's having a longer extension period. It comes down to a balancing of rights. I do not want to get caught up in a conversation about rights. They are important issues, but I want to ensure that we can protect people as quickly as possible. It would cause undue delay. As I said, if we do not get the Bill through on the timescale for Royal Assent now, it is possible that we would not move on it until after the summer. That is just too late. Evictions are already taking place. I need to move on the Bill now.

Scotland has adopted the same approach. The only difference is that they have brought in six months rather than 12 weeks. However, I have the ability, after those 12 weeks, to extend this for a further six months, if that needs to be done, in consultation with the Attorney General and others.

3.00 pm

Two points about evictions were raised. Under the Scottish legislation, landlords seeking to return to live in their property will have to demonstrate in front of a judge that they have no other recourse or any other property

to return to. We did not include that in the first 12 weeks because we do not want there to be a loophole for this to be abused in that period. We know that, as this runs on, there could be competing human rights that we need more time to consider. We just do not have the time to do all of that now, because we need to ensure that we move to stop evictions as quickly as we can. I will define those two areas further in the next couple of weeks, if we feel that the period has to be extended. This is based on legislation, and the Attorney General has been involved. Even since then, when looking at Scotland, for example, the issue of domestic violence has been raised as an area that might need to be looked at as we draft any future extension to the Bill. All of those issues will be refined more clearly and then brought back here for agreement.

The student issue has come up many times. It is not within my remit. I am the Minister responsible for housing, but the contracts that have been made come under contract law, not housing law. I do not have responsibility for contract law. I have tried to look at everything that I can within my remit and competency, because I recognise the hardship that many students face. It is a common law issue and, therefore, is based in Westminster. I have engaged on the issue with the Department for the Economy and Minister Diane Dodds. I asked for the student hardship fund to be increased, and I know that she is proactively looking at that. She is better placed to respond on that than I am. We continue to meet.

The homelessness issue has come up. Over the past couple of weeks, the figures for street-based homelessness have been good, which must be welcomed. I agree that it should not take a pandemic to resolve such issues. I had wanted to look seriously at homelessness before the pandemic. There is also the issue of hidden homelessness. Thousands of families, including over 21,000, children, are sofa surfing or are in hostels. That feeds into the conversation about public housing: how we value it; should it get a massive investment programme as we go forward; and whether we see it as an essential public service to meet that need. I had wanted and intended to set out plans for how to grow our housing stock over this period, particularly to meet the demand in the areas of highest need. That has been stunted a bit because we are responding to the pandemic, but I want to bring forward proposals in the time ahead that will start a conversation about public housing.

The other issue that came up, as it has previously, was a rent freeze in the social rented sector. I err on the side of caution because over 70% of the income derived from rent comes from housing benefit. A freeze would freeze the money coming in via the block grant, meaning that we could not pay housing authority staff or maintain the stock. In early February, I spoke in the Chamber about the sustainability of the Housing Executive, the need to invest in public housing and the resources that we need to do that. Without that income, we cannot reinvest. We cannot even maintain our existing stock. That hit the headlines in February as well. It is nice to say that you can do all of these things, but you need to look at whether you will make the situation worse at the other end of this. Those are some of the things that we have to look at.

We have introduced new measures relating to the housing benefit supplement. We are paying that at 100%. We are looking, of course, at discretionary support, and, where I

could include students and others, I have done that within my remit. However, as was touched on, not all of this falls to my Department; in fact, not all of it falls to the Assembly. Again, that shows the huge constraints of being a devolved Administration and not holding our own fiscal levers. In the time ahead, we probably need to look at that and have a conversation about it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill be agreed.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I advise Members that the Minister for Communities has requested that the remaining stages of the Bill be scheduled for next week's sitting, on 28 April. The deadline for amendments is 12:00 noon tomorrow, Wednesday 22 April.

Standing Orders 31(d), 37, 39(1) and 42(5): Suspension

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The next item of business is a motion to suspend certain Standing Orders relating to the passage of the Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill through the Assembly.

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): I beg to move

That Standing Orders 31(d), 37, 39(1) and 42(5) be suspended in respect of the passage of the Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill.

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 motion.

Ms Hargey: I thank the Assembly for the motion. Obviously, I firmly believe in due process for legislation that needs to pass through the Chamber and the Committee. However, we are not in normal times, as we are finding more and more with the Committee and the legislation that needs to come through. On this occasion, in a public health emergency, I ask for the suspension of those Standing Orders. In seeking your support, I ask specifically that the Standing Orders in the motion are suspended, removing Further Consideration Stage and suspending Standing Order 42(5) which states:

"No Bill shall pass all its required stages in the Assembly in less than ten days."

I hope that Members will support the motion on this occasion and take into account the real danger of evictions in the private rented sector that could increase homelessness and be a public health issue.

Ms Ennis (The Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges): I appreciate the comments from Members today. There is a clear recognition of the need to expedite the measures through the Assembly. There is a need to act fast and to act now, notwithstanding the issues that Members have mentioned about accelerated passage. This is the biggest health emergency in a generation, and these Standing Orders must be suspended to allow the Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill to pass and to be effective now, when it is needed most. If we are to protect families from becoming homeless through no fault of their own, accelerated passage of the Bill is the only viable option, and we need to act now with the utmost urgency. The Bill will ensure that no one will lose shelter at the most critical time of self-isolation. Therefore, to not support the motion is to put lives in danger.

Mr Durkan: It had not been my intention to speak on the motion, but I will echo the remarks of the previous Member. We have a real need for speed, so we support the Minister in her endeavours.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call the Minister for Communities, Ms Deirdre Hargey, to conclude and wind-up the debate on the motion.

Ms Hargey: Thanks very much everyone. I understand that today's measure should not become the norm. I would not advocate that at all, but I ask you to support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Orders 31(d), 37, 39(1) and 42(5) be suspended in respect of the passage of the Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill.

Adjourned at 3.09 pm.

Ad Hoc Committee on the
COVID-19 Response

Official Report
(Hansard)

Northern Ireland Assembly

Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response

7 April 2020

Ministerial Statement: The Executive Office

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Christopher Stalford (Deputy Chairperson)
Dr Steve Aiken
Mr Jim Allister
Ms Martina Anderson
Ms Kellie Armstrong
Ms Clare Bailey
Mrs Rosemary Barton
Mr John Blair
Mr Keith Buchanan
Mr Robbie Butler
Mr Gerry Carroll
Mr Pat Catney
Mr Alan Chambers
Mr Gordon Dunne
Mrs Arlene Foster
Mr Colm Gildernew
Mr Paul Givan
Mr Harry Harvey
Mr Declan Kearney
Mr Declan McAleer
Mr Colin McGrath
Mr Gary Middleton
Mr Mike Nesbitt
Mr John O'Dowd
Mrs Michelle O'Neill
Mr Matthew O'Toole
Mr Pat Sheehan
Ms Claire Sugden

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): On Tuesday 31 March 2020, the Assembly resolved, as provided for in Standing Order 53(1), to appoint an Ad Hoc Committee to receive oral statements from Ministers on matters relating to COVID-19 and the response and to question Ministers on such statements. Members are very welcome to this, the first meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee.

The Committee will receive two statements today: a joint statement from the First Minister and deputy First Minister; and then a statement from the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. Before I invite the First Minister and deputy First Minister to give their statement, it would be helpful if I clarified some procedural issues relating to the operation of this Committee. Members will have received a letter from the Speaker a short time ago to make clear that he is following advice to remain at home due to his medical history. Mr Speaker has therefore sent his apologies for not being here today as he had originally

intended, and I am sure all members send him their best wishes.

I also apologise to members for the delay in getting their electronic packs to them. We had received the statement from the First Minister and deputy First Minister in time, but, regrettably, we were still waiting for the statement from the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. There have since been server issues with getting the packs issued to members, and, as a result, we have had to email copies of the packs to members.

The motion agreed by the Assembly provided that:

"The Committee may not meet on days when the Assembly is sitting. The procedures of the Committee shall otherwise be such as the Chairperson may determine." — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 127, p236, col 2.]

The Speaker, as Chairperson of the Committee, wrote to all members last week to provide guidance on the procedures of the Committee. A copy of that correspondence has been included in members' electronic packs at page 4. The guidance has also been published as an all-party notice on the Assembly's website and sent to all members. I do not intend to reiterate now everything that was in that guidance; however, I think it would be worthwhile for me to clarify a few points.

The central reason for the creation of the Ad Hoc Committee was to create a more flexible means for Ministers to give statements to the Assembly on days when there is no plenary session. The Ad Hoc Committee shall be convened only if a Minister wishes to make a statement on a non-sitting day. Obviously, we will require a reasonable period to give members notice and ensure that the necessary arrangements and staffing structures are in place. However, as this mechanism has been developed as an agile means of responding to a fast-moving situation, I know that there may be times when it is necessary to convene the Committee at short notice. The Ad Hoc Committee has come about following the Speaker's discussions with the junior Ministers on behalf of the Executive. The Assembly has taken significant steps to ease pressure on Departments at this difficult time, including the suspension of Question Time and the discouragement of Assembly questions for written answer. However, the scrutiny role of the Assembly remains vital. The Ad Hoc Committee provides the Assembly with

additional flexibility through which it can exercise that scrutiny during this public health crisis. The Speaker has emphasised that it was important that the Executive take a coordinated approach to ensure that all Ministers — all Ministers — use the Ad Hoc Committee to provide regular updates to members on the Executive's response to COVID-19 and to take questions.

I think it is even more important, given the public announcements by Ministers that we are likely to be approaching the peak of the pandemic, that such work is undertaken. The Speaker had, therefore, made clear to the Executive that he expected to be required to convene meetings of the Ad Hoc Committee in the short time ahead. I am pleased that the Executive have responded to this and that, in addition to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister and the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs being here today, the Speaker's Office has received indicative approaches from the Education Minister and the Communities Minister about coming to the next meeting of this Committee.

I should remind members that the Committee can only receive statements from Ministers on matters related to COVID-19, and the response thereto. The Committee can conduct no business other than to receive these statements and to question Ministers on them. Consequently, members should not seek to raise points of order in this Committee about matters that should instead be considered at plenary sittings or other Committee meetings. I want this Committee to remain entirely focused on the important business of the statements being brought before it by Ministers. If members have other issues that they wish to raise, this Committee is not the place to do it.

Before we move on, I want to mention the layout of the Chamber for these Committee meetings. Included in your packs is a seating plan for the Ad Hoc Committee meetings. This layout reflects the fact that these are Committee meetings rather than plenary sittings. Ministers will, therefore, deliver their statements from lecterns on the Floor in front of the Table, rather than from their usual position on the Benches. An advantage to this approach is that, even with two Ministers giving statements, there is still room for a further 22 members to be seated in the Chamber in a manner that upholds the social distancing requirements.

I remind members that, as per the guidance issued by the Speaker last week, it is for parties to manage attendance at this Committee in line with the seating arrangements and thus ensure appropriate social distancing. Let us move on.

Agenda item 2 is a statement from the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. The Speaker received notification on 3 April that the Ministers wished to make a statement to the Ad Hoc Committee at today's meeting. A copy of the statement that they intend to make is included in the members' pack. I welcome the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to the first meeting of the Committee. I invite them to use the lecterns to give their joint statement, which should be heard by members without interruption. Following the statement, there will be an opportunity to ask questions.

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): Thank you very much, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I join with you in sending best wishes to the Speaker at this time as he self-isolates at home.

I am grateful for the opportunity to update the Ad Hoc Committee today. I recognise the critical role that the Assembly must play in responding to this crisis, and I am grateful to you, Principal Deputy Speaker, and the Assembly, for the flexibility that you have shown in helping to accommodate the Executive at this time. It is important that we all work together to respond to the huge challenges that we face. All in the House, I know, will wish to join with me today in sending best wishes to the Prime Minister for a speedy recovery.

It is the intention of the Executive to keep the Assembly informed of our response to COVID-19. The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs will make a statement later today. The Minister of Education and the Minister for Communities will give statements to this Committee over the next few days, and the other Executive Ministers will also come before the Committee on a regular basis.

Before I update members on the Executive's work, I would like to thank all our healthcare workers for their courage, their compassion, their commitment and their diligence in caring for all of us during these very difficult times. We are extremely grateful for the work of all our doctors and nurses, and everyone working in the health service from the laundry to the laboratory. I will also take this opportunity to thank all the workers in other sectors who are making sure that there is still food on our tables, that the lights are on, there is clean water in our taps, our bins are being collected and our key workers can get to and from their work, amongst many other essential tasks.

The thoughts and prayers of all of us across the Assembly, of course, will be with the families and loved ones of the deceased. As of 11.15 am on Tuesday 7 April, testing has indicated that the total number of confirmed cases is 1,255. Our modelling indicates that the peak of the first wave of the epidemic is expected between 6 and 20 April 2020. Our key messages to the public are, therefore, more important than ever and remain the same: please stay at home as much as possible; observe social distancing in public; and, where a member of a household starts to show symptoms of COVID-19, self-isolate for 14 days.

We know that the majority of people are taking those measures seriously and doing all that they can to protect the NHS and help save lives. We ask that all of that continues, and I want people to do the right thing this coming weekend and, indeed, over the Easter period. We recognise that Easter is a time when many families normally come together, but it is essential that everyone continues to follow the social distancing instructions as they did over Mother's Day. That will help to protect those who are most vulnerable in our society as well as those who are working so hard to look after our health.

As an Executive, we are continuing to do all that we can to work in a joined-up manner to respond to the crisis. We have been working from home and meeting virtually to ensure that we respect the rules on social distancing. We are engaging with our counterparts in London and Dublin to ensure that every avenue is pursued in protecting our people, and we are also engaging further afield. The deputy First Minister and I have had discussions with the Chinese consul general, Madam Zhang Meifang, on securing more equipment to support healthcare staff and share medical expertise.

As an Executive, we have developed collective strategic priorities focused on looking after, first, the health and well-being of all our citizens; secondly, our economic well-being, both in the immediate and short term and the medium to long term; and, thirdly, the well-being of our community and society. We are keeping our priorities under constant review so that we can react quickly as the situation develops.

In relation to our health and well-being, the concerns about PPE are being treated extremely seriously by this Executive. The first batch of a fresh order from the NHS was delivered to Northern Ireland on Monday 6 April, comprising some 5.5 million items in total. That includes over 1.3 million aprons and over 300,000 FFP3 respirator masks. The remainder is expected in the coming days. The extra 5.5 million items of PPE for Northern Ireland is very welcome news for our front-line staff. However, we know that we need to replenish and increase the stock that we hold given the expected level of demand in the coming weeks.

Efforts to source more PPE are continuing, and that is a constant focus of our Executive meetings. The Minister of Health is actively working with the Minister of Finance to pursue all feasible supply routes, both international and local, and it is, of course, a global challenge.

Updated UK-wide NHS guidance on PPE use was issued last week. That guidance will inform PPE use across our system and help us to prioritise distribution. I trust that that updated guidance, together with securing greater quantities of PPE for Northern Ireland, will play a part in allaying some concerns.

We recognise that other sectors are also facing PPE challenges, and we have been considering their needs in our Executive meetings and in our procurement efforts. I assure the Assembly that there is no lack of urgency in this matter. We are doing everything we can to the best of our ability to get the right PPE to those who need it at the right time.

I can also assure the Assembly that we are working equally as urgently on the important matter of testing. I am pleased to note that testing for healthcare workers has now commenced at the SSE Arena. The Public Health Agency is involved in that testing initiative, with input from health and social care trust colleagues. That complements work undertaken by trusts to scale up their own testing capabilities. We will continue to expand the testing of healthcare staff as quickly as possible. We fully understand the frustration at the fact that more staff have not yet been tested in the healthcare sector and across other sectors. We understand that people are concerned about potentially, unknowingly, passing on the virus to their loved ones or those whom they are looking after, and we appreciate that people with COVID-like symptoms are frustrated at having to self-isolate while their colleagues are under pressure, when the results of a test may have allowed them to go back to work. However, I assure you that the difficulties in scaling up testing are not due to a lack of effort or will. There are significant challenges, including laboratory and staffing capacity and the unprecedented levels of global demand for testing reagents and swabs.

Testing and PPE are two of the challenges that the Executive are working tirelessly to resolve, and, at the same time, we are facing multiple challenges across all Departments. The Minister for the Economy has been

working with the COVID-19 engagement forum to consider important social distancing guidance for our businesses. The Minister has also been working closely with the Minister of Finance to pay out grants to small businesses that are eligible for the small business rate relief scheme. As of yesterday, 13,187 grants had been paid and 1,603 other applications were being validated. That will provide some much needed cash flow to businesses. I urge anyone who thinks that their business is entitled to the payment, but has not received it, to use the online portal to register their details.

Working closely with Executive colleagues, the Minister for Infrastructure has made public transport free for all health and social care workers during the outbreak. That is a small gesture that will help to make things a little easier for those who are on the front line in caring for us all during this pandemic.

As we continue to support those who have been affected financially by the crisis, the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs has announced a substantial support package for our fishing industry to help the fleet to survive this difficult period. The Minister has also been considering the impact on the environment and has established a COVID-19 waste group to provide support, guidance and regulatory direction to the waste sector that is providing us with essential services during this time.

The Minister of Justice has been working closely with colleagues in the Police Service to ensure that they are able to continue to do their jobs.

The deputy First Minister will provide a further update on some of those issues.

Mrs O'Neill (The deputy First Minister): As Arlene has done, I send our best wishes to the Ceann Comhairle and wish him the very best in the time ahead.

We are grateful for the opportunity to update members on our response to the coronavirus pandemic. As we all know, we are in the midst of the biggest challenge of our lifetime. It is causing loss of life and great hardship to many people throughout our society, across this island and across the world.

The number of individuals who have been tested for the virus is 9,158, and the number of laboratory-confirmed tests is 1,255. Those figures relate predominately to patients admitted to an HSE trust acute hospital, so will be an underestimate, but, as the testing strategy is rolled out, it will change to include those with the virus who are also tested in the community, of which we want more, including our front-line healthcare workers.

Sadly, I can report that, as of 11.15 this morning, there have been 73 COVID-19-related deaths. On behalf of us all in the Assembly, I extend our sincere condolences to the families, friends and neighbours of those who have lost loved ones. Seventy-three families find themselves in the most heartbreaking of situations and, to compound their loss and grief, they have to deal with the fact that they are not able to bury their loved ones in the way in which they would, traditionally. Those who have passed on are not mere numbers: they are grandparents, parents, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, the lives of whom are lost but, as a society, we will remember them and never forget.

To our nurses, doctors, healthcare workers in our hospitals and in the homes: the virtue of loving care for the sick and

the vulnerable is remarkable and we are so, so thankful for all that you do. Each of us knows someone from our family or community who works in the health service. We want them to know that we take huge pride in their professionalism, selflessness and courage, and we salute their fortitude and dignity in combating what is a deadly virus. I was struck last night, as I am sure many others were, to see one of the news channels report the plight of paramedics. I believe that the lady's name was Tina-Marie. She was giving an assurance to families, and she said, "If we take your loved one out of your home, we can assure you that we will love them like our own". I think that that says it all about the care that our healthcare workers are providing to those whom we love.

I have spoken to many front-line healthcare workers. You have said that you are frightened. You have said that you are worried about being able to do your job safely. You have said that you are worried for your families. We want to say very clearly that we see you, that we hear you and that we are working night and day to make sure that you get the protection that you deserve. We can assure you that good progress is definitely being made in securing more PPE, and this remains a top priority for the Executive.

We want to assure the public that the Executive are working tirelessly in our response to this pandemic. Our top priority has always been and always will be to save lives. Be in no doubt that, while the five parties in our Coalition Government have a diversity of views, there is unity of purpose. No political difference of emphasis will interfere with the greater good of saving lives. This Assembly is a devolved Administration, so we have the ability to adopt a regional approach that responds to our local circumstances. We have two jurisdictions on this island, but we are one island, and it makes sense that we have a common action to combat this deadly virus. The COVID-19 pandemic does not respect borders, so there must be a common approach to action in both jurisdictions on the island. I am glad, therefore, that a formal memorandum of understanding has been devised by the Health Ministers and the CMOs to focus our North/South cooperation, and I believe that it has just been signed off in the past hour. Ministers across the island will meet in North/South format also on Thursday, again to discuss our approach to combat COVID-19.

The Executive have announced significant measures and interventions to help to stop the spread of COVID-19. Those have included everything from school closures and the closing of non-essential businesses and services to the introduction of regulatory powers and an enforcement regime to get people to stay at home. All social events are now banned, and public gatherings of two or more people, excluding households and for essential work-related purposes, are prohibited. The Executive secured a budget totalling £912 million to secure the Executive response to COVID-19. That has been used to resource our health service and provide substantial economic and social support packages to workers, households, the vulnerable and the business community. It has been used to help to give peace of mind, relief and support to everyone's well-being at this very difficult and challenging time.

This week is when the surge in the spread of cases will occur, and our plea is for people to live by the law, to stay at home, stop the spread and flatten the curve. That is all about protecting our lives and our families' well-being. This

weekend is Easter, and I know that it is not going to be easy, especially with the weather being brighter, but people must continue to stay at home. People must listen and understand that this virus is spreading and is killing people. However, we all can do something about this. You must only go out of your home to shop for basic necessities, but only once a day at the most; to take exercise, and, again, no more than once a day, and that should be done alone or with your household, not in groups; for medical reasons, for yourself or if providing care for support for a vulnerable person; and to travel to essential work if that work is absolutely necessary and cannot be done from home.

There is evidence that a lot of people are listening. Road and rail traffic on key routes has fallen significantly, and this is encouraging, but we cannot let this slip, especially as we head into Easter weekend. I would also like to make a special appeal to our young people. I know how difficult it is to not be able to see your friends or take part in your normal activities. However, what you are doing is saving lives. I would like to record also our thanks to all the principals and the teachers who are going above and beyond in coming up with creative ways to help our children to continue to learn at this time and also for helping our key workers in providing care for their children.

Arrangements have also been put in place to provide payment for 51,000 families, covering 93,000 children who would normally receive free school meals. The speedy implementation of this policy demonstrates the commitment of the Executive to looking after those in our community who are vulnerable at this difficult time. The Minister for Communities and her Department have been working hard to put in place measures to support and enable the voluntary and community sector as it seeks to mobilise and coordinate its response to the emergency. In recent days, Minister Hargey announced a £10 million scheme to deliver food parcels to 10,400 homes, and that will begin this week. Those who have been advised to stay at home because of underlying health conditions will be the beneficiaries. The Minister has also set up a Freephone community helpline and she will make a statement in the House this week to update Members on those efforts.

As the situation continues to unfold, our other Executive colleagues will appear before this Committee to provide detailed updates on their activities. We are working with leaders across the entire public sector, including local government and the emergency services, as well the private sector and community leaders. This is going to take a whole-society approach. We are taking a smart, proactive and deliberate approach to resilience, which is about saving lives, livelihoods and people's well-being.

Like everywhere else, the Executive have a very big challenge ahead to reduce the risk to our people and to save lives, and we cannot do it alone. We have high expectations of ourselves and the public that we serve to play our part in the weeks and months ahead to help to protect people's health and well-being for the benefit of today's and future generations. The protection of the lives and welfare of everyone on this island is paramount and no effort will be spared in that regard. We will definitely leave nobody behind.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): I thank the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for making their statement. I will now invite members to ask the Ministers questions. I will allow a period of around an hour for that.

It is my intention to allow all members to ask a question. However, that depends on members being focused and succinct in their questions. As is the case with questions on a ministerial statement at a plenary sitting, members should ask only one question, which should relate directly to the Ministers' statement. If members ask multiple questions, they should not be surprised or disappointed if the Ministers choose to answer only one of them. The only exception in this meeting that I will make is in the case of the Chair of the relevant Statutory Committee, Mr McGrath, who will be allowed some latitude to ask maybe two. *[Laughter.]* My munificence knows no limits.

I remind members that they must not preface their question with a speech. That is a matter of courtesy and respect towards other members, particularly those from the smaller parties who are further down the speaking list. Finally, if a member asks a short, focused question, I may allow that member a supplementary if required. If there is additional time left at the end, I may also allow some further questions.

Mr McGrath: I will try my best to stick to that list of rules. I join in the remarks of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister and extend best wishes to the Speaker and the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, and their families at this time. It must be a very worrying time for them, and we extend those thoughts.

First Minister and deputy First Minister, this is a defining time for our community, which is looking to you for leadership and direction. However, if we see a repeat of last week's briefing against each other, scrambling to get decisions issued by the party before the Ministry, or attempts to "orange and green" or "them and us" the coronavirus pandemic, people out there and many in here will not forgive you. You have a job to do and we need to see that being done, because that saves people's lives.

We will praise you and thank you for many of your responses to the crisis, but there is one issue that I want to focus on because some members of the public think that it is not going too well, and that is the issue of PPE. We are told that you are getting it right and that you are getting swathes of PPE from China, but the bottom line is that it is not going to the people who need it most. We are fast-tracking students and we are bringing retired medics back to the front line, but we are not preparing them for the dangers. Placing them at the front line without the necessary PPE is an unforgivable act.

I have to ask about yesterday's consignment of five million pieces, which, we understand, was for a hospital setting. The questions that I have focus on the front-line community services, our domiciliary carers in the community, our community care sector and our nursing and residential homes. Does the Executive care about the staff there, and their safety? I want to give an example that I heard yesterday, of key community health staff who were forced to come into a shared office. They could have worked from home, but they were asked to come in and work in their office. There were about 25 of them in that office: social workers, district nurses and others. They had little to zero PPE because, apparently, they were told that they do not need it. Thirteen of those 25 individuals are now self-isolating because they have symptoms of coronavirus.

First Minister and deputy First Minister, I do not want any polished or prepared answer from your pack. I want you to tell me whether you can look them in the eye and say that you have done everything you can for them. Do you value those staff and their contributions so much that you send them out to work afraid and scared, because they do not have the correct PPE? What is your message today to our community nurses and healthcare staff?

Mrs Foster: I will go first, and I am sure that Michelle will want to add her perspective.

Colin, you ask a clear question, whether we and our Executive colleagues care about our domiciliary care workers. My goodness, what a question to ask. We spend every single day caring about our domiciliary care workers, healthcare workers, police officers and prison officers. That is why we put such an emphasis — such an emphasis — on personal protection equipment. At every Executive meeting, of which there are now three a week, most of it is spent talking about personal protection equipment. That is because we, and all the other members, have heard from constituents and people such as you have mentioned, that they are frightened and concerned that they do not have the appropriate level of personal protection equipment.

We have been working very hard on that with the Minister of Health. As a result, you saw the PPE come in yesterday and that is only the start. You rightly indicated that that was identified for hospital settings. As I understand it, that will be distributed to the trusts and the trusts will filter it down to everyone else in their remit, which includes the independent sector and domiciliary care workers.

Some concern has been expressed that, when it gets to trust level, it is not distributed further, to the people who need it. We heard that clearly, about certain wards in certain hospitals, and care homes, not having the appropriate PPE. The matter has been raised with the Minister of Health, and he told us yesterday that he is putting in an audit team to look at how the trusts distribute it. There is no point in having a central store of personal protection equipment if it is not getting out to the people who need it.

We recognise that, but yesterday was an important step. To have that delivery from the UK Government and the National Health Service was important. Until then, people were concerned. At the Executive, we had a briefing on Friday about what we had in our stores at the time, so we knew what we had in reserve and that it would have to be replenished. We were pleased to see that come in, early on Monday morning, and there is more to come from the UK Government.

Local suppliers are also stepping up to the plate. We are very pleased to see that. They are offering their services, and we should be very proud of the number of people who have heard the call and come forward, both in their own areas and regionally in Northern Ireland.

Mrs O'Neill: I concur. Of course we value each and every one of those who work on the front line right now. We need them more than ever. After all this, we will have a conversation about the type of society that we value and the type of society that values those people who we depend on so much.

Domiciliary care workers are probably the lowest paid workforce. They are predominantly female and are already

faced by very challenging circumstances because of cuts across the health service. These are the people that we now rely on. They need to have confidence that they can go to work, do their job and feel safe, for themselves, their families and the people that they care for.

People should be assured that it is the Executive's priority to make sure that we get every piece of PPE that we can get our hands on, and get it out to those who need it. The disparity has been where we have the stock, but that is not what people see on the ground. It is not what our health care workers experience and tell us. That is not just in the community setting; that is also in the hospital setting. We are all probably fielding questions from healthcare workers who have that real, lived experience.

We have put a lot of focus on that in the Executive, and we have had considerable in-depth conversation on it all. I welcome the fact that the Health Minister is now looking at how to actually make sure that, whenever we have a large delivery of PPE and a health trust says that it has sufficient stock, that is the reality on the ground for staff. The fact that a mechanism will be put in place to look at that is a welcome development in the right direction. That should give some assurance to staff that that is where that is moving.

We are chasing all different avenues for PPE; from the British Government and from China, obviously, because that is the other area where we are trying to establish a supply chain, and also from local companies. I cannot remember the exact figure, but I think that more than 100 companies have come forward and said that they are prepared to repurpose what they do. Orders have been placed across a whole range of companies that provide a whole range of things that we need, not only PPE but other things.

Based on the recent modelling, it looks as though we will potentially face a second surge, and, if that is the case and we have another peak, we need to prepare for that now and for what is coming down the line. Our local companies will be really important in that preparation as well. The staff on the ground who are working for all of us — for our families, for our loved ones, for our communities, for our people — need to know that we are doing everything that we can to get them what they need, and that is our determination.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Before I call the next person to ask a question, I remind members that Mr McGrath got a bit of leeway. The era of indulgence is now over, because there are 19 members on the speaking list who want to get to ask a question.

Mr Givan: I welcome this engagement, the accountability that the Executive Office is giving and the work that the Assembly has done to set this up. I also thank the First Minister for the very assured way in which she has gone about her business — the calm way — but recognising the seriousness of what needs to be done and ensuring that a collective approach is taken, with her, as First Minister, giving leadership in the Executive and publicly. I put on record my appreciation for the way that you, First Minister, have carried out that business.

There is collaboration across the Executive and more widely into industry and academia, the North/South connection and collaboration east-west. Will the First Minister elaborate on how that collaboration seeks to provide the solutions to the many problems that we have to deal with in the face of this difficulty?

Mrs Foster: When you come to a time of crisis, there are always some people who really do step up to the mark, and we have seen that right across the community since this terrible virus has taken hold. We have seen it in the number of volunteers who have come forward to the NHS; former nurses and doctors volunteering to come back into what is — I think, we all recognise — a frightening prospect for them. You will know, Paul, that one of our colleagues, Kathryn Owen, has come back into nursing. She was an auxiliary nurse and has come back in again. That is a really brave thing to do, and I really do commend everyone who has done that. As well as that, of course, the Minister for Communities has set up a Volunteer Now portal and people can register there to volunteer in other ways.

As well as that, we have seen a great collaboration between industry, academia and people wanting to come to us in government to say, "How can we help?". A consortium that includes Queen's, Ulster University, C-TRIC in Londonderry and AFBI is looking at how to scale up diagnostic testing, for example. Randox and Deloitte are looking at a UK-wide initiative on staff testing. The SSE Arena is part of that UK-wide staff testing, and it is really good to see that.

The deputy First Minister mentioned that there is now a memorandum of understanding between the Chief Medical Officers in the Republic of Ireland and here in Northern Ireland. Again, that is about sharing information and looking at modelling and how we can model. What is really important is to look at the data that we are gaining from industry and from colleagues in the Republic of Ireland, in Great Britain and, indeed, here in Northern Ireland across all our Departments. At the moment — this is a very interesting point that I am not sure that members will be aware of — all our Departments are gathering data and putting it into our central hub in the civil contingencies group, and then that is informing how we move forward. All of that data analytics is very important now. We are in the age of technology, so we are using that. We are looking at our own modelling, and we were very pleased when the Minister of Health brought forward the modelling for Northern Ireland recently. The deputy First Minister and I had Professor Ian Young with us at a press conference just last Friday, and he was able to tell us how that modelling works. It is happening all the time, and it will be revisited, so they will look at the live data and say, "Well, how is that changing what is happening in Northern Ireland?". There is a lot of work going on behind the scenes that does not get talked about very much in the public domain, and I understand, going back to the last question, why PPE is such a critical issue, but there is so much other work going on behind the scenes that informs everything that is happening at the moment.

Mrs O'Neill: Just to add to that, the people who are stepping up to the mark are the amazing healthcare staff, and that is why it is so important that we support them now as best as we possibly can by chasing down every bit of protection that we possibly can and that we get them the testing that they deserve. This is about not only their own health and giving them assurances but trying to keep our healthcare staff in work as we work our way through this crisis. We all can attest to brilliant examples of community development, where people have stepped up to the mark right across our communities to support those who are most vulnerable.

In terms of leadership in this crisis, Arlene, the First Minister, and I sit every morning in a civil contingencies group meeting. That brings together all the Departments, all our emergency responders and local government, and it is about how we work collectively to provide leadership through this crisis. It is where things are escalated that need to be escalated. It is where we are informed of all the modelling work and of all the statistics that are being gathered, particularly on how the measures that have been implemented are impacting on, for example, the levels of traffic coming down and the number of people who are actually going out. All these things are going to keep informing the decisions that we take, because as we move through the next weeks and months — this could go on, as the Chief Medical Officer said, for some time, albeit in different phases — we have to be informed by the best statistics on the right measures to take, when to take them and how we implement them. That is an ongoing and very valuable piece of work.

Mr McAleer: Are the Ministers satisfied that the public information campaign is being heeded and leading to a reduction in the day-to-day contact between people, hence reducing the spread of COVID-19?

Mrs O'Neill: We brought forward a very informative public information campaign. I hope that people see that. It is very clear and concise in the message that we are trying to put out. It is on TV and radio, it is in newspapers, it uses social media and it is driving home the message about staying home and washing your hands. I think that it has been fairly effective. A lot of the information that we are getting back certainly suggests that it has been.

Again I will use this platform to say this: this weekend is Easter, but it is not a holiday time like any other, and people need to please listen to that advice. We know that the PSNI, for example, are out and about asking people why they are on the roads and are making sure that they are not out if they do not need to be. That needs to continue over the weekend. My plea to the public is: keep doing what you are doing. This is us fighting to save people's lives, and we all need to play our part in that.

Mrs Foster: I think we were heartened — I will go back to the data again, if you will forgive me — by the fact that, when data came in from Translink to say that the number of journeys had fallen significantly during the first week, it was clear that the regulations had had an impact on rail and bus travel. I think that the roads were a lot quieter. I agree with the deputy First Minister that it is critical that we do not lapse back on that, because I think that some people are taking the attitude, "Well, we have done two weeks at home, so surely that is enough". It is not enough, and even though this is Easter weekend and a time when we would normally be enjoying the outdoors, be with family or celebrating, it is really, really important that, actually, people need to stay at home and not be out and about. That is really important for us. I just really put a plea out that they do not lapse back on that, and I hope that our information campaign, which now has gone live, as the Deputy First Minister said, has an impact and points out that we all have to do it to get through it. That is true: we all have to do it.

Dr Aiken: I thank the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for their comments. May I, on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, pass on our regards to the Speaker and wish the British Prime Minister — our Prime Minister —

Boris Johnson, a very swift recovery? I also note the number of deaths we have had today, and we again pass on our condolences, as we do for everyone in the House in this position.

I have a specific question for the deputy First Minister, and it is to do with last week, when she talked about PPE. She was talking specifically about the Health Minister on Thursday evening, and she refused to give her full-hearted support to him. Bearing in mind that, in the House last week, the Finance Minister informed us that not only was PPE on its way through a joint order with the Irish Republic but it was due to arrive shortly in significant quantities. It now transpires that not only was an order not made, but there were no details of the order and no details of timing. What I would like to hear, deputy First Minister, is whether you have any faith and confidence in your Finance Minister, who, at best, misrepresented the House, and do you have faith and confidence in the Health Minister, who has done an absolutely sterling job with the rest of the Northern Ireland health service and all the health workers to deal with the crisis? Over to you, deputy First Minister.

Mrs O'Neill: First, I have confidence that everybody in the Executive is doing everything that they can to save lives. The number-one priority here is about saving lives. As I have said in the past, I believe that, if there is a difference in emphasis, that is what we should say. That does not mean that we do not have unity of purpose. That does not mean that we are not trying to do everything that we can to make sure that we protect lives and do the very best by people in what are the most unprecedented of circumstances, such as none of us have been through before.

I encourage the member to keep faith. We will continue to work together. The Finance Minister has said clearly on the record and will continue to say — I believe that he will come to your Committee because you have asked him to come on Wednesday — that he will not apologise for trying to get PPE. Let us just continue to do everything that we can to go down our three routes of supply and make sure we get whatever we can from the British Government, make sure we get our supplies from China where we can and make sure we work with our local suppliers.

We all need to work together, but, because we are a five-party coalition, we must have the space to say things whenever we think that things are slow. I have confidence in the Executive. I have confidence in the fact that, over the last number of days and even the last week, we have made progress. We have made progress on testing. We have made progress on PPE. That is what the public want to hear. We need to get these things right as best we can in the most challenging of circumstances.

Ms Armstrong: I will start by expressing, on behalf of the Alliance Party, our sincere condolences to those who have lost their life to this terrible pandemic. Our thoughts, of course, are with the Speaker, the Prime Minister and all those families, including mine, who have not been able to attend funerals. It is a devastating time.

One thing that has come forward is the fact that our Executive are working hard. I take the opportunity — you will probably not hear it too often from me — to say, "Thank you", to both the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and all the Ministers. We face a crisis, and, thank goodness, we are back and able to work forward through

it. This morning, I was part of a discussion with ComRes about the state of the UK during the pandemic and the effect that it has not only on businesses but on individuals. One thing that has become clear is that people need peace of mind. The deputy First Minister has mentioned that already today.

In order to get that peace of mind, there are certain things that I will ask you. It is a slight list, but it is all tied in together and it is just for clarity. For example, do we know if the financial assistance for childcare provision has been agreed yet? Has that come through the Executive? We know that we are depending on the detail of the Budget Act for the welfare mitigations to be paid: when will we see that welfare mitigation legislation coming through? The £25,000 business grant is something that our businesses desperately need. I have to make a clear call out for constituencies like mine that are holiday places. I have caravan parks where people are trying to get round the legislation by claiming that that is their permanent place of residence. It is bringing tourists to areas where we definitely do not need them. Any other time, we would say, "Tourists, please come to the Ards peninsula", but now I say, "Please stay at home because you are putting at risk very vulnerable older people in villages and coastal areas". Can you give us any further clarification on those points?

I will not get an opportunity to say this again, so I wish you both a very happy Easter, and I hope that we will all be back to the Chamber together as 90 again.

Mrs Foster: I thank the member for her comments, and "Happy Easter" to her too and, indeed, to the whole House.

On the specific issues, I understand that a paper will come to the Executive on financial assistance for childcare. As I said, the Executive are sitting three times a week now, so it is hard to keep track of all the papers that are coming, but I understand that there is a paper coming on that very soon. The welfare mitigation paper is at the Executive. It is still undergoing discussion but is still rolling out over the period through the Budget Act. I referenced the £10,000 payment, which is going very well, and that was because we had the data in Land and Property Services (LPS), as the member will know. I understand from the Economy Minister that she hopes to have a process in place for the £25,000 grant by the end of this week. She is working hard with the Finance Minister to get that actioned. I recognise that it is one thing to announce support packages; it is quite another to get the money out. We have all heard from individual businesspeople about the fact that they have cash flow difficulties at the moment. I recognise that, and I have urged the banks to work with them and not to look for fully developed business plans in order for them to access funding. That is important. We are also aware that there is a gap. Some people have not been captured by some of the schemes, and, again, we hear all of that and are trying to process how we can help those people. Lastly, people should be in caravan parks only if that is their main residence. They should not designate it themselves. We have seen the difficulties that, unfortunately, the Chief Medical Officer in Scotland got into in relation to going to a second home. People should not be travelling to their second home or their caravan. I know that it is difficult. I know that the normal thing at Easter time is to go to your caravan or to your second home, but, frankly, our priority is saving lives, and I ask them to consider other people and to stay away at this time.

Mrs O'Neill: I will briefly add to that. First, I did not know that you had lost someone, so condolences to you and your family at this time.

We will ask the Minister for Communities to give a definitive update on the question that you asked about welfare mitigations. To add to what the First Minister has said, we are examining the possibility of extending business support to businesses that have an NAV of under £15,000. That has been an issue, particularly for small businesses that have been left out of the current category. We are conscious of the fact, while the schemes that have been brought forward are welcome, some people have been left out. We are making the case to Treasury around those things in a joined-up Executive way.

Mr Dunne: I, too, thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for the commitment and leadership that they have shown. It is important in a time of crisis that we all work together with a united, strong voice for all the people. We all recognise the good work of local businesses, as has already been mentioned, but, unfortunately, the small business manufacturing sector has not been recognised. Those who are in receipt of industrial derating at the moment do not seem to be included, so I stress the need for funding to be put in place for that group. We all recognise the great work that industry has done in diversifying, stepping up to the plate and restructuring their business to meet the demands of the crisis.

Mrs Foster: That is precisely one of the groups that, we feel, has not been covered. I think that some of them felt that they were covered under the small business scheme for the £10,000 and then realised that, because we were using the small business rate relief as the passport, if you like, to the £10,000, they missed out because they were beneficiaries of industrial derating. That is something that the Minister for the Economy has opened up with the Minister of Finance, and we are trying to find a way forward on that. It is critical that we find a way forward on that, because there are many people whom it would benefit.

We are the beneficiary of, I think, £912 million from Westminster in relation to the virus, but we also benefit from the UK-wide schemes, which do not impact on our block grant. If we can do something on a UK-wide basis, it will not impact on the money that we hold here; it comes from Treasury. We are trying to encourage Treasury to look at some of those gaps as well. However, I assure you that the industrial derating issue is being looked at.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Before the deputy First Minister rises or, maybe, does not rise, I remind you that it is up to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to decide whether they both want to have a go at a question. If they both answer, it makes it more difficult to get to the end of the list.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an bheirt Airí as ucht a ráitis agus as ucht a gcuid freagraí. Thank you very much, and thanks to both Ministers for their statements and answers thus far. The recent modelling that was produced by the Chief Scientific Adviser, Professor Young, indicated that the health service had a realistic prospect of dealing with this initial period between now and 20 April, particularly if people adhere to the social distancing and self-isolation measures. It still

assumes hospital admissions of up to 500 people a week. Are sufficient resources being given to the health service to enable it to provide personnel, beds, ventilators and so on?

Mrs O'Neill: I will take that question and say, "Yes". It has been useful to delve into the modelling that has been done. We are doing our own modelling now, and we are looking at that. We will have an update on that over the next number of days. That is what determines what we do next, when we do it and why we take the measures that we have to take. We have to keep reminding ourselves that we are asking people to take extreme measures. It is not easy, and it is not the norm for people to stay apart from their families. We have to keep reviewing whether we are doing the right things at the right times. That modelling work is really important. We know that they will look at what things look like in the North and at the North/South position and the modelling that has been used there, because the disease knows no barriers. It is important that we watch those things on an ongoing basis.

You asked about resource and about whether the Health Department had enough money. Money is not the issue. We have said that we will find whatever is required. One of the first things that the Finance Minister said to all Departments in one of our early Executive meetings was that they should throw the rule book out the window. These are not normal times. We, as an Executive, cannot behave as normal, and our Departments should not behave as normal. That was warmly received and has enabled us to respond in an agile and fast manner to the issues that are presented to us. Finances are not the issue. There are a lot of issues with regard to capability in the health service, such as what we can do and when we can do it, and those are the things that need to be invested in.

You also asked about personnel. The response to the call for healthcare staff to come back into the workforce across every discipline has been absolutely incredible. I cannot remember the latest figure, but I think there were 14,000 when we were last updated — maybe that was yesterday. That shows the support that there is out there. While people are afraid and have, perhaps, stepped out of the profession or retired, the fact that all those people are coming back in the midst of the most challenging of circumstances shows the kind of society we have. People want to play their part. It is very positive that we have so many people coming forward.

Resource should not be the issue. We have to find the money for whatever we need, be that PPE, ventilators or whatever equipment is required.

Mr Middleton: I thank the First Minister, deputy First Minister and all Ministers for the work that they are doing at this difficult time. I, too, welcome the work with local businesses and communities and what they are doing to rally round and produce PPE and hand sanitiser. Will the First Minister and deputy First Minister confirm, from working with the UK Government at the national level, that the Government are fully aware of the need, specifically for Northern Ireland, not only for PPE but for ventilators and other equipment?

Mrs Foster: I thank the member for his question. You are absolutely right about our local producers. It is not just PPE, scrubs and everything that is necessary. Some of our local distillers are making hand sanitisers instead

of making gin. It has been quite incredible and really quite heartening to see the way in which people have repurposed their businesses over the past number of weeks.

On the question of our input into Westminster, there is a ministerial implementation group that takes place every day, which our Ministers are involved in, depending on the subject matter. Today, the issue was around freight and transport and food supply, and, as I understand it, the junior Ministers are usually there all of the time, and the Economy Minister, the Infrastructure Minister and, I think, the Agriculture Minister were on that call as well. There is very much a good flow of information between ourselves and Westminster, and, therefore, I would say a very good understanding. I have to say that last week in terms of PPE, both the Secretary of State for Health and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland were very helpful in making sure that that PPE was delivered on time. We do thank them for the work that they are doing on our behalf.

Mr Gildernew: Thank you to both Ministers for your answers and presentations. I do welcome the delivery yesterday of upwards of 5 million items of PPE. I know that it has been discussed here already, but I would like to recognise that the First Minister acknowledged that that needs to be replenished on an ongoing basis. Therefore, I welcome the signing of the memorandum of understanding, which opens up further channels and also potential sharing of resources. Specifically, can you outline what mechanisms are in place to ensure that the PPE that has arrived is delivered to front-line staff on an ongoing basis as and when they need it?

Mrs O'Neill: I welcome the member back into action, having been out of action for 14 days. The point that is hard for us all to fathom is the fact that we have this PPE but that is not the reality for staff on the ground. That is where that falls down. I welcome the fact that yesterday, as part of our discussions around PPE, the Health Minister said, after I had suggested using RQIA as a way to go and investigate, he thinks that it is best to bring in an independent assessor. That would be an individual or a group of individuals who can assess what the reality is on the ground for staff and have an engagement with staff. I think that that should go some way to give an assurance that staff know who they can talk to and know where they can go to when they are not getting the protection that they feel that they need. I think that that will be a significant development in giving the staff the assurance that they need.

Mr O'Toole: I associate myself with all of the other members who have paid tribute to our front-line staff. What can you say except we are all humbled and grateful beyond words for the sacrifices and dedication that they are showing on our behalf? There is really not much more you can say other than to thank them.

Both of you have talked about the importance of data and Northern Ireland-specific data and also about sharing data that is useful from GB and from the rest of Ireland. While we are rightly now focused on the next few weeks, making sure that people stay at home and making sure that our healthcare staff have the maximum support in dealing with this first wave, it is not irresponsible to think about how we will exit from the current arrangements and then how we manage what the deputy First Minister has already said will be a second surge. We hope that that is lower than the

first, but there will be a second surge. Part of that, surely, will be through extensive contact tracing and testing. Has thought been given to the very specific circumstances that exist in Northern Ireland?

Both of you will have probably come from your constituencies west of the Bann and noticed that we are a much, much more rural place than GB. What specific thought and modelling is going into how that mass contact tracing and testing can be delivered in Northern Ireland in a way that helps us to remove ourselves from the current restrictions and then manages the next surge?

Mrs O'Neill: You are absolutely right. We all note that there has been progress on testing and we know that the best evidence across the world is that that is where we need to be, but it is not just about testing by itself. It is about testing, tracing and isolating, and those three things are key component parts of being successful. The Executive have received a testing strategy, which will be populated with the numbers that we wish to see.

The opening of the SSE Arena as a testing centre over the weekend was a positive step in the right direction, but people who live west of the Bann are not going to travel to Belfast to get their test. We need to have a facility closer to home for those people. I welcome the fact that other areas are being explored, and that we now have MOT centres being used as potential venues. That gives us plenty of opportunities across the North to provide two or three testing centres.

The key to our success in all of this has to be following the best evidence. The best evidence is that we must take not just extreme measures, but alongside that we must test, isolate and trace. There has certainly been a lot of progress over recent days on those things, but we now need to quickly move to a point — and we are working on this — where, when we say that we are rapidly scaling up testing we ask: what do those numbers look like and who are we going to reach? Some of the work that is being done is around how to increase testing for healthcare workers and how to widen that out to other people on the front line, including everyone from emergency responders in the health service to the PSNI and people who work in the prisons. Work is being done on how we can work our way through that.

The issue of testing in community care and residential homes has been raised quite often. That all needs to be part and parcel of the roll-out plan, but I am certainly content that progress has been made on those things. We are moving towards a position where the best evidence says we should be.

Mr Nesbitt: My question is about the Health Minister. I have worked with Robin Swann since we campaigned to get elected to the Assembly in 2011. I could say that I would trust him with my children's lives but actually, I am trusting him with my children's lives. So, I would like the two Ministers to tell me whether they agree that any public attack on his motivation, his integrity or his ability is not only unwelcome but is just wrong.

The deputy First Minister quoted Tina Marie, the paramedic, who said:

"if we take your loved one out of your home, we can assure you we will love them like one of our own."

Is that not the spirit that the public want to see emanating from this Chamber? Loving each other might be a bit of a stretch, but for God's sake, we need to show each other respect.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mrs Foster: I say to the member that I have nothing but respect for his colleague. I work very closely with him, and I think that he would say that I have been incredibly supportive of him because I know the incredible job that he has. I do not know whether the member will recall it, but before the Westminster election, I was asked a question about the Health Minister, whoever that would be. I said that I did not care who the Health Minister would be in the next Executive and that I would support them.

At that time, there were incredible pressures when healthcare workers were on strike and there were issues around the crisis in our health service. Little did we think at that particular time that we would be dealing with a global pandemic coming to Northern Ireland. I will, of course, continue to support Robin in the very difficult job that he does. We have said to him in the Executive that this is not just a crisis for health but a crisis for the whole of society in Northern Ireland and, therefore, it is a crisis for the whole Executive. We very much recognise that and he continues to do a very good job under pressure that no one should have to face.

Let me take the opportunity again to completely condemn the vile sectarian attack that was directed at him and his family on Friday. When I saw the details of that, I have to say, I was outraged. Let us be honest, I have seen many a threat in my time, but it was completely wrong and has to be condemned in the strongest possible way. He does, of course, have my support.

Mrs O'Neill: May I also put on record, as I did at the Executive meeting, that the abusive commentary that Robin and his family received was disgusting and uncalled for. The PSNI are, rightly, involved in dealing with that. No Minister, going about their job, deserves to have that kind of attack levelled at them. As I said to Robin directly, I wholeheartedly condemn that attack.

We are committed to working together. We have unity of purpose in trying to save lives. That is the Executive's number-one priority. This is not about individuals, and it never has been. It is about the issues and differences in emphasis. As a five-party Executive, we will have differences in approach. I am on record as saying that we need to do more testing and more in terms of PPE — the reality of what was experienced on the ground was not what was being expressed. I call those things out, but that does not mean that we cannot work together.

I will continue to work with Robin through this crisis because, I tell you, we all need each other more than anything. We need to work our way through this, in the best possible way we can, to support people. The number-one priority, the only priority, is saving lives. That is all our focus, all our effort. I have confidence that all our Ministers are working together to bring us through this crisis.

We will come through this, and then we will have a lot of work to do to build society again. A lot of families will be left without their loved ones, and we will have a lot of building to do. We will have to work together through this and on the other side of it.

Mr Harvey: I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for all that they are doing at this difficult time. It is much appreciated. How would the First Minister and deputy First Minister say the public are responding to the requirements for social distancing? Are they content with the response?

Mrs Foster: I know something that the deputy First Minister may not. Mr Harvey's daughter has been recently called up to become a nurse. She is in her final year of nursing, and she is going to take up her place early. We want to remember her and all her colleagues as they go into front-line nursing. Please take her our best wishes.

As I have said, initially the social distancing message was taken on board. I am sure that I am not alone in receiving messages from people who complained that so-and-so was not social distancing, and asked what we could do to make sure that that happened. There was quite a bit of that.

However, I register a little concern that there may have been a slipping back because, as time goes on, people think that we are coming through this. The appeal I make today is that people should, please, please continue to social distance and stay at home. It is so important that we get through this wave of this terrible disease, protect as many as we can in the National Health Service and push down the peak of deaths. That is what we want to do: make sure we have the lowest number of deaths possible.

Ms Anderson: I thank the Ministers for their statement. You made reference to the number of tests that have been done. The PHA surveillance report shows that less than 10,000 people have been tested. The SSE Arena and C-TRIC in Derry were mentioned as places where carers in residential care homes who have symptoms may be tested. Unfortunately, vulnerable residents who have symptoms in those homes have not yet been tested.

Do the Ministers agree that, as a policy, that we need community testing, in order to ensure that there is contact tracing to detect who has COVID-19, so that we can trace who has it, and then isolate them? That is in order to flatten the peak, stop the spread and enable front-line workers who want to return to work, but who are isolating and may not know whether they have COVID-19, to actually return. Test, trace and isolate, as you mentioned, but we need it as a policy. People are crying out for community testing, as you know yourselves. Across the North people demand that we take that forward.

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, that is my position. Work has been done on rapidly ramping up the scale of testing. Our statement talks about moving towards that position, and that is where we need to be. You can look at examples around the world of how this has been done successfully.

Many people want to play their part. All the sporting codes are asking, "What can we do?", "Can we help?" and "Is there anything we can do?" There have been so many offers from people.

We will be dealing with this for probably the next year. It is important that, for the next two weeks, the focus is completely on the surge and how we respond. We have to get to the point where we are doing the full testing, isolating and tracing, because it will take us considerable time to come out the other side of this.

Care homes are an area of particular concern. Again, when you look at examples, you see some tragic examples

around the world of care homes and clusters and what that has meant, with large numbers of older people dying. We need to send out a clear message that we value everybody in society and that we will do everything that we can to make sure that we protect all people, including those in nursing homes who need our help now more than ever. I put on record the fact that I have heard stories of a number of nursing homes where the staff have moved in to protect the patients, and I think that that is such a heroic effort and a contribution to society that is second to none. People are so good as to do that.

We have to get the testing out onto the ground, with the maximum number of people tested, the isolating and the tracing done, as a matter of priority.

Mrs Foster: If I may, I will add to that. We have talked about our elderly people, and it is so important to say how valuable they are to our society, but, recently, I have been contacted by people who are concerned about the do-not-resuscitate issue. They feel pressurised into their family signing that. I have to say that that is wrong. That is wrong and should not be happening. I note that some of the charities for elderly people have raised that as an issue. It is certainly not something that our Executive would condone at all. If there are circumstances where it is happening, I think that we should hear about it, because it is not the sort of thing that we would condone.

Mr Blair: As the First Minister and deputy First Minister will know, sadly, the need for an abortion is often itself an emergency for a woman. That need does not stop in a pandemic, but the means of travelling to access abortion care in GB have disappeared. That has been well-documented. What are the Executive doing as part of their COVID-19 response to address that healthcare deficit?

Mrs Foster: As the member knows, there is not unanimity at the Executive on abortion, and nor will there be, I think, for quite some time, if ever. Therefore, a paper has come from the Department of Health. The Attorney General has raised some issues about that. Those issues have to be looked at before we can come to a determination in relation to the issue.

Mrs O'Neill: This is about compassionate care. This is about helping women who find themselves in very difficult circumstances. This is about the Executive delivering on a commitment that has already been made. Westminster has made the regulations. This is the law. It must be implemented. I look forward to further conversation at the Executive about how it will be put in place. As we stand here today, women are being failed in this crisis.

Mr McGuigan: I thank the joint First Ministers for coming before us today and making the statement and for all the work that they and their Executive colleagues are doing to see us through this crisis.

Early in the crisis, we saw panic-buying. As my family's designated shopper, sometimes when I am shopping late in the evening, I have witnessed that some shelves are maybe not stocked as fully as they should be. Will the Ministers explain what the Executive are doing to ensure that our shelves are full and that the supply chain keeps flowing and our supermarkets are full?

Mrs O'Neill: I note that numerous people are growing beards in this pandemic. I note the member's own.

We have been clear, from the outset, to say to people, "Please, do not panic-buy, because you leave other people at a disadvantage when you do that". Sterling work has been done on trying to secure the supply chains and making sure that everything is running across. We are working with retail, the hauliers and everybody else to make sure that the supply chains are in place. We are working with the ports, the ferry operators and everybody to make sure that we keep the food supply chains going. I am confident that, whilst you might not always have the same choices that you had, you will certainly have a supply of food, so people should not be panicking. Not everybody can go in and bulk-buy. Some people live week by week and their income dictates that. That means that it is really challenging and very worrying for people: you are dealing with the crisis in itself, but then you are panicking that you cannot get your children the food that they eat, for example. I encourage the public again to please understand that supply chains are continually reviewed. We are continually working our way through that to make sure we have adequate supply. We are not going to have a shortage of food. Choice might perhaps be limited sometimes, but that is all right. We are in a crisis; these are not normal times.

Mr Catney: I also pass on my condolences to those families who have lost loved ones. We here in Northern Ireland and in Ireland know the importance of a wake and how it can bring great comfort to the families. May I also say, as a back note, that I am sure that we as an Assembly will find in the future an appropriate way of coming together so that we can help those families through that grieving process? That is something that we all can reflect on in the future.

I also put on record my thanks to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister and all our Executive during this time of crisis, and I support whatever they can do and will do whatever I possibly can. I say that on behalf of all those in Lagan Valley.

Given that the World Health Organization has said that COVID-19 can be caught from a person showing only mild symptoms, I am sure that both of you would agree with me — this is more an acknowledgement than anything else — that the domiciliary care workers, the porters, other hospital staff and care workers should maintain the recommended safe distances required under such circumstances. The current guidance on PPE exposes those critical workers, who travel from one vulnerable person to another, to the risk of infection.

Mrs Foster: Thank you, Pat, and I will just say to you that it is typical of you to seek to comfort people at a time when they are losing loved ones. It is a very difficult time for people. We all know that we go to the house of neighbours, friends and families whenever they lose a loved one. At the moment, people are dying alone, never mind families not having the comfort of a wake. It is a hugely difficult time for everyone. The grieving process is being very badly interrupted, and we will have to deal with that in the future and how we help people to get through all that.

Just for information, the deputy First Minister and I have been talking to mental health professionals about what happens and how we can support people, because for many there will be mental health issues, not least for our front-line staff, who will have to see things that they probably never want to see. How do we deal with that? I

think it was Mr Newton who talked in the Chamber about a lot of our front-line workers perhaps having post-traumatic stress disorder, so how are we going to assist them? We have already started to look at that in the Executive, and I just wanted to make sure that people were aware of that.

In terms of your question, obviously we want people to respect the social distancing rule and to make sure that they are aware of the PPE guidelines. There are new guidelines out across the United Kingdom. They have been confirmed by the World Health Organization on how PPE should be distributed and worn, so I hope that that new guidance will again reassure people, regardless of what level of PPE they require.

Mr O'Dowd: In relation to the member's previous comments, it is worth noting that everyone who dies alone as a result of this virus caught it off another person. You do not want to be the person who passes it on either directly or indirectly, and that is why the messaging that has been coming from the joint First Ministers is so important. People need to isolate. They need to respect social distancing, and, as has been said in the Chamber time and time again today, this weekend is not a bank holiday any more; it is about saving people's lives.

Quite rightly, the Executive's first priority is saving lives, but, in tandem with that, they have also established a strategic forum of business, retail and trade unions to look at how they work together to protect workers, businesses and the future of the business sector. Could the First Minister and deputy First Minister update us on how that forum is working?

Mrs O'Neill: The forum has met on a number of occasions. It meets again tomorrow. Obviously, it is crucially important that you bring together all the various elements. Therefore, it has representatives from each of the business organisations, the trade union movement, the Labour Relations Agency, the Chief Executives' Forum, the Health and Safety Executive and the Public Health Agency. All the relevant people are working together, and the forum is going to meet again tomorrow. One of the things that they are working on is the essential workers list and who are the essential workers, because that clarity is vitally important.

The other area the forum is working on is safety in the workplace, and there is going to be some guidance brought forward. We expect that, over the next number of days, there will be a body of work brought forward, probably by the Economy Minister, to give more clarity. The forum has certainly been focused on the whole area of who is the essential worker and how the essential worker is protected in the workplace.

Ms Bailey: First, I want to congratulate Grainne Close and Shannon Sickles, and also Christopher and Henry Flanagan-Kane, the first two same-sex couples in the UK to enter into a civil partnership. It was their bravery and tenacity in fighting through a judicial review, at great personal expense, to overturn our ban on same-sex marriage, that led to a ruling this morning in their favour by our courts where we are, yet again, being told that personal and religious beliefs are no grounds for discrimination —

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): The member is out of order. I am going to ask the member to resume her seat.

Ms Bailey: — and that the legal ban is unjustified and discriminated —.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): I am asking the member to resume her seat.

Ms Bailey: I am going to ask a question.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Can you, please, resume your seat for just one second.

At the start, I said that questions should be related to the statement made by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. There will be other occasions, I am sure, where these issues can be discussed in the House. Will you please direct your comments to the statement by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister?

Ms Bailey: Thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker. Apologies. This House also knows that the law on abortion has also changed. I note the earlier comments and questions from our colleague as well. Given that it was the Attorney General who led the legal team that lost the case I just referred to, can I ask the Ministers if they can give us any reassurance that they will be seeking wider legal opinion immediately, given that on many occasions the Attorney General has stated his own personal opposition to women being allowed to access abortion in Northern Ireland?

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): One moment, First Minister. Given that no part of either of those questions related to the content of the statement given by the First Minister or the deputy First Minister, you are under no obligation to respond. If you wish to, you may.

Mrs Foster: I hope the member is not calling into question the advice which the Attorney General is giving to the Executive, in his capacity as the legal adviser to the Executive, because that would be a very serious charge for a member of this House to make. The Attorney General has a role to play, and he has sent in serious concerns. I say to the member: I am standing here today trying to save lives. That is what I am focused on: saving lives. I hope that everybody else is as well.

Mrs O'Neill: I say to the member that we need to have a society that is compassionate and provides compassionate healthcare to everybody, including women who find themselves in very difficult circumstances. Legislation has been brought forward in Westminster, because this Assembly did not deliver the legislation that was required. The Health Minister now has an obligation to put that in place. I am quite sure that there are a number of representative groups out there that will legally challenge if the Department does not do what it needs to do to bring those regulations into place.

Mr Allister: I wholeheartedly endorse what the First Minister said about best wishes to our Prime Minister at this critical time for his personal health. We trust he will be returned to full health and strength. I also endorse what she just said about how critical it is at this time to be saving lives, not facilitating the termination of life — that needs to be said.

The First Minister, I suspect, will have observed, and certainly it has not been lost on me, and I am sure not lost on any thinking citizen of Northern Ireland, how beneficial it has been to be able to draw down, and be part of, the largesse of the United Kingdom at this critical time. It is good to be part of a nation with deep pockets such

as those of the United Kingdom. I do not doubt for one moment that the First Minister is striving to do her absolute best at this critical time. It is a matter of regret, I suspect to her, though she will not say it, but certainly to me that, at the same time, necessary actions have been undermined by her partner in Government, Sinn Féin, which seems to be more interested in grandstanding than in governing, whose members are more interested in carping than in delivery and never cease to take political advantage of any crisis and get to the point of calling out the Health Minister. Maybe those who think that it is appropriate in Government to call out the Health Minister should think differently and get out, because opposition is when you call out not within Government.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Will the member get to the question, please?

Mr Allister: Yes. I have had to wait a long time, so it is coming, Mr Chairman.

On that theme of dysfunctionality in the Executive, a question pertaining to the many companies in Northern Ireland that are still in the dark about their entitlement to be open and that can practise safe distancing is whether or not such companies can be open. Have the Executive yet got agreed advice for them? We have had the vilification of Ulster Carpets from the deputy First Minister. Can we have united guidance as to whether such companies are entitled to be open? I know that we have the forum, but I know that it is a talking shop. It has been talking for 10 days. Is there a resolution —

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Mr Allister, please resume your seat.

Mr Allister: — on the issue? It is the sort of thing that people need an answer on.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): This has happened twice. I am starting to regret making sure that the smaller parties get in all the time. I think they got your question.

Mrs Foster: Retail businesses and businesses like that are closed. He will have seen those listed in the regulations. There are those businesses that are, of course, essential because they are in the supply chain to health or in the food supply. Those are essential. Then there are those that he mentioned, which are businesses that are still able to function and have an order book and are keeping people employed. Those people must ensure that there is a safe working environment and that people are social distancing, and, if they cannot socially distance, that they are staggering the number of people on the floor or making sure that they limit the number of people in their canteens. There are a number of things that can be gone through. The Health and Safety Executive very helpfully put out a press release to that effect two Fridays ago.

There are companies that can continue to operate as long as they make sure that they are looking after the safety of their workers, which, the member will agree, is paramount at this particular time.

Mrs O'Neill: I will say to the member that the only advantage that I seek is the advantage of the healthcare workers who need PPE and testing. I have also said that the Executive's number one priority is saving lives. Sin é. That is it. It is about saving lives. That is what we are trying

to do here. I think that the member should remind himself of that on a continual basis.

Mr Carroll: The First Minister said that 5.5 million items of PPE have been secured. How long is that expected to last? She also said that the Minister of Finance is to pursue all feasible supply routes, both international and local. Can she shed some light on why requisitioning the production of PPE testing kits and ventilators is not being considered by the Executive so that they can guarantee that demand is met?

The deputy First Minister rightly said that our top priority is saving lives, but, when doctors have repeatedly called for an ECMO machine, without which they estimate they will lose tens of lives, why are the Executive not pushing for that? Why have they decided not to push for that against medical advice? According to her figures, 0.4% of the population have been tested so far. Do you not accept that that is shockingly low? We have no idea of the scale of this crisis because of the lack of testing.

Finally, you said that non-essential businesses should be closed, but, every day, workers contact me to tell me that their bosses are demanding business as usual. What plans do the Executive have to begin shutting down those workplaces or fining such employers?

Mrs Foster: The member comes from a different political philosophy to me, but talk of requisitioning private companies must jar with the greater number of people in the House. We will work in partnership with our private sector companies, of which I am incredibly proud. When I hear that Radox is providing testing kits for the whole of the United Kingdom, I am incredibly proud that an Antrim company is providing that right across the United Kingdom. Therefore, he is wrong about that. People have stepped up to the mark. They are offering their services in a very real and meaningful way, and they will continue to do so.

I will write to the member with the information on PPE, but there are varying limits. We have more than 300,000 FFP3 masks. It was very pleasing to see that number of masks coming in, because they were needed in Northern Ireland. I think that the supply that we have received will last for four weeks. Aprons last for a longer period. I am happy to come back to the member in writing on the times involved. I have already said on the record that we will need to replenish our supply, and I have already said that we will look internationally and locally to make sure that that happens.

Mrs O'Neill: My party colleagues Pat Sheehan and Colm Gildernew, as Chair of the Health Committee, raised the issue of the ECMO ventilator and tabled a question to the Health Minister. It is important that we try to get the right things delivered in this period, and we are continuing to do that. It is one of the issues that we can raise with the Executive tomorrow when we are having this conversation with the Minister. Members should be assured that we are discussing and trying to bring about a resolution on PPE, testing, ventilators, hand sanitisers — whatever we need now; you name it. Progress has been made over recent days and last week, and we need to continue to see that progress developed and built upon.

The member mentioned testing. It is not a secret: we have said that we want to see community testing. That is what is required to bring us through the crisis successfully. I welcome the fact that there has been progress. There is still a way to go, but my job — our job as political leaders in

this crisis — is to make sure that we deliver on the things that we know we need. Testing is one of those things.

Ms Sugden: I wish to come back to the support for businesses. The small business rate relief scheme was a crude vehicle on which to support small businesses, and the Executive are now beginning to realise that. I am pleased that they are pursuing options to try to support businesses, such as small manufacturing businesses. Another area, which I am sure they are aware of, relates to businesses that would be entitled to the scheme under the small business rate relief if their rental space was re-rated. Is there an opportunity, through Land and Property Services, for businesses that exist in properties where, perhaps, rents are being paid for more than one business to get their own portion of that premises re-rated so that they would be eligible for this scheme?

I also want to talk about the supports being administered by the UK Government. I appreciate that the Executive will be limited in what they can do with those, but my point is that the unlikelihood of that money coming in within three months will, unfortunately, mean that businesses will have to fold because they will not have that cash flow. I impress on the First Minister and deputy First Minister the need to use whatever influence they have on local banks to try to support businesses, because right now, they are not supporting them. Recently, Danske put out a statement in which it said it was removing interest rates from overdrafts for personal customers, so there is form. That is what we need for any sort of credit that the businesses have currently, not just the credit that they seek, because a lot of businesses are telling me that they do not want to take on more financial burden, because they do not know if they are going to come out at the end of this. That needs to be looked at now, rather than in three months when we will review this again.

Mrs Foster: Those are issues that I have heard before. Her issue about businesses in a building and not paying rates is one that I have raised. She should write to the Economy Minister to raise that issue again, and to the Finance Minister because he is in charge of rating and everything that goes with that. The whole idea was that it was to go to the business, not the landlord, so I think that it is critical that it goes to the business and not the landlord. Really, the landlord should be passing the benefit on to the business, but we all know that that may not happen. I think that it would be useful if she did write to the Economy Minister about that.

I have to say that I am disappointed to hear the member's experience of banking. That is not what the banks are telling Ministers. They are saying that they want to be flexible and that they want to work with customers and what have you. Sometimes the experience does not exactly fit, so, again, if she has a specific instance, it would be helpful if she wrote to the Economy Minister on that as well.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): That concludes questions on the statement. We shall now have a brief suspension for five minutes to allow for a change of Ministers and a change of members. This meeting will resume in five minutes.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response

7 April 2020

Ministerial Statement: Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Christopher Stalford (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Martina Anderson
Ms Kellie Armstrong
Ms Clare Bailey
Mrs Rosemary Barton
Mr John Blair
Mr Keith Buchanan
Mr Robbie Butler
Mr Gerry Carroll
Mr Pat Catney
Mr Gordon Dunne
Mr Colm Gildernew
Mr Paul Givan
Mr Harry Harvey
Mr William Irwin
Mr Declan McAleer
Mr Philip McGuigan
Mr Mike Nesbitt
Mr John O'Dowd
Mr Matthew O'Toole
Mr Edwin Poots

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): The Speaker received notification on 6 April that the Minister wished to make a statement to the Ad Hoc Committee at today's meeting. A copy of the statement that the Minister intends to make is included in the tabled pack.

I welcome the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to this meeting of the Committee. I also welcome Mr Norman Fulton, an official from the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, who is accompanying the Minister today. I invite them to make their statement from the lecterns. As this is a ministerial statement, the Minister should be heard without interruption. Following the statement, there will be an opportunity for members to ask questions.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Thank you for the opportunity to provide members with an update on the arrangements that are being made in the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs as we support the people of Northern Ireland in these challenging and worrying times.

The coronavirus pandemic is one of the most significant challenges that many of us have experienced in our lifetime, not only in the impact on the health of our people but because we face unprecedented economic and

societal changes and challenges. If there is one message that I want to reinforce, it is that we are all in this together, working on the basis of the most up-to-date advice from the UK Government, our medical professionals and our scientists. If we have one lesson to learn from this crisis, it is that working together is not an option; it is a requirement.

When we face a crisis of this scale, it reminds us of our humanity and our frailty and of the generosity of people who sacrifice everything for their friends, their colleagues and even for people they have never met. We owe everything to those people and the hundreds of thousands of heroes who work tirelessly to put food on our tables, ensure that we have clean water, manage our waste and improve public health. We owe it to them to plan, deliver and learn together. I can only assure you that it is my aim, and that of my colleagues in the Northern Ireland Executive, even though we may not agree on every issue, that we support our front-line workers.

In particular, I want to pay tribute to our farming community, which is working day and night on dairy, beef, pig, poultry, sheep and arable farms, producing high-quality produce that ends up on our plates. They are dedicated, hard-working and resilient people and their contribution to the food chain has never been clearer. They, too, face the same worries and fears as the rest of us, and they have adjusted how they work in order to keep food moving during these extremely challenging times. They have our thanks and our full support.

DAERA is committed to ensuring that every effort is made to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic. Our priorities are to keep product moving, to ensure financial support to farmers, to protect the health and well-being of our staff, customers and the general public and to ensure that our essential services are carried out safely to help everyone through this difficult time. DAERA, its agencies and non-departmental public bodies continue to work through this challenging period. We support those who provide our food, remove our waste and support our rural communities. We are refining our emergency response plans and building resilience, both during the crisis and for the aftermath of the pandemic, as we navigate our way through a very different world. Despite all the challenges, we have provided this support in real time and in real collaboration with our stakeholders. For example, we have been teleconferencing with colleagues across industry two or three times a week, since the beginning of the crisis, and now meet with local government colleagues twice a week.

I have also attended regular emergency planning meetings of the UK Government and have had been in regular communication with other environment and agriculture Ministers, across the United Kingdom and in the Republic of Ireland. In particular, I have had several constructive conversations with the UK Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

We have always worked in an agile way, with more than 3,000 people located across 70 sites. At the end of 2019, we made some 1,500 video-conferencing calls, saving expenses and carbon. However, we have taken that to a new level in the pandemic, as we continue to find new and pragmatic ways of working and change how we interact with the public. Our priority is the safety of the people who work for the Department, work alongside the Department and who rely on the work of the Department. In so doing, we have had an opportunity to try out new technologies. We have learned a lot about how people can organise themselves rapidly, using those technologies. For the future, we will use those agile approaches to provide new and better services.

At this point, I take the opportunity to thank all the DAERA staff for their efforts in this challenging time, and commend them on their hard work and determination. I am proud of the part that my Department has played to date in working with others. For example, the technical capacity and expertise of the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) is being used to scale up Northern Ireland's Covid-19 testing programme. AFBI, which is one of my Department's NDPBs, together with Queen's and Ulster University, will undertake testing at its laboratories. The programme of testing, which is scheduled to commence soon for an initial period of 12 weeks, has the capacity for 1,000 tests per day to be conducted.

Until a few weeks ago, "social distancing" was a term not widely used, but it is now. In our sphere of influence, the challenges range from food processing to fishing vessels, from poultry to pork, and from water quality to waste collection. I am pleased that officials have been working closely with industry, the Food Standards Agency, the Health and Safety Executive and other public-sector agencies, to find ways to make it work for everyone, employees, customers and employers. We can and will continue to protect our people by ensuring that they follow public health guidance.

Maintaining our food supply is central to everyone's well-being. We feed up to 10 million people through our local agri-food industry, so protecting the food supply chain is vital. DAERA is firmly focused on doing everything that it can to protect this integrity and allow produce to move off-farm and through it. We have prioritised essential services and staff to ensure the continued flow of food and feed.

Veterinary teams are continuing to deliver essential food-safety official controls, providing veterinary certification for the export of meat and dairy products. I am particularly grateful to the dairy industry, which is working closely with our officials as we streamline our service provision. We have communicated with local companies and Dairy UK to ensure that all stakeholders are aware of the revised processes.

While essential controls will continue, I have taken steps to pause most inspections on-farm and off-farm. I have also decided that, in general, bovine tuberculosis testing should

not take place. This is to protect the health of farm families and testing veterinarians. Exceptionally, visits to carry out TB tests and some inspections may take place, if they can be done safely, in accordance with the social distancing advice of the Public Health Agency.

We continue to prioritise the prevention and detection of epizootic diseases through surveillance and testing at ports, airports, on farms and in meat plants. Routine bovine brucellosis sampling has been paused on farms and in abattoirs; however, high-risk sampling will continue.

We owe an immense debt of gratitude to everyone involved in our food supply chain. Food is being produced day in, day out. Cancelled orders due to the loss of the food service and hospitality sectors, significantly higher levels of consumer demand and fears about staff shortages have put unprecedented pressure on primary producers and processors. We need to ensure that people are paid fairly for producing high-quality, local produce. That means supermarkets doing their bit by continuing to buy and sell the excellent local produce produced by our farmers and primary producers.

Commodity prices are extremely fragile, and we are already witnessing a softening in the market. As that continues, as I am sure that it will, the UK Government will need to step up and provide the necessary support. I am, therefore, monitoring the situation closely to see what needs to be done and how it can be done and, importantly, working with UK ministerial colleagues.

I have been meeting the main local banks to ensure that they are doing all that they can to assist farmers who are experiencing severe cash flow problems. It is vital that the banks step up to the plate at this time.

I have also chaired meetings of the main dairy processors to help establish how our critical dairy sector can navigate through the crisis. As part of my ongoing engagement with the agri-food sector, I will meet the red meat sector again later this week.

As I highlighted, markets are extremely fragile. We are already experiencing a significant fall in markets. Given the uncertainty, I have been proactive and, in the last 10 days, have had regular discussions with Ministers across the UK and, indeed, with Minister Creed in the Republic. The issues are not particular to Northern Ireland, the UK or the EU but globally; hence the need to realise the significance of the support that will be required. We have never witnessed a crisis like this before.

There are many reasons for a global decline in prices. One of the primary reasons has been the near collapse of the food service sector. While some of the supply has been redirected to retail with an uplift in sales, unfortunately, it has not been like for like. That is putting significant pressure on sales and reorientation of the types of products being sold. For example, retail has seen an unprecedented demand for mince but not for steak, which would have been a key product in restaurants. The high volumes of some products available in markets are also having an impact on prices. Export markets are also extremely sluggish, and that is a key area for Northern Ireland produce, especially in sectors like lamb and dairy product sales. In relation to the lamb sector, I am fully aware of the issues that are coming down the track when large numbers of spring lamb will be available on the market. I will be monitoring that extremely closely. Issues

about carcass imbalance are impacting on the red meat sector, with lack of demand for fifth quarter products.

The horticulture sector is facing significant difficulties already, and I have asked officials to scope what support we can give.

Our priority is to keep product moving off farms and, where we cannot ensure that, to develop contingency plans and provide appropriate support to those farmers. In a meeting yesterday with retailers across the UK, I impressed on them the need for support to local farmers in their purchasing. I also received a commitment that they would put in place promotions to help address issues about carcass imbalance, especially for the red meat sector.

Particularly difficult market conditions face the fishing industry, with a collapse in fish sales to the Far East, mainland Europe and, more recently, domestic markets. Government initiatives, such as the job retention scheme and assistance for the self-employed, will help the fish-processing sector and ancillary fishing businesses to keep their workers and to put them in a better position to respond when markets for fish recover.

My Department has been closely engaging with the fishing representatives, and the £1.5 million support package that I announced last week is aimed at helping the sea fish catching sector to weather the storm. That scheme is the most far-reaching in the UK and will help the fishing fleet to cover its fixed costs for three months. It is not an answer to everyone's problems, but it will certainly help the fleet to survive through one of its most difficult periods. My Department is also urgently gathering evidence from the aquaculture sector on the impact of COVID-19. A report on that is expected shortly, and the Department will make a decision on what measures may be needed in relation to support once it has fully considered the data.

The decision taken by Northern Ireland livestock marts to close for two weeks is a helpful intervention, and DAERA is working with the markets to ensure that livestock movements can continue to be facilitated through a combination of the animal and public health information system (APHIS) online and telephony services. Markets are working to establish protocols that would allow a restricted opening in the near future. However, I must caution that only through sensible action will we deliver sustainable solutions.

We are focused on keeping daily movements of food, feed and produce moving into and out of Northern Ireland. In that context, some of the ferry companies have recently highlighted significant operational difficulties. That is deeply concerning, and my Department is working with other Departments, led by the Department for Infrastructure, to address that. Haulage and logistics companies face immense difficulties, such as the lack of return loads, loss of large volumes of business and significant overheads.

Farmers are vital to the people in the country, and it is imperative that they also follow the Public Health Agency advice and take all appropriate steps to look after their health. Farming unions are rightly concerned about their members and the implications that falling ill with COVID-19 would have for them, the welfare of their livestock and their ability to keep their business running. In conjunction with the farmers' union, I have issued advice to farmers on how to deal with possible COVID-19 infection, and my

Department will continue to work with them and with other Departments to explore options to mitigate the possible impacts and to safeguard animal welfare. For that reason, I have stopped all face-to-face services at DAERA Direct offices. For the time being, customers should conduct their business through DAERA online services, which are available 24 hours per day, by telephone or post.

The online single application and entitlement service is operating as normal, and an enhanced single application form (SAF) advisory service is available to provide farmers with advice and with digital assistance to help them to complete and submit their SAF. The closing date for SAF remains unchanged; however, I have extended the deadline by which farmers can amend their applications from 31 May to 9 June. Farmers are encouraged to submit their applications as soon as possible and ahead of the closing date of 15 May. In that way, we can ensure that our farmers receive accurate payments in October.

The face-to-face delivery of all College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) programmes has also ceased. Education programmes are being delivered remotely to ensure that the academic year is completed and that students achieve their qualifications. Although CAFRE open days have also been postponed, those interested in applying for CAFRE courses should apply online as normal. The delivery of existing outstanding projects under the farm business improvement scheme continues as far as is practically possible. The processing of applications to tranche 5 of the business development group scheme and registration of farmers/growers continue remotely. CAFRE advisers are also available to assist farmers and food businesses with technical, business and environmental advice to support them at this challenging time. Arrangements are being progressed to facilitate the use of CAFRE's residential facilities at the Greenmount and Enniskillen campuses by the Department of Health as part of its contingency planning. CAFRE has also made available over 20,000 overalls and other personal protective equipment (PPE) to the health and social care trusts.

Despite Public Health Agency and government advice on social distancing, DAERA's country parks and forest parks saw members of the public continuing to gather and to visit sites in increased numbers, with many ignoring the advice. Therefore, at the end of last month, I shut down vehicle access as far as possible to those forests and country parks and to public fishing waters. I am disappointed that I had to make that decision, particularly at a time when children are out of school and others were using the facilities for physical and mental health reasons. However, I felt I had no alternative, and I did so to help save lives. Those arrangements will be kept under review. This Easter, I implore people to think about safety, to think about your friends, family and neighbours and to think about our health and care workers. Take your exercise locally and do not congregate in country and forest parks, beaches or other open spaces.

There is an increased risk of social isolation for rural communities, which may be heightened due to restricted access to much-needed services. My Department is collaborating with colleagues in the Department for Communities, the Public Health Agency and local government to support a coordinated approach to assist the community and voluntary sector in this time of crisis.

DAERA officials have been assisting colleagues in DFC who are leading on the provision of food for vulnerable people, including delivery to the shielded group, which will be coordinated through local councils and starts on Wednesday 8 April, as well as the work under way to assist other vulnerable groups in society.

We have provided all community and voluntary sector funded partners with the much-needed flexibility to focus their resources on responding to the current challenge. The Rural Support networks support a network of over 1,500 rural community and voluntary sector organisations and are already involved in a number of initiatives such as engagement with food banks, drawing up lists of groups who can offer help and seeking to identify people who will need help. We expect them to be at the forefront as part of DAERA's response. Councils and other Departments are also making use of their local knowledge. It is anticipated that they will play an important role in delivering measures under the Executive's community fund and in ensuring penetration to rural areas. We are working with DFI and DFC to ensure that the DAERA assisted rural travel scheme can be utilised to assist in the delivery of much-needed food and services to isolated rural dwellers and with our health partners to ensure that vulnerable rural households are contacted on a regular basis and their needs met. The Rural Support charity stands ready to help rural individuals in stress and will support them with whatever is needed in these challenging times.

We have also provided emergency guidance and ongoing support to administrative partners delivering the LEADER and the tackling rural poverty and social isolation (TRPSI) programmes. That includes easements to support payment to project applicants and the reallocation of DAERA resource to process almost £2 million in payments to microbusinesses and community organisations in the last three weeks. That money has never been more important in supporting the survival of organisations, staff, their families and the communities they support.

DAERA continues to work with Northern Ireland Water, prioritising activities to help ensure that we continue to have access to safe drinking water. Essential staff continue to analyse water samples from key drinking water supplies. Responding to reports of water pollution remains a priority in order to help protect raw water supplies. The Drinking Water Inspectorate (DWI) has been working closely with NI Water, local councils and owners and users of private water supplies to ensure that all necessary measures are in place to protect public health.

A task and finish group with membership from across the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) has been established to identify issues that might arise due to an increase in burials. The group will produce advice and guidance on how best to mitigate those, and it links into the DOJ pandemic working group.

It is important to recognise that waste workers are one of our essential services, and that covers all those involved in managing waste, whether it is in collection, transportation, treatment or disposal. DAERA's priority is to maintain the fullest range of council waste services possible, including recycling, which supplies the waste industry and contributes to the packaging sector. Recycled material from much of the commercial sector is no longer available. At present, all 11 councils are maintaining kerbside

collections, although the majority of council household waste-recycling centres are closed.

DAERA has established a COVID-19 waste group, and regular meetings are taking place with local councils and the private waste sector to capture their concerns and discuss contingency plans. The Strategic Investment Board is involved in attempting to match up capacity and resource pressures across the sector. We are working with delivery partners on key messaging, and the Waste Industry Safety and Health (WISH) forum has issued guidance to maintain services and on observing social distancing.

A range of COVID-19 regulatory position statements has been prepared by NIEA to ensure pragmatism and flexibility in the waste sector, for example, on unauthorised waste facilities and the temporary variation of licence/permit conditions. With the reduction in legitimate waste services and the increase in waste arising, there is more risk of illegal dumping and fly-tipping. I urge people not to indulge in irresponsible behaviour that can have such a damaging effect on public health, and the Department is working closely with local councils on the matter.

All our advice is kept under review and, where necessary, updated. That is to ensure that public health is protected and the risks to drinking water quality and waste services are minimised.

Finally, the reduction in single-use carrier bags is hugely important, but there is a need to show flexibility in these unprecedented times. Carrier bags for home deliveries reduce the need for drivers to enter houses. The use of the bags also speeds up home deliveries. My Department has therefore made the Single Use Carrier Bags Charge (Coronavirus Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020, which have the effect of meaning that, for six months, the requirement to charge for carrier bags does not apply to bags used for home delivery as part of a grocery delivery service. The regulations came into operation on 1 April 2020.

In closing, it is worth again reflecting on the huge efforts under way to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic. Today, I call on the public to support those efforts, to follow PHA advice and to take all the necessary precautions to mitigate the worst effects. We have had to deliver at pace, take rapid decisions and act quickly to protect our people, our economy and our environment. Not all of those decisions will be perfect — we need to acknowledge that now — but they have been made with the best intentions and a strong desire to play our part in meeting the challenges that we all face. We will continue to review and adapt our actions in line with government advice as more information becomes available.

The crisis has brought the interconnectedness of our economy, environment and people into sharp focus. DAERA will continue to play its full part in the Northern Ireland response effort to COVID-19, supporting our people and businesses and leading them through these difficult times. Through continued cooperation and collaboration and by supporting each other, we will get through this. While it is critical that we focus on the here and now, it is also important that we look ahead to the future with optimism and plan for recovery. I know that the Northern Ireland Executive and my Department will have an important role to play, and we have already started to develop proposals to support the recovery of our economy,

environment and people. Those proposals will focus on the traditional values of hard work, thrift, using our resources to their best effect, self-reliance and valuing our local environment and economy. I look forward to sharing those proposals with people over the coming months.

Thank you. I ask that each of you and your families take care of yourselves, your neighbours and each other.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): I thank the Minister for making his statement. I now invite members to ask the Minister questions. Again, I will allow a period of around one hour for that. It is my intention to allow all members who wish to ask a question to do so. However, that depends on members asking focused and succinct questions that are relevant to the statement that we have just heard. Please note that, because this is a Committee meeting and not a plenary session of the House, it is in order for the Minister to ask Mr Fulton to respond to questions where he considers it appropriate.

Mr McAleer: I thank the Minister for his statement. I noted a headline in one of the farming papers at the weekend: "Not all heroes wear capes; some of them drive tractors". That is very true at the moment, if we look at what our farmers are doing for our community right now in the middle of this crisis.

The Minister will be acutely aware of the importance of a secure food supply in the midst of this crisis and, indeed, all the time. He will also be acutely aware of the importance of local marts for the trading of livestock. I commend the NI Livestock and Auctioneers Association (NILAA) for taking the decision to close the marts. It is a very responsible decision. It has put the public health of its staff and customers front and centre. However, the Minister will be aware that that causes difficulties with the movement of livestock in the wider production chain and food supply chain. I know that his Department has been in contact and had negotiations with the NILAA and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). Can he give his assessment of how trading could continue in a non-contact way? I note, for example, that, across the water in Britain, the first online mart is taking place today. What is his assessment of how trading could continue in a non-contact way with safe social distance in the current climate?

Mr Poots: I know that marts are looking at how they might open again, and at how they can try other means of trading. I have heard it suggested that if the marts open again, it would be on the basis of the seller leaving his livestock off and leaving the mart. The mart would be restricted exclusively to buyers, social distancing would operate in the ring where the sale would take place and the animals would be sold, conditionally, for the farmer to accept the price or not accept the price when the mart rings through. That is a suggestion that has come forward. I think that the marts will probably move ahead and open once things scale down a bit. I do not think they are ready to do that yet, because their assessment is that the social distancing that has been observed is making a difference, and they do not want to take any risks with public health. I think that we may see marts open on a very restricted basis, not just yet, but later in April.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for his detailed statement to the House and for his best endeavours to help the industry at this time. Given that the UK is still in the Brexit transition

stage, what support, if any, has the EU provided to the agri-food sector?

Mr Poots: We are still subject to EU regulations up until October of this year. Therefore the way in which we support the farming community in Northern Ireland is still under EU regulation. Through Minister Eustice and Minister Creed, I have been stating the case for Northern Ireland and how they can assist us in ensuring that the appropriate measures are put in place. Last night, I had a long conversation with the dairy sector and the farmers' unions. We had a meeting by mobile communication, of course. The indication from them is that the EU has an awful habit of waiting until a crisis has happened. We can see the crisis in the dairy sector, for example, happening in front of our eyes. We can anticipate what is happening with the lamb sector, in particular. We can see the problems in the beef sector, and we know the problems that already exist in the fishing sector. We can see all of that already, and we need to be moving now. I implore the European Union officials to be on the ball and recognise that there is a world health crisis and a knock-on effect on agriculture. If we are to have an agriculture sector when this is over, and if we are going to avoid numerous bankruptcies and people being no longer able to conduct their business, we need to respond quickly. That is what needs to happen at this stage.

Mr Catney: I thank the Minister for his statement. At the end of his statement, he wished members protection and safety for their families. I have learned that one of his family members has been struck down. I wish a speedy recovery, as does I am sure most of the House. I pass on our best wishes to your family member, Minister.

I also thank the Minister for the advice that he has given to households on how to manage waste at this time. Will he be assisting the councils in dealing with increased household waste and amending licensing laws, when or where required, and look at any financial assistance, where or when needed?

Mr Poots: I thank the member for his question, and for his personal remarks. They are very much appreciated.

The member asked about managing waste. You see how critical people are when we have a crisis such as this. We take our waste collectors for granted. They were at our house this morning at about 6.30. The waste was taken away; we do not see any more of it. That is brilliant. If those people closed at this time, it would create another public health problem. You ask about the regulations. We will provide the maximum flexibility for all our sectors, and, as we have worked through this, that is what we have been doing. Nobody can accuse us of not being flexible at this stage. If there are areas where we still have things to do, I am very happy to deal with those as they are addressed to us.

I am aware of additional financial strains on councils, so we will work with them. We will identify where those strains lie and how those can be best accommodated. We will look at how, right across the board, we can provide the appropriate financial assistance to people who are related to our Department. Of course, we have to do that through the Department of Finance, but, nonetheless, we need to recognise that there is a wide scale of people out there who need our support and assistance to get to the other side of COVID-19.

We will all get to the other side of this, by the way. It is going to be a real challenge. Sadly, there will be those who lose their lives, and that is horrendous for all the families involved, but the vast majority of us will get to the other side of this. It will be a horrible memory that we have, but we will be able to move forward once that is done. We need to have some confidence that that is the case, but we need to work together with each other to overcome this at this time.

Mrs Barton: Minister, thank you for your statement. I also wish your family member a speedy and safe recovery.

Minister, in your statement, you gave some clarification around on-farm TB testing. Does this allow farmers who want to have their herds opened, following, perhaps, a breakdown or, indeed, any other reason, to have the test carried out if they can comply with social distancing?

Mr Poots: TB testing is normally carried out by private veterinary practices, and most of those private veterinary practices are actually the farmers' vets. In that instance, the vet can do it if the vet wishes to do it. The farmer needs to be able to assure the vet that that is the case. Before a test would take place, they would have to identify whether they were capable of doing this within the Public Health Agency's guidelines and recommendations. If they are not capable of doing it, the test will not happen. If they are capable of doing it, they can do the test, but that is an agreement between the vet and the farmer. We are not precluding that. We are saying that, normally, tests will not take place, but that, where it is very important to a herd to get reopened, where the private vet is happy to do it and where social distancing can be observed, that is permissible.

Mr Blair: Before I ask my question, I wish to take a moment to thank the Minister for his statement. I also thank him for his good wishes to those in this House, and I extend our good wishes from this Bench to him, his colleagues and his family for the times ahead. I would like to associate myself with the gratitude that the Minister has expressed to the various areas of public service that are providing for all of us at the moment and on whom we are so heavily dependent.

Further to the information contained on page 11 of the report in relation to the delivery of food for the vulnerable, the Minister may already be aware that I have corresponded with DAERA, the Department of Health and the Department for Communities regarding priority access for online food deliveries. This, of course, relates primarily to supermarkets and is of benefit to those who can register if they are self-isolating as a result of direct advice from the Government, usually for a period of 12 weeks. Some local supermarkets have indicated a willingness to take part in this scheme, which appears to require registration. It seems that it is led in GB by DEFRA. Is there a chance that DAERA, in conjunction with other Departments if necessary, can implement this scheme in Northern Ireland?

Mr Poots: I am aware of the scheme that the member refers to, and it seems to be operating successfully in Great Britain. I know that whilst supermarkets such as ASDA are willing to do it, they would find it difficult to implement this scheme in Northern Ireland and need help and support to do it. I understand that it falls within DFC, but, if we can assist and help in any way in taking

the scheme that exists in GB and bringing it here, our Department will be happy to do that. In addition, the Department for Communities is going to contribute £200,000 to food banks, and DAERA will match fund that amount. We are going a little further in that it is being distributed through the Northern Ireland community fund, which does not fund religious groups. A number of food banks are run by faith-based groups, so we are putting in an additional £50,000 to fund those food banks that are organised by people from religious backgrounds.

Mr Harvey: I thank the Minister for his statement. What discussions has he had with the other devolved regions, and are they facing the same problems and difficulties that we are dealing with in Northern Ireland? I welcome his recently announced scheme for fishermen.

Mr Poots: We have been in discussions with our Scottish and Welsh counterparts on agriculture and fisheries matters. Scotland was the first to move on fisheries. We took a little longer, but we did something a bit more extensive than the Scottish were offering. We are working closely with them on how we can press to get support for the agriculture and food processing sectors to get out the other side of this crisis.

People need to realise how critical it is that we keep this thing going. We have a health crisis, and our first priority is to support the health service, the Health Minister and the team around him. The burden that is being imposed on them is incredible and we all need to respect and reflect that. However, people are at home and there are virtually no hot food outlets open at all. No restaurants are open, and people are dependent on the food that is in the shops. We have to keep the food chain going.

Last week, there were problems in the food processing sector with some workers walking out and all of that. I respect that some workers had concerns about their health and I appreciate the response that there has been in many of those places to ensure that workers' environment was made considerably safer. The situation is still not 100% ideal, but it is absolutely critical for the well-being of the people of this country that the food processing sector is kept going. We need to ensure that the food chain exists. We are in discussions with the Scottish and the Welsh and we have had a series of discussions with my counterpart in the Republic of Ireland because a lot of our milk goes south of the border and a lot of pork and chicken comes north of the border. We are all in this together, and that goes beyond the Assembly, Northern Ireland, the UK, Ireland and these islands; it goes right across the world. We can stand together or fall together, and I would much prefer that we stand together.

Mr McGuigan: I thank the Minister for his statement. I want to follow up on a point that was made by my Committee colleague, who touched on the support that the Minister announced recently for the fishing industry. How is that progressing, and how quickly will that support get to those who need it?

Mr Poots: The process will require the Assembly to pass some legislation. Is that correct, Norman?

Mr Norman Fulton (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): That is correct.

Mr Poots: Yes. With the best will in the world, the earliest that we can get payments out will be in early May, which

will be ahead of some of the work that the Assembly does, but we will still be allowed to get payments out if we can get things moving at the appropriate pace. I will engage with you as quickly as possible on the delivery of that work. I should add that the aquaculture sector and the freshwater fishermen are not included in that, but we are looking at that. For example, I know that the Lough Neagh eel fishery is closed down. Their market in Holland, where they sold most of their product, is also closed, so we will be looking at how we can respond in those areas as well.

Mr K Buchanan: My question follows on from that of my colleague from Lagan Valley. In the statement, the Minister referred to the Department's communication with local councils and private waste companies. Obviously, the closure of waste facilities by local councils has caused an issue with fly-tipping. My questions are: how can you control the overuse of landfill at this time, and what message can you send to those who think it OK to fill their boots, or vans, with rubbish, travel into the countryside, open the door, throw it out and think that is acceptable?

At a time like this, we see the good in people and, ultimately, the bad. What can you do about the overuse of landfill, and those who think it OK to leave their washing machine on the side of my road?

Mr Poots: It is never OK to leave waste at the side of a road. We have always had good mechanisms for disposing of that kind of waste. Unfortunately, that is not available at the moment, but, even when it was available, some people tended to fly-tip.

With the reduction, we see an increased risk of fly-tipping. We are working closely with councils on the matter. The nidirect fly-tipping page has been updated accordingly for the reporting of waste crime. I encourage people to report it. I am prepared to work with councils on increasing the fines for fly-tipping, if only to get a message out to people that, if you are caught, you could be hit quite heavily.

DAERA and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency COVID-19 waste management contingency group has been established to coordinate and maintain the fullest possible range of waste management services. A weekly meeting with local councils has been established, the Government waste working group, and the strategic waste partnership group, which also includes the waste industry. There has been good uptake by people in the waste industry in dealing with the problems that exist, but it is something that we need to keep our eye on. It is critically important that we maintain public health and one of the means of doing that is by the appropriate disposal of waste.

We do not want to lose sight of recycling. We should not send material to landfill where it is unnecessary. That is work that we continue to engage in.

Mr Gildernew: I thank the Minister for his answers. I declare an interest, as I come from a background in small farming. The Minister knows that, at present, farmers are under financial difficulties, given the increased cost of meal and fertiliser, and that the marts are closed. In light of the very welcome scheme on fishing that you discussed a moment ago with my colleague, are there any plans to put in place crisis funding for farming?

Mr Poots: We have written to the Department of Finance and outlined our needs, which we identified at over £100

million, for dealing with areas in this Department that need assistance. That is, almost certainly, too significant for the Northern Ireland Budget or the Northern Ireland Government to deal with. Therefore, we look to the UK Government and Brussels to see what can be delivered. It is not a Northern Ireland problem, but a global one. Therefore, we need to work within the parameters that currently exist. Within those parameters, we need to deliver.

Another area I have been looking at is banking. For some people, this is not a business problem, but a cash flow problem. You mentioned being unable to sell livestock. The livestock is still there as an asset and it will be realised a number of weeks down the line, as opposed to now. Consequently, farmers will have problems meeting payments at the end of the month, or whenever.

We met the Bank of Ireland, Danske Bank and Ulster Bank last week. A number of the banks are showing very good proactivity, if they carry out what they say they will. For example, one of the banks is offering a freeze on loans, so that no payments are required over the next three months on either interest or paying down the loan. It will be pushed back to the end of the loan. A loan that may have been ready to mature in, say, October 2021 will mature in January 2022. One of the other banks was offering to have no interest repayments in the period. That is all helpful.

We need to ensure that cash flow continues to take place within our banking sector and that banks work and are flexible not just with farmers and food processors but in general with the business community. At the other side of this, we need a business community. At the other side of this, we need farmers. At the other side of this, we need food processors. We will hit another crisis if that is not the case. I expect that unemployment will rise significantly as a consequence of COVID-19. It is our task to ensure that we provide as much opportunity for people to maintain and retain their business so that they can pick it up when the crisis is over.

Mr O'Toole: I echo what the Minister said about people who work in our food industry and, particularly, in the waste sector. As with lots of people — front-line healthcare workers and lots of other people — the true value of what they do and how they serve us is becoming more apparent every day that we go through the crisis — how much we depend on them, their sacrifice, their hard work and the fact that they get up early to do things for us.

I also echo what the Minister said about the banking sector, but I say that we need the banking sector to really step up here. There are too many reports. Particularly given the fact that our big, four banks are dominated by banks that are controlled by the state in Dublin or the state in London, we need them to really step up for our farmers and our businesses generally.

In the past, the Minister teased me about being a Member for South Belfast. There are not too many big farms in south Belfast, but there are lots of people who rely on and buy food. Indeed, I am one of them. I am pleased to say that, in the last week, I got a great delivery of local seafood from Sea Source NI, which I give a shout out to. It is based in Kilkeel. Fishermen from County Down drop off their catch, and it is being delivered to houses during the current crisis.

I am interested in whether the Minister or the Department can offer guidance to consumers who want to be part of a solution in buying local. Clearly, farmers and fishermen are getting their produce to supermarkets, and that is great. People are going into supermarkets, social distancing and, hopefully, buying responsibly. In what ways can people support local producers? Can there be an online portal through which people can see where they can buy great, local produce? How can the Department help with that?

Mr Poots: I can speak for my local area. The local authority is doing excellent work in providing information, as are all the local shops that are doing home deliveries. I am seeing all the wee butchers and bakeries and so forth popping up, and they are offering home deliveries. It is tremendous. I am on a few community pages, where people are saying, "Do you know what? I just ordered so much from such-and-such a shop, and we had it round two days later, and it was a great service", and then others are buying into that.

I suppose, in any crisis, you want to see whether good things can come out of it. It really would be good if there was more support for local businesses, because, when the going gets tough, they are the people who are always there. They are always there. I think that it would be tremendous to see a revival in our local butcheries, bakeries, greengrocers and all of those kinds of shops. It has been sad to lose them, over the years, and to see the big multiples come in and just take them all out. We will maybe learn to appreciate the small retailers a bit more, and we will maybe spend a pound or two more in local shops to sustain them and keep them going, as opposed to always looking for the cheapest option. Very often, the cheapest option is not in the big multinationals, but they are very good at marketing themselves.

Mr Butler: That was nicely teed up for me, Minister, because I want to talk about the small shops and agriproducts. I commend you, Minister, for your performance, and, along with the Executive team, there is no doubt that you were cut out for this role and for this Department. You are passionate about it, which was heard today when you spoke so passionately about the complexity of the services that underpin your Department and all those that serve.

I have just one point to make before I get to my question, if you will indulge me, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. You talked about the refuse collectors being out at 6.30 am waking you up. I have been living in the country for 20 years, and the only people who can beat those people in waking you early are the farmers, who get up at 5.30 am with the 3-ton roller on the back of their tractor outside your house — God bless Will Greer.

Minister, you highlighted some of the issues about the sale of agriproducts, and you answered the last question brilliantly. I am a former butcher, and I am passionate about butchers' shops and buying locally. Would you consider recommending putting in place a minimum price guarantee on agriproducts in supermarkets to ensure a fair return for primary producers and for those shops that we want to support? As you rightly pointed out, a number of shops are benefiting at the moment because they are able to provide that local service quickly for people, but we also know that, on the other side of this, the pressure that will come on people will be to buy cheap. I remember that, when I was a butcher, Brazilian beef came in, and we were

selling Irish beef but could not compete. We were seeing these wee skinny steaks, and the date on those pieces of beef when they came in was for four or five months, and you were saying, "How on earth does that stuff last in a pre-packed packet?". There is just something not right about it. Will you consider putting such a recommendation in place, Minister?

Mr Poots: We have lived in a generation that has witnessed globalisation, and we are perhaps now suffering because of that globalisation. The fact that people travel so much around the world has led to this virus travelling so easily around the world as well. If, 200 years ago, a virus had struck in China it probably would have just stayed in China. A reality of globalisation is that people are travelling and doing things all over the world, and, consequently, everything is global.

I think that it is time to pause and reflect. I am not sure how, legitimately, we can actually have minimum food prices, and I am not sure that that is somewhere that our national Government probably want to go. Ultimately, there are 65 million people in the United Kingdom, and there are a few hundred thousand farmers, so politically it is probably not the wisest thing for any Government to drive the food costs up for the 65 million to assist the 200,000 or 300,000. Nonetheless, there are ways of helping and supporting the hundreds of thousands of farmers and food processors and of ensuring that the public get good-quality food.

One thing that has really come to the fore in this is food security. We live on an island, and I know that there have been issues and that we are dealing with those, such as ferries, and Minister Mallon is leading on that and is doing a good job. But there are issues with ferries, and we need to retain the ferry service between not just Northern Ireland but Ireland and Great Britain. Ten per cent of our goods come in from Dublin, and 98% of our oxygen comes in from Dublin, so those connections have to exist. The fragile connection that really exists is between Great Britain and Europe; if there any issues at all at Calais, problems are caused. If capacity at Calais goes down, Britain very quickly does not have enough food for itself.

There are very smart people who advise in Number 10 and in other places, and Mr Toogood was one of those people and would not have given this advice; I know that he would have known better than to give such advice. In the last six weeks I heard a couple of advisers say, "We do not really need British farmers any more, and we do not need to produce food in Britain any more". What stupid advice that was. The most ordinary person in Britain, without any degrees or qualifications, can see that we need food that is produced locally. It is better produced locally, it is fresher produced locally, we have more traceability locally, so we need to support those local businesses. Perhaps we can engage on that with our business sector and local government after this and on how we can build up our local shops again. How do we fill our high streets with local shops again, and how do we take back control of our life from maybe the global superpowers, the multinationals and all that? Mr Carroll will think I have had a real conversion, *[Laughter]* but I genuinely have a passion for local business. I do not like all of these big guys coming in and dictating what we should be doing and how we should be living our lives. I accept the reality, maybe a little bit more than Mr Carroll on occasions, but I do see

an opportunity for us to revive that side of things again, beyond this.

Mr Givan: I thank the Minister for what was a very comprehensive statement, which recognises the breadth of the Department, and also the way in which the Minister is across that detail. He did serve in multiple Departments and has considerable experience, and I know that has been of great value to the wider Executive as well, and so we encourage him in the work that he is doing on that front.

He has highlighted a number of innovative ways in which he is adapting the Department's laboratories to be used for increasing testing. The wider public really need to see much more testing, and the utilisation of AFBI to do that will be very important going forward. Can he elaborate on any more innovation that can take place?

He said in his statement that:

"we are all in this together",

and we have talked at length about supporting those local businesses that often contribute greatly to their local community in a way that the big multinational global corporations cannot always do. Often, they are more interested in paying out a dividend to shareholders than in their community reach in the localities in which they operate.

Over the past week, a number of farmers have contacted me, and they are hugely frustrated at the import of cheap beef from outside the locality. At a time when they need support, they do not feel that they are getting that from the large supermarkets. What steps is the Minister taking to deal with the supermarkets' supply chain to encourage them to support local farmers, and also to deal with some of the evidence that is coming through that those large supermarkets are increasing prices on some of the core basic materials that go into people's baskets? I have heard from constituents that items that are fundamental to the home have become more expensive in the past two weeks, and this is at a time when people's money in their pocket is not going as far as it used to.

Mr Poots: Some of the competition rules that exist for supermarkets have been slackened because of the circumstances that exist, and necessarily so. I do not consider that to be something that should be seen as an opportunity by people to make more money. Retail trade was up 22% in March. Everybody can see how our supermarket shelves were emptying, and they were benefiting greatly from the buying that people were engaging in. There is anecdotal evidence that prices are slipping upwards, and I have to say that that is not appropriate unless there is a particular reason that goods have to be raised in price because they are costing considerably more and there is no choice but to pass that on. There needs to be very good reason why the public at home are paying more for goods and services without there being a very significant justification for it.

When it comes to the importation of beef, I raised that with the two supermarkets involved. I called them out on it very clearly and said that it was not acceptable. Interestingly enough, they said that it was not going to happen again, but they said it was necessary the last time. I do not accept that it was necessary and I do not believe that it should have happened. We are all in this together. At a time when there are pressures on beef prices, where farmers'

incomes over the past two years have reduced by 24% and 25% respectively, it was entirely inappropriate to be importing product at this time to the UK supermarkets.

I urge the supermarkets to support local people and to support local businesses because it is local people who support them. They are not getting business from all over the world; they are getting the business from local people. Therefore, they need to support local people and they need to support them by buying locally and by selling at prices that are not inflated in a period of crisis, because it would be entirely inappropriate for consumers to have to pay more to gross up the profits of large corporations.

Ms Anderson: I thank the Minister for his statement. I listened to you quite carefully when you were talking about the risk of social isolation due to restricted access to much-needed services, and I was conscious of what you said around the collaborative work that is taking place between you and the Minister for Communities, Deirdre Hargey, particularly around feeding the most vulnerable in our society through food banks. It struck me, and maybe it just was not in your statement, but it would be helpful for us to understand the kind of collaborative work that is going on between you and the Minister for the Economy in the context of broadband.

I do not live in a rural community, but I have lots of friends who do, and it is very difficult to communicate. We are telling people to stay at home, yet we know the difficulties with broadband. There are lots of apps now, such as Zoom, Discord and even Houseparty. Those are apps that I had never heard of before this pandemic, but they are allowing us to communicate with our families, friends and loved ones, yet people from rural communities who do not have access to broadband are finding that most difficult. Thousands of people have been sent home to work and cannot because they do not have access to broadband. If you cannot elaborate today, it would be good if you could come back to us at some stage to give us an understanding of the work that is being done between you and the Economy Minister to intensify broadband during this time, which would encourage people to stay at home.

Mr Poots: We have recognised for some time that rural broadband is a weakness and, consequently, our party secured £150 million for rural broadband in particular. A lot of that spend will be in Fermanagh and Tyrone, and I welcome that. It is good that those areas that have not benefited as well as others will have that opportunity. It is critical that that is rolled out as quickly as possible, and the Department of Finance is a key player in the delivery of that. Thus far, there has been a considerable degree of cooperation throughout the Executive on that issue. Unfortunately, we will not have it delivered for the end of this crisis or for the middle of it.

One of the added complications is that the providers are not allowed to go into people's homes now. So they can bring your broadband to your front door and fix you up with a plug, which you will plug in, but that is just a further complication. We are totally committed to ensuring that the broadband that is enjoyed by most can be enjoyed by that greater number throughout rural communities. It will be very difficult to achieve 100%, but I believe that we can get up to 98% or 99%, which would be a good asset.

The Member rightly points out that people really need it now just for ordering food from the shops and for the

simple things in life. One of the things that we will do, and, again, it is with the Department for Infrastructure — it is great to see how Departments are working with each other; we have been working closely with the Department for Communities, the Department for Infrastructure, the Department for the Economy and so forth — is that, instead of taking isolated people to the services, we will see how we can deliver and take the services to the people using rural transport services. It is crucial that those buses are not sitting there doing nothing and that they are used to deliver services to the rural community.

Ms Armstrong: Minister, I wish your family member well. It is a very tough time for all of us, but it hits very close to home when it affects us individually.

I will start off by saying thank you to you and your Department for keeping things going. I also convey thanks on behalf of the fishing industry for the support package that has been put in place. I have been communicating backwards and forwards with the Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation (NIFPO), which is based in Portavogie. They have said that it is a very, very welcome support to the boats, but they have a concern that it does not cover the needs of the crew — the concern that you mentioned. Many of our fishing crew are self-employed share fishermen. Most of them live below the poverty line. As self-employed, they will be reliant on the Government's self-employed income support stream, but we know that it is going to take some time for that to come through, unfortunately. You talked earlier about support for agriculture and farmers. I ask you to consider those crew as well.

NIFPO has concerns about some of their foreign crew in particular. There are 60 nationals working for NIFPO members. They are self-employed, but they are in the country under a transit visa. That visa is based on a reciprocal arrangement between countries and does not require that they pay tax in the UK. Those 60 men have no tax history and, since the collapse of our markets, have had no income and no recourse to government help. Boats are getting some money, but consideration of those vulnerable crewmen is missing from that package. Therefore there is not enough money to pay the boats' bills and crews. I ask you, probably with the Minister for the Economy, if you have any sway, to seek help from HMRC and the UK Government to consider a scheme similar to the hardship scheme, for instance, that is being brought forward for students by the Minister for Communities. Perhaps, we could have something like that for those fishing crews in the interim, until they can claim that money.

I wish you and your family a very happy Easter.

Mr Poots: Thank you. The member, rightly, raises a significant issue and problem. Our fishing industry has been supported greatly by crews from other countries. They were eastern European, primarily, but, in latter years, more of the crews have been from the Philippines and Ghana. They are excellent fishermen — brilliant at repairing the nets. They are skilled people. That is an argument that we have been having with the UK Department for a number of years. These people are not labourers; they are skilled fishermen and need to be recognised as such, coming in.

At this time, one section of those people does not qualify for the 80%, and that is causing problems and hardships. We are aware of it, we have raised it and we are trying to

seek solutions to it. I am not sure that that is going to be simple. I am aware that a lot of the boats were out fishing again. There is an intention to go out later this week, because the weather is not suitable for them at this time, but they intend to go out later this week, which may help them to some extent. The problem is that the price that they are getting for their product is significantly down. One good thing is that the fuel costs are also significantly down, but it does not compensate for the amount that the fish is down. However, added to what we have offered, it may help to see them over the next number of months, but I do not see what is offered as a magic bullet for the fishing industry. There are other issues, problems and complications that we need to try to assist them with, and I recognise that.

Mr Dunne: I, too, thank the Minister for his statement. I put on record my appreciation for all your efforts in supporting the agriculture and fishery industry at this difficult time, and for all of your work in ensuring that there is fresh food on the shelves of our shops and supermarkets. I know that you have done a lot of work on that.

Minister, is there an indication of a reduction in the farm-gate price for milk for farmers at this difficult time, in light of the drop in demand that you would assume there is for milk as processors are unable to carry out their work, businesses and schools are shut and a lot of tourist venues are closed?

Mr Poots: The dairy sector is having huge problems; there is no secret about that. The spot price of milk has fallen dramatically. We are probably looking at a spot price for milk of about 15p a litre. That will probably be reflected in what is paid to farmers next month, albeit it will not be as low as 15p, thankfully. We are looking at schemes through which we could support the farming community in that.

There were 12 million litres of surplus milk in the UK last week. A lot of that is down to the restaurant trade disappearing. For example, Lakeland Dairies supplied all of the milk products to many of the aeroplane companies, so, when you opened that wee sachet of milk, it was milk that was produced here. It supplied companies across the world and was very successful, and that has gone. It has had to readapt and try to change its processing lines and find other markets and so forth. It is a desperately challenging time for the food-processing sector. Nobody is buying to use at home those wee sachets of butter that you would use in a restaurant or a hotel.

Such companies are facing real, critical difficulties, and the one sector in agriculture that has large debts is the dairy sector. It has traditionally been more profitable, and, as a consequence of that, the banks have been more willing to lend. Having seven-figure debts exists within the dairy farm sector. It is not super common, but it is not irregular either for dairy farmers to have debts of over a million pounds and several million pounds. That is going to cause real problems if the milk price drops off the cliff. It is important that we are nimble and agile with our response, and that is why I will be encouraging the European Union to be quick in its response. That is why I will be encouraging the UK Government to be quick in their response, and that is why, over the course of the past week in particular and in the previous week, I have been driving home the importance of responding quickly to this crisis and not allowing it to develop into a micro-crisis in the midst of the current health crisis.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Minister for a very comprehensive statement and, indeed, a very engaging question-and-answer session. Poots and Lenin just rolls off the tongue. If we add Mr Allister to it — he is away — I thought we might have a revolution on our hands.

I want to return to the issue of rural broadband and acknowledge the investment that his Department has made and the confidence-and-supply money, which, hopefully, will be honoured, if it has not been honoured to date. For many farmers, the deadline for single farm payments is coming on 15 May, and, considering that many will be isolated and rural, obviously, is there an opportunity to extend that deadline beyond 15 May?

Before I end, I also want to offer my support to the Minister's relative who is unwell. I wish them a speedy and full recovery.

Mr Poots: Thus far, as Norman told me earlier, 6,500 people have their single farm applications in, so that is very good. That is out of how many, Norman?

Mr Fulton: About 23,000.

Mr Poots: Twenty-three thousand, so we are sitting now with about 25% in. I encourage people to continue to do that. We have already offered some degree of flexibility at the end. If they put something in and they are not happy about it, they can come back and amend it for a further nearly four weeks up to 9 June. We want to encourage people to do this because we are the only part of the UK that will be paying out in the middle of October, and we do not want to lose that. We want to ensure that that goes to the farming community at that time.

It is very important that farmers do receive their payments in October because, traditionally, the conacre land is paid for in October or November. Therefore, it is important to get that money into the farmers' accounts to allow their cash flow to work at that time of the year. We do not really want to extend the deadline. We will monitor it, and, if it is becoming glaringly obvious that we are nowhere near getting the numbers in that we need, we can reappraise that situation later. At this stage, we want to encourage people to keep working and keep getting the applications in. If they respond to us and get their applications in for 15 May, we will respond to them and get the payments out for 16 October.

Mr Nesbitt: Perhaps I should start by declaring an interest as a former binman as I echo the words of praise that the Minister offered our refuse collectors. If anybody is having difficulty, I will certainly try to get the old crew together and pop round to your house.

I want to thank the Minister and acknowledge the efforts that he is making to ensure that we have a fishing fleet on the far side of this crisis. It is not just about the £1.5 million in cash but the work with the agriculture research and the data gathering. I wonder whether he can expand on the sort of data that is being gathered and whether there is a range of potential conclusions that he has in mind.

Mr Poots: When it comes to being a binman, I will declare something in common. When I was at school, my first job was lifting bins. It was quite well paid at that time. I was very pleased with what we got paid. It was real work, because you had to lift the old grey bins.

Mr Nesbitt: Over your shoulder.

Mr Poots: Very often, they were filled with ash and you had to lift them over your shoulder. It was tough going for a 16-year-old —

Mr Nesbitt: Thirty-six quid a week.

Mr Poots: — and the older binmen used to have a good laugh at you struggling to lift a heavy bin while they lifted the lighter ones that they had spotted first. Those were the days.

I will turn to the work that we are doing in AFBI and in other places on research and on work that we are providing. We have offered testing services and we did that quite early. We have the capacity to test up to 1,000 cases a day, as I indicated in my statement. That will assist in getting those figures up, because once social distancing works, we will start to see figures coming down.

This is how social distancing is working, folks. Before social distancing was put in place, every person who had coronavirus was spreading it to 2.8 others. If you started off with 100,000 people, you would have 280,000 in two weeks' time and, in four weeks' time, that figure would be well over 700,000. That is where coronavirus was going. As a result of social distancing, we are on minus 1, so that number is coming down all the time. We are going to have to get out of social distancing, and the means of doing that is to have appropriate testing. Having adequate testing allows us to determine that someone has had coronavirus and is not going to get it again, so that they can be allowed back into the workforce. If we are going to get out of this, we need to have appropriate testing and research done.

One of the other things that my Department and the agri-sector can offer, if this crisis is bad enough, is the assistance of our veterinarians in hospitals. You might ask: what does someone who treats animals know about treating humans? They are experts in ventilation, and if there is pressure on ventilation, our veterinarians can help. I am just letting you know that if there are additional pressures in that regard, and we have the ventilation equipment and there are staffing problems in the hospitals, that that assistance can be provided.

I am not sure that that is the right answer to Mr Nesbitt's question. I am not sure whether the Deputy Chairperson will allow him to repeat it if I have missed something.

Mr Nesbitt: I am happy enough, but I wonder whether, if fleets are not fishing, that has a positive impact on fish stocks?

Mr Poots: I knew there was something that I had not quite picked up right. When it comes to fish stock, we have a rich supply of nephrops in the Irish Sea — better known as prawns to people who like a nice prawn cocktail. I know that Sinn Féin are into their prawn sandwiches. *[Interruption.] [Laughter.]* Anyway, for people who like their prawns and so forth, we have a rich supply of nephrops, which are exported around the world. They do very well in the mud in the Irish Sea. That stock is quite good. Our fishermen are catching haddock, of which there is a plentitude at the moment. It is better to finish the haddock stock before it goes into a new egg-laying season so that more haddock can be created. In all of that, then, we have ample supplies of certain fish. Other stocks have been challenged over the years; there has always been a bit of a struggle with the cod supply and the cod recovery programme has never really worked as well as it should have.

The problem that we have in fishing is that 70% of our product is exported and 70% of the fish that we eat is imported. We are importing cod that is processed in China and brought here and we are exporting our nephrops and crabs, which are very popular in the Far East and in China in particular. We are back to this global thing. We do not eat the fish that is produced locally. However, all the indications are that there is still a very rich harvest of particular fish varieties to be taken responsibly. The people who know best about that are those on the boats. They notice changes very quickly and identify them. It is in their interests to ensure that the harvest that exists in the Irish Sea and beyond will be there for them, and future generations, in years to come.

Ms Bailey: I thank the Minister and Department for the statement. I add my voice to the thanks given for the vital role that the waste workers, binmen, vets and farmers have played. A whole host of essential producers, who come under the remit of your Department, have contributed. That is evident from your words.

I note the successful intervention that the Minister made when Belfast City Council announced that most of its household bin collections were to be suspended. Today, the council tweeted to ask people to please stop fly-tipping on the streets. There might be a wee bit more work to be done, but it was a good intervention, and thank you for that.

Most of my questions have been answered. I was looking at access to recycling centres, trying to predict the huge volume of waste, including a lot of hazardous medical waste, that will appear on the other side of this lockdown and pandemic.

We could maybe look at agricultural waste: what is being done and what has been highlighted. The Minister mentioned the dairy industry in particular and a lot of the surplus that has been left. Today, you spoke about "carcass imbalance" and sales dropping. We are coming into the lambing season. What is being done to ensure that this surplus produce will not be, for want of a better phrase, fly-tipped into our rivers? We already see that happen from time to time in Northern Ireland, causing people further harm.

Mr Poots: At the moment, this is a business problem, as opposed to an environmental one. A surplus of goods has already been processed, and that will be cold stored until there is an appropriate time to sell some of them. That will have a significant value, at some point, and, therefore, it will not be wasted or dumped.

However, you touched upon an area wherein we could have an environmental problem. If our chicken and pork processors were to hit problems, there would be series of consequences. The first is that that material would not be available on the shelves of supermarkets, which would cause very significant problems. Chicken and pork, in particular, are very good value proteins, and they are bought by many people for their families. The second problem is that, if they are not slaughtered in the factories, they would have to be slaughtered and got rid of on-farm. How that is done creates environmental and public health problems. We cannot have farms with slaughtered animals that have not been disposed of. Those are the issues.

I mentioned, in particular, that should we hit a problem with processors, we must have contingency plans. We are developing those contingencies and working on ensuring that we have contingency plans in place. However, it is

never a contingency that we want to use, because it would be devastating for the farmers. It has the potential to cause public health issues and it is something we need to avoid at all costs. Maintaining the processing units that seek to ensure the welfare of their workers is critical. We have been having conversations with them. Our veterinarians, in particular, have been working very closely with them. We have veterinary inspectors in the factories to assist and develop social distancing. They developed the PPE that is now in many of the factories. Therefore, you have hit upon an issue that we want to avoid. If milk is not collected from farms, it will more than likely be spread on land. That is probably OK. Certainly, it is not OK for it to be dumped into drains, because it is very damaging if it gets into the waterways.

Essentially, we need to identify solutions to ensure that we keep taking the product off-farm. If we do not take the product off-farm, we create a public health and environmental problem. In particular, if one of the milk processors was to stop, that would create massive problems. If one of the pork processors was to stop, again, it would create massive problems. That is why, over the last number of weeks, I have been impressing and stressing the importance of maintaining our food-processing sector and, actually, expressing public gratitude to the people who maintain it, because, number one, they are keeping food on our shelves; number two, they are avoiding a financial catastrophe for a farmer; and, number three, they are avoiding an environmental, public health crisis for all of us to have to pick up.

Mr Carroll: The World Health Organization and the World Trade Organization have warned:

"Uncertainty about food availability can spark a wave of export restrictions, creating a shortage on the global market."

Obviously, global food production will be severely affected, if it has not been already, by this crisis. A major issue will be ensuring that we have adequate food supplies, as countries and workers are forced to go into lockdown. The idea, to be frank, that it is a problem of panic-buying, I think, is wrong.

The Minister referred at the start to the need for flexibility, and he shared some criticisms of corporations, maybe, if you can say that. Does he share the view that relying on the old ways of food production and distribution may not even be possible at the end of the crisis? Does he believe that we need to have a different approach to see a greater role for the state and, especially, his Department in ensuring that we have proper planning and adequate provision put in place so that people do not suffer from food shortages?

Mr Poots: Northern Ireland plays its role way beyond its own shores. There is a population of two billion in Africa, where, a few years ago, it was one billion. One of the means of that population having increased so dramatically is good inoculation; another one has been clean water. Obviously, a population like that also needs to be fed. One of the areas where we have extensive markets for our powdered milk is the continent of Africa. We are very good at producing milk. We can have it dried to a high specification. That is a good, safe food that can go to Africa that they could never produce enough of themselves, given the harsh climate conditions. A lot of it

goes to China. That is one of the reasons why our sector is being hit so badly.

In the rest of the United Kingdom — in Great Britain — a lot of the milk that is produced goes immediately, in its form as pasteurised milk, onto the supermarket shelves. They are less sophisticated in what they produce. It comes off the farm as milk, pasteurised, bottled and on to the supermarkets. That is the majority of their sales. The majority of our sales is powdered milk, butters and cheeses, and that is largely exported. We are much more vulnerable in Northern Ireland to the export market and the global market as a consequence. Therein lies the problem when it comes to the dairy sector.

It is important that we continue to provide quality food, because there are people in Africa and China who really benefit from it, and it is good that Northern Ireland plays its part.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Thank you, Minister, and thank you for answering all the questions.

Agenda item 4 is the time, date and place of our next meeting. We have received confirmation from the Education and Communities Ministers that they each want to make a statement to the Ad Hoc Committee at a meeting to be held on Thursday 9 April in the Assembly Chamber. The Speaker's Office will write formally to all members to confirm that.

That concludes this meeting. Stay safe. God bless.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response

9 April 2020

Ministerial Statement: Education

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Christopher Stalford (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Andy Allen
Ms Kellie Armstrong
Ms Paula Bradley
Mr Keith Buchanan
Mr Jonathan Buckley
Mr Robbie Butler
Mr Gerry Carroll
Mr Mark Durkan
Ms Sinéad Ennis
Mr Paul Givan
Mr William Humphrey
Ms Catherine Kelly
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Justin McNulty
Ms Karen Mullan
Mr Mike Nesbitt
Mr John O'Dowd
Mr Matthew O'Toole
Mr Peter Weir
Miss Rachel Woods

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): The Speaker received notification on 7 April that the Minister of Education wished to make a statement to the Ad Hoc Committee at today's meeting. A copy of the statement that the Minister intends to make is included in your pack. I welcome the Minister of Education and invite him to make his statement, which should be heard by members without interruption. Following the statement, there will be an opportunity for members to ask questions.

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to update the Ad Hoc Committee on the work that has been undertaken and is under way in the education sector in response to the COVID-19 situation.

I am grateful to all those who work in the early years, schools, youth and wider education sectors for their vital contribution at this very difficult time. The issues that we are facing have never been encountered before, and all areas of society are facing difficult challenges. As ever, the physical and mental health and well-being of the young people in our care and all our staff must be our priority. Our teachers and school leaders are doing an excellent job in supporting our children and young people and providing remote learning to maintain a daily routine.

In particular, I want to thank those schools that are open today for key workers' children and vulnerable children and those that intend to open over Easter and in the weeks ahead. In these extraordinary times, it is heartening that our principals and staff are showing such leadership and compassion for vulnerable pupils and those whose parents are key to the COVID-19 response.

I am sure that members will join me to pay tribute to teaching and non-teaching staff, their trade union representatives and the increasing number of volunteers who are now coming forward, be they school governors, retired teachers, retired classroom assistants or colleagues from the wider education sector. I am deeply grateful to those people for the whole-heartedly constructive and cooperative manner in which they have lent their support to the wider effort to respond to the enormous challenges posed by the COVID-19 outbreak.

Before going into detail on the Department's response to COVID-19, I can highlight that a formal offer on teachers' pay and workload was made yesterday to the five main teaching unions. I am pleased that there has been progress to the Executive in January, I have made the resolution of this long-running industrial dispute a priority. Indeed, this is one of the main commitments in New Decade, New Approach. I am grateful to Executive colleagues for their overall decisions on the Budget allocation to the Department of Education. They have allowed me to ensure that appropriate financial provision for a pay award has been included in my decisions on the allocations within the Department of Education's 2020-21 budget.

The five trade unions that make up the Northern Ireland Teaching Council will now consult with their members on the proposals in advance of any formal acceptance. I urge all teachers to consider the formal offer, which, if accepted, will bring an end to the industrial action that has been ongoing since January 2017 and has been having a debilitating effect on the sector.

Turning to the COVID-19 situation, the Department's COVID-19 strategy and plan supports the overall Executive strategy. Our plan is built around the following strategic priorities: first, to ensure the continuity of learning for children and young people; secondly, to support vulnerable children and the children of key workers; and, thirdly, to ensure that families do not experience hardship as a result of schools closing. Our central planning assumption is that

schools and non-statutory preschool education settings will remain open to accommodate remote learning and to ensure that there is provision for vulnerable children and for key workers' children up to the end of year 10. The vast majority of children should not attend school.

The Department will follow the Public Health Agency's advice at all times and will make use of the COVID-19 legislation and regulation-making powers only where necessary. My Department has put in place emergency response arrangements and is working closely with all its educational partners on a range of very complex issues that have arisen from the coronavirus outbreak. These include the Education Authority (EA) on service delivery issues, the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) and, on a daily basis, the teacher's unions.

Schools are regularly updated with appropriate advice as the situation evolves. These arrangements support the wider Executive response to COVID-19. In the Department, we have focused our work on six priority areas. These are: pay for the teaching and non-teaching workforce; free school meals; support for vulnerable children; distance learning; examinations; and support for key workers. In all those areas, we are attempting to address problems that we have never encountered before. We have been putting in place measures that we have never had to implement before, certainly not on this scale, and we are having to do this at great speed, with no opportunities to properly consult or test. It is really a question of deliver quickly, assess impact on the ground and refine as we go. Of course, all this is being done with a workforce that has been impacted at an organisational level and at a personal level, like everyone else in society, by the issues that this terrible crisis has visited upon us. The officials have risen magnificently to the challenge.

On pay for the teaching and non-teaching workforce, I can confirm that education sector employees will continue to receive normal pay during the COVID-19 crisis. Normal pay will apply regardless of whether people have been quarantined or medically advised to self-isolate, or are unable to work due to caring responsibilities or unable to attend their workplace due to closure. The same arrangements will apply to substitute teachers and non-teaching staff who are providing emergency cover. All current bookings through the Northern Ireland substitute teacher register will be honoured. Absences will not count towards the normal triggers for absence management or contractual sick pay and will not constitute a break in service for pensions or other purposes. We are putting in place contingency arrangements to ensure that payrolls will be processed and payments made.

I recognise that some workers in education, such as the substitute teaching workforce who would normally provide day-to-day cover, will no longer have access to secure work. Proposals have been developed for a hardship fund for those substitute teachers who were providing day-to-day cover in recent months but whose regular work has now ended as a result of COVID-19. A separate bid for this has been made to the Department of Finance and this will be dependent on additional funding.

To address concerns about the impact that school closures will have on children who are eligible for free school meals, a new direct payment scheme has been introduced for those families. From 23 March, eligible families have received fortnightly payments of £2.70 per child per day

for each day of term that the schools are closed. To avoid further hardship, the payment will continue over the 10 schools days of the Easter period. To date, over 51,000 direct payments have been made for 93,000 children, and, by 15 April, over 96,000 children's families will have received payments.

We are aware of a number of children who have not received direct payments because no bank account details have been made available to the Education Authority. The EA is working hard to obtain the bank details, and I urge everyone whose children receive free school meals to get their bank details to the EA as soon as possible. We also know there are a number of children whose families have no bank accounts at all, including 360 children of asylum seekers. We are working with the Home Office to resolve that issue urgently.

The Department for Communities has announced a number of additional measures to support the provision of food and assistance to vulnerable groups, and my officials are working closely with that Department to ensure that food is available to those families. As part of the voluntary and community sector response programme, which is coordinated by DFC and was agreed by the Executive, the Youth Service will work with the councils to assist in the provision of food for vulnerable young people. The funding for that was agreed yesterday by the Executive and announced by the Finance Minister earlier today.

The Youth Online website allows young people to register a food need. Going forward, its role is expected to involve the provision of food for over 3,000 vulnerable young people who remain at risk despite the free school meal direct payments. I am grateful for the proactivity that the Youth Service has demonstrated in response to COVID-19 to date. I know that it will have a vital contribution to make, working alongside other partners at local level.

In line with the rest of UK, I am prioritising support for vulnerable children and their parents and carers. I appreciate that school is a protective factor for many vulnerable children. For some, it offers the only stability in their lives. Vulnerable children should therefore be facilitated to attend school where it is in their best interests and safe and appropriate to do so. Schools, parents and carers — and social services, where children have a social worker — should work closely together to determine the safest option for each child. The Education Authority has a range of services in place to provide support for vulnerable children and their parents. My Department continues to engage with colleagues in the health and social care sector to ensure a continuum of support for families, including those children who are on, or on the cusp of, the child protection register, as particular pressures could materialise if they are at home for significant periods. We are also developing further guidance to support vulnerable children, including those who attend special schools. I anticipate that this will be published shortly.

The EA and the health authorities have given assurances that provisions are in place to meet the educational and care needs of children who attend special schools. Where school buildings are closed to pupils, a range of creative approaches is in use, with online learning platforms being used to maintain contact and engage directly with children. Protocols remain in place between schools and Health and Social Care, keeping all the needs of children at the forefront of decision-making. As our children and young people have

more free time, it is only natural that they will spend more time online. We want to make sure that teachers, parents and carers have all the knowledge and advice that they need to keep children safe online. I will announce further measures to help them in the coming days.

The Department has published guidance on its website in relation to social distancing and personal protective equipment (PPE) in education settings. Current NHS guidance is that, where staff and children are not symptomatic, no PPE is required over and above normal good hygiene practices. Further guidance is being developed in Great Britain on the use of PPE in education settings, including in relation to children and young people with complex needs. The equivalent Northern Ireland guidance will be published once it has been cleared by the Public Health Agency.

That said, the EA has received a supply of PPE and cleaning materials, which is available to all schools, including special schools, on request. On a number of occasions, there has been delivery of that equipment. It should be noted that, in the main, parents of children who attend special schools have decided to keep their children at home. Where key workers or parents of vulnerable children who normally attend a special school, or indeed any school, wish to send their children to school, they should, in the first instance, discuss this with the school, which will determine whether it can accommodate the request.

In the current context, distance learning is clearly vital to support continuity of learning and provide a sense of purpose and daily routine for our children and young people. My Department, together with the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, the Education Authority, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), is focused on ensuring that appropriate action is being taken to secure, as far as possible, the learning, progression and well-being of our children and young people. Our delivery partners have identified designated link officers who are the first point of contact for schools. These officers are working with schools — every school has a point of contact — to provide pastoral and practical support to ensure that individual issues are resolved promptly and to identify what more can be done to support continuity of learning. Expertise in the EA, CCEA and ETI is being used to ensure that curriculum resources are available when and where needed. There have been additional offers of help from outside those bodies.

Schools have been proactive in supporting home learning, and teachers have devised booklets to guide parents on how to use learning platforms. Substantial capacity and provision exists within the Education Network service to support learning and teaching outside the classroom. We are also seeing some very positive statistics. On Friday 3 April, almost 45,000 individual students and teachers accessed the EA Education Network portal from home. In excess of 80,000 visits to the EA Education Network portal were made from homes over a 24-hour period and over 720,000 emails were sent and received by students and teachers within that 24-hour period.

Turning now to qualifications and examinations, I recognise that exams are a key concern for children and parents. In the absence of exams this summer, my priority is to ensure that pupils can move on as planned to the next stage of their lives, be it starting university, further

education, sixth form or an apprenticeship or employment. It is crucial that no one is disadvantaged. My officials have been working closely with CCEA and colleagues across the UK to develop appropriate arrangements that are robust as well as fair. I want to ensure that we maintain alignment with arrangements in England and Wales as far as possible to ensure that learners here are not disadvantaged, particularly in relation to admission to university. However, I need to take account of policy differences between the different jurisdictions and take decisions that, ultimately, are right for the young people of Northern Ireland.

CCEA has provided the Department with detailed advice on a range of options, and my officials have been assessing these and consulting with key stakeholders, including representatives of head teachers and some teaching unions. I expect to be in a position to make key decisions very soon and will announce these as soon as possible. Once I have taken those decisions, CCEA will be instructed to implement them as a matter of urgency. There will be a significant amount of detailed work required, including work to develop an appropriate appeals process and arrangements for private candidates. CCEA is developing detailed guidance for schools. It will be finalised and issued as soon as decisions have been taken.

My Department is also working closely with the Department for the Economy to ensure that those who are taking vocational qualifications are not disadvantaged by the cancellation of scheduled exams and assessments. The Economy Minister made reference to that yesterday.

Members will be aware that the Executive have asked parents to keep children at home, wherever possible, and that schools remain open only for those children who absolutely need to attend. The education sector has been asked to deploy its resources as part of a wider national — indeed, global — effort to keep vital services functioning for the greater good. Schools are not open for normal business. Schools and preschool settings should be open where it is safe to do so, as per PHA guidance, to provide supervised learning for those children who are vulnerable, or whose parents' work is vital for the functioning of essential services, for example, the children of key workers. This is a very last resort: children should not come to school if alternative arrangements can be made.

In recent weeks, between 750 and 1,400 vulnerable children and children of key workers have attended 400 to 500 schools for supervised learning and educational supervision. In these schools, around 750 teaching staff have been on site along with around 600 non-teaching staff. I should say that because those are the individual figures for a particular day, the global number of children will actually be higher because many parents will, for example, have other arrangements for two or three days but want to have their children in school on the other days. The figure can be a little bit misleading.

On a daily basis, we are gathering data from schools and the wider education sector on the key issues, including the number of schools that are open and the number of pupils at schools. So far, uptake of the scheme has been relatively low, which is consistent with the pattern elsewhere in Great Britain. That would suggest that parents are keeping their children at home where it is possible. That could change in the coming weeks due to the predicted surge, but it will depend upon parental choices. Mechanisms are in

place to capture the information that is needed to allow the Department and the managing authorities to refine, adjust and replan as necessary in light of the ever-changing situation. If school leaders consider that it is unsafe to open because they do not have the staff available, they should either not open or limit the number of pupils who are permitted to attend accordingly.

In addition, schools have been working on collaborative cluster arrangements. Work is continuing to be done that in. The Department has been working closely with the EA and other education partners to assign a link officer to every school or cluster to ensure that sufficient provision exists to care for vulnerable children and the children of key, critical workers. The system is bedding in well.

The EA has a helpline for key workers and a registration system whereby key workers who are having trouble getting a placement for their children can request additional help. The number of unplaced children has decreased in a matter of days, from 271 to 131. The number continues to come down. We are confident that those children will be placed soon.

An increasing number of school leaders are coming to the fore to establish cluster arrangements with immediate effect. They are supported by EA teaching staff and volunteers to ensure that there is sufficient provision for the children who need it. The Department, the EA and other education partners will continue to work closely to support that leadership in the days and weeks ahead.

I put on record my thanks to the educational leaders in our community who are playing their part to support vulnerable children and the children of key workers by opening their schools and working collaboratively with other schools at this unprecedented time. We are all in this together, and we simply could not do it without that leadership.

Members may be aware that, on 27 March, I announced a volunteering scheme to assist in the response to COVID-19. The aim of the scheme is to give extra support to teachers and other school staff to carry out the various duties that are required for the supervision of children, and they are ready to be deployed if that becomes necessary. Early figures for the volunteer scheme are encouraging. As of today, 1,088 people have applied to be a volunteer. So far, 882 of those people have already been cleared by Access NI. We are continuing to process applications. The scheme will operate alongside the clustering measures that the Department and others are developing.

Finally, in relation to childcare, I am pleased to inform members that my colleague Robin Swann, the Minister of Health, and I have published a joint announcement that sets out the arrangements that we will put in place to provide childcare for vulnerable children and the children of key workers across Northern Ireland. We have secured a significant funding package of £12 million, which will help to address a number of key issues for childcare provision in response to COVID-19. These include: the need to ensure that registered childcare providers, including childminders, who are providing childcare for a reduced number of vulnerable children and the children of key workers, during limited operating arrangements, can do so without risking the sustainability of their provision; to ensure that key workers and parents of vulnerable children can access childcare places and do not experience financial hardship as a result of needing

longer hours of childcare or incurring higher costs for the bespoke approved home childcare scheme; and to ensure that registered childcare and day-care providers and childminders who need to operate longer hours, holiday cover or evening provision are supported to do so.

The package of emergency measures also seeks to address sectoral sustainability by developing a support measure for registered settings that have closed. We all need to realise that we must ensure that there is a childcare sector in place when we come out of this crisis. That measure will interact with the financial assistance measures that were announced by the Chancellor and are being administered by the Department for the Economy, of which childcare settings and childminders might be able to avail themselves.

More detail on that package of support measures will be made available. Essentially, we aim to provide a bespoke, approved home childcare scheme to enable key workers to have their childcare needs met in their own homes; enhanced support for registered childminders who provide childcare for the children of key workers and vulnerable children; support for registered day-care centres to remain open for the children of key workers and vulnerable children in locations where key workers need them most and for those settings that have been forced to close; childcare advice and guidance for parents who are key workers, including a helpline; and advice and guidance for registered settings and providers. I hope that the measures that we have announced today will provide much-needed reassurance to parents of vulnerable children and to key workers that a range of approved and registered childcare options is available and, importantly, that the additional costs of keeping key aspects of provision operational during this time will not be passed on to them. Parents who need it will not be required to pay any additional childcare costs during this period that might arise from the approved home childcare scheme.

These measures do not change the starting position that we have adopted: where possible, children should be cared for in their own home. Schools, preschool education settings, registered day-care facilities and childminders should be providing care only for the children of key workers and vulnerable children. It is essential that we work together across the education and health sectors to ensure that vulnerable children and those of key front-line staff can access safe and responsive provision. The new measures will sit alongside the support being provided by schools and preschool education settings for the children of key workers and vulnerable children. I know that childcare is a key issue for many parents. It is even more critical for key workers, and we need to support them in the fight against coronavirus. I hope that members agree that the package of measures that Robin Swann and I have announced today will go some way towards helping key workers access a wide range of childcare provision and help to protect and sustain the childcare sector so that it is in a position to remain open or, for some, reopen when the COVID-19 crisis ends.

It is difficult to overestimate the challenges that our society faces as a consequence of the COVID-19 outbreak. Our lives, family and work are being influenced and impacted on every day in ways that we could never have imagined a few weeks ago. The position on COVID-19 is exceptionally fast-moving, and I have made it my priority to bring as

much clarity as possible, as quickly as possible, on the full range of very complex issues that we face. My Department is working hard to support the education sector in the fight against the virus. In the months ahead, the Department will continue to have a crucial role to play not just in relation to the pressure being felt by the education sector but the related health, economic and social issues being felt by our society. I am sure that, by continuing to work closely together, we can make a significant contribution to the overall effort to address and defeat this threat to the well-being of our society.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): I thank the Minister for making his statement. I now invite members to ask questions, and I will allow a period of around one hour for that. It is my intention to allow as many members as possible who wish to ask a question to do so. However, as per Tuesday, that depends on members asking focused and succinct questions. Members may ask one question only, and it must be related to the statement that has just been made by the Minister of Education. The Chairperson of the Committee for Education, Mr Lyttle, will be allowed some latitude, and he can ask two questions of the Minister.

Mr Lyttle (Committee Chair - Committee for Education): Thank you Principal Deputy Speaker, and thank you for your service at this difficult time. I thank the Minister for his statement and for the democratic accountability that it affords the Assembly. That is more important than ever. I also thank the teaching and non-teaching staff across Northern Ireland for their courageous and innovative leadership during the emergency. School leaders have established their own guidance and approaches, and many of our schools are fabricating essential PPE to protect our community. We thank them for that, and we welcome the formal offer to hopefully deliver the long overdue fair teacher pay and conditions settlement. I also thank the children and young people in our community who are staying at home to protect the NHS and to keep us safe.

The Education Minister's guidance to schools is to close, other than to the children of key workers and vulnerable children. That includes children with a statement of special educational need. All special school pupils have a statement of special educational need: that is around 6,000 children across Northern Ireland and, I think, up to 30 schools. The Education Minister will be aware that there is particularly close, one-to-one contact in those settings, so I ask him when he has met the special school leaders. What arrangements has he put in place to make PPE, testing and medical provision available so that special schools can open? What arrangements are in place for that to be provided remotely, when pupils are at home? What action has he taken to enable the reopening of special schools in due course?

Mr Weir: My mathematics suggests that that is more than two questions, but I will try to cover it as one main question.

We are in constant contact with special schools. The member is right about the impact. A "vulnerable child" is not simply defined as anybody who has a statement; it is in a wider context than that. As part of this, there are particular issues with those who are particularly medically vulnerable and those who are not. Sometimes the two can be conflated, although I appreciate that the member is not in any way conflating them.

We are in constant contact with each special school, and the Chair has, I think, made helpful suggestions about direct contact with some of the groups. We find, first of all, that, in the vast bulk of cases, even if their child has a medical vulnerability, most parents have expressed a desire to look after their child directly at home. Many of the schools are not open at present. Where they are open, we are trying to facilitate them, but we have been told by, I think, 23 of the special schools that they have had no request from any parent to be open. It is therefore about accommodating where there is need.

As indicated, where there are requests for PPE, there will be a response. I think that I mentioned that at the Committee. I am trying to find the details. As part of the overall PPE procurement process, while the focus has clearly been on the health service and on health workers, through the Department of Finance's Central Procurement Directorate (CPD), a small stock of PPE has been held back for requests from other agencies and Departments. As a result, a wide range of stock has been obtained, most of which will also relate to hygiene. Stock is constantly being renewed, and there has been a wide range of deliveries. For instance, if you include all elements of stock, there has been some level of delivery to, I think, 580 schools. While there is remaining current stock — things such as aprons and face shields — an amount has been delivered. We have tried to facilitate that where it is needed, where it is necessary and where it has been requested, and that remains the position. Individual employees in special schools have perhaps raised the issue about PPE, but I do not think that we have had a direct request from a school saying that it is closed because of a lack of PPE. Working with the EA, we will be happy to accommodate that, where possible.

On the matter of reopening, there is a wider context that the Executive will have to face, which is to decide when it is safe and appropriate to open schools; indeed, there is a wide range of things to consider. That will be kept under constant review. There are no plans at this stage to reopen in the immediate future. It is important that we get on top of the virus at a time when there is a level of surge. We will obviously tailor any responses that involve the wider school sector as time moves on. It is a moveable situation.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive statement to the House this afternoon.

Minister, I am sure that you will agree with me and join me in congratulating the north Belfast principals who, a number of weeks ago, gathered together some PPE and delivered it to the Mater Hospital for the NHS staff working on the front line in that hospital. Will you also join me in commending the principal of St Malachy's College in north Belfast, Dr McBride, and his governors and senior management team for making the school available for use by those same workers in the Mater as they continue to fight this wretched disease?

I thank the Minister for all that he, Mr Baker, his permanent secretary, and their team have done. We will reach the peak in the coming weeks, so I ask the Minister to outline what further developments could be put in place for key workers, some of whom may have had difficulty getting their children into school, to assist them to get their children a place at school.

Mr Weir: First, I would like to commend those schools. You mentioned St Malachy's, and I understand that there is a similar position with Methodist College: it is now doing that as well. He mentioned the north Belfast schools. A wide range of schools is doing that. I do not want to name individual schools, because I am sure that I will forget some of them.

One of the things that has been very apparent is the number of schools that, beyond simply the role they have played in providing education or support for key workers, have provided and have looked and seen — particularly because there would be more potential availability in the post-primary sector — what stock and resources they have and, where they have found face masks and aprons, they have provided those. I have seen that across all the sectors and in all parts of Northern Ireland and I completely commend the work that is going on.

On the support for key workers, broadly speaking as we move ahead, part of it will be achieved through the helpful development of clusters to try to make sure that there are individual opportunities for every key worker. It is interesting that the pattern has been very similar in different jurisdictions. We had a situation on day one, when a certain number of pupils came to schools. Those numbers reduced fairly significantly within a number of days, but have remained fairly level or gone up at times since then. It is quite plausible that we could see a greater level of peak, so the clusters have a role to play. Those are not forced on schools and there will be a number of schools that will want to make individual provisions.

Given the numbers that have been there, we have not had to draw on volunteers. However, the fact that we have had over 1,000 volunteers — nearly 900 of them have been cleared so far — means that we have a ready group of people, who, if there are gaps in particular geographical areas, can step up to the plate. The best way of providing that assistance is probably through the rotation of staff and, where possible, most of the schools that have been open have ensured that those who come in do so on a rota basis so that they would come in only once every number of days. That has not been the case in every school, but it has been in a large number of schools.

A lot of work is being done by officials to collect data daily. That has been very useful. The helpline and, indeed, the contact with the EA has also been very useful and the numbers of unplaced children are coming down day by day. In some cases, to be fair, some of those referrals go beyond what any school could accommodate, because sometimes key workers will make a request on the basis that they are in work until 8:00pm or 10:00 pm and, generally speaking, it would be very difficult for any school to be able to accommodate some of those people. The important thing is that, when we reach the surge, key workers are not denied that opportunity. I have been taken by a number of schools that are staying open to facilitate maybe only one or two children of key workers in their local school communities, but those schools have felt it absolutely worthwhile to remain open to do that.

Every contribution that every school makes is making a difference. We do not know whether one individual could make the difference between somebody's life or death.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): We are nine minutes 40 seconds in and have had two questions. Just

as I asked members to keep their questions streamlined, I gently remind my good friend the Minister to do the same. I am sure that that would be appreciated. I call the Deputy Chair of the Committee for Education, Ms Karen Mullan.

Ms Mullan (Committee Deputy Chair - Committee for Education): Minister, I thank you for your statement and the work that you and your Department have done to date during this period. I particularly welcome the ongoing work of the Department and the teachers' unions to bring forward a proposal on teachers' industrial action. Thank you for that.

Minister, according to your Department, 60,000 children are being educated through remote online learning. That is under 20% of the school-going population. I have been working with the post-primary schools in Derry to provide laptops to young people who would not have one in their home. Are you concerned at the level of online learning that is taking place? Will your Department look at providing laptops and connectivity support to those who need it?

Mr Weir: If there is any lack of resources, I am sure that that could be worked through. At times, we will get figures that will be a snapshot of a particular moment in time. For example, I mentioned that in one 24-hour period something like 720,000 emails about online learning went back and forward, so there is a considerable amount being done. A number of schools in certain geographical areas of Northern Ireland, where there are particular problems with broadband, a lot of schools have provided packs, so it is not all simply online learning. A lot of that is focused particularly on the post-primary sector. We will look at whether anything else can be done.

I should say to the Principal Deputy Speaker that I will do my lines afterwards, "I must not take too long to answer". I will write that out 1,000 times for him.

Mr McCrossan: I, too, would like to pay tribute to and express my huge admiration for our teachers, teaching workforce, principals, classroom assistants and other people who are in schools, helping with the children of key workers in the health service at this very critical time.

Minister, I also put on record my appreciation and thanks to you, particularly during these challenging times. I know that it is extremely busy and challenging for you, and I have to say that you have been more than accessible and entirely open — in fact, you have, I feel, an open-door policy. It is very easy to get answers from you, and I appreciate that.

I will follow on from what William Humphrey said about St Malachy's. The school's very important announcement on entering a voluntary arrangement with its local hospital shows great leadership. I wonder, Minister — you have received correspondence from me on this — whether any consideration has been given to the wider school estate, given that schools in every town and village are very accessible for the testing that will be ramped up. Have schools been considered as places for treatment, step-down services or any form of use by the Department of Health that would be appreciated during these times?

Mr Weir: I thank the member. It is important that the public sector as a whole pulls together. The member is right to mention the availability of facilities. Direct arrangements can be made at a local level, but, in many ways, schools remain a public asset. I am more than happy to

accommodate anything that is requested. The driver in that must come centrally from the Department of Health. My general assessment — the Health Minister can speak for himself — is that, at the moment, some of the challenges out there are not particularly driven by a lack of space.

The specific case at St Malachy's was that the proximity of its showering facilities to a hospital was extremely helpful. Largely speaking, work around testing has gone on at some MOT centres, for instance. If a location is needed, I will, on request from the Department of Health or the Health Minister, be more than happy to make it available.

Mr Butler: Like the rest of members, I would like to commend you for the service that you have given as Minister of Education. I also commend the permanent secretary and echo Daniel's words that there has been an open-door approach. In these unprecedented times, that has worked better for democracy. I also thank you for your relentless pursuit of praise for key workers — our teachers, teaching staff and support staff — and the incredible job that they are doing. Further to that, in my town, Wallace High School, and Mr Monteith in particular, has done a tremendous amount of work creating PPE visors for front-line workers. I am sure that you will want to thank the school for that, as will the whole Assembly.

Minister, you referred to the ongoing work by CCEA and other exam boards. I understand, having spoken to you about this a number of times at the Committee, that protracted and diligent work is ongoing to ensure that the process is as fair as possible. However, I am increasingly coming across households with two key workers. Perhaps both parents work three, four or five 14-hour shifts a week. I just want reassurance from you that such children will not, perhaps because of a lack of parental help at a key point in their education, be disadvantaged in any awarding of marks, especially for GCSE and A-level exams.

Mr Weir: Detailed proposals are, I think, effectively, ready. I will update members: the particular point reached this week is that discussions were held with important stakeholders such as trade unions, the likes of CCMS, the EA and other organisations. The discussions identified a need for a little fine-tuning, but, broadly speaking, suggested that that would be the case. One of the slight restrictions has been that, while we want to make sure that it is absolutely fit for purpose in Northern Ireland, we also have to make sure that it is compatible with wider opportunities in the UK and that it does not clash with anything in the Republic of Ireland or beyond. I hope to bring that to a conclusion very quickly. I suspect that there would be more direct damage if, for example, we were doing exams next month and late study had been disrupted. The fact that it will be done through a mechanism — whenever that is revealed — involving a mixture of presumed grades and coursework assessment should mean that something done in the teeth of the result will have very little impact.

As part of the overall package to be revealed, there will need to be examination of what appeal mechanism there will be. Let me put it this way: I suspect that all of us who have stood for election have, at various times, felt that we did not get the result that we merited. There is no appeal mechanism in politics, but that will need to be taken account of here. As with a lot of aspects of society, even the short-term impacts will create ripples as we move ahead. At least, it has not been very geographically

centred. This applies not just in Northern Ireland but throughout the world, so, broadly speaking, it is about how we, as a society, cope with it.

Mr Givan: I thank the Minister for coming to the Committee this afternoon. Other members have spoken about the Education Minister coming here, engaging and being accessible. He has engaged with me in personal phone calls and been very quick to respond. I want to put on record a comment that a principal of one of the largest schools in my constituency sent to me. This school principal said:

"On behalf of my school community, I am emailing to thank you for your exemplary leadership at this unprecedented time in education ... You are leading from the front, and communication has been transparent, regular and informative ... I am immensely proud of my own school as we continue to support the pupils of parents who are key workers, and we are fully staffed for the first week of the Easter holiday".

It is important that we put on record not just the political appreciation for the Minister but the appreciation of principals who admire the work that he has undertaken in these very difficult and challenging times.

Members, including the Committee Deputy Chair, have raised the issue of the accessibility of online schooling. There are schools that are very much tooled up for online delivery. My children go to Wallace High School and Pond Park Primary School and, every day, those schools email my children with online assessments and feedback. However, not every school and not every home has that online accessibility. There are examples of schools that can deliver effectively, but there are also constituents contacting me who are concerned that there is not sufficient engagement and that they are not getting the necessary support to provide homeschooling. Minister, what more can schools do to provide that support? Also, can you confirm that schools will continue to provide that kind of assistance over the Easter break?

Mr Weir: Schools are continuing to provide that. I am always slightly worried when I hear praise because I just wonder what disaster is around the corner. I am sure that we have all been there. In Northern Ireland, we have the advantage of the C2k system, which enables that level of delivery for the most part. Now, that delivery will not be to every home or every area and, as I said, a number of schools are then providing material. We are working with schools to see if additional leaning materials are required, because not every school is at the same level in being able to provide those. Where help can be provided, we will be happy to step up to the mark.

The member mentioned Easter. Initially, quite a large number of schools were open. Some of those then found that no children of key-worker parents needed the school and have closed. However, the concern was that, as it is outside normal term time, there would be a large drop-off at schools over the Easter period. That has not happened. We are maintaining around 400 schools being open. Indeed, the extent to which schools have stepped up to the mark to provide that level of service is an exemplar for our society. I have been delighted to see that. Sometimes we can see negativity in the news. We can see people breaching social distancing and abusing the system. However, throughout this crisis — and the school system

is very much at the forefront of it — we have seen people stepping up to provide the best that they possibly can, and I am proud to say that that has happened in our education system as well.

Ms C Kelly: Like other members, Minister, I welcome the positive news in your statement. This afternoon, the Finance Minister announced a funding package for emergency childcare provision. What role will the Department of Education play in that initiative, and when do you believe the new package will be in place to provide the flexibility required by many key workers that has been lacking to date?

Mr Weir: Although that was announced in relation to DE, we have been working very closely with the Department of Health on the issue. From that perspective, there has been a particular problem with childcare and childcare settings because the economies of scale have meant that, in many cases, it has simply not been practical for childcare providers to open, whatever their willingness.

A school can open with a small number of staff to accommodate a small number of children. That is, in many ways, relatively straightforward. However, a lot of childcare providers are private organisations and to do that and sustain it is simply not financially viable. In addition, if they were getting a volume of children, there would be issues around social distancing.

The detail is being worked through with the Department of Health. It has been doing a trawl through its HR of those who need childcare, working through the Department's trusts and, in particular, the early learning section. I suspect that we will see elements of this coming on stream at different stages. For example, for the largest volume, we are looking at maybe 75 childcare settings. Some are ready to go straight away; some will take slightly longer. Some of those settings will be reopening after closure.

I also place on record my thanks to a number of schools that, when this initially kicked off, were not in a position to open but have worked hard to reopen. So, if you like, the traffic has gone both ways.

On the detail and practicalities of the scheme, the work that will identify the requests and need with particular childcare settings, or through the other aspects of the scheme, will largely be driven by the Department of Health and the trusts. My Department stands by, working closely alongside them, to assist them in that task, but Health will probably take the direct lead in terms of the practical implementation.

Mr Buckley: I also put on record my thanks to the Minister for coming to the Assembly today, his accessibility and, indeed, the leadership that he has demonstrated in this difficult time for all.

Much has been said in tribute to teachers and teaching staff, and I concur with it. They have done an excellent job in difficult circumstances. I also place on record, as I am sure the Minister would, our sincere thanks to the many parents who have stepped up to the teaching role in their homes. They have done so with immediate pressures, whether that is the loss of a job or trying to hold on to a job without sending children to school, as the advice has suggested, where there is an alternative to childcare.

Many have been distressed about grades. I welcome the Minister's statement which outlines a way forward, I hope,

in the coming days. There are questions around AQA examinations and whether they will be postponed, and how GCSE and A-level results will be calculated, as many parents realise that a mock examination is not always an indication of the reality.

In relation to childcare, can the Minister outline any plans to introduce emergency schools in areas of Northern Ireland where childcare provision has been lacking to date?

Mr Weir: I will deal with a couple of points on that. I hope there has been greater clarity on exams. The broad outline of where we are has been sketched out previously. I want to be in a position where the detail of that can be announced fully as a package, and CCEA would then be ready to write directly to schools and parents.

There has been a good deal of work ongoing to ensure that things are, broadly speaking, aligned. That is particularly important for A-level students. Yesterday evening, I took part in a conference call with the Education Ministers of the four jurisdictions within the United Kingdom. One of the things that was made very clear was that when A-level results are able to be announced — I know that Scotland is in a slightly different position, but certainly between England, Wales and Northern Ireland — that that is done on the on the same day at the same time: that is critical. There has got to be a little bit of a measured balance between ensuring that on the one hand we keep dates as close as to what they would normally be, but also balancing that against the issue of universities facing a particular difficulty this year, and obviously there will need to be a bit of time given for them to prepare.

In terms of emergency schools, we have scoped out a range of options. First, we are finding that the expected drop-off that would have happened during Easter has not really happened. That means that current arrangements are probably working better than maybe could have been anticipated.

Secondly, we are seeing a range of schools either formally or informally clustering. We are asking schools that are coming together — that can be in groups of two, four or five — that when they are doing that they register with the Department, and the first few of those are starting to appear. On other occasions, we have found situations in which two local schools have simply come together; they may not have made it a formal arrangement, but arranged that side of it as well. That seems to be operating as a driver to provide assistance for key-worker children who would potentially be going to a school that is closed. While the numbers are still not particularly large, we started off with a situation where a minimal amount of children were going to a school that was not their own; steadily, that number is growing.

Where we have a final fall-back position, the feeling is that the cluster side of it, as it develops, will actually work and provide the solution. There is also a fall-back that, if in a particular area it is clear that schools are simply not open and cannot accommodate the children of key workers, there is an opportunity for the EA to open up a school with a range of local staff and volunteers and provide that safety net, but we have not reached that point. With the success of the clusters starting to kick in, I suspect it may be a step that we do not have to take, but it has been something that has been scoped as a possibility if needed.

Ms Ennis: I want to thank the Minister for his time here today; it is very much appreciated. I concur with the remarks by Jonathan Buckley and I want to send a message of solidarity to the parents who are homeschooling children at this time. As a parent who is currently doing that, I can tell you it is not easy — it is very frustrating at times. However, there is support from our schools, and particularly my own child's school Bunscoil an Iúir, and I want to place my thanks to the teachers from that school for their support.

I am glad to hear the Minister say in his statement, and other members have alluded to it, that there will be a robust appeals mechanism for the predicted-grades process. That is very important and students need that reassurance. I want to ask whether, given the prevalence of cross-border study, there has been any contact between the Departments of Education North and South in relation to the admissions process and whether the various options being pursued on both sides of the border will have any adverse impact on students from the North accessing further and higher education in the South and vice versa?

Mr Weir: We have to create a situation that is seamless for everybody. In terms of direct contact on admissions, possibly uniquely, the Department of Education here will operate up to the end of secondary level and a lot of the work with the universities will have happened through the Department for the Economy. There is ongoing contact, and we are confident that there will not be barriers placed North/South or South/North in the same way that there will not be barriers placed east-west. There is recognition from universities across a wide range of areas. Indeed, I think there has also been acceptance, even on a pan-European basis, that grades will be accepted. I think people recognise the very difficult and challenging circumstances, and so there are ongoing discussions across a wide range of jurisdictions. I cannot say that there will not be some teething problems somewhere down the line, or a particular pupil that is left in some difficulty, but, generally, I am confident that arrangements will be in place to ensure that smooth transition across different jurisdictions.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): I wish to associate myself with the member's remarks, speaking as the Key Stage 2 coordinator for our dining room. I very much appreciate teachers this weather.

Mr McNulty: I want to place on record my appreciation and admiration of our teachers, principals and support staff for their versatility and their commitment to playing a very important role in defeating COVID-19. The form of the education system has been entirely reconstituted, and teachers have proven their worth in our communities and our society. I also pay tribute to parents and pupils in the same manner for the responsibility that they have all taken for defeating COVID-19. I am sure that the Minister can reassure the House that grades awarded for A levels will be recognised by universities across this island, across Europe and across the world.

On a more important issue for me personally, I am acutely aware that the enforced lockdown has confined some children to a 24/7 unsafe and frightening environment. Before COVID-19, school was a safe haven for those children, and now there is no escape. The Minister spoke about children who:

"are on, or on the cusp of, the child protection register".

Can the Minister give this House a reassurance that no child will be unsafe at home as an outcome of the enforced lockdown from COVID-19?

Mr Weir: I can certainly give the assurance that every possible action will be taken to try to prevent that. The concern that all of us have, and it is something that is shared — I was speaking to other Education Ministers last night, and there is concern and nervousness in every jurisdiction. It is not just about children who are on particular registers or in particular positions. What difficulties will occur in families where, perhaps, we do not know that there is a problem? Indeed, there may not have been much of a problem beforehand, but this will exacerbate some sort of situation.

Every effort will be made to try to protect children. I mentioned that we will be working, in the days to come, particularly on safeguarding issues online. We are working particularly closely with social services and the Department of Health to try to make sure that the range of services that is available to children, through the EA, will continue and, indeed, be tailored for that. Indeed, that is one of the reasons why, when there has been an examination of the availability of school places, it has not been just for key workers. It was also vulnerable children who would benefit from being in school, and that is why they have been a cohort of those who have been in.

It is also the case that, while people may appear, in particular circumstances, on particular registers, we also avail ourselves of the local knowledge within that. Yesterday, for instance, I wrote to all schools, saying — and I know, from talking to some of the schools, that they have been doing this already — that, where you have particular concerns with particular children, you need to bring those forward and reach out to those children. You need to contact and make that information available to social services. One of the key link points, as I mentioned, is that, for each school, there will be a range of link officers who will be there through the Education Authority. They will sometimes be a conduit, as well, between schools. It is about schools looking beyond simply, "Here is a list of names." They will apply a certain level of particular knowledge to that, and I am encouraging schools to do that.

Can I be confident that no child will be unsafe? Sadly, I do not think I am in a position to give that guarantee, in the same way that we all fear that there will be terrible domestic incidents that will happen through, I suppose, evil actions — I was about to say, "as a result of this". Ultimately, if someone commits a domestic crime or a crime against a child, whatever pressures are there should never be an excuse for perpetrating that. Sadly, while we try to avoid it where possible, I think that we will see some instances of that happening. I cannot give a guarantee that no child will be unsafe throughout this, but every conceivable effort will be made to try to protect our children as time moves on.

Ms P Bradley: I join other members in thanking the Minister for the work that he has been doing in these very worrying times and thank him for the measures that he has put in place. I also join other members in thanking all of the teaching family. We know that it is more than teachers who allow for those gates to be opened every morning. I also thank the childminders who are doing a wonderful job. I am glad to note the protections that will be put in place for childcare facilities. We know that this will end someday

and we want our children to be able to avail themselves of those childcare facilities. We also know that you have responsibility for the childcare strategy.

In your statement, Minister, you talked about clustering. If I heard you right, you said that it was a voluntary model. Can you expand on that and state how many clusters are up and running?

Mr Weir: The latest information, for those who have directly registered, is that there are around 14 direct clusters, involving around 56 schools. We are encouraging those who have made arrangements to notify the Department. Although there are link officers from the EA to help to facilitate this, some schools will want that help and others are happy to do it on their own. I spoke to a school principal last week who said that although he was running a girls' post-primary school, it was adjacent to a boys' post-primary school, with many siblings attending one or the other. So one school was, effectively, accommodating both sets of children. That would not be a formal cluster but it is there.

The reason why it is voluntary is twofold. First of all, while the overriding aim is to ensure that there is somewhere where a child can be placed in a safe environment, the most successful clusters will happen with facilitation, essentially and embryonically, by agreement and on a voluntary basis. It is also the case, particularly within some primary schools but also in post-primary, that many schools feel more comfortable with fewer children. Having a minimal number of children coming through their door can give reassurance to those parents.

With regard to the clustering, we are talking about the overall numbers, and I do not think that any school, at any stage, has gone beyond about 30 pupils. In most cases, it will be below 20 or very low indeed. A local school might end up with three or four children each day coming through the door. It will have a couple of teachers who are very familiar to those children and that school might feel a lot more comfortable simply operating on its own.

Support is available to schools so that if, for example, they feel under pressure because of staffing, that can be worked on either through the substitute list or volunteers. Clustering is not being forced on schools. We are not saying that schools must close to work with other schools. That, as an embryonic level, seems to have been developing. We are in an unprecedented situation, and it is actually about trying to scope out what is best and trying to adjust according to experience.

Mr O'Dowd: I welcome the Minister's statement and the range of answers that he has given today. It is always useful for the public discourse out there.

I am sure that the Minister will recognise the very wise decision that was made a number of years ago to stick with AS levels and modules during GCSEs and the fact that our not following Mr Gove down that rabbit hole will benefit him in reaching a decision on how we can move forward with exams.

I welcome the fact that the Minister and the Department of Finance are exploring a hardship fund for substitute teachers and how that will be rolled out. Can the Minister give any more detail on that? Is there any light at the end of the tunnel for those substitute teachers who find themselves in significant financial difficulties at this time?

Mr Weir: The Member raises a valid point. I congratulate him: it is probably the first exchange that we have had without academic selection's being mentioned. Even in dark times, there is progress.

We have scoped out a range of options that could be pursued. With regard to substitute teachers, I should point out that, broadly speaking, there are, effectively, two categories of substitute teachers, although there is an invisible line and people can move between the two. The first category covers those who do not have a permanent post in the school, but have a particular contract. A substitute teacher may well be in post for a term or two to fill in for a teacher who is on maternity leave or off work with long-term illness. Where those teachers are in place, and have a contract, that is being honoured. Those teachers are being paid on the same basis as their permanent colleagues.

The member raises an issue that has been a major problem with regard to a large section of the substitute teacher population. They may be described as "casual workers", at least with regard to their timings. They may work a day here and a couple of days somewhere else. That has been a problem because they are not direct employees. They are not self-employed. Even from that point of view, we find ourselves in a slightly different situation structurally from that of England and Wales, for instance. While a lot of those people are also casually employed there, the structures in England and Wales are such that substitute teachers there are largely supplied via agencies, and the agencies have had the opportunity to furlough workers.

Proposals have been put forward. I do not want to speak on behalf of the Finance Minister, but, to be fair, I think that he is very sympathetic to the position that substitute teachers are in. The problem that we have at present is that, in order to do the maximum that we could for those substitute teachers, it would require considerable resource. It is not there in the Education budget. It would be next to impossible to turn round to schools and tell them, effectively, to take a cut to their funding in order to fund staff who will not be providing a service. That really has to come externally. A range of options is being explored. The one problem that we have is that, given the somewhat unprecedented nature of demands, the Finance Minister, to be fair, is dealing with a large range of bids across different Departments. I think that the issue would be relatively high priority, but available resources are not enough and not sufficient at present to meet all those demands.

Each week, we have seen further movement with regard to Barnett consequentials. For instance, last night, we saw that money will be made available to charities. I think, therefore, that where we are today is not the end of the story. We are also looking at whether there are any imaginative solutions, working alongside the Finance Minister. However, I have to caution that it is difficult to see a solution unless additional money is levered in. Certainly, anything beyond that would be suboptimal.

Ms Armstrong: I would like to start by thanking the Minister, although I will declare an interest as the mother of a year-13 pupil, and say that there are a group of students — and it ties in with my question — whose mental health must be considered because, as year-11 and year-13 pupils — as Mr O'Dowd mentioned — they do not know

what will happen to them. They will be heading back to school. In your clarification, Minister, can you give some thought to those pupils, who are part way through their GCSEs and what should have been their AS levels?

Thinking about that mental health, stress and pressure, how is the learning, medical and respite care that is normally accessed by pupils at special schools being provided to children and their families who are at home now? You said that many of those families are caring for those children at home. Breaks in care can have significant difficulties for those children, especially with occupational therapy or speech and language. Many principals feel that communication, in the tone and substance, has been somewhat lacking. I just want to ensure that their voices are heard today. Can you give those principals some reassurance that they can pass to families about that support?

Mr Weir: Obviously, some of that support is health-related, so we are working with Health colleagues on that. The EA is reaching out. For instance, on mental health, contingency planning has been implemented to ensure that counselling sessions can continue. With regard to individual circumstances, we are trying as much as possible, working alongside Health, to ensure that there are bespoke interventions for individuals. Where advice goes out, particularly to schools, there is a difficult balance to be struck and that is on a number of fronts.

Around the work that is ongoing, I will make a couple of points. In terms of the balance, some people will see a particular piece of advice as being too prescriptive, while others who receive the same advice respond by saying that they actually want to be told what to do. You will get that simultaneously. Sometimes people will say that you are spending too long in getting a particular piece of advice out, while others will complain that they have not got it yet. It is about striking that balance. There has been a thoroughness in the advice that has been able to be provided, while, as best as possible, trying to give that flexibility to schools.

It is undoubtedly the case — this was particularly true in the first few weeks of this — that things that normally go through the system have had consultation, either formally or informally. I know that there is often criticism in the body politic that it takes forever to turn particular things around or to do particular things. Things that are being studied and looked at in policy development or implementation at the minute, which might, under normal circumstances, take months or weeks, are having to be done in days or hours. That means, therefore, that any advice or guidance is not, by its nature, absolutely perfect. It is why, when we put things out, it is sometimes on the basis of the best possible estimate of what can be done. I think I referred yesterday to something being a work in process. That is not on the basis of the normal meaning of “work in progress”, but it means that it is a process rather than a full stop. It is a comma rather than a full stop, and, consequently, a range of things have to be ongoing.

Mr K Buchanan: I commend those teachers who are facilitating some schools to stay open for the children of key workers.

Social distancing, as we are all aware, is very important and it is the reason why schools have been closed, which has caused massive disruption to childcare and exam

preparation. I support this action, which will help to save lives.

Does the Minister agree that reports of 200 people ignoring the social distancing regulations, which everybody is driving home day and daily, by gathering for a funeral in Mid Ulster, are deeply concerning given the direction that has been taken by every area of government? While some played pretend soldiers and risked all the people in our community, the real soldiers are battling day and night in hospitals to save lives, not to cause lives to be taken.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): The member needs to return to the content of the Minister’s statement, please.

Mr K Buchanan: I will. Does the Minister support the call for children and young people to stay at home this Easter weekend and to ignore the actions of others?

Mr Weir: This is a period when all in society have got to be responsible. I mentioned earlier that, in the response to coronavirus, we have seen in a very positive way, it bringing out the best in people. From a range of things, in responses at times, it sometimes also brings out the worst. We have seen selfishness in social distancing. My Department has been able to provide further advice on social distancing. Broadly speaking, because of the numbers that have been coming to schools — because parents have been responsible and have taken a view that, where possible, their children should be at home — social distancing has, generally speaking, not been a particular problem in schools.

There was an initial worry, here and in other places, that when the initial decision was taken to try to keep schools open on a partial basis for the children of key workers and vulnerable children, schools would be inundated with thousands of children coming in and it would be very difficult to manage. That worry was not just felt here but was shared in a wider context. People have behaved responsibly. For the most part, very few people have abused the school system.

The member mentioned the Easter period. We are living in extraordinary times, and there has been an extraordinary response. I think that all of us appreciate now more than ever the things that we normally take for granted and see as being normal. For many families, the Easter weekend has traditionally been viewed as the last break before the summer term, before pupils plunge into exams and such things. Quite often, the period has been used by people to go away and spend a few days somewhere, be it at the seaside or wherever. What I will say is that, whatever the temptation to relax, revert to being normal and do things that you would normally do over the Easter weekend, that has to be resisted by people. We are at a critical point, and all of us have a part to play, because none of us knows whether we are a passenger, if you like, for this virus. It is therefore critical, whatever the conditions over Easter, that people remain at home and behave utterly responsibly. That is particularly true for families with children, who will want to see this weekend as some sort of release valve from what has been happening. It is critical that social distancing carry on until we beat this virus.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his statement, his Department for its response to date to the crisis, and indeed the education sector as a whole for its response, which other members have touched on. I particularly

commend the Minister on his collaboration with the Communities Minister, which has now seen the roll-out of money to pay for meals for children who were in receipt of free school meals. We certainly hope that that is what that money is being spent on now.

The Minister referred to the small percentage of pupils who are not getting that access, owing to the fact that their parents do not have a bank account. Can he elaborate a wee bit more on that and on the efforts that his Department is making to make sure that those extremely vulnerable, extremely poor children get the nourishment that they need?

Mr Weir: I thank the member for his comments. There are a number of responses to that. We are in a position unlike that in other jurisdictions. One of our advantages is that Northern Ireland is not that large. Whereas other jurisdictions have had to work through local authorities, and there is great work being done there, we have been able to provide a Northern Ireland-wide solution to things, in particular on the issue of free schools meals, because the vast majority — around 95% — of the cohort entitled to free school meals were also getting a uniform grant. We were at an advantage pretty much from day one, in that a large number of bank account details for uniform grants are held by the Education Authority. We were therefore able to pay that money directly. At the start, approximately 4,000 children fell outside that number, but appeals were then made by the EA for people to get their bank account details to it. Those appeals have been largely successful. Additionally, there will be pupils who will be getting processed to come on to free school meals because of job losses in their household and parents coming on to universal credit, and that work is also being done.

That leaves two particular groups, which we are attempting to reduce in number each day. There are around 500 who, we believe, do not have bank accounts, and ongoing work is being done between the EA and those individuals to try to get them to set up bank accounts to receive the payment.

I will come to the final group in a moment. One of the less noticed parts of the funding package that has been able to be announced today is the £400,000 to Youth Service, which will try to target the money at vulnerable children in vulnerable circumstances, because it is also the case that, unfortunately, although paying money into bank accounts is the most effective and efficient way of getting it to families, doing so will not necessarily guarantee that every child gets a proper meal. Youth Service will therefore use its knowledge to support that aim.

In my statement, I mentioned one other group: that of around 360 asylum seekers. We have worked with the Department for Communities, but we are now working with the Home Office in particular. The methodology is that, although they may not have a bank account, more money can be debited into the system used. I cannot remember its exact name.

Mr Durkan: Aspens.

Mr Weir: Yes. That is it. We are working with the Home Office so that Syrian refugees and others who fall into that category will get direct financial assistance as well. It is about drilling down into the numbers to make sure that we move from the position at the start, where there were 97,000 children to be catered for. That is probably

a growing number, but we want to bring down to zero the number who still require that additional help.

Miss Woods: I will keep this brief and to the point, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, and, perhaps, you will allow me a second question.

What provision will there be for children of key workers who attend fee-paying schools? I am talking about the likes of the Steiner School. Can they be provided with support at local EA-funded school clusters?

Mr Weir: Yes. The idea with the clusters is that we want to reach a situation in which they are open, effectively, to anyone in the local area. I do not want to see a situation in which, if someone comes to a school genuinely — indeed, that is why the EA is trying to help place people. If a school is closed, there is a helpline through which parents can get in touch with the EA. That is starting to be successful in saying, “Here is a child. Here is what is available in the area”, and in trying to liaise to ensure that there is placement. As I said, while there were not very large numbers at the start, the numbers of unplaced children have gone down by more than 50% and continue to go down.

The idea and, indeed, the guidance from day one was that people should not be put off because of the sector. If there was a maintained school, it should accommodate those from controlled schools, local Irish-medium schools, integrated schools, private schools or whatever else. There is no barrier to that; indeed, there is no reason why private schools should not continue provision where they can. If someone finds that a local school is closed, the aim, more and more, is to try to find a place for them. To be fair to many schools, a lot of them will be closed in part because, particularly with very small schools, if there is some level of disruption to their staff, it makes it completely unfeasible for them to open.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Before I indulge the member and allow her to ask a second question, I would point out gently that there were 17 people on my list to speak in the debate and the member was number 16. The reason why I shimmied other people along was to ensure that the member and Mr Carroll were called. Ask your second question.

Miss Woods: Thank you very much; I really appreciate that. What is the Minister’s position on Northern Ireland universities being able to conduct admissions in a timely manner, given that the UCAS moratorium ends on 20 April?

Mr Weir: The admissions process is obviously a matter for the Department for the Economy, but we are working on a UK-wide basis to provide solutions. That is one of the reasons why, for instance, it is critical that A level results are published at an identical time so that the universities can all operate within that.

Mr Carroll: Thank you for your discretion, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I want to ask the Minister about the situation faced by substitute teachers who work off the register and classroom assistants who do not have a contract. It is concerning that they are still in limbo and do not know whether they will get a pay packet going forward. As the Minister may know, nearly one third of teachers do not have permanent contracts, which, in itself, is a damning indictment of the state of the education sector as it entered the crisis. They are public sector workers who

provide an essential service, and many of them are still working from home. What plans does the Minister have to guarantee their wages? To me, a hardship fund does not seem to cover it. What will he do to ensure that those wages are covered?

I have written to the Minister about asylum seekers trying to get access to Wi-Fi services at home. There is also an issue with some of them not having bank accounts to receive payments for free school meals. I want to make him aware of that as well.

Mr Weir: I might have to get into the Tardis to go back in time to answer a couple of those questions.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Actually, Minister, in my introduction, I said that I would allow “around one hour”.

Mr Weir: OK. Your generosity of spirit is great.

On the substitute teachers, we can call it a “hardship fund” or whatever else; it is about trying to get some level of funding that is there. The issue is the demands that are there from society as a whole across a range of Departments. At present, what is in the budget across all sectors is not enough to deal with that. As a country, Northern Ireland is largely dependent on what is in the block grant and in Barnett consequentials. At times, that has been increased through, for example, increasing regional rates — there are relatively small levers — but, from a practical point of view, that is not really an option at present. There is no lack of willingness, I think, across the board to try to tackle those issues. At the moment, the economic packages being presented reflect where we have reached in terms of what is available. The exception to that is the broader transport issue that is coming up. It is a question of trying to tailor whatever help we can. More can happen only if additional money can be levered in. That said, this is a bit of a moveable feast, in that various pots of money seem to become available as we move on. From that point of view, it is not hopeless.

I mentioned that we were working directly with the Home Office on our ability to provide funding to asylum seekers, particularly for children. The Communities Minister has already announced a package that will look particularly at providing food support for a range of vulnerable people, and asylum seekers will, I think, come under that. I do not have details of the Wi-Fi situation to hand, but it could be looked at.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Thank you, Minister, for answering questions and for your statement. We shall now have a brief suspension of five minutes prior to the statement from the Communities Minister. I remind you of my opening statement about using the appropriate doors to maintain social distancing.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response

9 April 2020

Ministerial Statement: Communities

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Christopher Stalford (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Andy Allen
Ms Kellie Armstrong
Ms Paula Bradley
Mr Keith Buchanan
Mr Jonathan Buckley
Mr Robbie Butler
Mr Gerry Carroll
Mr Mark Durkan
Ms Sinéad Ennis
Mr Paul Givan
Ms Deirdre Hargey
Ms Catherine Kelly
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Daniel McCrossan
Mr Justin McNulty
Ms Karen Mullan
Mr Mike Nesbitt
Mr John O'Dowd
Miss Rachel Woods

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): The Speaker received notification on 7 April that the Minister wished to make a statement to the Ad Hoc Committee at today's meeting. A copy of the statement that the Minister intends to make is included in your pack at page 27. I welcome the Minister for Communities to the Committee and invite her to make her statement, which should be heard by members without interruption. Following the statement, there will be an opportunity for members to ask questions.

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): Thanks very much. Hello, everyone. First, I want to formally recognise the many difficulties and challenges that people and communities, particularly our most vulnerable, face at this time. As the Minister for Communities, I am committed to doing everything in my power to support the most vulnerable in our society. I welcome the opportunity to update the Assembly on the important work that I have undertaken to support and protect people in need during this public health emergency. In recent weeks, intensive work has taken place across the Department for Communities in partnership with our multiple partner organisations to ensure that those most in need are protected and receive the help and support that they require.

One of my key priorities has been to ensure the continued delivery of benefits to those who need them and to

introduce necessary changes to the system to provide additional support and flexibilities in these extraordinary times. To date, work has been completed to change the necessary legislation, regulations and operational procedures to provide easier and faster access to universal credit, personal independence payments (PIP), jobseeker's allowance (JSA), employment and support allowance (ESA) and discretionary support. We have seen unprecedented demand in new claims for universal credit, with 45,000 cases received in the last three weeks, a tenfold increase. As a result, we have reconfigured a lot of our services to make the payment of benefit to those who need it our first priority. Since 16 March, the average number of claims received each week has been 16,650. That can be compared with a weekly average of 1,950 new claims before the emergency began. Significant operational adjustments have been put in place that put a priority on payments and supporting the most vulnerable. In the last three weeks, we have made over 35,000 regular payments of universal credit, with 99% of those paid on time. Our average speed to answer calls in these three weeks has been under three minutes. We are answering nearly 95% of calls offered to us. There will be exceptions, but please recognise the context in which our staff are delivering.

All of that has been delivered with a much-reduced workforce due to the circumstances that we operate under. That has resulted in available staff being redirected to priority areas, including dealing with new claims for universal credit and discretionary support and maintaining important telephony services; indeed, I have visited a few of the offices in the last two weeks to meet staff and view the situation for myself. I take the opportunity to pay tribute to staff across the Department, who are providing an exceptional public service under the most severe pressures. Their determination and hard work has helped to ensure that important services continue to be delivered at this really difficult time. These important changes to our operations have presented significant challenges for managers and staff in the organisation. We have worked closely with trade unions to ensure that they comply with social distancing guidelines across our office network, and we have increased cleaning regimes to protect our staff. I also met the trade unions on-site in one of our Belfast offices recently. Many staff now work rota systems to ensure that the guidelines are strictly adhered to, and I commend them for their dedication in working long hours and over weekends to ensure that vital public services are delivered.

Members will be aware that the universal credit standard allowance has increased for everyone by £86.67 a month. In addition, everyone who makes a new claim for universal credit can now apply for a non-repayable universal credit contingency fund grant, which is only available here, through the discretionary support programme. That is publicised through nidirect, the main citizen-facing information portal, as well as the Department's social media channels and the network of independent advice sector and community groups.

I have taken steps to improve our ability to respond to increased demand for discretionary support. I have amended the regulations to widen the grant eligibility criteria to provide a grant for short-term living expenses to assist claimants specifically affected by COVID-19. An online application form for the new living expenses grant is now available, and staff have been redeployed to this area to ensure that we can manage the increase in applications.

I have also suspended face-to-face assessments across the jobs and benefits network, including medical assessments for PIP and ESA, to ensure continuity of awards. Access to telephony channels will continue to be available for anyone claiming universal credit, PIP, ESA, jobseeker's allowance and discretionary support. However, given the significant staff absences experienced across all benefit operational areas and the potential long delays in answering calls, new online application forms for ESA, JSA and discretionary support COVID-19 living expenses are now available on nidirect. The forms can be downloaded, completed and emailed directly to the relevant benefit area for processing.

Due to the COVID-19 emergency, some households in social homes may face difficulties with paying the rent that are beyond their control. I assure those households that their home is secure and they will not be evicted. The Housing Executive and all of the housing associations have given a commitment to treat all rent issues with sensitivity. That will support tenants through this difficult period. The Department will work with housing associations and the Housing Executive to help to keep tenants in their homes and to ensure that the welfare system can provide help to their tenants as fast as possible.

The package of measures recently announced by the British Chancellor, alongside changes to local housing allowance rates and increases in periods of discretionary housing payments, provides some assurance to landlords and tenants at this time. I have also announced that the proposed Housing Executive rent increase will be put on hold until October this year. People are worried about their jobs and the impact of the crisis on their families, and I do not want them to face additional pressures about whether they can pay their rent.

My officials and I are also exploring the groups of people who remain adversely affected by COVID-19, the scale of the issue and the future mechanisms available to the Department to support those groups. I am particularly focused on how we can protect the homeless during this period. We have been working with the Housing Executive, which has taken emergency measures including the sourcing of additional temporary accommodation for those who are homeless or threatened with homelessness. I am thankful that we have had no-one sleeping on the streets of Belfast and Derry in the last two weeks, and I commend those who have worked with us in the Public Health

Agency, the Department of Health, the PSNI, the Probation Board and, in particular, local homeless providers to ensure the protection of our most vulnerable groups.

The Department's Make the Call helpline has prioritised its available resources in light of the decision to step back from home visits and attending community events in order to protect vulnerable people and minimise the spread of COVID-19. All additional resources have been redeployed to the telephony team to increase its capacity to assist those who need to access benefit advice and other supports and services. I know that that vital service has been a lifeline to many vulnerable people during the crisis, and we will ensure that the necessary resources remain in place to continue that service.

My Department has also worked closely with Advice NI to support the establishment of a Freephone COVID-19 community helpline. The service is available 9.00 am to 5.00 pm, seven days a week, to ensure that the most vulnerable and those at risk of COVID-19 have access to practical support services and emotional support at this difficult time. The Department also provides funding to Advice NI for the independent welfare changes helpline, which is another important source of information for the public.

Whilst the main focus of the Department has been responding to the ongoing crisis situation, I have continued to progress important work in relation to welfare mitigations. A draft Bill to allow the extension of mitigation payments for the bedroom tax has been shared with the Executive. Once approval to proceed has been granted, the Department will ensure that that is formally presented to the Assembly as quickly as possible. The legislation to extend the remaining welfare mitigation schemes will be laid shortly after the Bill. However, the Department has now implemented contingency arrangements with mitigation payments under the sole authority of the Budget Act from 1 April 2020. That approach has been agreed by the Department of Finance and was announced by the Minister of Finance during his opening statement to the Assembly on the Budget Bill on 25 February this year. The use of the Budget Act will allow the Department to make payments to people who would otherwise be entitled to a welfare supplementary payment. This approach is an exceptional measure that is necessary to protect people and ensure that payments continue to be made. This approach will continue for a short period until the relevant legislation to extend the mitigation schemes is approved by the Assembly.

At this point I place on record my sincere thanks to all of our community and voluntary sector partners, who continue to deliver essential and important services in their communities. I have put in place the Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Leadership Group, established by me in February, whose role is to support and input from local government and other stakeholders. The group has a key role in providing collective leadership across government and grassroots community organisations and to develop and implement urgent measures for protecting and supporting communities in need.

This partnership approach has been demonstrated this week with the introduction of the new weekly food distribution service. My Department is investing £10 million in that service over the next three months that will see 10,000 food boxes being delivered each week to the

most vulnerable in society during the current lockdown. The box of mainly non-perishable goods will be delivered directly to the door of vulnerable people who have been notified to shield by their GPs and do not have access to local support networks. The boxes will also be available to those who are not shielding but are in critical need of food. Whilst my Department is leading on the initiative, it has been made possible only through collaborative working with the health trusts, councils and, importantly, the voluntary and community sector at the grassroots and with the private sector. This vital service will ensure that those most in need in our society who do not have a support network of family and friends to help them through the emergency will have access to basic food supplies. It will also allow those at risk of social isolation to see a friendly face and know that society has not forgotten about them. There is a tremendous amount of goodwill and generosity in action across our society, which is very welcome at this challenging time.

The Department has taken the lead in responding to the challenges that community and voluntary organisations face in introducing a range of flexibilities in terms and conditions around grant funding, including upfront payments and reduced bureaucracy. In addition, we have introduced a COVID-19 community support fund. This week, I wrote to the 11 local authorities around releasing £1.5 million initially through that fund through local government's existing community support programme. That funding will enable our councils to directly support grassroots organisations in tackling poverty and helping those in greatest need. We have also released £200,000 to the Community Foundation's small grants programme as part of its COVID response programme. I am pleased to work with the Education Minister to announce a new scheme for direct payments to families who would normally benefit from free school meals; I am sure he touched on that earlier. That will extend over the Easter period to ensure that no child goes hungry during that time.

One of the positive aspects to arise from the emergency has been the willingness of people to reach out, to help others and to volunteer their services across a range of areas. I am pleased to work with Volunteer Now in launching its campaign, #HelpEachOther, to direct new volunteers to its online registration and matching platform. Since the launch of the campaign, we have seen over 2,000 people registering and expressing their support. Existing volunteers across health trusts, sporting bodies and other large organisations are also being coordinated to respond to people's immediate needs.

I am conscious that other sectors face significant challenges at this time. I recently announced a new £1 million COVID creative support fund, which will be a mechanism to support individual artists and institutions in finding innovative ways to combat social isolation and address well-being challenges. The arts sector has such an important role to play in keeping spirits high and promoting creativity in difficult times. I have also asked my officials to work with Sport NI and the Sports Forum to consider immediate practical steps that can be taken to support sporting organisations. To date, that has involved the early release of the grants for 2020-21, and we are also seeking to have a programme in place to provide emergency financial relief to grassroots sports organisations.

We are all involved in a fast-moving and challenging situation that demands high flexibility and responsiveness across government, particularly with our partners in the voluntary, community and private sectors. I will continue to work closely with Executive colleagues, with the Committee for Communities and with the Assembly to ensure that we do all in our power to limit the damage of this deadly health emergency and particularly to protect the most vulnerable in our communities. I know that I will have your full support for the measures we have introduced so far, and I am happy to engage further with members to explore how we can all work together to protect everyone in our society.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): I thank the Minister for making her statement and will now invite members to ask questions. You know the routine, folks: short, focused questions to the Minister and no speeches beforehand. The one exception, who, I am sure, will not abuse this, is the Chair of the Committee for Communities, Paula Bradley.

Ms P Bradley (Committee Chair - Committee for Communities): I will certainly try not to abuse that.

First, I thank the Minister for her comprehensive statement. It shows the amount of work that she and her Department have done over the past few weeks, especially in helping the most vulnerable in our community. I also put on record, on a personal level, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, my thanks for including me in many of those updates as Chair of the Committee. I also thank the voluntary and community sector. The Minister is absolutely right about positive aspects. Some of the stuff that we see on our social media from the voluntary and community sector has been truly imaginative, so "Well done" to them and to the many neighbours who are looking after people in our community.

I just want to touch on two issues, and I will not go over anything that was discussed in Committee on Monday. The first one is to do with collaborative working between councils and the voluntary and community sector, especially with the food boxes and the crisis grants coming in. Is that on a statutory setting or a more formal setting, so that it is rolled out in such a way as all councils have the direction that they require to take it forward? We have noticed over the last week that there has been a bit of an ad hoc approach to the food boxes. That is no criticism of you, Minister, whatsoever; it is just saying that there has not been a direction there.

Secondly, I ask the Minister about priority shopping again. I know that this is in other parts of the UK, and I know that it is not perfect. It is far from perfect, but we have a situation here where people are still waiting for baby food, nappies or sanitary products. People cannot get access to priority shopping, so I just ask whether the Minister, with the Health Minister, can look at that again and see if there is a way forward.

Ms Hargey: It is a very fast-moving situation, and, obviously, people are in crisis now. We are trying to work as quickly as we can to respond to the situation.

We have a formal relationship with local government, in that SOLACE sits on the emergency group, which is across the Executive. I have also established the community and voluntary sector emergencies leadership group, which includes regional organisations and local

government is represented as well. It also includes grassroots community organisations.

The way that we have looked at the parcels is that we are working through local councils formally, where each council has been asked to set up distribution hubs. We feel that it is better to work through councils because they know their communities best. They have developed community plans and they have looked at issues of inequality and poverty within their own areas, and we are working with them. When you look at England, for example, and this will feed into the shopping list, the difficulty is that the English healthcare system has one database to work from, but, because we have multiple trusts, we have multiple databases. I know that we are not operating in a normal climate but trying to get that information through and trying not to breach GDPR rules and protocols has proven to be a bit more burdensome than you would initially think. So, there is cross-departmental working between my Department and the Department of Health. We are working with the local health trusts, and I know that, with the council areas, the trusts are working together, collaboratively, to get those lists established as quickly as possible and to make sure that they are streamlined. That will develop over the coming weeks, and we will start to see better consistency.

Initially, 10,400 parcels have been identified, and we do not want to leave anybody out. We know that the issue of poverty, more generally, is an impact and, particularly at this time, when people are losing their jobs and have reduced income, we do not want anybody to feel that they have to go hungry. We can scale-up these boxes and we can make sure that other people can be added. They can phone the COVID freephone community helpline, where they can self-refer. They can also be referred through local independent advice sector organisations or from grassroots community organisations, working with the local council, which can then refer in and respond to that local need. That is how it has been operating. It has not been working perfectly because of the scenario that we are working in, but I am confident that, over the coming weeks, we will start to close any gaps to ensure that no one goes hungry during this period.

Ms Mullan: I want to thank and commend the Minister on her leadership, the speedy action and level of support that she has made available to those most in need. In my community, I have been involved in delivering some of that support. People are very grateful, particularly for the free school meal payment and the food boxes. I also want to commend the community and voluntary sector.

Minister, this is rightly a worrying period and, with reduced household incomes, I am being asked by constituents for clarity around bedroom tax. Can the Minister provide an estimated time frame for when the Executive will approve the paper on the extension of the bedroom tax?

Ms Hargey: I answered some of your question in my opening statement. I have the Bill drafted and it is being presented to the Executive. I am just waiting for that to be signed off within the Executive. The key thing is that the payments are continuing. They did not stop in April, and it was important that they continued for all the mitigations that were in place before the start of April. That will continue until the agreement and the legislation comes in. It has been drafted and it is ready to go. It just needs to have the Executive approval. The regulations are

drafted and ready to go as well. They will not take as long because they do not need the legislation. The payments are continuing. As soon as I can present the Bill to the Chamber, I will, as quickly as I possibly can. No one will feel the impact; they will not see the difference because the payments are continuing.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her statement, and commend her Department for the fantastic manner in which it has responded to the crisis. I pay particular tribute to those who are on the front line and those who are on the phone line in advice services. I also thank those who are in the back rooms, who sometimes are forgotten, but whose busyness is reflected in the plethora of positive press releases that we see emanating from the Minister's Department, reflecting the great work that is going on there.

The Minister will be aware that, last night, the Chancellor announced a new £700 million package to support charities. Subsequent to that, there was a statement from the Secretary of State that Northern Ireland will receive at least £10 million of that. Is the Minister in a position yet to clarify how much of that money charities here in the North will get, given the importance of such support for the charity sector, particularly at this time? Has she envisaged how any such scheme might be rolled out in the future?

Ms Hargey: I know that it is a worrying time for a lot of charities, particularly for those that deliver end-of-life care facilities, for example, that just cannot close down. They rely very heavily on donations and sponsorship, which, obviously, are not there now because of the restrictions that are in place. My understanding is that the Finance Minister is looking at that at the minute. I do not know what the definitive budget from the Barnett consequential will be. The Finance Minister is looking at it at the moment. He is in discussions with the Treasury and he will make an announcement soon. We have an Executive meeting tomorrow. I am not sure whether he will bring an update to that meeting. I have not seen the agenda yet. I imagine that it will be announced in the coming days, because our priority is to get that money released as soon as possible — I am sure that you have seen that charities are closing now — and ensure that it is directed to those who need it. I am sure that members will be informed once that is announced.

Mr Allen: I echo the sentiments of my Committee colleague across the Chamber in commending the Minister, her back-room staff and all officials in the Department, and, indeed, the many organisations and individuals right across Northern Ireland who have selflessly stepped up to the mark to support each other within their respective communities.

In her statement, the Minister mentioned the universal credit contingency fund. Indeed, she highlighted the fact that it is unique to Northern Ireland. Minister, are you satisfied that the current budget for the contingency fund is sufficient to meet the scale and number of individuals who may require to avail themselves of it? You highlighted a tenfold increase of 45,000 over three weeks. Is there enough in that budget? Is there the provision to increase that budget if need be?

Ms Hargey: Thanks very much for that. Obviously, we are keeping those issues under constant review. I engage with social security staff regularly because of the pressure that that system is under. We do have the finances for the

contingency fund at the minute. We have bid for increased moneys for contingency and discretionary support from the COVID-19 budget. We are waiting on the announcement from which that will flow. We will make additional changes to discretionary support around the income threshold in order to ensure that more people can avail themselves of it. At the moment, we are satisfied that the money is there for those who need it. We have paid out over £300,000-odd in support so far. We know that, if the criteria change, that will increase again, so we are keeping it under constant review. I know that Executive colleagues are supportive of that when it comes forward because it goes directly to families who need it. We are OK at the moment. As I say, if more resource is needed, we will make those bids to the Department of Finance.

Ms Armstrong: I would like to start off by thanking the Minister. I am sure that it has been a baptism of fire for you. I also want to say that your staff in Communities have excelled. I think that the thousands upon thousands of people in the community who depend on them at the moment would like them to know that their work has not gone unnoticed.

Quite a few members have asked questions that I was going to ask. One thing that I am quite cautious about, Minister, is the number of people who have applied for universal credit. We now have people who have come into the benefits system who have never faced that before. They have never understood exactly how much paperwork people have had to do. I hope that there will be a change in society's attitude towards people who have to live on benefits, given that more people will see what they have to go through. What preparations are going to happen for those people who have applied for universal credit, because their cash flow has been in difficulty, but who are waiting to be furloughed or for a redundancy package to come in? How do we help those people to understand that, when that money comes into their bank account, they may be moved out of the universal credit system because there is another lump sum of money there? Can you give any assurances to people that we will know that that is furlough money or that it is redundancy money? Can you explain to those people who are newly on benefits what will happen to them?

Ms Hargey: A couple of members have mentioned the staff, and the staff have been absolutely amazing under extreme pressure. That is why I made it my point to go out to a number of the offices, just over a week ago. Obviously, they are afraid, because they are going to work and they have loved ones, family and maybe people with underlying health conditions. They are also determined that they are public servants delivering essential front-line services, like many other low-paid workers that we are seeing throughout the crisis. I commend the work that they are doing. They have been absolutely brilliant, and I have not encountered any barriers. People are putting their hands up to get involved, and I have to say fair play to each and every one of them.

We have stood down certain business areas in the Department and that is to ensure that the first priority is to make sure that benefit payments are made and that we can get those payments out as quickly as possible. We will pick up on the other work behind the scenes.

Universal credit takes real-time information on where people's incomes are at the minute. People are getting

advice. We are putting more resources into our universal credit team because it is under pressure. We also have people working from home: because it is an online system, they are able to do that. Again, they are working weekends and they are working during the night time so that we can make sure that we can respond to that as much as possible, so they are offering those additional supports to people who are coming in.

They are also meeting on a regular basis with our independent advice sector via virtual online meetings. That has proven to be really beneficial, as well. Where changes have happened, the independent advice sector is getting that information out to communities and to the people that it engages with. That is because, like you say, there have been thousands who have never had to engage with the benefits system, who are now doing it in social security.

We are continuing to support them and there are plans in place in the Department, and whilst our priority now is to focus on getting payments out, we are obviously looking at the next phase and what we will need to do. Plans are being drawn up at the moment and that is being reviewed on a daily, if not hourly, basis, by Colm and the rest of his team. We will update members as we move through those periods.

The big thing for me, and I know that it was mentioned, is what people in the social security system have to live on. People are seeing the impact of that now, and I hope that, after this emergency, people look at society differently and that we look at embedding a rights-based approach and that we have a new economic order that protects the most vulnerable in our society, because, through the crisis, we are seeing that our front-line workers are our lowest-paid workers, and something needs to change.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Minister for her statement. It rightly prioritises the protection of the most vulnerable and we know that a tragic reality of COVID-19 is death and the agonising task of arranging a funeral. The Minister talked yesterday, in a press conference, of the 78 families, so far, that would not be able to say goodbye to loved ones. While difficult, it is accepted begrudgingly in the difficult circumstances. Would the Minister agree with me that that stands in stark contrast with what has appeared to have happened yesterday in County Tyrone, where a mass public gathering at a Republican funeral of a former Sinn Féin councillor took place? That has caused much distress, as was outlined by my colleague Mr Buchanan, and has caused much distress to families who have had to bury loved ones in isolation and on their own. It has caused a lot of mixed messaging. Minister, would you join with me in condemning that activity, that reckless behaviour, and would you raise it with your Executive colleagues and the appropriate authorities?

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): The member is very close from being far removed from the content of the Minister's statement. In the context of the Minister's previous remarks at a press conference and the fact that she related to community groups and their work, and the member prefaced that, I will allow that, but he is on very thin ice with that question.

Ms Hargey: This is a difficult time. People are dying from this virus. People are losing loved ones, whom they cannot say goodbye to. It is important that people adhere to the public health guidance and the messages that are being

put out there. I heard the PSNI say yesterday that it does not want to enforce in the first instance. It wants to try to engage and work with people. We know that these are draconian measures that are being brought in, and I think that that is accepted. On the whole, people understand the reasons for them. What I will reiterate today is that we need to work collectively as a community to save lives at this time. I appeal to everyone out there to ensure that they are adhering to the public health guidance so that we can save lives.

Ms C Kelly: Like other colleagues across the Chamber, I thank the Minister for the work that she has done and the mitigations that she has initiated to ensure that the most vulnerable are protected as best as possible. Can she provide additional details on how the partnerships involved in the collation of information and the delivery of shielding boxes will work on the ground?

Ms Hargey: As was touched on earlier, we are working with the local health trusts on collating the database of names that they have of people who are vulnerable. The 40,000 letters that went out to those in the North who have been asked to shield also have the phone number of the Freephone COVID-19 community helpline, so those people have been told that if they feel that they have no family support or cannot access food because they have been asked to stay in, they can self-refer on that database. We are taking names that way.

We are working with local councils as well. Each council has been asked to establish hubs within its council area, where those parcels can then be dropped off by food suppliers and subsequently distributed. We are also asking local councils to be involved, because they know their communities. Local community organisations know their communities as well. We are therefore asking people to feed in information and names of those who are vulnerable. Even if you did not get a letter from the doctor, if you feel vulnerable because you have no support network, you can self-refer through the Freephone COVID-19 community helpline as well.

We are trying to use as many avenues as we can. We do not have one single database or list, and that proves difficult, so we are trying to find other ways in which to close any gap that there is, in order to make sure that no one falls through the net in the time ahead. We need everybody's effort to ensure that we can do that. We are seeing it at the moment with football teams, Gaelic teams, rugby teams, Church groups and community groups all getting behind this effort at the grassroots level. We just need to make sure that we are getting the word out that the food boxes are here and are telling people how they can self-refer.

The situation will change over the next couple of weeks. Hopefully we will be able to refine things more and bring in more people. Moreover, the £1.5 million in funding that is going to local councils can be used for food security. I have seen local community groups in Belfast, Derry, Lisburn and other areas putting together food parcels. I would rather that somebody get two food parcels than none. As we move forward over the next couple of weeks, we want to make sure that nobody falls through. Therefore, engage with the local council and get community groups involved through the council.

We are doing work through the health trusts as well. We are also working with the three sporting codes — Ulster GAA, the Irish Football Association (IFA) and Ulster Rugby — on how we can use the activists and volunteers among their membership. One of the particular areas on which we are trying to work with them is the distribution of essential medicine and prescriptions for those who are shielding and those who are vulnerable. Hopefully, we will have that rolling out in the coming weeks also.

Mr Givan: I thank the Minister for coming to the Assembly and giving us that comprehensive statement. She is right to point out all the different sporting groups and community organisations that are doing great work. I am pleased that she namechecked Lisburn, because quite a number of groups, some of which she has already met, in Ballymacash, for example, have undertaken specific COVID-19 response efforts and are doing fantastic work. Thank you for that.

In Great Britain, there are schemes in place in which supermarkets have been able to identify the most vulnerable to prioritise the delivery of goods. I understand that your Department is leading on the engagement with supermarkets, and it is important that we get a system in place so that people can get the delivery of goods because of the demand that is there and their lack of access to supermarkets.

Minister, it is also important, in light of the comments by the deputy First Minister, who has gone out of her way to call out Ministers and businesses when they have breached, that you take the opportunity to call out the incident in Ballinderry in the deputy First Minister's constituency that has caused huge consternation and that my colleague Mr Buckley referred to.

Ms Hargey: First, on supermarkets, we are working with the main retailers and supply chains to see what we can do. As I said, the difficulty at the moment is that we do not have one database. We are trying to quickly establish that database and pull it together so that it can be shared. Supermarkets also have to create an online IT system for that. There have been really good discussions with the supermarkets on how we can identify those who are vulnerable. I am hopeful that we will get a resolution to that over the coming week or so and that that will open up new slots.

It is also important to notice — again, we are seeing it through the power of social media — that a lot of small, independent retailers are also doing home deliveries. It is important that we show support to them because they are doing some brilliant initiatives and are even supporting local food banks, church halls and sports halls in the delivery of food to those who need it most. I know that they have opened up services. The Consumer Council has an online list of all those local small independent retailers and the COVID-19 freephone community helpline can provide lists of retailers in local areas. We are also looking at the Volunteer Now list to link in with local councils and community organisations. There is a list of volunteers that can collect shopping for people, and we are trying to match volunteers to those who may be vulnerable or may have to shield during this public health emergency. It will come in different forms, but we will work with the supermarkets in the time ahead.

On your last point, I am not here to get into a political squabble or to call out every single incident where people may not be following the public health guidelines. That leads you down a rabbit hole from which there is no return and which helps no one. People are dying and families are grieving at the loss of loved ones. I have seen that in my community, where an elderly mother and grandmother lost her life and her family will not see her again. As a political leader, my role is to call on people to follow the public health advice and ask them to do that, because it saves lives. The more that we can encourage people to do that —. The PSNI and other enforcement agencies are doing the same. Their first port of call is to engage and encourage and, if nothing is listened to, to look at enforcement. It is very much about engaging and encouraging first. I want to do that today and I will continue to do that, along with the other Executive Ministers.

Ms Ennis: Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 crisis has had an immediate impact on our sports scene. The decision by all the sporting codes to cease activities and competitions will not have been an easy decision to make but it is, undoubtedly, the right decision at this time. I commend all the sporting organisations, but particularly the governing bodies of the GAA, soccer and rugby for stepping up to the mark and playing their part in the civic response to the crisis. I commend the Minister — she mentioned it in her statement — for some of the support that she is making available to our sports clubs. Will she provide a little more detail on what action she is taking at this time to support our sports sector and what measures she will introduce, or is thinking of introducing in the future, to relieve the financial burden and the uncertainty that our sports scene and grassroots sports clubs are facing at this time?

Ms Hargey: One of my last arranged visits before this crisis, which had to be cancelled, was to one of our sports grounds, Windsor Park. Sport makes a really good contribution, and we want to make sure that, at the other end of this emergency, sports have sustained. We know that mental health issues result from physical inactivity. At the other end of this, we will need our sports teams to lift morale and community spirits. They play a vital role there. Over the last couple of weeks, on my instruction, my Department's officials have been engaging with the Sports Forum and with sporting codes across the North, looking at what the issues are. I have set out my intention to launch and roll out a sport relief fund, which is about trying to work with grassroots sporting organisations in order to give them financial assistance in the time ahead. We are finalising the criteria for that funding through engagement with the sporting codes and the Sports Forum. We hope to announce that fund soon.

I have also engaged with the Minister for the Economy on the rates issue. I wrote to her just recently, and I know that she is looking at this in the wider context of business support and rates to see what we can do to ensure that sports clubs can be included in the relief that is being laid out. There is an Executive meeting tomorrow. I am not sure whether this issue is yet on the table, but those conversations are ongoing with sporting teams. I will continue to engage with them, and my officials are engaging with them weekly to ensure that they sustain beyond this emergency.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for her statement. Like her, I applaud the work of her Department, in unison

with so many sporting organisations and community and voluntary groups that are working together in a phenomenal surge of goodwill and volunteerism that will, hopefully, help us all to defeat COVID-19.

The Minister may or may not be aware of the financial quandary that many cross-border workers now find themselves in as an outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many cross-border workers — these are people who have helped to rebuild the economy on this island, who pay their taxes, who have mortgages and who have families to feed and bills to pay — are not eligible for universal credit because of their specific circumstances. Will the Minister back the call from Colum Eastwood, the MP for Foyle, for an urgent meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council to agree a bespoke financial support package for cross-border workers who fall between the cracks and have no support from the existing COVID-19 support schemes?

Ms Hargey: The Executive, through the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the Finance Minister and, of course, the Minister for the Economy, have already been in conversations on this issue. They have been engaging with the Irish Government to see whether a resolution can be found. We have seen the strife that many living in border communities are facing, and there has been commentary even in the South. Hopefully, a resolution can be found as soon as possible. I know that it is high on the agenda of Ministers around the Executive table and has been discussed with the Tánaiste and others in the Southern Government.

Part of the next phase of community support that I am rolling out is the announcement of an initial £1.5 million for councils. However, conscious of rural poverty and poverty in and around our border communities, I want to look at a second tranche that will start to look at rural poverty. I will work with Edwin Poots and DAERA to see whether there are things that we can do jointly. As part of the COVID-19 community support fund, it will look at areas such as access to food, those who are on a low income and struggling, and connectivity. Cross-border workers are high on the Executive's agenda. There is no resolution yet, but there have been direct engagements with the Tánaiste and with the Southern Government more broadly.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for her statement and also for her kind words for the community effort in Lisburn and Lagan Valley, which were picked up by the Member for Lagan Valley, Mr Givan. Paul mentioned Ballymacash, but there is also Laganview Enterprise, which you are aware of and have met, and which is making a tremendous effort, and Via Wings; you may take up an invitation to go and visit it as well to see the work that it is doing. I thank the Minister for the efforts that she has made. As my colleague Kellie Armstrong said, you have hit the rails running as a new MLA.

I also want to thank your staff for the effort that they are putting in. Many of us will have been in contact with those involved in all facets of your Department, and they have been only too ready to offer help. My question is on that very point. Obviously, there will be some sickness and a lot of people trying desperately hard to meet the needs of the most vulnerable in our society. Are you confident that you have in place a support mechanism for your workers who, like all those on the front line, are carrying a heavy burden, and that those support services will not just be there in this

hour of need but will be carried through to the time when we revisit normal business here?

Ms Hargey: Thanks very much. It is a good question. Those workers are nearly forgotten sometimes, because they are not always seen face to face. However, they are essential front-line workers who cannot be forgotten. They are delivering essential services, sometimes to the most vulnerable in our communities.

As I said, I went around some of the offices. People are frightened; they are afraid. There were distancing issues at the start because of the nature of these offices where people work quite closely together. After engagements with the trade unions in the last couple of weeks — I recently met NIPSA on-site in one of the offices — to ensure that we are protecting workers, we have put in social-distancing measures and are making sure that work stations are cleaned regularly throughout the day, because those were some of the concerns of people who were coming in to do their job.

A good part of the workforce are working from home and, obviously, we have had to increase the IT supply to allow them to do that. We are also working staff on a rota to ensure that there are not too many of them on the floor. That obviously puts a pressure on the system, which is just something that we are continually having to manage. That is why I engage regularly with the managers in our social security system. It is such a vital service, particularly given that almost 40,000 people need it now because they have lost their jobs.

We will continue to work. Staff who we have met are nervous now, and we are concerned about the mental health and stress impacts that this will have afterwards. We will continue to engage with the trade unions around what we can do and what other support we can provide.

More broadly, an issue that I was going to look at anyway, even before this emergency, is agency staff. There is a large population of agency staff within DFC; that is the nature of the DWP's year-on-year contracts. However, our agency staff are at the fore at this time and really showing their dedication to come to work every day. I want to look at that in the longer term because I feel that, if you have been working there for a few years, you are not agency and should be a permanent member of staff with the same terms and conditions as everybody else. That is one of the areas that I want to look at.

There is the ongoing pay negotiation, which needs to be addressed urgently. The unions are actively engaging with the Department of Finance on the issue of pay. We are paying for the car parking of those who are working in our benefits offices, mainly in Belfast but in other areas as well including Derry. We are also introducing lunches into the system twice a week, and we will look at what else we can do beyond that. In conversations that I had with the unions even before this healthcare crisis, I recognised that many staff within my Department are low-paid staff. However, it is being shown in this crisis that they are delivering fundamental services that society needs. That needs to be recognised in the time ahead, and I want to play my part in making sure that we deliver on that.

Mr O'Dowd: This follows on from Mr Butler's question, and your response to that somewhat answers the question. You mentioned that 40,000 workers have lost their jobs and are now turning to social security benefits such as

universal credit to survive the crisis and the impact it has on them and their family. Have you enough staff available to administer universal credit? Are they able to process the huge amount of work that is coming their way? I also want to add my thanks — indeed, our thanks — to the staff and to you, Minister.

Also, I want to thank the Clerk/Chief Executive and the staff of the Assembly for facilitating the last couple of meetings. It takes a huge background operation to keep this place going, and we appreciate their work as well, thank you.

Ms Hargey: The main priority for my Department is to make sure that benefits are maintained and are paid to those who need them, particularly at this time. For that reason, we have stopped certain parts of the Department from working and have redirected those staff to front-line social security benefits to make sure that payments are being made and applications are being processed. I know that some staff are working from home because they are shielding or are unable to come to work because of a family member, and they have the IT equipment and are doing a lot of that work from home.

We have just re-prioritised the work that we are doing to ensure that benefits are the key priority in the time ahead. We have also streamlined the forms, have stopped face-to-face assessments and have closed the benefits offices to the public, and that has really helped. We have also streamlined the forms for JSA and discretionary support to ensure that we cut down the bureaucracy and get the processing times down quickly.

Things are working at the moment and we are, obviously, keeping them under constant review. Within the Executive emergencies group ensuring that social security payments continue to flow and that staff are there is a key priority. It is only down to the dedication of our staff — I cannot emphasise that enough — and particularly agency staff, who are going above and beyond every day to process payments and take thousands of calls. They are doing tenfold what they would do in a normal day in the Department, and it would not be possible without them.

Mr Lyttle: I briefly add my condemnation to the alleged defiance of social distancing guidelines that appears to have taken place in County Tyrone, and I thank the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland who are staying at home to save lives during this public health emergency.

I thank the Minister for her statement and welcome the investment that has been made in weekly food deliveries to vulnerable people in our community, and I commend the community and voluntary sector's response in helping with that scheme. What information is being used to ensure that these essential food deliveries reach the people who need them most?

Ms Hargey: As I said, there is no definitive list yet, and it is work in progress. We are working with the health trusts in terms of the databases they have, and the health and social care boards on categories of vulnerable people. We also know who the 40,000 people who are shielding are, and we have made direct contact with them.

Primarily, the food boxes are for those who do not have existing support networks and do not have friends or family who can get them the essentials. This is to fill that gap. However, I recognise that there is poverty out there.

There is inequality, and that has an impact on finances and people's ability to buy essential food, particularly at this time. Therefore, we want to make sure that food boxes reach those people too. That is why, over the coming weeks, as we start to roll this out, we need all that information from local councils.

We will continue to work with the health and social care trusts and with the Department of Health more broadly. We are also engaging through GPs, through the letters that have been issued and through people on the ground. People know their communities. I live in a community and have been an activist my whole life. I was out last night in my local area, where the local residents' group delivered more than 200 food parcels — not those boxes. They easily identified the need in the community. They put out calls on social media and on leaflets to identify anyone else who needs help, because people will fall through the gaps. You have the difficulty that people will not self-refer, so how do we get others in the community to refer somebody, if they feel there is a vulnerability there? We have to be as flexible as we can to make sure that we reach as many people as we can. It is about society as a whole playing its part in trying to identify those people and for that list to be centralised and disseminated out amongst the 11 councils. The role of the local authorities has been brilliant. They are under immense pressure in terms of lost income, trying to redirect services and keeping their staff safe, but they have gone above and beyond to work with the Department and connect to local communities to ensure that we reach those people.

It is a work in progress. If you have other ideas, we are more than interested to listen to you, but it will develop over the coming weeks. The more people we can include, the better.

Mr McCrossan: “Thank you” to the Minister for her statement. I know the House and the Minister will join me in offering the prayers and condolences of the House to the families of the 82 people who have sadly died as a result of this dreadful virus and sending our thoughts and prayers to the many families who are impacted directly, with a loved one battling this awful disease. I join the Minister in commending the tremendous work of the front-line key workers in her Department. They have certainly stepped up way beyond the call of duty and have delivered on a huge scale, given the demand on the Department. Minister, you are to be commended on your leadership on that.

It is important, in these times, to recognise that, out of all the awfulness of the virus, so much good has come out in our community. I witness at first hand, throughout West Tyrone, the huge levels of kindness, generosity, sincerity and the selflessness of our communities, particularly when you consider businesses that have opened their doors, like the Red Pepper in Castlederg, the Hidden Pearl, the Strabane Community Project, Mark McDermott in Strabane. Those four examples, in a day, deliver in excess of 1,500 meals to a wider area. That is an unbelievable and generous contribution to vulnerable people in our society, and I want to put firmly on record the thanks of the House to everybody across Northern Ireland who is stepping up and doing a huge amount to support people.

Minister, my question is focused on discretionary support. I know you have touched on it quite a bit today, and I thank you for the efforts around that and the staff. I have no doubt they are inundated with queries. I have had some

difficulty, in that applications that were submitted two weeks ago have still not been processed or answered. There may be an obvious reason for that, in that the demand is so significant. I wonder what is being put in place to make that a more efficient system. Has there been a cap on the amount that a person can claim, or is it unique to circumstances? Finally, how often can someone apply? If they were to receive, say, £100 this week, can they apply again in a fortnight?

Thank you again Minister for your work around this. It is appreciated.

Ms Hargey: Thanks very much. Like the other benefits, there has been a huge uptake in demand for discretionary support, and it had been under pressure. We have realigned our services and staff to support that. The difficulty with discretionary support is that it is a manual system and you have to be in work, so those working from home are not able to do it. That added a pressure a number of weeks ago, and we are working through that and rectifying it. I have changed the regulations and brought in an additional measure under discretionary support that, if you are impacted by COVID-19 and have to self-isolate, you can access discretionary support as well. It will be done through a grant and will not be a loan. You can get that grant more than once. Obviously, that is about people who are in crisis, and we will respond to that crisis in the here and now. If it is access to food or paying essential bills like rent, electric or heat, they can get access to those discretionary support payments.

I am also changing the regulations to lift the income threshold. At the minute, it is just over £18,000. The benefit cap is at £20,000, so I want to lift it above that benefit cap to ensure that more people can be brought in. I hope that that will be tabled in the Chamber just after the Easter recess.

Miss Woods: Minister, I too commend you and your Department for your work and the commitment made to our most vulnerable citizens at this time.

My question is on eligibility criteria and the publication of such to make it easier for people to apply to two funds. First, are you minded to publish the criteria by which your Department awards grants, in order to make it easier for people to make a successful application for the universal credit contingency fund? Secondly, are you able to detail even further the expanded eligibility criteria for people to apply to the discretionary support fund?

Ms Hargey: The changes to the discretionary support fund came through the Assembly a couple of weeks ago. Anyone who has to self-isolate or has symptoms of COVID-19 and has to stay within their home, and who is under financial pressure, can apply for the grant through discretionary support. We have streamlined all the forms to try to make it as easy as possible, because even I get confused trying to navigate the system. All that information is now being put up and streamlined on nidirect.

We are also working on the COVID community helpline number. It is being managed by Advice NI, so you can phone that helpline number or the Advice NI helpline number. Advice NI is working with a lot of the independent advice sector in managing that phone line, and again you can get support there in going through, or trying to navigate your way through, the system. We are looking at a new communication that can be either in a leaflet or online that really sets out the changes that the Department has

made. Obviously, there have been a lot of changes, and it is hard to keep up. The Committee raised that at the start of the week. We are working on it at the moment so that it can be streamlined and can go out.

I will have a look at the issue of universal credit. I am not sure, but I would have assumed that the eligibility criteria would be there. I will take that back, and come back to you on it.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for her statement. I have a question in relation to renters in this crisis — all renters, including low-paid workers, the unemployed, students and everyone else. It seems to me that a lot has been done for landlords, but not enough for tenants. The bigger question, really, is how we can have a situation where low-paid or vulnerable people are able to afford to keep a roof over their heads. I am concerned that not enough is being done to support them. For example, landlords can avail themselves of a three-month mortgage holiday, yet there are no provisions in place to provide a suspension of rents as exists in other European countries. In this context, landlords might actually be able to make money out of the situation, because they can avail themselves of mortgage holidays while extracting rents throughout this crisis. To me, that seems bizarre. Thousands are, obviously, losing their jobs, others are having a reduction in wages and many are struggling. My view is that there should be an immediate rent suspension for those impacted by this, and I believe that the Minister, the Executive and the Westminster Government should be doing everything in their power to achieve this.

If I may, Mr Speaker, as we are under time, can I quickly ask the Minister about the benefit cap? I believe that the benefit cap should be scrapped immediately. It was always wrong and unjust, and it should have no place in this crisis. Many workers are obviously doing more hours to ensure that our shelves are stocked. Does the Minister agree that the benefit cap should be replaced, and does she have any plans to scrap it?

Ms Hargey: Thanks for your kind comments, Gerry.

I suppose the first thing is around renters. I live in a working-class community in south Belfast. I know the impact that this is having on working people and on working-class communities. Obviously, a variety of changes have been introduced within my Department in trying to protect the most vulnerable within the private-rented sector, but also those in the social sector who are paying rents. We have an agreement with housing associations and the Housing Executive that no one will be evicted from their home because they cannot keep up payments. The important thing when you are looking at the payment increase is that over 70% of the income of the Housing Executive comes through housing benefit. It is important that those payments continue, through the social security system, into the Housing Executive. You will know yourself — you have raised it on previous occasions — that the Housing Executive is under critical pressure. We have to make sure that we can maintain our stock at the end of this, particularly for those who need it the most: those working-class communities that are vulnerable. We need those housing benefit payments to continue to flow throughout this crisis, and beyond this crisis as well. I have suspended the rental increase, which is at a cost of £4.5 million for the next six months. I have put that on hold and, obviously, that is money that cannot be used to upgrade

the stock. Those are the difficulties and challenges that we face.

With regard to other areas that we have looked at, I do not have the power to instruct that rent is not paid within the private rented sector. Some of that legislation rests with Westminster and I do not have the power around that. I am introducing legislation here. It will come to the House on 21 April, I think, and that is about extending the notice to quit to ensure that no one, as a result of COVID-19, is going to be evicted from their home.

I am also issuing clear guidance to landlords this week and I reported this to the Committee at the start of this week. It says clearly to landlords that, if they get the three-month holiday, it should be passed on to the tenant. I will also be issuing clear guidance around the process that landlords must follow in engaging with their tenants and giving them a reasonable time with regard to their financial situation so that if anything goes to court, the court can clearly see the Department's guidance and take that into account. We are also engaging with the Court Service around that.

With regard to housing payments, the local housing allowance has been increased as a result of changes; 100% of that payment is now going to be paid and that is going to be covered over the 13 weeks. I am looking to see if I can extend the discretionary support housing payments and to change or increase the criteria to allow more people to come into that. With regard to the discretionary support allowance, through the normal social security system, if people are in crisis because they have to self-isolate, they can apply for that grant under the COVID-19 discretionary support for housing.

We are looking at more. I know that there are issues in the private rented sector and I am trying to address those. We can only take it step by step, so we are looking at it. I know that students have been adversely impacted and we are looking to see what further changes we can make. If I can bring changes, I will do it. There is no problem there, whatsoever. If people have suggestions and it is within my remit or power, I will definitely do it.

We are engaging with the National Union of Students, which tweeted me today. We are proactively trying to look at everything that we can. We are moving, firstly, on the eviction stuff because that needs a legislative change, and it has to have Royal Assent, which will be heard on the Floor of the House on 21 April. We will continue to move on other areas of housing.

I have touched on the issue of homelessness. We have done a lot of work on that issue. I am glad to report that, in the past two weeks in Belfast and Derry, because of the amazing work by those at the coalface in the Housing Executive, we have not had any rough sleepers — those who have had no choice but to be on the streets. Again, it has been really good how people have worked together. I have to commend those working at a community level and within that sector for the amazing work that they have been doing. We are committed to extending that over the coming period.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): As noted by Mr Carroll, we have around four and a half minutes left. In Tuesday's meeting of this Committee, I said that if there was time left over I would allow members who had any burning questions that they wanted to ask, to rise in their place.

Mr Givan: One of the issues that was brought to my attention is on the pressure being put on local government and councils across Northern Ireland. They have triggered their emergency planning mechanisms but they are also facing significant financial implications as a result of that. What support is the Minister's Department able to provide?

Ms Hargey: We have released emergency financial assistance. I wrote to local councils at the start of this week. If they are responding to a crisis — normally this would have happened in flooding incidents — my Department will cover the emergency costs associated with that, if that is increased staff costs. We have initiated that as part of this public health emergency. We have had the community support fund filtered via the local councils and we are working with them on the food boxes. We know, as I touched on earlier, that there is a loss of income for councils. That is a huge loss of income and we are in the middle of compiling what that is going to look like in the time ahead. We plan to make a bid to the Minister of Finance. At this point, obviously, the initial bids that are coming through Finance are to deal with the emergency in the here and now, in order to try to save lives, protect the most vulnerable and ensure food supplies. I am acutely aware of the impact that it is having on councils. We are making those financial bids for the loss of income, because that income is used for essential services in council areas. We are working with local government and SOLACE on that. That will be presented to the Minister of Finance and, ultimately, to the Executive.

Mr O'Dowd: During the past 50-odd minutes or so, the Minister has outlined a range of initiatives and interventions that her Department has made in a very short period to protect people at this time. She said in one of her answers that her Department was collating information on a number of those issues. Can she provide the Assembly with a figure for the financial contribution that her Department has made to protect the most vulnerable people in society?

Ms Hargey: I do not have that figure. However, I can get the figure for those changes, which will include the bid that we got yesterday for homelessness services and others. It goes into the tens of millions of pounds. If benefit support is included, it probably goes way above that. I can get that information and share it with members.

Ms Armstrong: I did not get the chance to ask about this issue earlier, Minister. I am sure that you have seen on Facebook and different social media that a number of volunteers have come together to provide food banks. You talked about it earlier. They are not in any organisations: they are simply good-willed people who have come together to meet the needs of their communities. When we take learning from this situation, can we consider how we can help those people, who are using their own cars and fuel to go out and deliver prescriptions and groceries to people's homes, and who, out of the kindness of their hearts, have come together in this crisis and have really shown how wonderful the Northern Ireland community is?

Ms Hargey: I agree, 100%. The amount of goodwill has been amazing. As you say, it is not always in structured groups, albeit I would encourage volunteers to get involved in activism in that way. It has been amazing. Whether it is a neighbour or somebody in the street looking after or identifying somebody else, or just having a chat or a phone call, it has been absolutely amazing. I suppose that the

important thing is that, if people are out and using petrol, or whatever, they should go and speak to the local council, because part of the community support fund, which is going through local councils, covers those types of issue to try to support grassroots work during the crisis to ensure that we respond to those needs. Nobody should be out of pocket, especially if they are volunteering. I encourage them to speak to the councils.

As I said, we will look at that fund. I have agreed that I will review it in the next six weeks in order to ensure that it is fit for purpose and to see whether we need to look at additional resource for it in the time ahead. They may not want to, but I would ask them to speak to their councils. The local council could pick that up through the community support fund.

Yes, there could be a day of recognition for a lot of people across society. The bigger issue for me is whether society will change in the time ahead. Will the economic system change and protect the most vulnerable? Will it look at the front-line workers who are, often, the lowest paid? If that is what changes after this emergency, maybe some good will come out of it.

Mr Buckley: I want to go back to what my colleague Kellie Armstrong said. We have seen some of the best in our community groups. In my constituency, John Lawson of the Head O'The Road bar and restaurant has provided meals to isolated people in rural communities. I think of Phyllis Abraham of the Edenderry community group. Those people are doing fantastic work. Is there any way in which we could help organisations to target people who, potentially, may be missed in the epidemic, particularly people in rural communities who do not go and seek help, but are now living in isolation? In many cases, they are very elderly people who are on their own.

Ms Hargey: I agree, 100%. You are right. Many chefs and people who are out of work and not getting any income are actually out volunteering now. They have turned their kitchens into community hubs and are making sure that they provide hot meals. We are working with the Now Project and chefs across the North.

We are doing the free school meals, the food boxes, the money that is going out through councils, and organisations are doing that, as well, through food parcels. As not every older person cooks and gets one hot meal a day, we are trying to see how we can work with local restaurants, local chefs and even social enterprises that do food preparation to see if we can provide a hot meal or a ready-made meal service. Again, tell them to contact the Department and we can link them in.

The other thing is the COVID community fund, that I announced yesterday, and it is going through the councils. That money can be used in the local council areas and the kind of priorities for that are around food, and making sure people have access to food. If that is linking in and working in partnership with local restaurants, that is good, if it is meeting the need.

It is also around financial security. Again, I know from Belfast, because that is where I live, they are buying gas cards and they are doing top-ups to make sure that people have the essentials, so some of the money is being used for that. The other issue then is connectivity, particularly for rural areas and border communities as well.

As I said, I am looking to the community support fund to ensure that funding is mainly disseminated on the basis of objective need and population size, so the likes of Belfast and others will get an increased amount. I recognise there is a gap in rural areas, around rural poverty, and particularly in areas with border communities as well. I am looking to see if I can add an additional fund to support those local areas, and I will announce that in the short-term, as well.

Miss Woods: Minister, with the food box scheme, there have been some significant concerns raised with me, through community organisations, around who makes the decision on who can get a box. There is some confusion with the councils and, as you said earlier on, there is no definitive list yet, but who would make that decision? Would it be the trust or the GP? Or is it through referral or through the council? If there is not any guidance, can that be issued?

Ms Hargey: I will just go back to local councils to ensure that that is filtering out. The guidance is for anyone who is shielding for the next three months. They have a letter from their GP and they have to shield. It is not for all of those people because there are 40,000 of them, but it is identifying those people who do not have a support network. People who, if they are in their home for the next three months, do not have somebody who can get them food. They maybe do not have the financial wherewithal to get the food. The boxes should be targeted at those people, but we want to go beyond that. In England, that is how the scheme is working, but I recognise that there is food poverty out there anyway, let alone in the midst of this public health emergency.

I want to get those boxes to as many people as we can. Therefore, the scheme has to be flexible. That is why I want to work with local councils and local community organisations, because they are better placed than I am. When you look at a health trust's list and you look at the vulnerable people that may be on that list, there are a lot of people out in the community who are not on that list, but they are vulnerable. Therefore, we need to use as many mechanisms as we can to do that. We are on 10,400 parcels at the minute, and we can grow that if we need to grow that further. I am sure that the Executive will be supportive. — we have £10 million in the budget at the moment — if there was a need to look at more, we could do that. I will make sure that the guidance is reissued to local councils, but it is important that we do not limit it. If somebody is in need of a food box and they are saying that they have no other support, or do not have the financial means to get that food, they should receive a box.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Agenda item 5 is the time, date and place of the next meeting. We have received confirmation from the Health Minister that he wishes to make a statement to the Ad Hoc Committee at a meeting to be held on the afternoon of Wednesday 15 April. We have also received confirmation from the Infrastructure Minister that she wishes to make a statement to the Ad Hoc Committee on the afternoon of Thursday 16 April. Formal notification to Members will be issued this afternoon by the Speaker's Office. That concludes this meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee. The meeting is adjourned.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response

15 April 2020

Ministerial Statement: Health

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Roy Beggs (Deputy Chairperson)
Dr Steve Aiken
Mr Jim Allister
Dr Caoimhe Archibald
Ms Clare Bailey
Mrs Rosemary Barton
Ms Paula Bradshaw
Mrs Pam Cameron
Mr Gerry Carroll
Mr Alan Chambers
Mr Gordon Dunne
Mr Alex Easton
Mr Colm Gildernew
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Colin McGrath
Mr Maoliosa McHugh
Ms Sinead McLaughlin
Mr Gary Middleton
Mr John O'Dowd
Mr Matthew O'Toole
Mr Pat Sheehan
Mr Mervyn Storey
Mr Robin Swann

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): Item 1 of today's business is the minutes of the previous meeting, held on 9 April. Members are asked to note the minutes, which the Deputy Chair has agreed. Members should also note that the Minutes of Evidence from that meeting have been published as an Official Report, which is available on the Committee's web page.

Item 2 is a statement from the Minister of Health. The Speaker received notification on 9 April that the Minister wished to make a statement to the Ad Hoc Committee at today's meeting. A copy of the statement that the Minister intends to make is included in members' packs at page 8.

I welcome the Minister of Health to this meeting of the Committee and invite him to make his statement, which should be heard by members without interruption. Following the statement, there will be an opportunity for members to ask questions.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Good afternoon. I welcome the opportunity to update members with the latest developments regarding COVID-19.

As I have said in numerous statements to the Assembly, to the Committee and to the public, we are living in unprecedented times. People are understandably anxious and they are worried about the safety of their families, especially those who are older or who have underlying conditions. People are unnerved by the empty streets and town centres. Of course, after this morning's news that our economy is currently experiencing its fastest and deepest decline in the history of Northern Ireland, people are understandably concerned about what the future will hold for them.

We are living through scenes that only three months ago would have been wholly unimaginable. For future generations, 2020 will be remembered as the year of the coronavirus. This is a serious virus, and we have seen in too many countries across the world the frightening pace at which it has spread. Nevertheless, we must remember that for the vast majority of people who contract it, the virus will be mild and they will make a full recovery.

However, as we all know, not everyone who gets it survives. Sadly, there are homes right across the country that are grieving. No matter how long this lasts, we must never ever forget that behind every statistic is a human being: a mother, a father, a brother, a sister, a friend, a person who will have been loved and is now missed.

In all the briefings that I get and all the calls and meetings that I take part in, nothing drives home the tragedy of this virus more than seeing the pictures of funerals with only a very small number of permitted mourners. Wakes and large funerals are understandably not able to happen right now, but that is not how we usually say goodbye to our loved ones.

I want to take this opportunity to once again put on record my sincere thanks to all those who continue to deliver our vital services: our front-line health and social care staff, our police officers, those who are looking after the children of our key workers and those who are ensuring that there are supplies on the shelves. There are too many to mention, but it is important that we recognise here today the significant time, energy and commitment that is being invested by so many to keep us safe in our homes.

I will now take some time to explain the approach that I have adopted to deal with this emergency and to outline some of the significant actions that have been key to my response.

There has been much focus and discussion on the issues of personal protective equipment (PPE), testing and the reporting of COVID-19-related deaths in recent days and weeks. I assure you that I and my team across the health and social care (HSC) sector are acutely aware of the challenges arising from these issues, and we are working tirelessly to ensure that every conceivable effort is being made to help people keep safe, stay at home and protect our NHS.

Key to informing the decisions that I and Executive colleagues will need to make in the weeks and months ahead is the work being undertaken by the COVID-19 modelling group. The projections provided by this group are informing the work that needs to be progressed to ensure there is sufficient PPE available; that testing is scaled up; that our hospitals, GP services and community pharmacies have capacity to deal with the demands they are facing; and that key services within the community are prepared to deal with the challenges they are facing today — and every day — until this disease has been defeated.

To meet the additional need for staff, once again, our health workers have stepped up. Many hundreds have gone through additional training, and, as of 6.30 am today, the HSC workforce appeal, which was launched only 3 weeks ago, has had 18,354 expressions of interest, which have been converted into 10,777 formal applications to date — a conversion rate of nearly 59%, which is double what could normally be expected in a recruitment campaign. In fewer than three weeks, almost 300 people have been offered or appointed to posts, with over 3,000 now job-ready or about to be job-ready, subject to completion of final checks.

Clinical applications, of which there have been 2,784, have been prioritised for processing. This includes former doctors and nurses who are returning to service, many from retirement. I pay tribute to their dedication and thank all applicants for rallying to this cause.

The team is now turning its attention to processing the 7,993 non-clinical/support worker applications. This support will be crucial in our response to COVID-19. Online applications have been paused while the team works through these applications. The campaign is sophisticated and social media-driven, so further expressions of interest can be sought quickly if there are further areas of high demand.

It is important to note that we are putting processes in place to support the independent sector, in addition to the HSC, from applicants to the workforce appeal.

The response from our pharmacists and primary-care colleagues has been phenomenal. Despite all pressures, our chemists remain open and continue to provide their essential service.

Similarly, as members will know, we have opened a series of COVID-19 centres — 10 in total — which have seen more than 1,300 patients already. They have moved mountains and, I have no doubt, will continue to do so.

Importantly, along with a number of additional supports across the community and government, the HSC is also putting in place mental and emotional support for their workers at this very difficult, challenging and often emotional time.

Modelling colleagues have indicated that the peak here may now, potentially, be less severe than we had feared, in this first wave at least. I am sure you will all agree when I say that it was reassuring, but not surprising, to see the positive and responsible approach adopted by the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland who adhered to social distancing over the Easter holidays. We have risen to the challenge and, I have no doubt, will continue to do so.

We cannot be certain of how this first wave will play out. No modelling can predict the future, but we can acknowledge that the unprecedented social distancing restrictions on all our lives are starting to make an impact. However, there can be no grounds whatsoever for complacency.

The focus now, as much as ever, has to be on staying at home, saving lives and protecting our health service. Difficult times lie ahead, I have no doubt. However, I am confident that we are ready to face them together. Indeed, I and my Executive colleagues are working closely to ensure that we are working as one in our plans and in our actions.

In partnership with the Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland's further and higher education institutions are now making an invaluable contribution to the fight against COVID-19 by creating personal protective equipment and joining the research for a vaccine.

In partnership with the Department of Education, we have developed a package of measures to provide emergency childcare for key workers.

In partnership with the Department for Infrastructure, a number of MOT centres have become available to test people rather than vehicles. In partnership with the Department for Communities, the response to this emergency has been focussed on the local community, by the local community.

Indeed, across every Department, partnership working has resulted in innovations and progress that we could not have imagined possible just a matter of weeks ago.

I turn now to the issue of PPE. I have been clear about the challenges with PPE. COVID-19 is a worldwide issue and protecting staff and patients impacts as much elsewhere as it does locally. The pressures on supplies are significant globally, and, as I have said on a number of occasions, that there is not a country in the world that truly knows the path that this virus is going to take. Would I like to have more PPE? Of course I would. That is why I am committed to ensuring that we rigorously pursue every viable supply source, both locally and elsewhere.

The four nations PPE plan was published last Friday, and we are working closely with England, Scotland and Wales on all aspects of that plan. We have already supported each other by way of mutual aid and that will continue in the weeks and months ahead.

I know there have been some concerns expressed at the fact that, in recent weeks, I had agreed to mutually aid England. I can confirm that I did send 250,000 gowns to England over the last two weeks — those supplies will be immediately reimbursed once their stocks arrive. Equally, when I recently reported a shortage of eye protection equipment, England and Wales acted quickly to help us. We must remember all of this is in the context that the UK Government have already sent Northern Ireland

over 5-6 million items of PPE. So, I make no apologies for sharing our stock, because when we need some, the other UK nations are not reluctant to share theirs. That demonstrates the value and success of the four nations approach we have been taking.

None of us can work on our own in our battle against COVID. Equally, we continue to explore new supply lines with the Republic of Ireland. We have significantly increased supplies from local agents. Local industry is to be commended as it continues to show itself to be adaptable, innovative and responsive to changing operational environments.

China is the most significant source of worldwide supplies. The work led by the Department of Finance and the Department of Health to secure PPE is important and at a critical stage. We continue to work to ensure all possible steps are taken to open up a supply chain that meets our needs and supports our four nations approach.

I have already underlined the vital importance of distribution and deployment to all front-line settings and stressed that all staff must know where to turn within their organisations when they have concerns or questions.

I remind colleagues of the scale of this issue. We must continue to support our staff, and indeed the broader community, in helping them understand and make informed decisions about when, and how, PPE should be used. The correct use of this precious resource is as equally important as is confidence in supply chains. However, if we are asking staff to trust the guidance on what PPE they need, then they are understandably relying on us to get the right PPE to them and at the time they need it. That is why, after speaking to the Chief Medical Officer, we have now agreed that there is going to be a thorough examination of the flow of PPE. I have made it clear that it would be inexcusable if delays saw PPE remaining in stores or in trust buildings, waiting for onward allocation whilst staff and care facilities were going without.

I turn now to another key issue that I have been focussed on: the provision of testing and the significant role it has, and must continue to play, in our fight against COVID-19. I would like to reassure you that testing is growing and will continue to do so as rapidly as is possible. As of this morning, the total number of individuals tested for COVID-19 in Northern Ireland stands at 13,672. That figure includes 4,151 healthcare workers. However, it is important to note that, because testing was not specifically targeted at healthcare workers at the outset, that figure may underestimate the true number of healthcare workers tested.

In today's figures, we are reporting an additional 121 confirmed cases and, sadly, a further six deaths. That represents six more families in mourning, and we should keep them in our thoughts at this time. I am also aware that, in recent days, there has been growing commentary asking why, if our testing capacity stands at over 1,000 — I am glad that it does — the number of tests being reported daily is often below that. Whilst a number of issues can have an impact on the daily figures, an important point that I wish to stress to members and to members of the media is that it often takes more than one test to confirm a positive or negative diagnosis. Of the 577 individuals that are being reported today, a number will have been tested more than once, so we will have carried out many more

than 577 tests. The difference in tests and testing capacity is not what it may first appear.

I am also committed to further scaling up our daily capacity through existing health and social care laboratory space and through external partners at local and national level. Just yesterday, I visited DAERA's Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) with my Executive colleague Minister Poots to talk with officials there about the work that they will now undertake as part of a consortium in Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University to assist the health service in testing up to 1,000 samples a day from suspected COVID-19 cases. You will be aware that testing is now also being carried out at a number of DVLA sites to support local trust capacity and through the national initiative at the SSE Arena testing site, and there will soon be testing at a second testing centre in Londonderry, which is due imminently. Further sites are at an advanced stage of development. In addition, the expert working group has been established to lead on the expansion of testing across all our laboratory services in health and social care facilities and to consider options for the utilisation of other testing facilities, including those in the commercial sector. In the testing strategy, which has been shared with the Executive and the Health Committee, I have made it clear that the overall testing policy will be adjusted over time as testing capacity increases and priority groups for testing are expanded. Similarly, the strategy also includes a pledge that testing will soon move towards surveillance of COVID-19 in the population to inform the planning of services, including surge capacity, and to estimate population immunity.

I know that members will also be keen to hear an update on COVID-19-related deaths in care homes. I would like to take a few minutes to reassure members that care home providers and staff in Northern Ireland are working extremely hard to keep some of the most vulnerable people safe, and I recognise their commitment and dedication here today. I am committed to providing all the support that they need to continue this vital work, and, as such, the Public Health Agency is working very closely with local care homes, providing expert support and detailed advice in the event of infections and outbreaks occurring. Where care home residents and/or staff are symptomatic, they are being tested, and testing is being increased. There has been much focus in recent days on deaths that occur outside hospital settings. Let me again be clear about this: every single one of our residents in nursing and care homes matters just as much as every other citizen in our society.

The process for registering deaths in the community takes a number of days and involves a doctor completing a death certificate and a number of additional steps being undertaken by the General Register Office and the Northern Ireland Statistical and Research Agency (NISRA). NISRA publishes a weekly bulletin on all deaths registered in Northern Ireland, and, from this week, the bulletin will provide information on all COVID-19-related deaths registered in Northern Ireland across hospital and community settings. However, for clarity on this issue, I will highlight that many of the deaths of our care home residents are already being captured in the figures being published, as many of the patients are first being admitted to hospitals.

Members, I am conscious that my statement is lengthy and that you will be keen to ask a number of questions on a range of issues, but I would like to take another few moments to update you on some of our key actions that are ongoing to support the emergency response across the HSC.

A key component in the emergency response has been work to maximise HSC's capacity to treat COVID-19 patients. Each trust has also taken steps to significantly increase critical care capacity at local hospitals. We now have 143 adult ICU beds, with a further 12 paediatric beds. Today, there are 49 COVID patients in ICU, with a further 38 non-COVID patients. Thankfully, that means that, as it stands, and before even more beds come online for any further increase in critical care admissions, we have 56 spare ICU beds. We also have 197 ventilators, but, as was demonstrated with the Prime Minister's recent ICU experience, not all ICU patients require ventilation. We also have 3,820 geriatric and acute beds. At present, there are 603 COVID-related inpatients, including confirmed and suspected cases. There are a further 1,345 non-COVID patients in hospitals across Northern Ireland, meaning that, as it stands, we have almost 1,900 empty beds. If our modelling is accurate, that should be more than sufficient capacity to meet the surge.

In the event of an extreme surge, Northern Ireland's first Nightingale hospital has now been established at Belfast City Hospital. The unit will initially treat a mixture of patients who are critically ill and those who require admission to hospital with less acute symptoms. However, if the surge is more severe than expected, this new regional unit will have the capacity to treat up to 230 ventilated patients from across Northern Ireland. In this scenario, if local ICU services come under severe pressure, either due to the weight of demand or due to staff absence, they may need to be folded into the Nightingale hospital in a carefully planned and phased process, while ensuring that local services are still equipped to safely treat a small number of critically ill patients. However, I stress that much of the day-to-day, non-COVID business of the health service continues. People are still having strokes and heart attacks. That is why I urge anyone who suspects that they need to talk to a doctor or present to a hospital to do so. While having empty beds is positive, equally I do not want to see people who need to be in hospital not coming forward.

In recent days, I have also approved two decisions to activate military aid to civil authority (MACA). This was something that I announced almost a fortnight ago that I was minded to do. The first decision relates to the need to redistribute medical equipment between hospitals across Northern Ireland to ensure that all hospitals have the necessary equipment, including ventilators, required to fully enact their surge plans. The second relates to the provision of technical advice and assistance to explore the potential for the development of a new, temporary Nightingale facility. There have been lessons learned in the course of our preparations for this surge, and one is the need for a regional facility that can react quickly to changing patterns of demand in the event of an extreme surge of COVID-19 patients.

In addition, HSC trusts are now accessing hospitals in the independent sector to treat urgent non-COVID patients across a number of elective specialities. It is expected that

between 120 and 135 procedures will be carried out per week across a range of red-flag and urgent cases. These will include breast surgery, gynae cancer surgery, plastic surgery, urology procedures, general surgery and ophthalmology, as well as potential for a small number of local anaesthetic procedures to be undertaken. The HSC will fund this activity on the basis of compensating the independent sector on a net cost recovery, not-for-profit basis.

On next steps, I very much wish that I could provide some certainty on what the future holds for us all. Modelling has indicated that we are now in the peak of the first wave of the pandemic, but it is too early to confirm whether the current figures represent the peak. In the absence of a vaccine, we will have to plan for a potential second wave of COVID-19 cases later in the year, once restrictions are eased or lifted and normal life gradually resumes. While there are grounds for hope that the outbreak can be brought under control through maintenance of the current restrictions, coupled with the continuation of the high level of compliance that has been observed by the people in Northern Ireland, the outbreak has not yet reached the point where the restrictions can be relaxed. The progress achieved through good adherence to the restrictions by the people of Northern Ireland will be lost very quickly if there is any adverse change in compliance with the existing social-distancing measures or relaxation of the restrictions that help achieve that compliance. It is clear that, in Northern Ireland, as elsewhere in the world, the restrictions are causing hardship, distress, anxiety and economic harm. They represent a level of interference with family life, work, religious practice, social and cultural activity, leisure, sporting and educational pursuits that is alien to our way of life.

My Department has carried out the required review of The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020, drawing on the advice of the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser. On the back of that review, the Executive have today agreed that the restrictions and requirements set out in the regulations continue to be necessary if we are to continue to flatten the epidemic curve, manage the capacity of the health service and keep COVID-19 deaths to a minimum. There will be a further review, which will inform how we progress, and the position will be closely monitored. However, now, as before, the message remains the same: please keep safe, stay home and protect our NHS, as it is working to protect us.

I will conclude by appealing to members and to the general public. I have previously expressed concern about noise on social media and elsewhere that is distracting from the work that we are doing and from our life-saving messages to the public. That noise remains a challenge. We seem to have a lot of self-appointed experts commenting minute by minute. We seem to have lot of people on Twitter who have secured doctorates in epidemiology in a few short weeks. They are entitled to their opinions. They are not entitled to their own facts.

I urge everyone to avoid speculation or rushing to judgement. Comparing our statistics and our actions, favourably or otherwise, with those of other countries is premature at best. It is highly likely that this planet will be battling the coronavirus well into 2021 at least. The prospect of a second surge later this year must weigh heavily on all our minds. This is no time for final verdicts to

be delivered, favourable or critical, because we are in this for the long haul.

We will also have to face up to difficult conversations down the line about when or whether or not to ease any social-distancing restrictions. That time is not now. At this moment in time, we have to stick firmly with the measures we have, but the time will come for those discussions, and we have to face them together, honestly and openly. There will not be any easy decisions, because simply maintaining the current lockdown indefinitely would have serious repercussions for many people's mental and physical well-being. We will all have to weigh up our options very carefully, working closely with colleagues across these islands, to ensure that we take the right decisions at the right time. Thank you.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): I thank the Minister for his statement. I will now invite members to ask questions. I will allow one hour for this and it is my intention to allow every member in the Chamber to ask a question. Of course, to enable that to happen, I need members' cooperation and for them to be focused and succinct in their questions. Members may ask one question and it must be related to the Minister's statement. As is normal, the Chair of the Health Committee will be allowed some latitude to ask an additional question. I invite Colm Gildernew, the Chair of the Health Committee, to ask a question.

Mr Gildernew (Committee Chair - Committee for Health): I thank the Minister for his statement. I acknowledge and endorse his comments about the hard work of staff. I also pass on my condolences to the additional six families who have been bereaved as a result of this dreadful virus.

In your statement, Minister, you referenced the fact that modelling cannot tell us what the future holds. However, we have been aware for some time from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) that the way in which to tackle and fight the virus is first to test, then to trace the people who have been in contact with those with positive tests and then to isolate those people. In light of that, it is my view that testing should have happened more extensively and longer ago. The Chinese have a saying:

*"The best time to plant an oak tree was 20 years ago.
The second best time is today."*

I ask you today, Minister, what plans are in place and when you will be in a position to roll out testing to our care home sector and to the staff who work in it, in order to protect the most vulnerable people in our society.

You mentioned in your statement that you would:

"rigorously pursue every viable supply source"

for PPE. You will know that I wrote to you some weeks ago about the European procurement scheme. My second question is this: were you made aware of that scheme by the British Government, and would you have taken part in it had you been? Are you now pursuing the potential for us to purchase PPE for our front-line staff via that route?

Mr Swann: I thank the Chair for his questions. I also thank him for the support that he has given to our healthcare workers, because I know that it is gratefully received and appreciated.

Especially with the additional 1,000 tests a day coming online through AFBI, we are now moving to a position in which we can move on to our next phase of testing, and it is exactly as the Chair laid out. It is in the testing plan that we shared with the Committee. How we move once we get out of this phase, how we find out where the virus is in the community and how we make sure that we lock that area down — I do not mean that we lock it down physically but that we lock down the virus in the area — is by testing and tracing. The Chair is well aware that we have always been pushing to get as many tests done in Northern Ireland as we can. The ability to test more people through the partnership working that we see both in our own health labs and in AFBI's labs and through taking part in the national testing programme will enable us to take testing to the next stage, which is something that I want to do as quickly as possible, and the Chair is well aware of that.

With regard to testing in care homes, we put out a notice at the start of the week that any resident of a care home — I say that deliberately, because I have heard people talk about "patients" in care homes: they are "residents" of care homes — who has shown symptoms will be tested. That is the guarantee that we have made, and that is what we will do. It is vital that we support people in care homes so that they get tested as they need it, including the staff. It is also about reassuring the family members of people in care homes that we are here to make sure that their relatives receive the support and protection that they require.

The Chair may remember that we took criticism at the start because we closed down visiting at care homes quite early, which caused emotional stress. I announced yesterday that, at that minute in time, we had 32 care homes with COVID-19-positive patients in them, which relates to one in 12 of the care homes in Northern Ireland, whereas, across the water in England, it is one in six. I am therefore hopeful that that early intervention will have restricted the number of care homes in which we see positive cases, and we are making further support measures available.

The Chair asked specifically about PPE. I have not seen the letter that he has written to me, but I am sure that it will be one of many that are there for me. I was not made aware of the EU-wide procurement scheme, and I can say openly standing here that I was not briefed on it at the time. Would I have availed myself of it? The member knows well that I would avail myself of any scheme or mechanism to get PPE to our front-line workers, and that is why I am thankful that, working through the member's party colleague the Minister of Finance, we have progressed the work that we are doing internationally and locally to source PPE supplies for all our front-line staff. The member will know how the Minister of Finance is working with representatives in China who are working with the British embassy out there to secure a supply line from China. More important is the ability for us to repurpose and reskill our manufacturing processes in Northern Ireland, because that economic support and recovery is vital to those people. I was with the member's colleague, the Minister of Finance, at Huhtamaki in west Belfast, and they will be able to upskill to provide four million face shields per day. That is a vital piece of PPE that our front-line workers need. When we start to produce that locally, it means that we can get that security of supply chain. One of the things that the virus has proven in regard to our supply chains, especially with the likes of PPE, is

that that just-in-time, international delivery pipeline is good when there is no threat, but, once we start to see threats, we need to make sure that we can secure our own PPE and support individuals in our home markets.

There was an e-tendering process for additional Northern Ireland suppliers and manufacturers to come online. It was being managed by the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) in the Department of Finance and, I believe, closed at midday yesterday. I spoke earlier with the Minister of Finance, and he has said that they are working through the options and offers that went into that bidding process so that we can get more Northern Ireland companies up and running and producing PPE.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for his statement to the House today. Minister, you referred to the good reaction from the public to the stringent measures that have been put in place. That includes, obviously, social distancing. In order to give context to my question, I will read a bit of the guidance given on a question on the government site. The question was:

“Can I exercise more than once a day if I need to due a significant health condition?”

It goes on to say:

“If you have a specific health condition that requires you to leave the home to maintain your health - including if that involves travel beyond your local area - then you can do so. This could, for example, include where individuals with learning disabilities or autism require specific exercise in an open space two or three times each day - ideally in line with care plan agreed with a medical professional.”

Can you clarify or produce further guidelines to that piece of government guidance, given the large number of individuals who have a diagnosis of autism in Northern Ireland?

Mr Swann: I thank the Deputy Chairperson for her question. I know that she has been a long-time champion of those with autism, and I know the challenge that the current social distancing and the stay-at-home restrictions put on some individuals who have autism and suffer from being confined in their home. I was part of a ministerial four nations meeting earlier, and it was indicated that there has been a 21% increase in calls to the likes of the Samaritans.

In regard to the specific guidance for those with autism, the key point that she refers to is about a care plan on advice from a medical professional. For those who need to go outside their home more than once a day, it would be with that guidance and support from a medical professional. I am willing to get specific guidance to the member in regard to autism, because I am also conscious that that guidance advises that any physical activity that is undertaken should be limited to close to home. It is not about getting in the car to go to somewhere else for a walk; it is about using the area close to your home for that support and always remaining in line with the other social-distancing regulations to remain two metres apart from anybody else you meet, unless they are a carer or a member of your household.

There are exclusions or specific cases where people can go outside their home more than once a day under medical

guidance, but it is not something that I want to see abused. It is something that I want people to do under advice and guidance. I am happy to get more guidance to the member.

Mr McGrath: I thank the Minister for his statement. I commend him for the work that he has done recently in some very difficult circumstances. It is not often that Ministers get praise, but, certainly in my constituency, people recognise the work that he is doing, and I want to pass on that message.

I want to ask the Minister about deaths in care homes. There has been a change in the way that deaths are verified and certified, maybe not so much in the certifying but certainly in the verifying. Is that causing some of the time lag, maybe because it is care home staff rather than doctors and nurses who have to carry out the verification? Is that causing the slight delay in the reason for death being communicated to doctors, who then certify those deaths? That can take several days to come through.

Let us set that against some statistics. Last week, NISRA stated that we had 434 deaths, 55 of which were coronavirus-related. However, if we compare that week with the average over the last five years, there is a 30% increase in the number of deaths, which means that there are probably around 80 deaths that do not fit with the statistics that we have had over the last number of years. Is there an opportunity there to establish that some of those deaths are coronavirus-related but are not being recorded? Is it possible to tighten up as best we can how deaths are verified and certified?

Mr Swann: Again, the member brings to light one of the current issues that we are dealing with. It is always one of the issues that come up when individuals or members of the media start talking about numbers. I want to say to people, “Please remember that these are individuals”. Too often in these conversations, when people start to look at graphs and numbers, they forget that there is a loved one behind every one of them.

There was a piece of work being done between the Public Health Agency (PHA) and NISRA, which falls within the Department of Finance, to ensure that we captured every death that was related to coronavirus. The discrepancy between the PHA-reported deaths and those coming through from NISRA is specifically that those being reported by the PHA were people who had been tested and confirmed to have coronavirus in the last 28 days and had passed away in a hospital setting.

The member may recall that, when we started reporting deaths — we are talking about deaths in Northern Ireland — it was because someone had passed away with COVID with an underlying condition. NISRA picks up the death of someone who dies with a condition with COVID as an underlying condition. NISRA picks up the deaths of people who die with COVID but not of COVID. It is about a more rigorous way of recording deaths, rather than someone being missed out. However, we have to be cognisant of the additional deaths that fall outside the normal average, which is something that has been raised in other countries. It is an awful way to talk about death. There have been 143 deaths, and the member has referred to that. NISRA is doing a bigger piece of work to break those deaths down and determine the underlying cause.

As I said in my statement, what concerns me as Health Minister is that there are people who may have had a

stroke or a mild heart attack but are staying away from hospitals rather than seeking help and support. The message that I want to put out is that, if you need to go to a GP or a hospital, please do so. Do not be afraid to do so: the NHS is here to help.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Minister for his statement. He does not need expressions of support from us because he has it in spades. I particularly welcome the revelation that over 4,151 healthcare workers have been tested so far. Will he give a commitment that we now have sufficient testing capacity, through both local and national testing channels, so that we can test all the healthcare workers who need to be tested?

Mr Swann: I should have said in response to Colin McGrath's question that, when people talk about praising me, the only reason that the Department is seen to be doing the job that it is doing is the work of those in our National Health Service and in community pharmacy and those who fill shelves in shops and all of that. This is not about any individual or any one Department; this is about society in Northern Ireland actually working.

As regards testing of healthcare workers, I am now confident that, if a healthcare worker needs to be tested, they can be tested, should that be through the testing facility in a trust or through the national testing facility, currently at the SSE and, as I said earlier, one will be opening shortly in Londonderry. Hopefully, in the next couple of weeks, there will be a further one in the south and south-west that will utilise the Randox test. We can get front-line healthcare workers tested.

Regarding an updated figure for staff across health and social care trusts, I suppose that members, the media and the public always look to the numbers. Of the 60,096 people working in the health and social care trusts as of 10 April, which is the most recent data that we have, there are 274 staff out because of COVID-19; that is 0.4% of the workforce. Updated figures will come shortly. The number of staff who are isolating is 1,430, or 2.1%. They may be self-isolating or shielding because of underlying health reasons. So, 2.5% of the entire health and social care staff were off at that point in time, but that can be compared with 3.6%, or 2,500 members of staff, who were off due to other health matters at the same time.

When it comes to testing our health and social care staff, we will make sure that they are tested when they need to be tested.

Ms Bradshaw: Minister, you will recall that, at a Health Committee meeting a few months ago, I raised the issue of guidance for expectant parents, and I asked you, at that time, to put up the guidance from the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. Since then, that guidance has been updated, and the section relating to front-line employees who are pregnant states that they should seek to move to an admin role or to another part of the health trust. That is not always happening, and even though they may have PPE or have risk assessments carried out, front-line healthcare workers are living with chronic stress right now because they feel that they should not be in work and that that is having an impact on their pregnancy etc and that it could possibly lead to long-term issues in relation to perinatal mental health, for example. What is your assessment of the current support that

pregnant front-line workers are getting and what is the long-term plan for supporting them?

Mr Swann: Again, if a member has a case like this, they should bring it to me, because I am prepared to look at it, even if it is on an individual basis. As the member mentioned, the advice and guidance was updated. It should be in the remit of the employer to offer an alternative working place. If they are not doing so, or cannot successfully do so, then I am happy to look at the case and take it forward. If the member wants to, she can talk to me outside, after the briefing, because I do not think it is appropriate to discuss individual cases now rather than the generality. I will check the guidance to the trusts, but I think, as the member mentioned, it was updated to say that they should be moved to an admin position or one that does not require interaction with patients who might pose a risk. Again, if the member has specific cases, I will take them up with her, and she can contact me.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): Members, I need your cooperation. You need to be focussed and succinct if everyone is going to get to ask a question.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for his statement. As he knows, I fully support everything he, his staff and the health service have been doing, and I pay tribute to them for the excellent work that they have been doing.

I am concerned about the independent sector, particularly nursing homes. In my constituency, one nursing home has 10 cases of COVID-19, and, having spoken to some of the staff, I understand that there is an issue with getting PPE to the independent sector. Is that an area where we could possibly use the army to get supplies out to ensure that all staff have the correct PPE?

Mr Swann: I thank the member for raising this point. There should not be an issue with PPE. As the member indicated, the private-sector care homes have direct access. They have a point of contact within each trust should they have an issue with PPE. There are also support mechanisms if there are COVID-19-positive patients within care homes. There are support mechanisms within the Public Health Agency. Also, a number of weeks ago we moved some staff from the usual inspection process that the RQIA maintains, to a support mechanism whereby we can use their professional skills, whether they be as social workers or nurses, to advise and support care homes with COVID-19-positive residents.

At this minute time, there should not be an issue in the independent sector with care homes having a problem with PPE. I am also aware that a direct contact app has been set up through which every care home has the ability to contact RQIA directly should they have any concerns about testing, support or PPE. There should not be a case where a care home is still experiencing problems in obtaining PPE. If there is, I am happy to have a conversation with the member outside the Chamber, get the name of the care home and make sure we can get this addressed.

Mr Sheehan: The Minister will be aware that the countries that have been most successful in tackling the virus, for example China, South Korea, Singapore and Japan, have used a combination of measures. They have used widespread testing, rigorous contact tracing, isolation and social distancing. However, on 12 March the British Government took a clear policy decision to cease all

contact tracing, and a similar policy decision was taken here, presumably by yourself, Minister. Those decisions not only run counter to international best practice, but they also run counter to advice given by the World Health Organization. Will the Minister tell us when he is going to reverse that decision and put in place a comprehensive programme of testing and rigorous contact tracing?

Mr Swann: Again, in response to the member's question, I will refer him to my statement in which I talked about how we will be increasing our capacity for testing and how it is a drive and target, not just for me, but for the Executive.

With regard to contact tracing, when we get through this surge, move into the next phase and start to see where the virus is present in our community, that is the point when the contact tracing becomes a vital tool. At this minute in time, we are working with colleagues from environmental health and other agencies to make sure they can be trained-up and skilled in what contact tracing actually is, because it is not just something you can throw anybody into.

We want to make sure that, when we go into the next stage involving contact tracing, the people who are doing it are fully skilled and realise its importance. That is why, in the initial cases that we had, we were able to utilise the highly-skilled individuals in the Public Health Agency to do that contact tracing, and that proved vital. If the member recalls, our very first case was an individual who landed in Dublin Airport and then travelled to their residence in Belfast. Through the Public Health Agency working with the Health Service Executive (HSE) in the Republic of Ireland, we were able to trace all the contacts that individual had from when they got off the plane until they arrived home in Belfast.

Therefore, it is a skill that is not just as easily picked up as some may believe, but it is something we are already working on so that, when we come to the next phase of how we tackle COVID-19 within our community, we have people there and ready to do that. So, the member can be assured that, when it comes to the next stage of how we manage and tackle COVID-19 within Northern Ireland, and within the community, we will have the people in place to do that.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister, and I again reassure him of our support for his leadership to date on this very important issue. We should, again, pay tribute to all the health professionals for the high level of care that has been given to everyone throughout Northern Ireland. It is a good example and we are very fortunate as we are probably getting the best level of care in the world, and to date there has been great success.

Minister, the level of PPE that has been available to our GPs is a matter that I raised with you some time ago, its having been brought to my attention by a constituent who is a GP, some weeks ago. There is still some concern out there about the provision of PPE for GPs within their practice and also the use of an antibody test. I forwarded information to your office some time ago about a local GP — in fact, a number of GPs — having sourced an antibody test that costs £5 per test. He was keen to get that into the service. Can we have an update on that antibody test and the possibility of its being used? Health professionals believe that it would do a lot to reassure their staff and would go a long way to ensuring that people are available to continue with the good work that they are carrying out.

Mr Swann: I thank the member for his kind words of support for those working in the National Health Service.

There are a number of antibody tests on the market, but none of them is yet verified or certified for use. A national working group is leading the work on that aspect of the pandemic response. That working group includes membership drawn from HSE England, Public Health England, and the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency. All tests — even the one that the member refers to — that may have potential for wider use in population testing are first triaged according to strict MHRA criteria. If a test is successfully triaged, it will be subject to further detailed work, according to the nationally agreed processes and protocols. Staff from the HSC in Northern Ireland are well embedded across the work programme being led by the national working group, and regular updates are provided to each meeting of the expert advisory group on testing. It is envisaged that HSC staff will actively contribute to work progressing through that national programming body.

At this point, no suitable antibody test has been identified for use on a population basis, but I will continue to update Executive and Assembly colleagues as the national and local work progresses in that regard. What would be worse than no test is having a bad test. If the antibody test is not efficient in its reproducibility or repeatability, you could be telling somebody that they are clear when they are not. I would rather make sure that the antibody test is right before we utilise it.

In regards to PPE going to GPs, there was a major piece of work and updated guidance was put out at the end of last week. There was a major push on PPE across the sector, including to GPs. That should have completed this week, as well. I would be surprised if GP practices out there still do not have PPE kit. One of the reasons why we established the COVID centres was so that, if anybody was phoning a GP and being triaged at that point, they were directed, if necessary, to a COVID centre, so they did not have to present specifically to a GP surgery. That work is ongoing, and, again, if the member knows of specific GP surgeries that still have not been supplied or need supplies of PPE, please get in contact.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): Members, we are halfway through the time for questions and we have only got to question 9, so I need your support — succinct and focused.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Minister for his statement. Like others, I offer my condolences to those who have been bereaved and express my gratitude to all our front-line workers.

Minister, you will likely be aware that my party colleague Colm Gildernew and I wrote to you last week about agency workers in the HSC and, in particular, their terms and conditions. Will you consider offering temporary contracts to all agency staff on Agenda for Change terms and conditions to help to provide stability during the crisis?

Mr Swann: I thank the member. Our workforce is being looked at and that is one of the many avenues of upskilling and upping the numbers of our workforce across the HSC sector. That increase includes the volunteers who are coming in to support our HSC, those who are coming back into practice — nurses, doctors — and student nurses. We have brought forward a number of general medical

practitioners in their training. So, we are looking at every avenue to make sure that we have the workforce in place.

I have not looked directly at bringing agency workers onto the payroll under Agenda for Change, but we are looking at every avenue to make sure that those who are working in our health service are receiving the best support that we can give them at this time. It is not something that I have ruled out, but it will not be imminent in the next couple of days. I do not want to mislead either the agency workers or the member herself, but we will look again to see where the staff are in our National Health Service and those supporting roles. It is like when you go to war. When any country goes to war, the most valued person that they have is their soldier in the front line. When we go in to tackle coronavirus, the most important people that we have are those health workers. In peacetime, people often forget their army and their volunteers. When we get through coronavirus, we must not forget the sacrifice and the dedication of our National Health Service.

Mr O'Toole: Like others, I associate myself with the comments, first, paying tribute to our amazing healthcare staff and also offering condolences to the families and friends of those who have lost people in Northern Ireland to this awful virus.

In answer to a previous question, the Minister noted that Northern Ireland's first case of COVID-19 arrived here via Dublin airport. With that in mind and given the memorandum of understanding last week and his acknowledgement that all-island contact tracing is an inevitability, particularly in the context of what is now very low passenger transit between the islands of Britain and Ireland, when can we expect to see a joined-up all-island testing-and-tracing strategy brought forward by his Department?

Mr Swann: The member will be aware of the memorandum of understanding, which he referred to. We do meet regularly and talk regularly with our counterparts in the Republic of Ireland. Our Chief Medical Officers are well intertwined, but one of the things that the member has to be conscious of is that we are two jurisdictions that share this island. While we do work closely together and we will continue to work closely as we tackle COVID-19, it will be a joint approach but a joint approach that is North/South and east-west. When it comes to specific all-island approaches and all-island mechanisms, we will work in collaboration with our partners in the Republic of Ireland, as we do with our partners across the United Kingdom.

Mr Chambers: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive statement today. I note that he referenced the noise coming from social media and some media commentators and others, who recently appear to have become fully qualified scientists. It is unhelpful and it can cause disquiet in the minds of the public, who the Minister is seeking to protect. It must be acknowledged that the Minister and his staff in the NHS and associated services have moved mountains over a short period of time. My question is: can he provide an update on the work being undertaken on COVID-19 research and development?

Mr Swann: It was a pointed comment in my statement, because some of the noise that is generated is not just unhelpful but is undermining to some of the key workers in our National Health Service. It is unfair that commentary is

often misguided and based on a tweet that somebody has put out from someone who is not a real person to start with.

The next phase is the medical trials, and a number of those are ongoing where we will be looking to what medication may be useful in either reducing the ferocity of the virus or as an antigen or a vaccine to prevent it entering society. Our Chief Medical Officer here in Northern Ireland chairs that working group, so the member can be reassured that Northern Ireland will be fully linked in to any UK-wide approach to any trial of medication or vaccine that will be brought forward.

Mr Middleton: I join others in thanking the Minister for the work that he is doing, along with all of those key workers on the front line, who are doing everything that they can to save lives. Minister, this morning, I spoke with a senior consultant in my constituency, who raised concerns like the ones that you have around people in our communities who have serious conditions, such as heart conditions and strokes, who are not attending their appointments and are not going to the hospital. Ultimately, that will lead to further complications, if not death. Minister, can you remind people that they need to take those conditions seriously, and, whilst being mindful of COVID-19, they must not put their health at risk and they should attend their appointments?

Mr Swann: I cannot stress that enough. If anything leaves here today, it should be the reinforcement of the message that those who need to go to the GP or an emergency department should do so. GPs are now triaging, and if there are COVID symptoms, the patient is sent to the COVID-19 centre. Most of our EDs now have a dual-track approach, and those who present with COVID or respiratory conditions are treated separately from those who are experiencing stroke or heart attack symptoms. I urge the Northern Ireland public to remember that our health service is still here to serve you. It is our National Health Service, which is free at point of delivery and point of use. That is what it is there for. If you need to present with any medical condition, please do so, because it is still there to support you. As I said in my statement, it is reassuring to have the number of empty beds that we have in the preparation for the surge, but I am cognisant of the fact that there are people who could be utilising those beds, but are not.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Minister for his statement and answers thus far. The two self-appointed experts who most concern me in the entire debate are Boris Johnson and Dominic Cummings and the influence that they have had on the strategy around tackling COVID-19. I accept, as the Minister said in his statement, that there will be time afterwards for a closer examination of all of those things.

PPE has come up, time and time again. In his response to several members' questions on the independent sector, the Minister said that there should not be an issue, and in response to another question about GPs, he said that they should have the equipment. However, time and time again — night after night — we hear stories from reputable news agencies that front-line staff are seriously concerned about the level of personal protective equipment that they have. Can the Minister redouble his assurances and recheck, again, that the proper equipment is going out to front-line services? PPE covers a broad range of issues, from gloves and aprons to purpose-built masks. Can the Minister redouble his efforts? I know that he is sincere in

his efforts — I have no question about that — but there is clearly a difference between what the Minister is telling the House and the experience of some front-line staff.

Mr Swann: I thank the member for acknowledging our sincerity. The sincerity is across my Department and our health service. As I said in my statement, the Chief Medical Officer came to me in his push to make sure that the correct PPE is being made available. The supply of PPE is a challenge, worldwide, but I do not want it to be sitting in a stockpile or in a warehouse and not getting to the person who needs it. The regulations and guidance that we put out are to make sure that the PPE is used at the appropriate point in time by the people who need it.

The member is right: PPE covers a multitude of items and issues. In the past seven days, we have issued more than 12 million pieces of PPE. In 2019, our usual weekly distribution was just over one million, so, year-on-year, we have put out 11 million more pieces of PPE. I want to be assured — I need to be assured — that it is getting to the people who need it. So, I say to members, with genuineness, if a care home or GP is telling you that they do not have that PPE, it should not be. That is why I have asked the Chief Medical Officer to put in a more stringent approach.

We have seen an improvement over the past number of weeks. We had wards on which nurses were reporting that they had run out or faced shortages of PPE on a Saturday night or a Sunday morning, but we have worked on that; we have cracked that. A number of GP practices are saying that they do not have it, but we are working on that, and I believe we are cracking it. Care homes in the independent sector are meant to procure their own PPE, because they are independent and private suppliers, but we have made it very clear that, as a health and social care system, we will support them in the obtainment of PPE, should it be through access to our own stocks, because it is important that we support the residents in their homes as well.

The member can be reassured that I will do all that I can, should that mean that I have to work with the Chief Medical Officer to put a team in place that has to go out to walk wards and GP surgeries and visit care homes to make sure that that PPE is in the right place. We will do that.

Mr Lyttle: I offer my condolences to the families bereaved by COVID-19 and I thank health staff who are risking their own safety to limit the impact of this disease. It is clear that public compliance with coronavirus restrictions is also saving lives, but, as the Minister acknowledges, this public health emergency also has the potential to cause anxiety and distress for many people. Will the Minister establish an emergency mental health assessment unit to receive urgent referrals for those suffering with mental illness during this time?

Mr Swann: I thank the member for his question. Looking down and seeing him sitting in my chair is one of the disconcerting things about this Committee of the House. *[Laughter.]* As I said earlier in regard to strokes and heart attacks, people who are suffering from mental health traumas and anxiety should be looking for the same support from our National Health Service, because it is still there to support them. It may have been repurposed where we are taking telephone triage more than face-to-

face contact but I reassure the member that that support mechanism should still be there for those who need it.

What we also have to be cognisant of is that, on the other side of this — and there will be another side to this — the level of mental health, anxiety and stress that we will see, not just in society but in our health and social care workers, will be immense. We are already working in the health service and across trusts to make sure that mental health and well-being provision is there for our staff, because there will be a point when, because of the pressures, anxieties and stress of the working environment that they are in, they will need that support and we will have to be there to provide it.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for his update and for the information that he has given. I share the sympathy that has been expressed not only to those families who have suffered as a result of the passing of a loved one through COVID-19, but to those families, some neighbours of our own today, who have had to bury loved ones in very difficult and challenging circumstances, given the restrictions that have to be in place. Our thoughts and prayers are with all those who have lost loved ones at this time.

I welcome the Minister's comments, particularly in regard to pharmacists, and the money that he released recently to community pharmacy. He knows that we have raised that issue with him previously. I also welcome his comment about not forgetting our National Health Service after this and that our community pharmacists will not be not forgotten.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): Can the member come to a question?

Mr Storey: You will be aware, Minister, that changes have been made to the operation of the Causeway Hospital in Coleraine, particularly in relation to ICU and maternity services. I have not been speaking to a keyboard warrior or individuals on social media, but to a retired consultant from the Causeway, whom I spoke to in the last 24 hours. He expressed grave concern about ensuring that these are only temporary measures and that they will not be used as long-term decisions to undermine the long-term viability of the Causeway Hospital.

Mr Swann: The member will be aware — I brought a copy of it with me because I thought that it probably would be raised today — of the press release and the reassurance that was issued by the Northern Health and Social Care Trust. It restated that it is a temporary arrangement and reflects the limited anaesthetic, medical and ICU nursing workforce in Causeway, and the fact that other hospitals, such as Antrim Area Hospital, have been specifically set up to deal with such cases. So, in regards to the concerns that were raised, including on social media, the Northern Trust moved itself to reassure the public.

The member's opening comments were about the perception of death and how we treat it in Northern Ireland. How we look at death in Northern Ireland has always been a very personal, family and community-based experience. It is how we come together as a community to provide support to the families who have been bereaved and also to make sure that they are aware of the support that continues to be there. Where we are today is that we do not get the chance to get that closure. For those people who lose their lives to COVID-19, whose family members do not get to hold their hands in that final moment: that is

a challenge that we are working on. That is the challenge in ICU, and it is taking a toll on the nurses. It gives me reassurance and pride in our nursing workforce when they can put out a message to the families of those loved ones that, "Your family member did not die alone. We were there". That is a big onus on any individual, but it is a reassurance to those families who could not be there at that final moment that the dedication and love of our health staff is there to support them.

In regards to community pharmacists, I cannot stress enough my thanks and appreciation for how much they have stepped up. The work that they have done in the past number of weeks has been immense. They have also brought in changes to their opening hours, with the pressure and number of prescriptions that they are putting out. They have done an invaluable piece of work in supporting the health service, and, as I said when I last met them, they are part of the health family. That is how they are perceived, and that is how they should be treated.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): I call Melissa McHugh.

Mr McHugh: It is Maólíosa not Melissa.

I thank the Minister for his statement. I know that you do not like to talk about statistics, but New Zealand was talked about today and the strategies that have been adopted there, and one statistic that jumped out is that one is three times more likely to die of coronavirus in Britain than they are on the island of Ireland. There is food for thought there, and I want you to consider that when you are looking at strategies.

Aside from that, there are 5,566 receivers of direct payment for care. How do those workers who are technically employees for care access PPE and testing? With the recent guidelines published on 9 April, there is a feeling that those workers have effectively been abandoned.

Mr Swann: I assure the member that we are putting in support measures for those people who are looking after their loved ones and have taken on that direct care, so the supply and support will be there and further guidance will be issued as to how they can access that.

In comparing one nation's death rate with another, as I said earlier, I will not go there. I will not go into that level of analysis at this point in time because we do not know where we will finish.

Ms McLaughlin: Thank you for your statement today and for the additional information that you have shared with us. Before this crisis, our social care was in dire straits anyway. Our community care and home care were in difficulties, and now we see even greater pressure being put on them. I had occasion over the weekend to speak to quite a number of our home care and community care teams and they are confused about the guidance in relation to PPE. They do not believe that they have sufficient PPE, and they think that the guidance coming out from PHA and RQIA and the trusts, in many ways, is conflicting and it changes rapidly. What is appropriate and correct one day is maybe not appropriate and correct the next day. As a doctor in a care home said to me, it is like the parent who goes into the cupboard to see what they are going to have for dinner. They open the cupboard and say, "This is what we are having for dinner today" because

that is what is in the cupboard. PPE cannot be distributed in that manner. People are feeling confused —

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): Can the member ask the question, please?

Ms McLaughlin: — and do not feel confident. Can we have a joined-up approach between the various clinical bodies and organisations to make sure that the right PPE is in the right place at the right time for the right carers?

Mr Swann: Again, that is the reassurance that I have given, because when it comes to those in community and social care, it is often those who are least noticed that we now most especially value, and that is where we are finding ourselves with those workers.

On the guidance, I am not going to take exception to what the member said, because the current guidance that we are working on is an agreed set of guidance that was brought together not by trusts, not by the PHA, but was brought together by the Chief Medical Officers of all four nations and the Chief Nursing Officers of all four nations, supported by the Royal College of Nursing, the Royal College of Midwives and the Royal College of General Practitioners. Therefore, the guidance that we have for what members of our health service should be wearing at particular times is guidance that was brought forward in consultation with all those organisations, and it is also based around the principles of the World Health Organization, and what we see as developing PPE standards across the world.

Therefore, I do not believe that the guidance has changed that often. It changed over a week ago, which actually made PPE more accessible to those people who wanted to use it in different circumstances. It is about the clarity of how that information is being cascaded down through our independent and private providers, and that is maybe where the challenge is, and that is something that our Chief Nursing Officer has worked to address with a number of online seminars and demonstrations on what PPE should be used in different locations. There was also a tick-box exercise about what PPE should be used in each setting, but we will make sure that the information and guidance is being cascaded down in a manner, and using a method, that can be easily understood.

Mrs Barton: Thank you, Minister, for your statement. I want to look a little bit further and ask what support you have put into the guidance for those particular people who have lost loved ones to COVID-19 and have not had the chance to say goodbye or to grieve properly.

Mr Swann: I will say to the member that there is bereavement guidance and there are support organisations out there. This is a very challenging time for anyone who loses a loved one to COVID-19 and who is not able to be there in those final moments, but, again, it goes back to what I said to Mervyn Storey: how we perceive death over this period will be challenging for many people because they will miss that final part of closure that they often get when they see a loved one pass away. It is about making sure that the support mechanisms are there through bereavement counselling and other methods, including churches, community groups and faith-based organisations.

Due to social isolation, wakes, visits to the house and the other traditional parts of grieving in Northern Ireland

are not happening. Therefore, it is not just that family members are losing a loved one. They are not getting that support that they would often get through the network of family members and the local community. It is important that, as a community, we come together to support those individuals who lose loved ones, and not just those lost from COVID-19, but through other natural methods or medical conditions. We should make a special effort to support those individuals at this time.

Ms Bailey: I heard with interest the Minister's comments on social-distancing restrictions. When he said:

"there can be no grounds whatsoever for complacency."

He is, of course, right, and that:

"The focus ... has to be on staying at home".

Of course, he is right again. Therefore, Minister, why are women still being told to travel on journeys of up to two or three days to access abortion services during this COVID lockdown? Why can the trusts here, having started an early medical abortion (EMA) service off their own bats, with no support, direction or funding from either you or your Department, not be allowed to prescribe from home to reduce travel, just as has been done elsewhere in these islands?

Mr Swann: The member will know that abortion and termination in Northern Ireland is a controversial issue, and, as such, I referred the matter to the Executive over a week ago. I am aware that some trusts are performing EMA. The Chief Medical Officer has written to them about the requirements that they should be following in regards to the regulations that were put out by the Northern Ireland Office at the end of last month. Those regulations were not widely consulted on with or brought forward by this House, but they were brought forward by the Northern Ireland Office. Unfortunately, that is where that service and that delivery remains, and it remains a controversial and contested issue in Northern Ireland. I am aware that trusts are performing it and supporting women who need it.

Mr Allister: I commend the Minister and the health workers whom he represents for the sterling efforts to contain and to deal with the crisis. I particularly commend him for not shrinking from the necessary resort to military aid, even though, of course, it provoked the predictable and scurrilous attack upon him, again, by the deputy First Minister, who, once more, put politics before saving lives.

I want to ask the Minister, in particular, about the much-speculated Chinese order. Is there such an order, or will there be such an order? A senior official raised concerns, over a week ago, about the unreliability of the potential product, given that 35% of Chinese product has not been suitable. Where do those concerns stand? Will he give us an update on that?

Mr Swann: In regards to the member's opening comments, I will not be distracted in any shape or form from the work that I have to do, as Health Minister. I have a duty to the people of Northern Ireland to make sure that we get through this crisis and this virus as well as we can. To quote the head of the World Health Organization, Dr Tedros Ghebreyesus:

"Please don't politicize this virus. It exploits the differences you have at the national level. If you want to be exploited and if you want to have many more body bags, then you do it."

That was his response to Donald Trump. I think that it is right that we do not politicise the virus and how we react to it in Northern Ireland.

Specifically, in regards to the PPE order from China or wherever else, the member will be very clear, from my statement, that I will accept PPE and get PPE from wherever we need it at this time. The UK policy on PPE is working on three pillars, as it is talked about: the international, which includes our supply from China; the national, which is our support from the United Kingdom; and the local, where we look to local manufacturers. In regards to the quality of the consignment coming from China, the current procurement route that we are using and the Department of Finance is utilising is embedded with the British Embassy in China. That is the avenue that we are working on, in conjunction with the UK Government and the other three nations, to secure that supply of PPE and to ensure that its quality is what we require.

Mr Carroll: I want to share some concerns raised with me about our care homes, but, before I do, I give my sympathies for everybody who has died from the virus, in particular, those in care homes, particularly in Our Lady's care home in the Beechmount area in my constituency. We have to ask what message it sends out when the Health Department did not add the numbers of people who died in care homes to the official register. For weeks, people were likely passing away in our care homes and the Department did not see fit to add their names to the official deaths register. That implied that those lives were not worth counting alongside everybody else who died from the disease. That is a deeply disturbing development in the crisis.

We have heard from far and wide — from care home providers, staff and family members — of situations in which care home providers and staff are ill-equipped, with not enough or inadequate PPE. On top of that, we are being told that a large section of the multimillion-pound offer of equipment coming in may be faulty. Does the Department have the basic capacity to check that equipment before it comes in? It truly reflects —

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): Will the member come to his question?

Mr Carroll: — the shambolic situation that we are in.

I come to my question. One former public health official, John Ashton, has suggested that the real figure for deaths could be twice as many as the official figure touted by the UK Government, because deaths in care homes are not counted as part of the official figures. Do the Executive and the Minister take the view that many old people will be collateral damage in this health pandemic?

Mr Swann: I take great exception to what the member has just accused me and my Department of doing. I can assure him that we care. I can assure him that I care. I can assure members that there are nights when I do not sleep, when I think about what we are doing and what we have to do the next day. When he talks about not caring for people who are in a care home, does he honestly believe that I or Members of the House or staff in my Department do

not have family members in those care homes? How dare you? How dare you accuse us of not caring? I can assure you that my Department and my officials care as much about every citizen and every individual in Northern Ireland as we do anybody else.

In regard to the numbers, the member is well aware, because a statement was issued yesterday. The individuals who are recorded by the Public Health Agency are those who passed away in hospital and who had been tested in the past 28 days. NISRA is responsible for the statistics on deaths that are recorded through death certificates. There is a time delay and a lag in the recording of those. That information has been brought forward, and that was done on 3 April. This week's NISRA statistical bulletin will show where those people died, whether that was in hospital facilities or in care home settings. So, do not ever accuse us or this Department of not caring for the individuals who are in care homes: we do.

I also say to the member that, with regard to the care home that he named, I think, from reading the front page of 'The Irish News' today, that a number of the deaths that were recorded in the care home were of people who had passed away in or had been in a hospital facility within the past 28 days and had been tested for coronavirus, so they will have been part of the PHA report as well as the NISRA report. That is all I will say to the member on this occasion.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): That concludes questions on the Minister's statement. We shall now have a brief suspension of five minutes prior to the next statement from the Economy Minister. I remind all members about the importance of maintaining social distancing when leaving or, indeed, entering the Chamber during the suspension. I ask you all to please do so via your nearest door. The meeting will resume in five minutes.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response

15 April 2020

Ministerial Statement: Economy

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Roy Beggs (Deputy Chairperson)
Dr Steve Aiken
Mr Jim Allister
Dr Caoimhe Archibald
Ms Clare Bailey
Mrs Rosemary Barton
Mrs Pam Cameron
Mr Gerry Carroll
Mrs Diane Dodds
Mr Gordon Dunne
Mr Alex Easton
Mr Colm Gildernew
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Colin McGrath
Mr Maolíosa McHugh
Ms Sinead McLaughlin
Mr Gary Middleton
Mr Andrew Muir
Mr John O'Dowd
Mr Matthew O'Toole
Mr Pat Sheehan
Mr John Stewart
Mr Mervyn Storey

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): The Speaker received notification on 10 April that the Minister for the Economy wished to make a statement to the Ad Hoc Committee at today's meeting. A copy of the statement that the Minister intends to make is included in your tabled pack at page 3. I welcome the Minister to the meeting and invite her to make a statement, which should be heard without interruption. Following the statement, there will be an opportunity for members to ask questions.

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): Thank you for the opportunity to bring members up to date on my Department's response to the COVID-19 crisis.

The daily death toll from the virus is horrendous. My thoughts, first and foremost, are with grieving families across Northern Ireland, people in hospital or ill at home and the NHS staff who are working to save lives daily.

The biggest health emergency that Northern Ireland has ever faced has also created an unprecedented economic crisis. My role as Economy Minister right now is to try to mitigate the worst impacts on our economy by protecting as many livelihoods as possible. By doing that, I believe, we will safeguard the economic foundations on which

recovery must be built. That is why we are working to distribute over £400 million in support packages to businesses across Northern Ireland and why I am in near-daily contact with Ministers in Westminster, working on behalf of businesses large and small, on behalf of sectors including manufacturing, tourism, construction, aviation and haulage, and on behalf of workers and the self-employed.

The need to prepare the local economy for a return to normality at some point is the driving force behind the work we do to help furloughed or redundant workers retrain or find work in the sectors where they are needed most. My priority is to do everything in my power to try to protect jobs, safeguard supply chains and sustain businesses. However, let us be in no doubt about the scale of the task. COVID-19 has brought to a halt a significant portion of global economic activity. Exporting and importing have become more difficult, supply chains are significantly disrupted and international travel has all but ceased. A swathe of industries has had to close down to wait out the crisis. Others are dealing with dramatically reduced orders and sales. Our tourism industry collapsed overnight, and businesses are dealing with crippling uncertainty. We will be dealing with the economic aftershocks for a long time to come, and, make no mistake, all sectors of the economy will be affected. Economists in my Department and externally anticipate significant falls in GDP during quarter two of this year, while holding out some hope for a rebound later in the year.

A small number of companies remain open with strict social-distancing measures in place. Others, such as the retail and health sectors, have stepped forward and have even expanded to play a crucial role in supporting the effort to tackle COVID-19. In the darkest of times, I have seen the best of business. Companies have repurposed production lines; workers have volunteered to help whenever they can; staff facing lay-off have asked how they can use their skills to fill gaps created by sickness; and others have offered support in sourcing and importing vital resources. However, I am acutely aware of the hardship facing many business owners and workers. We are rolling out grants to some of our most severely affected businesses. As far as I am aware, this is the largest financial package ever to be made available to local businesses. The schemes, which, in normal circumstances, would take months to put in place, are being delivered in a fraction of that time. I want to go

on record and state my appreciation of the work of the officials in my Department as well as the Department of Finance in getting to this stage.

The first payments under the small business grant scheme were made nine days after the original announcement. Since then, nearly 15,000 businesses have received the £10,000 grants, totalling around £150 million. I know from speaking to owners that those payments help businesses to survive, pay their staff and plan for the future. The scheme has now been extended to include small industrial businesses that qualify for industrial derating. That expansion will cover around 2,500 additional businesses.

The Executive have also agreed the £25,000 grant scheme, which will open on 20 April. It will be crucial to our hospitality, tourism, leisure and retail sectors, which have been hit particularly badly. Over 4,000 businesses, many of which were among the first to take the hit from the crisis, will benefit. Businesses will be required to apply for the scheme, and I encourage those who consider themselves eligible to apply as soon as we open for applications. We aim to make the process as easy as possible, and, to achieve that, Department of Finance officials have advised that the portal will be fully operable by 20 April. I assure businesses that, as soon as applications have been verified, the grant will be paid. We will not wait until the end of the application process before making the payments. The scheme will run over the next month and will deliver funds to ease the cash-flow problems of some of our hardest-hit businesses.

The Executive have committed to providing a three-month rates holiday to all businesses from April to June. It is my view that that is one of the most effective ways to support the sustainability of the wider economy and I believe that it should be extended further. For many companies, rates are a huge outlay and it would make a positive contribution if the Northern Ireland Executive were able to match other parts of the United Kingdom in this respect.

The UK-wide job retention scheme, which I lobbied long and hard for, allows businesses to keep people on their payroll by providing up to £2,500 a month for furloughed employees. Self-employed workers can also receive 80% of their taxable profit over the last three years, capped at £2,500 a month. That applies to those with trading profits below £50,000. Those are critical measures, which are providing support to tens of thousands of businesses and workers across Northern Ireland. However, I am acutely aware that others across Northern Ireland are facing financial hardship but, as yet, have not been able to access any of the existing national or regional grant schemes. We are currently working out how best to assist them. At the Executive meeting on 10 April, we agreed the need for a further scheme. A budget has been identified and we are examining the ways in which that money can be delivered. We will look to fill the gaps for businesses that are not already receiving funding.

The increases to working tax credit and universal credit by £1,000 a year will help the most vulnerable. The coronavirus business interruption loans scheme is a further tool and should be a crucial step in getting cash flow to firms in this difficult period. Our national Government have undertaken a huge amount of public borrowing to support the economy in the short term. It is important that the support provided nationally and by the Executive is deployed to limit job losses so that, come the

recovery, workers can come off furlough and back into the workplace.

As the impact of the crisis bites deeper, assistance will need to be targeted to those who need it most. The shutdown of many industries in Northern Ireland, the collapse in footfall around our towns and cities and emerging survey evidence all indicate that the reality is that there has been widespread furloughing of workers by many firms. Invest NI client companies have notified it that over 30,000 jobs have been furloughed. Outside of Invest NI's client base, many more will have been furloughed too. However, it is worth noting that we have seen many examples of large-scale furloughing of workers by firms, but what we are not seeing, as yet, are examples of large-scale redundancies.

In assessing all the available economic indicators and data, my Department's economists fear that the number of workers in Northern Ireland that will be directly impacted by the shutdown could well go beyond 200,000, with widespread job losses too; potentially as many as 25,000 in the short term. Outside of the labour market, their analysis also suggests that house prices look set to be negatively impacted and trade and investment appear set to stall. However, while that analysis is based on assumptions and indicators which can, and do, change, we can say with certainty that the economic impact is set to be deep and far-reaching, and many across Northern Ireland will need ongoing support. The latest information on every support scheme that is currently available to businesses can be found at the nibusinessinfo website.

There has also been significant pressure on the aviation industry and on haulage and ferry companies, which has led to a dramatic reduction in our air and sea connectivity. That is a very important issue, which I continue to raise with Government Ministers in London. In respect of Northern Ireland's vital air connectivity with Great Britain, my officials, alongside those in Finance and Infrastructure, are working with the UK Department for Transport to provide support to maintain Northern Ireland air connectivity during the COVID-19 crisis period. Indeed, Ministers Mallon, Murphy and I wrote yesterday to the UK Chancellor in support of the Department for Trade business case, seeking UK Government support to maintain strong air links between here and GB. I am hopeful that that intervention will realise a support package.

Aviation will also have an important role to play in the recovery of our tourism industry. I am conscious that the tourism and hospitality sector was one of the first sectors to experience the impact of COVID-19. I thank those who are on the front line and working in vital industries such as food, manufacturing, telecoms and retail. Our energy supply has remained constant throughout this crisis. Turning on the heat, flicking a light switch and cooking a meal are all made possible by the thousands of energy workers who are making sure that everyone has the energy they require.

I am planning to speak to Mr Kwarteng about how the energy system is coping across the UK, and my Department is maintaining solid communication at all levels with the system locally. Generators, network operators, suppliers and those representing consumer interests have all stepped forward in recent weeks to ensure that people's needs are met. I also take this opportunity to thank them.

The safety of workers must remain an absolute priority. If people can work at home, they should, but for those who cannot, the work environment should be safe and follow the public health guidance. In response to some concerns raised, the stakeholder engagement forum was convened, comprising unions and business groups. It has provided advice on priority business sectors and codes of practice, which I will bring to the Executive on Friday.

We already have examples of successful social distancing at work where production lines have been extended, break times staggered, canteen tables restricted to one per person, and increased cleaning and physical measures, such as Perspex panels to minimise contact, have been introduced. We will make sure that that good work continues, and I will do everything in my power to ensure that we have a safe workforce. Working with industry will save lives.

Our economy is changing very significantly, leading to a change in direction for many businesses. However, we know that improving the digital skills of our workforce will enhance our competitiveness and increase productivity in the long term. I also believe that investing in digital skills provides an opportunity to reinforce our competitive advantage in areas such as cybersecurity, data analytics and robotics. I want to provide individuals, particularly those who are furloughed, with the opportunity to improve their digital skills. To begin the process, we intend to provide a range of online digital courses via our careers portal. Those courses will be free for everyone and provide an opportunity for individuals to use their time at home to prepare for the future.

My Department is also helping people seeking alternative employment. Our careers advisers are supporting people in matching their skills and experiences to opportunities and demand, including full-time, part-time and temporary roles. There is high demand in sectors such as health, retail and agri-food.

Our universities and colleges have been forced to close their doors for face-to-face learning, but they remain active in the fight against COVID-19. Students and staff at our higher and further education institutions have been providing and creating personal protective equipment, joining the research for a vaccine and volunteering and joining the health service workforce.

I am acutely aware that the stopping of face-to-face teaching has had a particular impact on how vocational qualifications will be awarded. I have instructed my officials to work with CCEA and other regulators as a matter of urgency to identify the fairest way of issuing grades.

I am aware that the downturn in the hospitality sector will have had an impact on students who often work in that sector. With that in mind, I have requested an extension to increase student hardship funds as we move into the third semester. I hope that that can be doubled, and I will be discussing that with Executive colleagues. Those students have stepped up and I thank them for that.

In the severest of times when our resilience is being tested, I cannot promise that every job or every business will be saved because this crisis will leave no one unscathed, but I will do all I can to counteract the severest impacts and protect the livelihoods that support families and communities in Northern Ireland. We will get through this, and when we do I believe the measures we have put

in place will form the foundations on which our businesses can build our economic recovery.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): I thank the Minister for her statement. There will now be a period of around an hour for members to ask questions. It is my intention to allow all members to ask a question, but again I will need your cooperation, and those asking questions must be focused and succinct. Members may ask only one question, and it must be related to the statement. The Chair of the Committee for the Economy will be allowed some latitude and allowed to ask an additional question.

Dr Archibald (Committee Chair - Committee for the Economy): I thank the Minister for her statement. As she outlined, the economic impact and the impact on local businesses is severe and that is beginning to be shown through business surveys. In particular, cash flow is an issue. Minister, you addressed that somewhat in your statement, but the announcement over the weekend about the £25,000 grant and the potential for it to take three weeks to administer caused anxiety and distress to many in those sectors. I wrote to you about this over the weekend, I spoke to you about it this morning and you addressed it somewhat in your statement when you said:

"as soon as applications have been verified the grant will be paid."

Will you expand a little bit on how we can ensure that this money will get to businesses as quickly as possible? I very much welcome the news about the student hardship support. The Minister will know that that is something I have pushed for, and it is very welcome. I also ask that you look at how we support students who do not go to university in the North.

Finally, my second question is about those not covered by the current schemes. For example, our very innovative and vibrant social enterprise sector, where we have a number of businesses doing really important work, and also the charitable sector and sole traders. Will you outline what is being planned to support people working in those sectors?

Mrs Dodds: I thank you as Chair of the Committee for the continuous cooperation and work that we do together on the very important issues that impact on all of our lives.

The £25,000 grants are now going to be available to those in retail, hospitality, tourism and leisure; that is an important expansion of where the grant is now going from what was originally intended. Quite a bit of work has been done to try to get additional companies included from those sectors.

As you are aware, there are £10,000 grants for small businesses that qualify for small business rates relief. There is already a process for small manufacturing companies who qualify for the grant already and they are easily identifiable in the system. We have been able to work very well with Finance to make sure that those companies are identified quite quickly. We have been able to pay out those grants very quickly.

The £25,000 grant is slightly different in that we had to create a process, and it took some time to look at all of the databases. I had originally hoped that this grant would be live today, but that has been delayed for just a few days until 20 April because the Department of Finance need to make sure that the web portal is fully functioning and will

provide those applying for the grant with a fairly seamless application process. Therefore, at the request of the Department of Finance, we have delayed its introduction just for a few days. However, I talked to the Department and the Minister today, and we agreed that, if we can bring it forward, even by a day, we will do that, in order to get it out as quickly as possible. It is not in anyone's interests to delay it, in any shape or form.

There will be an online application process. It is a very simple process, but it gives comfort and financial comfort around the process. As soon as we are able to verify the application, we will pay it in exactly the same way that we paid the smaller £10K grants; so, as quickly as possible.

I acknowledge the work put in by my officials and Department of Finance officials in creating a scheme and a payment system in a very short time.

I say, for the benefit of members, that, every week, the Chair of the Committee and I have a bit of a catch-up on all the issues that rumble around the Committee. I undertook to look at students who do not go to university in Northern Ireland but are subject to universities, maybe in England, Scotland or Wales, that are continuing to ask them to pay for accommodation in the third term when they are not there. I will undertake to look at that. I suspect that it is up to each university and the particular hardship schemes that it introduced, but I will look at that.

For our part in Northern Ireland, we will continue, for students, to pay grants or loans into the third term. In order to try to address the issue of hardship, we have also asked the Executive for support to increase the amount of money that is available to each university in its student hardship fund. Each university has a separate student hardship fund, which is directed at those who are in financial difficulties, particularly those with disabilities, lone parents and those who find it more difficult within the system. I would really like to get the Executive's support to double that, so that we would have a substantial amount in that fund, in each university. I do not want to create a new process. I have tried to stick with the process that is there and not to reinvent the wheel in a difficult situation.

We are looking at how we can offer help to businesses that have not yet been identified, including those in the social enterprise sector. I hope to be in a position to make a further announcement on grants reasonably soon.

For those in the charitable sector, the Finance Minister updated us today that, as a Barnett consequential of the money that was announced for the charities sector, additional money will come to Northern Ireland for Northern Ireland charities and, as far as I am aware — not to steal anyone's thunder — for charities like the hospice and so on, which really are valuable and have seen a huge decline in the money that people are able to raise for those good causes.

All of those are in the system and will be working their way through.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Minister for her statement. Minister, on Friday, I took part in a q-and-a MLA session via video link with the Londonderry Chamber of Commerce and a number of its members. One of the key issues that came out of that was around the essential and non-essential workers, and I appreciate the fact that an engagement forum has been set up to look at that. Can the

Minister give clarity as to when that would be available? Given the fact that there is now an extension of three weeks to the current restrictions measures, it is important that we have that clarity for businesses.

Mrs Dodds: Yes, thank you. I think that that is essential and clear, and I am glad that you are conducting all your business online too. It seems quite strange that we are conducting conversations with Ministers, across the United Kingdom, with Zoom at every opportunity.

First, I will take the opportunity in the House to congratulate those who have spent their time in the engagement forum; the trade unions and the businesses that have come together to do important work. A paper will go to the Executive on Friday, and that will update them and ask them to make decisions on the work of the engagement forum. I can tell the Committee that the engagement forum has produced two pieces of work. One is a code of practice agreed between unions and businesses around safe working practices, and this is really a very valuable tool for us going forward. One of the things that I talk about often in Executive meetings and with officials is the path back to recovery and the gentle steps that we will have to take to ease ourselves back into recovery and into full work mode. I believe that social distancing will be with us for a considerable period of time, and that continuing engagement of the forum, along with the Health and Safety Executive, the Public Health Agency and so on, on that piece of work will be a very valuable contribution to that.

The forum has also produced a further piece of work around essential and non-essential workers. I will present that to the Executive and take their view on it, and I am sure that that will be published reasonably soon thereafter.

Ms McLaughlin: Thank you, Minister, for your statement. It is very welcome. All the schemes that you have outlined have been welcomed by the business community. I suppose that the biggest complaint that we are getting is to get that cash as quickly as possible into business accounts, and that is where the difficulty lies. Scotland is already administering the £25,000 scheme, and we have not got to that part yet. Cash is key for those businesses. A lot of businesses felt that they have been vilified —

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): Can we have a question?

Ms McLaughlin: — because they were operating and working, and I think that it is great to hear the Minister welcoming those businesses that have repurposed. It is important to say that.

I would like a bit more clarity on the self-employment support coming forward. Can that be speeded up? We have a lot of small entrepreneurs who are not going to get any cash until maybe later on in June. Can she give us a bit more detail on that scheme?

Mrs Dodds: Thank you to the member for the question and for the comments around the businesses. I am acutely aware of the need for cash flow, and I am acutely aware that many businesses face dire circumstances. People who have spent their lifetime building a business are in significant difficulty through absolutely no fault of their own. That is important, and we will endeavour to get the £25,000 scheme as quickly as is possible out into the community and into the business community.

On cash flow, one of the things that we have been able to do with our Government in London is to keep a constant flow of contact through various groups. I dial in every week, and tomorrow I will be dialling in to the economic response group, which is chaired by the Chancellor. So, we have a very good and open channel of communication to bring these issues forward. Of course, both the job retention scheme and the scheme for the self-employed are matters for national government and for Her Majesty's Treasury. I will, again, bring some of these issues forward, and I have written to the Chancellor about these.

There are two things that I think are absolutely massive and pertinent to your question. The first is the issue of getting money from the job retention scheme for furloughed workers to companies as quickly as possible. We were told by the Chancellor on our last call that this scheme and this web portal would open on 20 April, with payment to be made thereafter. Almost without exception, many of the people on the call made the point that money needed to flow fairly quickly for those furloughed workers because that is what businesses were depending on to run their April payroll. That point has already been made.

Two things come up, over and over again, from those who are self-employed. One is the length of time that it is taking for the implementation of the scheme. To that, the Chancellor, invariably, will reply that we are doing huge schemes on an unimaginable scale in a very, very short time — and I am quoting him, not advocating for him. That does not help the self-employed people who have lost their business outlets, again, through no fault of their own. The timescale is, therefore, important.

The other issue that comes up over and over again relates to those people who became self-employed in the previous tax year. It is worth noting that I have made representation for those people, because they have not had time to file a tax return; they cannot fill the qualifying of the three-year averaging that the scheme asks for. We have made representation on behalf of those people. I think of some of the people who have written to me. There are heartbreaking stories. People have signed up for the leasing of equipment, and so on, and invested their life savings in a new self-employed venture and been met with this. Their help, at the moment, is universal credit. That is deeply damaging to the economy, to entrepreneurs and to what we want to encourage for all our businesses.

Mr Stewart: I thank the Minister for her statement. As usual, it raises more questions than answers. Sadly, I am allowed only one question today. As the Minister will probably know, I have asked a number of questions in recent weeks by letter. I would appreciate it if you came back to me on those issues, Minister.

As you said, the Government interventions, to date, have been substantial, to say the least, but 50% of companies in Northern Ireland are entitled to nothing, and, of those companies that are entitled to a grant, less than half has already got it. It is important that we get that out there as quickly as possible. Cash is king, and there are businesses that I am talking to every day that have only days or weeks to go. We need to do more. We need to get more money to those companies. Will you give an undertaking to look at a bespoke version of the Welsh economic resilience model, which they launched at the end of March? Some £500 million has been put into that fund, and companies can access grants of up to £100,000. We are staring into

an economic abyss, Minister. It is a health crisis now, but it is going to become the biggest economic crisis in history, and we need to do whatever we can.

Mrs Dodds: I thank the member for his question. It is a very important issue — one on which I have been working. We have been concentrating on getting the grant packages out, helping companies with some of the difficulties they are having via the loan scheme, which, again, can be considerable, and in addressing issues relating to the self-employed and job retention scheme. However, we will be turning our minds to the recovery. The Welsh resilience fund provides one model of how we can do that. Invest NI has been asked to look at the schemes and measures that we will need to help the Northern Ireland economy in its recovery. I will be going to the Northern Ireland Executive and asking for considerable investment in Northern Ireland businesses and the Northern Ireland economy in order to help them to recover, not just to mitigate where we are now. I will be asking for investment in packages that will be important around the recovery of the economy. We are doing work on that. Significant work is being done in the Department with our economists and some health economists. I am acutely aware that we will need to maintain some of the practices that we have currently in the workplace, but I am also aware that economic recession has its own health impacts and we want to address those in a holistic manner. We will be looking for a package for the Northern Ireland economy. We will be looking at something along the lines of the Welsh resilience fund, for instance, but we will not be looking at just its mitigation measures; we will be looking at something to take us a step further.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for her statement and for all the work that is being done to date by officials, not only in her Department, but also in the Department of Finance. It is greatly appreciated.

Unfortunately, my clear view is that the speed of delivery of the grants is not acceptable. Significant numbers have still not received the £10K grant; a significant survey about that came out from the local chambers today. People are having to resort to the benefits system to survive because of those.

The delays around the £25K grants are just not acceptable. The timescales that were announced on Friday night left business owners in tears. What is the Minister planning to do to ensure that the timescales for the delivery of assistance is accelerated? Scotland announced a similar scheme of around £25K on exactly the same day that the Minister did — the money was paid out on 6 April. Why is Northern Ireland again behind the curve in relation to assisting businesses?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the member for his questions. Let me first address the £10K grant scheme. You indicated that many thousands of businesses have still not been paid those grants. At the start of this scheme we indicated that there were a number of businesses that we could pay directly because Land and Property Services (LPS) already held bank account details for them, and those businesses have been paid. We opened the web portal for the remaining businesses, and those that applied via it have been paid. We have around 17,000 applications for grants, over 15,000 of which have already been paid. Some others are awaiting verification, some had an incorrect ratepayer

ID number, some just had mistakes in the application process, and we are working through those.

One of the things that I plan to do over the next week or so is to try to have some further public announcements about the £10K grants scheme. At the start, we saw an initial rush of businesses applying to the scheme, but that has seen a tailing off over the last number of days. We want to remind businesses that, if they are eligible, if they receive small business rates relief or if they receive industrial derating, they can apply for the £10K grants scheme, but they need to do so through the portal. We have paid everyone for whom we hold details. We need to harness your energies, help and support in advising businesses in your local area that if they have not applied to the £10K grants scheme they should please do so if they fall into one of the particular categories. There are not tens of thousands of applications outstanding. There is potential for many more to come in, but we need businesses to actually apply and give us their details: we will respond to that.

On the £25K scheme, I have already explained that it is a new scheme. We prioritised the £10K scheme because it obviously reaches many, many more businesses. The £25K scheme is now there. It is unfortunate that the portal is just not at a stage that it can go live at the moment but, as I said, I spoke today to the Finance Minister at the Executive and we agreed that we would look at that again and see if there was a way that we could do it. The application system is not long or complicated but it does require verification, as you would expect, and as soon as we can verify applications, those businesses will be paid.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): Members and Ministers, we have been averaging five minutes for a question and answer, and if that continues only 12 of the 21 members who wish to ask a question will be afforded that opportunity. I ask everyone to be much more focused and succinct in their questions and answers.

Mr Dunne: I, too, thank the Minister for her statement. We all recognise the effort that she and her staff in the Department for the Economy have put in, alongside the work of the Finance Department. It is important that we, as elected representatives, continue to lobby and work to ensure that we do all that we can to support our local businesses at this very important time.

Again, I urge prompt action on the £25K grant.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): Can we have a question?

Mr Dunne: Yes, indeed, Deputy Speaker; I will get there. I emphasise the need for prompt action. Perhaps the Minister could comment on the point, as we have noticed, that leisure is now included. I assume that that would include golf clubs and, perhaps, football clubs. Can we have some clarification on the point that was made earlier that a number of businesses have fallen through the cracks and are not in any particular scheme? I have had an example of that in my constituency today of a small manufacturing business, which was delighted to hear about the change in industrial derating but, because it is over £15K NAV, it is not eligible. We need to look at trying to broaden out the whole scheme to include vital businesses such as that one.

Mrs Dodds: I thank the member for his question. We will be looking at those businesses that have not been

identified by any of the schemes that are so far available. In his paper last Friday, the Finance Minister indicated that a further £40 million has been set aside to look at more schemes for those businesses. We fully intend to use that money to support businesses through a very difficult period.

It was decided that we would include leisure in the £25K grant scheme because it is a mirror of the scheme that operates in the rest of the United Kingdom, of which leisure is a part. It will be open to any leisure business that can show that it has suffered hardship because of the COVID-19 emergency that we are experiencing.

Mr Sheehan: I thank the Minister for her statement. I am sure that she, like many other MLAs, has been contacted by companies that service gas boilers and who are concerned about having to carry out their work in the context of the social distancing guidance. Difficulties have been highlighted around accessing premises where individuals are ill or are social isolating. There are some people who are reluctant to allow engineers to come into their premises. That is a particular issue in the rented and social housing sectors, where the landlord has a statutory obligation to carry out annual servicing. I know that the Health and Safety Executive guidance states that —

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): Can we have a question?

Mr Sheehan: — those services can continue. Will the Minister consider a temporary, short-term suspension of the annual checks and a relaxation of the obligation on landlords that would alleviate some of those problems?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the member for his question. I have taken specific advice on that issue from the Health and Safety Executive, which has advised that gas boilers need regular servicing and that there is an obligation to ensure that those boilers are serviced. I understand the issues around social distancing and people's reticence to allow others into their home. However, I am absolutely clear that we must put the safety of people first, whether they are in the private or public rented sector. Indeed, I advise private individuals that if they have a gas boiler, then the servicing of that boiler is an absolute must. Personally, I could not live with myself if something happened to somebody because of an accident from a gas boiler that had not been serviced. We have given contractors some latitude around the timing issue.

Mr Storey: The Minister has expanded various grant schemes and I thank her for that. Unlike some other members, we appreciate all that has and is being done by her staff. However, will one- or two-person businesses — I am thinking, for example, of a coach company in my constituency that has fallen below the £25,000 and the £10,000 grant limit — be eligible for the expansion that she has referred to?

Mrs Dodds: Thank you for the question. I cannot give a guarantee on a specific example, but the intention is to look at businesses that have, at this minute in time, no route to specific help. I have been contacted by coach operators; maybe someone who has a couple of coaches who operates those for the tourism industry who has leasing requirements on those vehicles and overheads to pay, yet tourism has all but stopped. I understand the issue, and I hope to address some of those issues in the new scheme that we will bring forward.

I am also thinking of small businesses that perhaps are in an enterprise park where the park pays the rates and the small businesses are not easily identifiable in that park. Those are businesses that are operating and we would like to see help extended to them as well, and the same with the social economy sector. We will be doing some work with Finance to try to help with that sector. So, there are still a number of issues that have to be addressed, and we are committed to doing that in a future scheme.

Mr Gildernew: I thank the Minister for her statement and answers to questions here today. You will be aware that, under the job retention scheme, furloughed workers will be adversely affected when seeking maternity entitlements. In the first 39 weeks of maternity leave, mothers are entitled to statutory maternity payments, which equate to 90% of their average gross weekly earnings. However, instead of being entitled to 90% of their usual earnings, furloughed workers will instead be entitled to 90% of their furloughed earnings, which are only 80% of their regular wage. That discrepancy will skew the calculations of the average gross weekly earnings and place them at a financial disadvantage. Will the Minister seek to address that issue with the British Treasury?

Mrs Dodds: Thank you for the question. Your colleague has already written to me about that particular issue, and I have already taken it forward. I recognise that there is that kind of anomaly; when a scheme is brought forward in haste, there will always be people that it does not quite fit with. So, yes, is the answer.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Minister for coming and giving us an update. Like other members, I thank her officials and those in the Department of Finance, who, I know, as a former civil servant, are working very hard on this stuff. It is difficult. This stuff takes time.

She referred to the devastating scale of the economic shock that Northern Ireland and, indeed, the entire world faces. New survey data out today from the various chambers — Belfast, Derry and Newry chambers — indicates that nearly half of businesses are not trading at all at the minute. In light of that, and in light of the depth of the economic shock, does she agree with me that the UK Government's current position that they will not seek an extension to the Brexit transition — and I hate to even mention Brexit in the current circumstances — is absurd, if it was not immoral, given how much they risk vital supply chains of food and medicine at the end of this year?

At the end of last week, I wrote to the Executive asking the First Minister and deputy First Ministers to make representations on behalf of all the Northern Ireland institutions, which are the only devolved institutions specifically mentioned in the withdrawal treaty, which she will well know, given her past as an MEP. Will she agree with me that it is squalid and immoral that the UK Government will not ask for an extension in the current circumstances? Will she agree with me that the last thing that Northern Ireland business needs is the jeopardisation of supply chains by —

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): The member has asked the question.

Mr O'Toole: — the UK leaving without a trade deal at the end of this year. Will she agree with me —

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): The member has asked the question.

Mr O'Toole: — that the Northern Ireland Executive should write to the UK Government and make those representations urgently?

Mrs Dodds: It is always nice to get back to the subjects that we know. Back to Brexit.

A Member: [*Inaudible.*]

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): Order.

Mrs Dodds: Thank you for the question. I will address it in two parts. You are right that there is a huge shock to the economy, not just the economy here in Northern Ireland, but the world economy and the UK economy. I read a report this morning that indicated that, across the United Kingdom, up to two million people could find themselves unemployed following this. Those are very sobering and difficult statistics, and remember: for every one of those people there is a family, and that is a person. Those are very difficult issues. There are huge issues to be dealt with in the economy about how we actually proceed gently out of the phase we are in, bearing in mind that we need to keep people safe and keep lives safe. Yes, I agree with you on that.

On Brexit, it will, of course, be up to the United Kingdom Government to decide whether to seek an extension. There are a number of views about seeking an extension. Some people believe that to seek an extension would merely be to prolong the agony and that we could get this done within the required time. Others believe that to seek an extension would mean that we simply further prop up the European Union, which will be under significant stress because of the downturn in the world economy. Those are issues that we will, of course, discuss with the Government in due course, but, for now, our focus pretty much at every meeting that we are involved with is on the immediate impact of COVID and the economic situation we are in.

Dr Aiken: Thank you, Minister, for your remarks. I was particularly struck by one of the things you said when you were making your statement. When you were talking about rates, you said that an extension of the rates holiday:

"would make a positive contribution if the NI Executive was able to match other parts of the United Kingdom".

Are the Northern Ireland Executive exploring extending the rates holiday from three months to six months and beyond? That is particularly important to critical areas of our economy.

Mrs Dodds: It is critical, and we currently have grant schemes that help businesses with rateable values under £15,000. We have grant schemes that help businesses in certain sectors with rateable values up to £51,000, but, actually, for many of our businesses, the most significant help that we can give them is additional help with their rates bill. Businesses have written to me about that, and I believe that it would be a very significant contribution to businesses, going forward. I believe that we should extend the rate scheme to match other parts of the United Kingdom. As you are well aware, it differs in some parts of the United Kingdom, but we should try to stretch ourselves to extend that because that is where we will give real help particularly in our tourism and hotel sector and to some of our retailers who have been very badly hit by the situation

that we are in. Therefore, I am in full agreement with you. I have brought the issue up at the Executive and will continue to push it.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for her statement. On the back of the previous question, we understand, fully appreciate and completely support social-distancing measures, but can the Minister comment on the harm to the economy from the current social-distancing rules? I think in particular about very personal roles such as hairdressers, beauty therapists and even dentists, and I declare an interest as someone who is rapidly growing much long grey hair. *[Laughter.]* On a serious point, Minister, these are peoples' livelihoods, and they are desperately affected by the rules. Do you have a comment to make on that?

Mrs Dodds: I, too, declare an interest: COVID hairstyles are not the best that we have had.

I absolutely agree with you. Those sectors of our economy have simply had to close, and some of them will find it very difficult to open again. We really need to work with them into the future to try to ensure that they have the support they need. I am aware that some of our local businesses will be able to avail themselves of the furlough scheme and so on, but it is important that we recognise their contribution to the economy. Helping them further via rates is one of the issues that will be most significant to them, because rates are such a huge part of the bills and are ongoing. Those are the standing bills that they have to pay and that they have to meet all the time. I have made those points to the Executive.

Mr O'Dowd: Minister, thank you for your statement. My advice is to go grey gracefully. *[Laughter.]* I welcome the fact that the Executive have set aside £40 million for businesses that fall between the stools. On my way here, I was notified about a business that employs 11 workers in a rural community that may fall between the stools. There is hope there yet.

I specifically want to ask about the insurance business. I know that it is not a devolved matter, but I think that the Minister can have some influence. Insurance companies are refusing to pay out on the pandemic issue, even though businesses have paid huge premiums over many years in good faith. Will the Minister engage with the Treasury and others and the financial regulators for the insurance industry to ensure that the insurance industry pays out to businesses that have been paying their premium?

Mrs Dodds: "Yes" is the short answer to that. I, too, know of businesses in my area, in Upper Bann and further across Northern Ireland that have paid for cover for these exact reasons and, because COVID-19 is not named in the policy, have been told that they cannot claim in the current pandemic. A bit of a mixed message has come from the Government in the past — "They will pay out, because I say that they will pay out" — but, of course, the insurance industry does not operate like that. I will, of course, continue to make representation on behalf of those businesses. That cover is significant. It is quite an outlay for businesses to have it, and some of them thought that, in covering themselves in that way, life would be a little easier and are very disappointed to find that they are not included.

Mr Lyttle: In response to a previous question about the extreme cash flow problems facing businesses that are ineligible for existing grant schemes, the Minister advised

that Invest NI was scoping a recovery package. This is not an issue of recovery; it is an issue of survival. Given that cash flow is such a serious problem for such businesses, when will the Minister follow the lead of Scotland and Wales and deliver the hardship cash funding to ensure that businesses survive?

Mrs Dodds: There are two elements to the work that we would have to do. One is the mitigation elements, and we have outlined the work that has been done so far. Those are really important. They are really important for the survival of businesses and how they will be able to pick up again. There is also the issue for us that we would be doing wrong if we were not looking at and planning for recovery and the future. That is also an important part of our work. We discussed it at the Executive today, and I will discuss with them again on Monday some of the actions that need to be taken and some of the issues that will need to be dealt with. It is always good to have those people to advise and support policy decisions of government going forward.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for her statement. As the Minister is aware, the impact on our air connectivity has been substantial. Does she have plans to help with that for the foreseeable future, when we maybe get back into the way of things?

Mrs Dodds: That is a really valuable and important piece of the work that we have been doing over the last number of weeks. Our air connectivity in Northern Ireland is at an absolutely critical stage. There are no flights, bar freight flights, out of Belfast International Airport. City of Derry Airport is down to one flight a day, which is the public-supported flight. Just last week, BA announced that it was discontinuing the London Heathrow route temporarily and that the only flight would be one return flight a day via Aer Lingus. Northern Ireland's air connectivity to the rest of the United Kingdom is absolutely at a critical stage, and we all, as Members of the House, need to be aware and cognisant of that.

I have been working with the Department for Transport in London, as have Nichola Mallon and, in Finance, Conor Murphy, trying to bring forward help and support for those airports, particularly for the routes that keep us connected to the rest of the United Kingdom. We want to ensure that, when we are able to pick up with the economy, when air travel resumes, we have airports that are in a position to service that demand in the economy and that we have the routes there to do so. I speak on a regular basis, probably weekly, with every one of the airports, and my officials are in constant contact on the issue. I hope and think that it will have positive results, but it will be for both the Department for Transport and the local Executive to ensure that our air connectivity to our biggest market is maintained and that our airports are resilient going into the future.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): I call Maolíosa McHugh.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. You got it right this time.

Minister, thank you for your statement. The grant schemes that have been announced so far are welcome, but they have been directed towards businesses with premises. A self-employed scheme for those who are eligible will not be available until June, so what supports are being looked at for sole traders or businesses without premises in the interim?

Mrs Dodds: I hope that that support will be resolved through the additional scheme that will be announced shortly.

Mr McGrath: Thank you, Minister, for your statement today. I echo the remarks made earlier about golf clubs. A number have contacted me, and they feel that they fall between a number of the stools. Maybe the inclusion of leisure could help them, because they also see themselves very much as tourist providers. The ones in my constituency such as Ardglass Golf Club and Royal County Down, are certainly visited by many people from outside Ireland. There are tourism businesses that do not hold rateable value, such as the Saint Patrick Centre, and there are others. Could they be considered in your deliberations about some of the businesses that might have fallen between the cracks?

Mrs Dodds: “Yes” is, again, the short answer to that one. There is such a myriad of business models and ways in which those business present themselves and interact with government and agencies in the ability to identify them. Hopefully, a scheme that is not too prescriptive but allows different businesses to apply will help in identifying businesses that, so far, have not been easily identifiable through the existing channels that we have.

Mrs Barton: Minister, thank you for your statement. My question is in regard to the small business grant. Can you confirm whether a business that pays rates on a number of properties will be entitled to an equal number of grants? I think of a business that is run under one title but has properties, perhaps, in Enniskillen, Omagh, Banbridge etc.

Mrs Dodds: The issue is brought up to me regularly. The Executive decided that the small business grant scheme and the £25,000 grant scheme would be one grant per business, irrespective of the number of outlets that that business had. That is where it is at the moment. However, I recognise the difficulties that that presents. When we see how the scheme works out, I would like to try some sort of mop-up exercise for some of the more difficult issues within the scheme and see how they can be addressed. At the moment, the guidance is clear: it is one grant per business, irrespective of the outlets that those businesses have.

Ms Bailey: I thank the Minister for her statement, and for her reminder that this is the biggest health emergency ever faced. She is absolutely right that the daily death toll from the virus is horrendous. The numbers will continue to rise for some time.

The Minister said that a small number of companies remained open, with strict social-distancing measures in place, and that she will do everything in her power to ensure that we have a safe workplace and workforce. What can the Minister do for the numerous workers, particularly from retail and the postal sector, who are given no option but to continue working? They are contacting me, in serious distress, and telling me stories about what is going on behind the scenes — in the warehouses and freezers — where we do not see on the shop floor. They are being told to share uniforms, jackets and gloves. Some postal workers are saying that they are busier than they are at Christmas. Their distribution centres are taking the overflow from Amazon, which is on a bumper bonanza, dealing with the consumerism that is going on. One postal worker asked me, “Why am I delivering new clothes to people who have got nowhere to go to wear them?”

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): The member has asked her question.

Ms Bailey: They still feel that social distancing and adequate sanitation for handwashing etc are not in place. What does the Minister have within her power to help reassure those people and make sure that they have safety?

Mrs Dodds: The member is quite right. I have said over and over again — I make no apology for saying it — that the workplace should be safe. In previous weeks, I have worked with a number of firms to resolve some of their well-known issues, as have the Health and Safety Executive and the Public Health Agency. In fairness to firms and many of our food firms, they have stepped up to the plate and spent significant amounts of money on trying to ensure that they have appropriate and safe working conditions for the people who work there. That includes looking at choke points such as the clock-in areas, the canteens, the changing areas etc.

Many firms are doing good things, particularly some of the agri-food firms that I have worked with over the past number of weeks in helping them achieve the standards that they have now, and they should be commended for that. However, we are not complacent. The message still is that you must provide a safe workplace. If you are not providing a safe workplace, the people within that workplace should take up their complaint with the Health and Safety Executive, which will investigate but also work with the workplace and business to try to ensure that the workplace is safe. They will work together to make sure that there are proper and appropriate measures in place.

I do not know the complaints — they have not come to me — but I suspect that no one should be asking people to share uniforms in this day. That should not be happening. If there are complaints, I encourage you to contact the Health and Safety Executive and make sure that those complaints are investigated. The message from me as Minister is clear: the workplace must be safe.

Mr Allister: A few weeks ago, when the Executive were publicly rowing about whether businesses should be open or closed, your response, Minister, was to announce a stakeholders’ forum, which was going to bring forward the answer. Three weeks later, we still have not got the answer. Is there yet an agreed Executive position on whether a business, which can practice safe distancing, can and should be open? I ask that because, at the end of all this, we still have to have an economy. Can we, please, have direction that allows such businesses to open, conscience-free, instead of some Ministers pretending that they are inhibiting public health?

Mrs Dodds: I have already addressed the member’s question but perhaps he was not in the Chamber at the time. I asked the forum to come together. It is a forum of unions and significant business representative bodies. They have worked very well on the issue and have produced guidance on workplace practices, which I will take to the Executive on Friday. They have also produced a list of essential workers. It will be for the Executive to decide how they take that forward, but we will have that discussion on Friday. I do not want to pre-empt that, but the member knows very, very clearly that I want this economy to thrive and to do well, but I want people to be safe and for their health to be looked after as well. We have to find the balance between the two, and those are

the difficult choices and decisions that have to be made at the moment. Yes, there is a substantial piece of work from the forum. I thank them for that and that will be considered by the Executive on Friday.

Mr Carroll: The Minister stated that 25,000 jobs could be lost in the short term. One estimate says that there could be 100,000 job losses here in total. Does the Minister accept that the current economic strategy of over-reliance on the market, has not always worked, with getting PPE and testing being the two main issues? Does she believe that, on the other side of this crisis, we need to have a different economic approach that is not focused solely on the interests of the market or maximising private profits but on meeting human needs for food, housing and other issues. Finally, what role, if any, has her Department played to coordinate, direct and, if necessary, implore industry and businesses to do all that they can to tackle this crisis?

Mrs Dodds: I will take the last part first. I am very proud of the businesses in Northern Ireland. Many of them, such as O'Neill's, faced closure, but they repurposed and they are producing scrubs for the NHS. They are doing work that is crucial and vital to the fight against COVID-19. There are other businesses, and I think of a blinds company in Northern Ireland that is producing visors for people who work with COVID-positive patients. Companies in Northern Ireland have been doing an enormous amount of innovative work, repurposing and thinking how they can help in a very difficult crisis for them. I pay tribute to each and every one of them, including food companies and supermarkets, whose workers go out day after day to meet the public and do their job. It is very important that members make that tribute to them.

On whether I believe that there has been an over-reliance on the market, I suspect very strongly that the member and I will not agree on economic strategy, but I congratulate him on getting that into his question on this occasion. I think that the impact on jobs will be very severe and very great. That is why I am keen to try to get measures in place that will help us with economic recovery. It is why I am keen to talk to businesses about their needs and to work with Executive colleagues to have a package that will help us to recover and keep our businesses resilient in the face of a very grave crisis.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs): That concludes questions on the Minister's statement. Item 4 on the agenda is the time, date and place of our next meeting. We have received confirmation from the Infrastructure Minister that she wishes to make a statement to the Ad Hoc Committee at a meeting to be held tomorrow afternoon, Thursday 16 April. We have also received confirmation from the Education Minister that he wishes to make a statement to the Ad Hoc Committee at the meeting to be held tomorrow afternoon. Formal notification has been sent by the Speaker's Office to members. That concludes this meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee. The meeting is adjourned, and I invite members to leave by the nearest door.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response

16 April 2020

Ministerial Statement: Infrastructure

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Christopher Stalford (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Martina Anderson
Ms Kellie Armstrong
Mr Roy Beggs
Mr Cathal Boylan
Mr Keith Buchanan
Mr Robbie Butler
Mr Gerry Carroll
Mr Pat Catney
Mr Mark Durkan
Ms Sinéad Ennis
Mr Paul Frew
Mr David Hilditch
Mr William Humphrey
Ms Liz Kimmins
Ms Nichola Mallon
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Justin McNulty
Mr Andrew Muir
Mr Mike Nesbitt
Mr Matthew O'Toole
Ms Emma Sheerin
Miss Rachel Woods

Witnesses:

Mrs Katrina Godfrey Department for Infrastructure

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Members are welcome to this meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response. Item 1 is the minutes of the previous meeting, which was held on the 15 April. Members are asked to note the minutes, which the Deputy Chairperson Mr Roy Beggs has agreed. Members should also note that the minutes of evidence from that meeting will be published later today in the Official Report and will be available on the Committee's web page.

Item 2 is a statement from the Minister for Infrastructure. The Speaker's Office received notification on 9 April that the Minister wished to make a statement to the Ad Hoc Committee at today's meeting. A copy of the statement that the Minister intends to deliver is included in members' packs. I welcome the Minister for Infrastructure to the Committee meeting. I also welcome Mrs Katrina Godfrey, permanent secretary of the Department for Infrastructure, who is accompanying the Minister today. I invite the Minister to make her statement, which, as members

know, should be heard without interruption. Following the statement, there will be an opportunity for members to ask questions.

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I am grateful for the opportunity to update the Ad Hoc Committee today.

This is not an easy time for any of us. It is an unimaginable time for all those families who have lost loved ones to COVID-19 and who are denied by the same virus the traditional way of saying goodbye, which we have known and drawn comfort from for generations. I begin today by sending my heartfelt condolences to every one of those families. I know that I speak for all of us in the Chamber when I say that we are with you and that you are in our prayers.

The challenges that we are facing due to coronavirus cannot be underestimated. The words "crisis", "emergency" and "pandemic" are now everyday language, but this is not everyday life. While we are dealing with the chaos, the pain and the suffering, we must also be strong and have hope that this extraordinarily difficult time will not last forever.

I am proud to stand here as a citizen of this place. Thanks to the efforts made and the leadership shown across our community, we have seen positive signs that our health service is coping and that social-distancing measures are working. We cannot be complacent, however. As my colleague the Minister of Health has continued to stress, we must — all of us — continue to play our part, because each of our individual actions will determine the future for our community. It is a huge responsibility, and one that I know that the people of Northern Ireland are prepared to bear.

I wish to update members on my actions to deliver on my responsibilities as your Minister for Infrastructure. I am clear that addressing the unique challenges presented by coronavirus requires us all to work together towards the common goals of protecting the health and well-being of our healthcare workers and citizens and, crucially, of saving lives.

I welcome the opportunity to provide an update to members on the ways in which my Department is contributing to the fightback against COVID-19. I will set out clearly for members how I am doing all that I can within my remit and powers, and also by working collaboratively to support Executive colleagues, especially the Minister of Health, in our collective endeavour to support our NHS and to save lives.

I am sure that members will agree that there are few services more critical to our health and well-being than the availability of clean drinking water and the ability to treat our waste water effectively. Throughout the crisis, Northern Ireland Water has worked tirelessly to ensure that those services continue. That has involved prioritising essential work and changing work practices to ensure that social-distancing rules are adhered to. I know that keeping staff and customers safe has been a key focus of Northern Ireland Water. Northern Ireland Water's front-line workers are undertaking essential maintenance and repair work to make sure that our water keeps flowing and our drains do not get blocked. I encourage the public to show them support. They deserve our respect and our thanks.

Northern Ireland Water is also doing what it can to support its customers. I am pleased to be able to announce that Northern Ireland Water will not implement the increase in tariffs planned for April and will hold off on this until October at the earliest. The company will also defer issuing bills until July at the earliest. This will create a short-term cash flow problem for Northern Ireland Water, but I am putting arrangements in place to resolve this within my current budget cover.

More concerning, however, is the very sudden loss of income from the non-domestic sector as a result of this crisis, which will not be recovered. This is creating a serious gap in Northern Ireland Water's operating budget that must be met. I have already raised this matter with the Minister of Finance and Executive colleagues and will continue to work with them to find a resolution that manages this risk, protecting this vital service and protecting our communities from COVID-19.

I turn now to the issue of connectivity. The need for connectivity at a time when we are separated has never been greater. Now, more than ever, it is so very important that we continue to manage and maintain our transport network. We must ensure that emergency services can be kept moving and that key workers, including healthcare staff, equipment and supplies can travel safely or be transported to where the need is greatest.

Our ports and airports, the key gateways into the North, are struggling during this crisis to maintain air and sea connectivity. The ban on non-essential travel, which is needed to fight this pandemic, means that passenger numbers have plummeted. In addition, as non-essential businesses close, the downturn in manufacturing production has also had a significant impact on our hauliers and ferry operators. These sectors are interconnected. We rely on our ports, ferry companies, hauliers and airports to ensure that supply chains are maintained. If we fail to maintain resilience in those supply chains, it will impact each and every one of us, and it could impact our ability to restore our economy when the health emergency recedes.

I assure members that I am doing everything that I can to ensure that our ports, ferry companies, hauliers and airports receive the support that they need so that they can continue to provide the connectivity and the critical supply chains that we need, especially between here and GB.

As well as working on a cross-departmental basis, in particular with the Economy and Agriculture Ministers, I have been engaging with my counterparts in Wales and Scotland, with the result that we have been able to set out

a clear and compelling and shared case to the Secretary of State for Transport for intervention to support supply chains. I am also continuing to engage with my counterpart in the South, as we need to maintain the critical supply of food and, in particular, oxygen through Dublin port.

As well as focusing on ferry links, we are very much focusing on the needs of our hauliers so that they can stay in operation and are able to maintain the supply of critical goods for us and ensure that essential trade from here to GB and from Dublin to the North can continue. As I have said several times, information sharing and cooperation across these islands is key in the fight against COVID-19.

In addition, members will be aware of changes that I have made to the requirements relating to drivers' hours to secure and maintain deliveries and movement of all important goods that people in our communities, in particular vulnerable people, need at this time. This temporary relaxation of the rules reflects the current exceptional circumstances that we find ourselves in, and it must only be used where necessary. I will continue to keep the position under constant review and will ensure that measures are taken to extend the relaxation further if required, while making sure that the balance is maintained between relaxation and road safety as we protect our community at this difficult time.

Our public transport network continues to play a key role in facilitating essential travel, including for many in our health and social care sector at this difficult time. It is for that reason that the public transport network continues to operate, albeit in a reduced capacity. Translink has introduced working practices to ensure that all staff who attend work can follow social-distancing guidelines. Gloves and hand sanitisers are being provided to all front-line staff and protective screens have been fitted to all buses in use. All staff carrying out cleaning duties are trained to follow a safe system of work, and I am assured that they are given the correct personal protective equipment (PPE).

As a small token of our appreciation for the life-saving work that our healthcare colleagues are delivering, I have introduced free public transport for health workers during the COVID-19 outbreak. Translink continues to engage with all the health and social care trusts by offering assistance for any transport-related services, including passenger transport or delivery services. This has been well received by all the trusts and is providing important support to our workers while they face unprecedented pressures.

In relation to ensuring connectivity across the region for key workers and goods, I have supported the Rathlin ferry operator and the local community on Rathlin to ensure that essential goods, services and support continues to be provided to the island.

Community transport operators have also been contributing to wider efforts to support the vulnerable. I have been heartened to see how community transport operators have transitioned their services to assist with the delivery of prepaid groceries, prescriptions, food parcels or fulfilling essential journeys, and I am pleased that, with the support of Minister Poots, I have been able to support them in doing that.

The outbreak of COVID-19 has caused significant challenges and changes to a wide range of businesses, and the taxi industry is no exception. The regulations

introduced by the Health Minister allow taxis to continue to operate but they do so in a context where only essential travel is permitted, and I know that taxi drivers are facing real challenges. My announcement last week provides for the automatic renewal, without prior testing, of taxi vehicle licences that were due to expire during the current emergency. That will ensure that those vehicles can remain on the road during this period. It is a temporary measure to reflect the exceptionally challenging times of this current pandemic.

My officials are also working urgently with officials in the Department for Transport to find a quick solution to licences that require medical assessment. As soon as I am in a position to update members and affected drivers, I can reassure you that I will immediately do so.

At the same time, I have been encouraging other ministerial colleagues to respond to the needs of taxi drivers and operators with clear health and safety guidance on keeping drivers and customers safe, and to explore opportunities for the sector to repurpose its services to play a wider role in supporting those who are being shielded or who are vulnerable. I will continue to work with Ministers to ensure that we do all that we can as an Executive to assist taxi drivers, who are a key part of our transport network and should be supported at this time.

The need to avoid non-essential travel and maintain social distancing, in line with Government advice, has also made it necessary for me, and all other Ministers, to prioritise services and determine which departmental functions should be significantly reduced or stopped during this emergency period. In determining which services to prioritise, I have reflected the need to stop the spread of the virus and save lives and the need to support those working to keep us safe and keep our critical supply chains open and to protect livelihoods. A further consideration is to ensure that we keep a focus on the work needed to avoid unnecessary problems or difficulties that could divert the emergency services or disrupt necessary travel, while maintaining support for the most vulnerable in our communities.

In common with other Departments, my Department is ensuring that staff who can work from home are not required to be in the workplace. Where a job can be done from home, my senior team has made it clear that staff are expected to work from home, and I am pleased to report that that is happening.

We have also moved a number of our services online, including the DVA's driver licensing renewal service. There are, however, some services that people rely on and that simply cannot be delivered from home, including essential works on our transport, water and sewerage infrastructure. Where staff have to come into the workplace or onto a site to perform an essential role, all necessary steps are being taken to protect them. That includes ensuring that there is adequate social distancing and that appropriate personal protection equipment is made available and used in line with the relevant guidance.

In order to protect staff and to enable my Department to focus resources on responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, a number of departmental functions and services that could not be considered essential have been stopped or significantly reduced. I have suspended parking charges for DFI-operated on-street parking and parking enforcement,

with a small team retained to respond to illegal parking that is unsafe or blocking access to or for emergency or essential services, and driver and vehicle testing for all but emergency or essential services has also been temporarily suspended. Reducing or stopping those services has meant that we can refocus some of our efforts to support our health trusts in the fight against COVID-19. I assure members, however, that I understand the inconvenience that that presents and that this situation is being kept under regular review in line with public health advice.

Turning to planning, I will highlight some of the steps that I have taken to ensure that our regional planning system continues to function effectively. Thus far, I have issued letters to councils urging a relaxed and positive approach to enforcement, specifically on essential deliveries and pubs, restaurants and cafes that are providing takeaway services during this emergency period.

My officials have also provided information and advice to all 11 councils on the ongoing operation of the planning system through this time. We in my Department will continue to play our part by progressing the statutory casework that we handle, including notified and called-in planning applications, and by discharging our responsibilities on councils' development plans.

I also hope shortly to bring forward a legislative amendment to the Assembly that, subject to Members' agreement, would temporarily remove the requirement to hold a public event as part of the pre-application community consultation for major planning applications. To support that, I propose to issue guidance for applicants and councils on appropriate replacement measures to ensure that public participation in the process is not compromised.

I am also aware that the operation of council planning committees has been impacted. My officials have moved quickly to approve amended schemes of delegation to reduce the number of applications that would be required to go before planning committees. They have also been liaising with officials in the Department for Communities who are working to prepare regulations concerning the meetings of councils that would, if agreed, enable committees to operate effectively during this time.

I assure members that, in planning and right across my Department's functions, we will continue to work closely with other jurisdictions, councils and planning stakeholders to explore the obstacles and the temporary solutions that are needed to get us through this period.

Throughout this period, I have maintained a focus not only on the responsibilities of my own Department, but on how it can make its skills and resources available to support others, particularly those in our health service. Through the use of DVA vehicle test centres in Belfast and Newtownards to date, I am proud to have been able to support the Health Minister in helping to rapidly increase testing to help save lives.

My Department has also provided storage space at depots in Dungannon and Craigavon for use as required by the Southern Health and Social Care Trust. That has freed up much-needed space in Craigavon Area Hospital and has provided a local, secure and accessible facility for the daily transfer of supplies. A further approach for storage space in the greater Belfast area has been received from our health service colleagues, and we will do whatever

we possibly can to assist in meeting their needs. I have provided access to free parking at Crumlin Road Gaol for healthcare workers who are based at the Mater Hospital, and, from last Friday, I also opened up access to the site at the gaol for the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust to facilitate decontamination of ambulances and disposal of contaminated PPE material.

I want to put on record my appreciation to all the staff in my Department. From the beginning of this crisis, they have worked tirelessly to find solutions to the new challenges that this virus continually presents. We are all in this together and, in my Department, we will continue to do all that we can to support the work of Minister Swann and our healthcare heroes as they put their lives on the line to save ours.

In closing, there is no doubt that these are incredibly challenging times. Sadly, it is likely that, in the days ahead, it will get even more difficult. However, we must continue to work together and support each other to ensure that we continue to deliver for all of those who rely on our public services. Together we can get through this, and never before has the message been so clear to the people of Northern Ireland to stick together while staying apart. My message to everyone at home is that all of us can and must play our part. The advice is clear: stay at home to save lives. By looking out for each other, we will get through this, we will recover from it and we will be stronger as one community for it.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): I thank the Minister for her statement. There are a few housekeeping rules, members. I will allow around an hour for questions to the Minister. As this is a Committee meeting and not a plenary meeting of the Northern Ireland Assembly, it is appropriate for the Minister, if she wishes, to seek answers from the permanent secretary as well as providing answers herself. There are 21 members listed to ask a question. Therefore, it is very important that members ask a single, focused question that relates to the Minister's statement. The one exception that will be made is for the Chairperson of the Committee, whom I now call.

Miss McIlveen (Committee Chair - Committee for Infrastructure): I welcome the Minister's statement and congratulate her, the Department, Translink and Northern Ireland Water for stepping up and doing all that they can during this difficult time. I also want to place on record my condolences to the families who have lost loved ones and to pay tribute to the key workers who continue to serve our community.

In regard to the haulage sector, the Minister refers to connectivity and protecting critical supply chains. Is she satisfied that everything that can be done is being done to increase the maximum permitted authorised weights for vehicles, and, most importantly, is she working with others to provide the urgent financial support that hauliers require to ensure the continuity of our medical and food supplies?

I will turn to planning. I appreciate that the Minister has outlined some of the things that she plans to do. Does she intend to introduce measures to extend planning permissions that are approaching the expiry of the time limit for development, similar to the provisions in schedule 7(8) of the Coronavirus (Scotland) Act, which provides for permissions that are due to expire within six months to be automatically extended by 12 months?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Chair for her questions. In terms of the hauliers' situation, the member will be aware that we have brought forward a number of relaxations on enforcement of drivers' hours. We have also extended MOTs for lorries and relaxed rules around deliveries of stores to try to assist. The one area that we are still exploring is the one that she highlighted about weight. We are actively considering that and working with the sector on it.

In terms of the package, the member is absolutely right. Our hauliers are critical in ensuring that we have a secure supply of food, medicines, PPE and other vital supplies. I have been in very regular contact with the Department for Transport in England. We have fed very closely into Northern Ireland's business case for a financial package for our ferry operators and hauliers, and we are hopeful that that is being actively considered by Treasury at the moment. We are hopeful that they will recognise the critical impact that it will have here. I assure the member that I will continue to make representations to Ministers in England and continue to work with my colleagues in Scotland and Wales and in the South, because the member may be aware that we are wholly reliant on Dublin port for our access to oxygen. While we are not in a position to know when a package will be announced, I am very hopeful that we will get there very soon. We have pressed on the Department for Transport and on Treasury that time is of the essence and that we need intervention urgently.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Minister for her statement and I welcome the measures that she has introduced to date. I want to take her back to the issue of taxis. She mentioned medical assessment, but there is also the issue of periodic training and the certificate of professional competence (CPC). Obviously, the taxi industry is very anxious at the minute because people are waiting to renew their licence. Will she give a commitment to resolve this matter as soon as possible and will she agree that the taxi industry needs a cash injection as well?

Ms Mallon: I thank the member for his question. As the member will know, we had to bring in new legislation to extend the PSV provisions. It took longer than I would have liked, but it was a much more complex issue than just issuing temporary exemption certificates (TECs).

The issue of medical assessments is presenting a particular problem because, rightly, our healthcare workers and GPs are very much focused on the fightback against COVID-19. I assure members that we are working urgently to try to find a solution to that problem. I recognise that it is a difficulty, and, if legislative change is required here, I will do it. I am very much focused on finding a solution.

The member asked about training. As he will know, 35 hours of training are required over a five-year period. A number of the trainers have developed online versions of the training and I encourage drivers to take that up. The member may also be aware that DVA made an announcement that it is content that no enforcement action will be taken against drivers whose CPC expires between 1 March 2020 and 30 September 2020. I also anticipate that that is likely to have to be reviewed again in due course given that so many elements of the training and licensing process have been impacted as a result of this crisis. I assure you on that front.

There is no doubt that the taxi industry has been hit hard by this. I have been working with Executive colleagues and we pushed the UK Government for a financial package for the self-employed, but there are flaws with that in terms of the time it takes to access it. I am also very cognisant of the fact that there are a number of drivers who cannot avail themselves of that. The Ministers who take the lead on financial support for those whose livelihoods have been hit are the Minister of Finance, the Minister for the Economy and the Minister for Communities. I assure members that I have been raising this issue with them. They are aware of it and are keen to explore the options.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her statement, for the leadership that she has shown throughout this very difficult period and for the many actions that her Department has taken. The fact that it has done so much is reflected in the length of her statement.

I will take the Minister back to taxis. Mr Boylan raised the issue. Taxi drivers have undoubtedly been hit hard by this crisis. There is an obvious lack of fares and, to many drivers, there also seems to be a lack of fairness. Taxis have always been a valuable service but now, in many instances, they are literally a lifeline. The Minister referred to her officials working with the Department for Communities, which I understand takes the lead on redeployment. She also quite rightly pointed out that the Department for the Economy has a role. Will the Minister provide us with an update on what work the Executive as a whole are doing to support the taxi industry at this time?

Ms Mallon: I thank the member for his question. I was conscious of the length of the statement and I assure the member that we had to take a number of action points out because officials in my Department have worked so hard. They have worked so hard with officials in DAERA, the Department of Finance, the Department for Communities and officials right across the Executive. On the issue of taxis, yes, I am responsible for the regulatory side of things, and I laid out in the statement a number of actions that we have taken to resolve issues. There are still some other issues, and we are working to resolve those. The issue of financial assistance falls to Executive colleagues, and I know that they are looking at the matter. I have written to them, and they have responded. Collectively, the Executive, are very conscious of the financial difficulties facing the taxi industry.

I have always thought, from the beginning of the crisis, when we started to see the scale it, that the real solution for both the taxi industry and the most vulnerable in our society is around the repurposing of the taxi industry: redeployment so that they can deliver pre-paid groceries — we know that that is a problem for supermarkets — or medicines from community pharmacies and so forth. I still firmly believe that there are huge opportunities in that area, and I know that the Minister for Communities is exploring options with local government to see what we can do there. I have made the commitment that my officials are keen to work. There are no regulatory barriers to redeployment, so it is something that I will continue to work on with Executive colleagues and local government to try to progress.

Given the severity of the situation and the fact that taxis have been listed as an essential service under the regulations and that the public are being told not to engage in travel unless it is essential, the taxi industry, by its very

nature, will have to adapt during this period. Be assured that I am doing what I can on the regulatory side but am also working proactively with ministerial colleagues who have responsibilities in other areas so that we can provide the support that the taxi industry needs and deserves at this really difficult time.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for her statement and for keeping the Assembly up to date on relevant issues. Minister, you referred in your statement to last week's decision to enable taxi vehicle licences to be renewed automatically without prior testing. Prior to that, MOTs were given extensions as a result of COVID-19 and, indeed, as a result of faulty lifts earlier in the year. Some of those MOT extensions are coming to an end. Can you assure those drivers that they, too, will be given renewals so that they can keep their vehicles on the road? That will apply to many key workers.

Ms Mallon: I can give the member that assurance. My Department has done considerable work to ensure that we are in a position where, if the need arises for further temporary exemption certificates to be issued to motorists, that will be the case. It is important to say that the trigger for that remains that the customer has to book the MOT appointment, which will automatically trigger the TEC, if a secondary TEC is required. I make the point that we have to encourage people to make that booking in the first place.

The member will know that, as a result of this crisis, the Department moved to issue temporary exemption certificates to four-year-old vehicles. That was not the case previously. The other outstanding issue concerned taxi drivers and the PSV, and we have now resolved that. We are conscious that, as time goes on, certain customers will have to see a further extension of their TEC, and we are putting all the necessary arrangements in place.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for her statement, and I echo the words of other members in passing condolences to those who have lost loved ones as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. The terrible human impact on everyone is something that we need to keep in our minds.

I really appreciate the update you have provided, Minister, in relation to logistics. That is a key issue. There are logistics companies in my constituency that have built up their business over many years and family generations and now face financial ruin, so it is really important that support is given, particularly by the Department for Transport. We look forward to an update on that, and I appreciate the work that you are doing on it.

My question is about Translink, and I declare for the record that I was previously an employee of Translink. It has been reported that Translink will potentially need £100 million to continue. The fares revenue of the company has plummeted and is now very low, although services are still operating. I am really grateful to the staff for continuing to operate those services, but the patronage has gone down. What are the plans in the short and medium terms to safeguard the future of Translink as a public transport operator in Northern Ireland?

Ms Mallon: I thank the member for raising that issue. It is very important. As you point out, Translink already had financial difficulties from having to dip into its reserves over a number of years. That has been profoundly escalated as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. We have

seen a dramatic reduction of 90% to 95% in passengers across bus and rail that has brought with it a dramatic reduction in income. You are absolutely right: the financial pressures and the hole that is emerging in Translink are deeply worrying.

Members will also know that the Finance Minister announced a COVID-19 budget. There was no allocation to DFI in that, but money has been held in the centre, and I have received assurances from the Finance Minister that money will be forthcoming in recognition of the very difficult financial situation that Translink finds itself in as a result of the pandemic. The fundamental question, though, for all of us in this is this: do we as an Executive and as an Assembly believe in having a publicly owned public transport network? That is the fundamental question that we will have to address, and it is recognition of the fact that our public transport network is essential at this moment in time in transporting our key workers and our healthcare workers to and from work. It will be essential in our economic recovery, and it is, of course, essential in the other global crisis that we all face: the climate emergency. I welcome the assurances from the Finance Minister that there will be further allocations in the COVID-19 budget, and I think that Translink is a compelling case for that. I believe that that is, rightly, recognised by all Executive colleagues.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for her statement. There is some great work going on in transportation and in infrastructure.

Minister, you pointed out in your statement the importance of various networks of connectivity and transport at this time. What guidance and discussions have there been for companies that would assist the roads section of the Department in maintaining the road network at this time, particularly on the essential road maintenance programme?

Ms Mallon: Our officials are in close contact with those who have contracts for that work. Obviously, we have responsibility for our staff, and we have been clear that, where work is not deemed to be essential, it should not take place. Where it is deemed to be essential and has to be on-site, social distancing guidance must be adhered to and PPE must be given to our staff because their safety is paramount. We are also working with contractors who can assure us that they can apply all that guidance and have those supports and protections for their workers. Others say that they are struggling and finding it difficult to do that, and we are working with them as closely as we can, because, above everything else, the safety of workers and of the public is absolutely paramount. There is nothing that comes before it.

Ms Anderson: I thank the Minister for her statement. I commend the front-line workers in your Department who are supplying us with clean, safe drinking water and making sure that the sewerage systems operate and those in Translink who transport the essential workers. I want to mark that down as well.

I was contacted a few weeks ago by workers who were concerned about PPE in relation to your Department, so I acknowledge what you have said today about ensuring that that is all now in place. Have you been in touch with the trade unions to make sure that those workers are comfortable and confident with the protections that are in place and feel reassured that, with the PPE that is now in

place, the protection will continue into the future as we live through this awful pandemic?

Ms Mallon: I thank the member for her kind comments about our front-line staff. They are doing tremendous work. It might sound glib, but it is true that not all heroes wear capes, so I thank her for her recognition of that.

Yes, I have been engaging with the unions; in fact, I have a teleconference, I think, with NIPSA on Friday — you lose track of days in the middle of all this — to talk about these issues just to give reassurances. I want to add to the tribute that you paid to our front-line workers. I do not want to single out any group, because, in my Department, there are so many people doing tremendous work, but I think of our Translink workers, who are going out to their daily work to transport our essential key workers. Over and beyond that, they have redeployed their services across our health trusts so that they can transport staff to and from hospital sites. They are giving over car parking free to health workers who work in hospitals and have to stay in hotels at night. Members of Unite, the union for Translink workers, have been donating money out of their own pockets so that they can provide toiletries to our healthcare workers who have to stay overnight in hotels and other places. That feeds into a wider analysis and into a wider discussion that we should have as an Assembly about reorientating our understanding of the value that we place on our workers across society and re-evaluating the fact that the essential workers who are seeing us through the pandemic are often the lowest paid. When we get through this and as we are getting through this, there is a discussion that we need to have as an Assembly about the types of public services that we want, the type of economy that we want and the type of society that we want.

Mr K Buchanan: The Minister referred in her statement to staff working from home etc. Are many people in your Department suffering from the virus or illness? Has homeworking been taken up?

Ms Mallon: I am not aware that we have. We have numbers who are self-isolating, and I will maybe pass your question over to the permanent secretary. We are seeing a very good uptake of homeworking. There are challenges around IT equipment — I do not think that any of us ever thought that we would be in this situation and in it so quickly — but we are trying to meet the challenges by trying to make sure that our staff at home have the essential IT equipment to do their job.

My view on this is simple: if you have to come to work but cannot carry out your work safely, the work should not be carried out until we can make sure that safety mechanisms and protections are in place. If you can work from home, we have to do absolutely everything that we can to ensure that you are able to work from home.

I will now pass over to the permanent secretary to speak about staffing figures.

Mrs Katrina Godfrey (Department for Infrastructure):

To reassure the member, I can say that, like everybody else, we have staff in a number of categories. We have staff who are vulnerable and absolutely must stay at home. We have had, sadly, instances of staff who have been quite gravely ill and have been hospitalised, but the latest information is that they are making full and good recoveries. We have a fairly significant number of staff who are required to self-isolate because of symptoms in

other family members. We are managing all of that. We are managing it with huge goodwill and support and with a commitment to public service from the 3,000 men and women who make up the Department. Like everybody else, we are finding new ways of working that, I suspect, we will not lose completely when we come out the other end of this.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for her statement. It was very good. I echo the comments made about all front-line workers. There is such a broad range of people among us out providing a key service.

I welcome the decision to defer water bills. The Minister will know that it is an issue that I have been raising. I am pleased to hear that, because it is important to support local businesses at a time when they are struggling, through no fault of their own, to make a lot of payments. It is good news. I just want to ask whether the deferment of water bills will also apply to those who have received a bill after COVID-19 started. If anyone has outstanding bills since the beginning of this, will theirs also be deferred?

Ms Mallon: May I check that and come back to the member to make sure that I give her an absolutely accurate answer?

Ms Kimmins: Thank you.

Mr Catney: I thank you, Minister, for your statement. I also pass on my condolences to all those who find themselves bereaved at this time because of COVID-19. It is a difficult time. There is not a chance for them to grieve properly. I thank the Minister for her kind words.

The Minister has done tremendous work, acting quickly and efficiently to deploy what resources her Department has to support citizens and industry. As well as the COVID-19 effort, in particular I welcome the offer of MOT centres for testing and as a site for ambulance cleansing. Can the Minister provide an update on what other resources have been made available and say whether Executive colleagues have taken on providing similar support to the Department of Health?

Ms Mallon: I thank the member for his question and for his kind words. In truth, I want to pay tribute to the Health staff and the staff in my Department who have worked so closely to ensure the transformation that we have seen of two of our MOT centres — Belfast and Newtownards — into much-needed COVID-19 testing centres. In fact, I was out this morning. I visited the Newtownards COVID testing centre with Minister Swann. It was amazing to see it in action; to see our front-line healthcare workers, who have been redeployed from other Departments, and the number of people who are going through. The MOT model and the COVID testing model are a perfect match for each other. We are hopeful that others will come online. I have offered all of the MOT centres right across the North to the trusts because that is important if we are to rapidly increase testing.

All of us in the Executive recognise that this is primarily a health crisis. If we are to get through it, we absolutely have to work together. Our primary concern should be that we do everything that we can individually, within our Departments and across Departments, to support our healthcare workers. Also, we are mindful that it is an economic crisis and we are working together to ensure that we get through this by working and planning together

to make sure that we recover from it in the best possible way that we can.

Mr Nesbitt: I begin by echoing the sentiments expressed by Mr Durkan in terms of the leadership being shown by the Minister, not just her actions. In fact, not just her words. The tone that she has deployed in her public comments has been very important: assured and reassuring.

My question is with regard to the impact on budget lines, because the whole Executive are now taking actions that were unplanned and probably unprecedented in their scale. Mr Muir mentioned a figure for Translink, which the Minister neither confirmed nor denied. It would be useful to know what the impact is and how you think that may play into the debate, which you mentioned will follow the crisis, about what sort of public transport system we want in the future.

Ms Mallon: I thank the member for his very kind words. There is no doubt that the financial impact of COVID-19 on the Department for Infrastructure is hugely significant. At present, we are looking at a potential figure of £178 million. As Mr Muir pointed out, Translink has gone public on this. We are talking of an impact of over £100 million on Translink.

At this moment in time, none of us know the certainty about the duration of this crisis. As a Department, we are working through modelling the financial impact on Northern Ireland Water. In my statement I touched on the dramatic loss in income there, in Translink and in DVA because of the measures that we have had to take. We also have to be mindful that this comes against a backdrop in which the Department for Infrastructure, for historical reasons that I do not think it is appropriate to go into right now, was already in a difficult financial position.

I will not dress it up; I will be honest about that. There are huge challenges across all Departments. The COVID-19 budget allocations have not all been fully met and my Department is the one that is waiting. It is really important that we work together and recognise the critical importance of our waste water infrastructure and a publicly owned transport network. We should not dress it up. We are facing huge financial challenges. While we welcome interventions that might come from the UK Government, and we are reassured that more will be coming, it will never be enough. We are going to have to reorientate how we look at and finance our public services, and that debate needs to take place.

Mr Frew: I agree with the Minister and I would welcome that debate on how our public utilities are factored in and how they could invest in the infrastructure.

I thank the Minister for last week stepping in on a constituent's case about an MOT. That was greatly appreciated by me and that constituent. However, such cases seem to be a trend because I received a number yesterday and today on the same issue: when people go to fulfil their test, the MOT centres are closed and those people are not getting any documentation, either before turning up or after, with regard to an exemption certificate. I also heard today that the email system may have crashed or jammed, which means that they cannot contact the MOT centres and the organisation behind them. Can the Minister shed some light on that and investigate it after this meeting?

Ms Mallon: Yes. The member raises an important issue. I am aware of it because of contact from members and also

from contact with members of the public. That is why, at the weekend, I put up a post to explain the situation with TECs and to make it straightforward. It is a cumbersome process because of the lack of automation. It is difficult trying to communicate to people that they need to book a test for a centre that is closed to be able to get a temporary exemption certificate. Given the volume of work and the impact of social distancing and working from home on our staff, it is taking much longer than we would like for hard copies of certificates to reach people's homes. There is also a bit of a delay in updating the website to enable people to check their registration to see if a TEC has issued. I know that causes concern and that people are then afraid to drive. I assure members and members of the public that, if you book your MOT test, you will automatically be issued with a temporary exemption certificate in our system.

The email system has not crashed. I wrote the email address down because I suspected that some members might ask about this. It is dva.customerservices@infrastructure-ni.gov.uk. That is the central point of contact. We checked today before I came here and I am advised that there is no backlog in that email address. The member might be referring to the fact that, over the Easter weekend, the DVA website crashed. I became aware of that and we have asked Capita for a full explanation as to how that happened. It seemed to be resolved very quickly, but it caused confusion among members of the public. We are taking steps to make sure that we do everything we can to prevent that from happening again because, now more than ever, customers are reliant on communicating with us online.

Ms Ennis: I thank the Minister and the permanent secretary for being here today. I concur with the sentiments of colleagues across the Chamber about planning. Minister, your Department needs to issue guidance to councils on that issue sooner rather than later because it is a costly and stressful exercise and applicants need reassurance.

The measure on the relaxation of drivers' hours was taken to secure the supply lines, and I understand and appreciate the reasons for that. Our drivers are on the front line making sure that our shops are stocked and that we have access to supplies. Has the Minister been engaging with the drivers and their representatives? They are under a lot of pressure at this time. Can the Minister give us assurances that they are being supported to the best of her ability?

Ms Mallon: I thank the member. My chief planner has written to all councils and is engaging with them, but if a council feels that it is not getting sufficient support from the Department, please come to me with that information and we will look at it. There must be some breakdown in communication, because I know my planning team has been very active on that front.

On the issue of lorry drivers and so forth, yes, I have been engaging with the representative bodies. We had a very successful and productive teleconference in which they were able to discuss a number of issues. It has been a very productive working partnership. The industry and its representatives have been very quick in coming to us to identify difficulties and in coming forward with suggested solutions. They have also been working with my officials

very positively and proactively to resolve issues. I want to put that on record.

For me, part of this experience is about learning, and it has reinforced to me the need to do government with people, to be informed by representatives and to have a more dynamic approach to finding solutions. Engagement with the representatives of the hauliers, with the industry and with lorry drivers has been very insightful for me, and we have made a lot of progress by taking that approach. I want to maintain that approach going forward.

Ms Armstrong: I thank the Minister. I love talking about infrastructure, so I am a happy girl today. I thank you and your team. A heck of a lot of hard work has been going on through your Department. People may not see that Infrastructure has a key role in this pandemic, but it absolutely does. I also take the opportunity to pay tribute to my former colleagues in community transport who, when the tough times come along, certainly come out and represent. To get back to my question: a bit like my colleague Mike Nesbitt MLA in Strangford, I am concerned about the future of your Department. While it is working extremely hard now, filling gaps and providing a vital service, I am very concerned that, often, Infrastructure is the poor relation when it comes to funding, and, although you have a huge budget, it tends to be last on the list when key moneys are being allocated. The last thing that I want to see is Northern Ireland Water failing to meet its standards. My colleague Mr Andrew Muir MLA asked about Translink. Translink is our one public transport provider. Unlike the rest of the UK, we have one public service provider. They do not cherry-pick.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Can I ask, Ms Armstrong, that you get to the question, please?

Ms Armstrong: Sorry. I will.

Northern Ireland Water is in the same boat. Both organisations need money, and we know that we have a Budget coming forward. What work will you be able to do to consult to maybe bring forward the integrated public transport strategy and the future of Northern Ireland Water so that neither fails?

Ms Mallon: I thank the member for her comments and her question. I will take the community transport operators first. I have been amazed and uplifted by the way in which the community transport sector has stepped up, has so quickly repurposed its services and is playing a critical role by making sure that food and medicines are going to people who are shielding and who are vulnerable. It is true community spirit in action, and I would not expect anything less from community transport. I am genuinely very heartened by it.

I also welcome the member's comments about infrastructure. I have made those comments since I took up the portfolio. It is often seen as bricks and mortar, cement and roads. Infrastructure is actually about connecting each of us to critical services and to each other. It is the bedrock upon which you build a strong economy and a connected society and how you tackle the climate emergency.

I have tried, since I took up the portfolio, to communicate it in that way and to make people see, as I did when I took up the post, how it clearly impacts on every aspect of our daily lives. From the moment that you get up in the morning and

turn on your water tap to how you get to and from school or work, to whether homes are built in your area and whether factories and other employment opportunities can be progressed, it all comes down to infrastructure. I have become very passionate about it, much more passionate than I was before, and I put my hand up to that because I now realise how critical it is to each of us and our future.

Like you, I share serious concerns about the financial situation facing my Department. I had serious financial concerns prior to COVID-19, and those have dramatically escalated as a result. The first thing that the Executive and the Assembly have to do is recognise and accept the value and importance of infrastructure and what it can do to transform lives, and then we need to work together to see how we finance that. That will require having difficult conversations, but I am up for having difficult conversations. It is something that I think and hope will not fall along party lines — maybe I am being too optimistic. There are difficult issues that we must grapple with because we are talking about the essential supply of clean drinking water, the effective treatment of waste water and other public services. These things go to the very heart of our society. So, it is a conversation that I want to have with my Executive colleagues and others, and I think that we can agree on an approach to it.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for her statement. I very much welcome the Minister's collaborative approach, working across government. I have no time for politicians playing politics with these issues at this time; it is simply unacceptable when people face such a threat.

The Minister referred to front-line staff. I equally commend front-line staff in the Department for Infrastructure. As she said, they deserve our respect. As regards potential threats and intimidation of staff, what steps have the Minister and her Department taken to protect those members of staff? Can I also ask, in relation to part of the question that my colleague from Strangford, the Chair of the Infrastructure Committee, asked earlier about planning, whether the Minister intends to introduce extended planning measures similar to those introduced in Scotland?

Ms Mallon: I thank the member. There is, sadly, a problem with our front-line essential workers being subjected to abuse from others who cannot understand why they are at work. It is something that I have discussed with others. I tried to be very public in saying that we need to value, to say "Thank you" to and to appreciate our front-line workers, and I know that Executive colleagues have been doing the same. It is very important that we reinforce the message that those who are out on our roads working are doing so because they are providing essential services to all of us, and I encourage all members to help in getting that message out there.

There is no excuse for intimidation. It should not be tolerated. When you think about the fact that these people are going out and are putting themselves at risk to keep essential services running for you and me, you see that it is even more deplorable. I have to say, however, in saying that, that it is at times like this that we can see the true face of our society, and while we have a small number who may be engaged in that type of behaviour, the vast majority of people have stepped up, are working to help each other and are working together to get through this.

I apologise to Miss McIlveen, because I omitted to answer her question, so thank you for giving me a second opportunity to do so. I am aware that this is an issue, and I am aware that legislation has been introduced in Scotland. It will require primary legislation here, so we are exploring that as an option. The difficulty is that if applicants have planning permission that is imminently going to expire, the legislative option is not going to be a solution for them. One route is renewal, and, granted, they have to pay a fee for that, but that has been significantly reduced to the new fee, and we have been engaging with councils to say that, if that is the case, they should please process applications as quickly as possible. The other route is the commencement of works, but, again, it is not a straightforward situation. There is case law about what will be accepted, so there is no straightforward answer yet. However, to assure you, we are looking at a legislative option, but it just would not be a timely option, and that will not help the people who find themselves in this situation.

Ms Sheerin: I thank the Minister for her statement and echo the comments of colleagues across the Chamber in honouring the front-line workers and extending sympathies to anybody who has lost a loved one during or because of this crisis.

You would not know it today, but, for almost the entirety of this crisis, we have had a spate of good weather across the North, and that has meant that people who are furloughed or working from home have been taking the opportunity to exercise outdoors near their home. I know that the rural roads in my locality have never seen as many cyclists, walkers or runners, and, obviously, everybody is practising social distancing. Meanwhile, roads are seeing less car traffic, which leaves us in the situation where the few motorists who are still travelling might take the opportunity to speed in areas where they normally would not, which compromises road safety for all. Some measures that have been proposed to mitigate that risk include a temporary reduction of the speed limit as well as public awareness campaigns. In other countries, extra bike lanes have been put in place to allow increased space and safety for cyclists making essential journeys —.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stafford): Could the member get to the question, please?

Ms Sheerin: I am getting there. Is the Minister considering any initiatives to improve road safety and potentially alleviate the pressure on an already stretched health service during this coronavirus outbreak?

Ms Mallon: I thank the member for her question. The Department has engaged in communications strategy for a lot of this: road safety messages as well as social-distancing messages to those who are out walking and cycling. I have been giving consideration to changing speed limits, but we have to be mindful that we have to get to the other side of this, and I do not want to add further confusion to the situation, so, at present, we are very much focused on putting out and raising, as you say, public awareness on the issue. We will continue to do that. I will engage with the PSNI again after today to get a better understanding of the speeding problem and to see whether we can work more collaboratively on that as well.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Minister for giving us an update today. Like lots of people, I join her in paying tribute to the extraordinary effort and commitment made by people

working in her Department who are out there every morning at the front line delivering services for us. She will probably agree that those people, like everybody else, will want to have access to testing for COVID-19. What conversations has she had with other Ministers, including the Health Minister, about the need to urgently scale up testing and contact tracing in Northern Ireland as part of not only managing the current peak but moving to the next stage of this crisis? In addition, has she had any conversations about the possibility of bringing in outside expertise to scale up contact tracing and testing?

Ms Mallon: I thank the member for his question. It is an important one. I am pleased to have received assurances from the Health Minister and the Chief Medical Officer on their commitment to scaling up testing and the testing regime in Northern Ireland. As I have outlined, I am very pleased that my Department is able to play its part by handing over its MOT centres to help rapidly increase testing.

I think that all of us recognise that it is very clear that the medical evidence and the facts lead us to the conclusion that we absolutely need to test, test, test and trace. It is very important that we follow the medical advice and are open to the learning that comes from it. I am happy to raise with the Minister of Health and my other Executive colleagues issues that the member has highlighted, but the overarching principle has to be that we follow the medical evidence. Nobody has anything to be threatened by or to fear from listening to a wide range of evidence, but it is also really important that we continue to work together. At this time, of all times, there is no justification for point-scoring or for a "them versus us" approach. I am committed to doing what I can with Executive colleagues and to doing all that I can in my Department to make sure that we play our part, particularly in ramping up testing.

Mr Butler: Thank you, Minister, for a very good brief. Thank you for your unstinting cooperation, especially with the Minister of Health. I am sure that he is deeply appreciative of it, as are all the people of Northern Ireland. That type of leadership promotes good community cohesion.

Minister, my question is about LGV licences. I know that I have asked you about this previously, and it is to do with medicals. It became apparent to me just this week that we have a real need to protect life, and you have said that keeping people safe is your number-one commitment. A lot of drivers who drive fire appliances and emergency vehicles have to undergo regular medical assessments, and they are perhaps going to fall foul of COVID-19 and all the fallout from it. I am just looking to see whether you have any update for us or whether you can make any commitment even to expedite and prioritise people who provide that service on the front line to attain their licence.

Ms Mallon: I can reassure the member that, while we are working to find a comprehensive solution to the medical assessment and licensing issue, priority is being given to those who require their licence for essential or emergency services. If members therefore know of drivers who, given the role that they play, require that service but are not able to get prioritised, please flag it up with me. Undoubtedly, our healthcare workers are under immense pressure, but I think that all of us recognise that we need to be doing everything that we can to ensure that we keep our essential and emergency services moving and available.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for her statement and for her answers thus far. I echo the sentiments of all in the Chamber by offering my condolences to those families who have sadly been bereaved by COVID-19 and by wishing well all those who are fighting the virus, as well as the healthcare workers who are helping them to recover from it. I pay tribute to you, Minister, for your rock-solid leadership in the throes of this crisis. Well done. I also pay tribute to your Department's front-line workers, in infrastructure, transport, water and waste water treatment. Those people are out rolling up their sleeves and steering the wheels that ensure that our society's machine can keep on turning.

I welcome your Department's announcement today on non-domestic water and waste water charges. That will be a very welcome relief for many in the business community. I ask the Minister to confirm that the measures will also be available to the farming community, which has also been very hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ms Mallon: I thank the member for his very kind words. Yes, it will apply to farmers.

Mr McNulty: Thank you.

Miss Woods: I, too, thank the Minister for her statement and for coming to the Chamber today. I also thank her for the great response time that I got on behalf of constituents. It is very much appreciated.

My question is about the possible allocation of road space during the pandemic. As we know, there has been a great reduction in the number of cars on the roads. Would the Minister be minded to look at implementing temporary cycle and pedestrian lanes for people to use, adhering to social-distancing rules, which would make it easier for people in urban and other areas to access safer areas for exercise, as other countries such as Mexico, the United States, Canada and EU cities Berlin and Budapest have done?

Ms Mallon: I thank the member for her kind words about the efficient response on constituency issues. It is important that we do not lose sight in the middle of this pandemic that we are there to serve our constituents, and I am very conscious of that and want to retain a focus on that.

I do see the merits in what the member suggests. I suppose the difficulty that we find ourselves in is that we are in the middle of a pandemic. There are pressures on our staff, and we are focusing all our efforts in responding to and planning for COVID-19. That does not mean that we do not recognise the importance of the issue that she raised. I spoke earlier about the need to reorientate and to do things differently after the crisis and not just to go back to the way it was. The issues that she has touched upon are the kind of issues that I want to be very proactive about and look at. We need to look at active travel; I committed to that before the crisis. We need to look at reshaping our space and our places so that they are people-centred.

So, it is something that I am looking at, but, in realistic terms, the ability to progress it at this time is limited in scope. However, it is something that I want to continue to progress when we get to the other side of this.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for her statement. I want to raise the Minister's response to pleas from the trade unions to extend free public transport to all essential workers. I think that she said that she had no plans to do this. The move to offer public transport to health and

social care workers was the right thing to do and widely accepted and praised, but I think that it is now imperative that it should be extended to those in the public sector and in retail, and those who are risking their health every day to ensure that we have food and other services. The Minister mentioned that many of those workers are low paid. They were disgracefully low paid before the crisis — now that their role has been elevated dramatically, it is clear that their pay is inadequate. It is evident for all to see.

Does the Minister have any plans to review the decision around extending free transport to all workers? She rightly paid tribute to Translink staff. Does she have any plans to review her decision around reduced daytime bus services to ensure that the drivers in particular are not unnecessarily behind the wheel for long periods of time?

Ms Mallon: On the issue of reduced services: yes, there will be further reductions in services while maintaining essential routes to make sure that our healthcare and essential workers can get to and from their places of work. We are doing a piece of analysis there, but there will be further reduction in services.

The member raises an issue that I have been grappling with, because I absolutely recognise and appreciate the role of essential workers. I am trying to weigh up the practicalities of rolling out that extension, because, for it to operate, it would mean offering free transport to everyone. It would be very difficult — it would actually be impossible — to be able to categorise workers. I am considering the unintended consequences of incentivising the use of public transport across Northern Ireland as the lockdown continues. People might want to avail themselves of public transport and, because it would be free, come out and use it unnecessarily.

I can assure the member that, in principle, it is something that I would be very supportive of, but, as a Minister, I have to think through the intended and unintended consequences of my actions. I am keeping the situation under review.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): I thank the Minister for her statement and the answers to the questions.

In accordance with precedence that was established at the first meeting of the Committee, we have around nine minutes left for questions. If members have any pressing questions that they wish to ask the Minister, they should rise in their place. If not, we can set the Minister free. No further questions? The answers were comprehensive, Minister, so congratulations.

That concludes questions on the statement. We will now have a brief suspension of 10 minutes prior to the statement from the Minister of Education. I remind members of the rules about social distancing. Please use the door nearest to you when exiting the Chamber. Thank you.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response

16 April 2020

Ministerial Statement: Education

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Christopher Stalford (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Martina Anderson
Ms Kellie Armstrong
Mr Roy Beggs
Mr Cathal Boylan
Mr Keith Buchanan
Mr Robbie Butler
Mr Gerry Carroll
Mr Mark Durkan
Mr Paul Frew
Mr David Hilditch
Mr William Humphrey
Ms Catherine Kelly
Mr Chris Lyttle
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Justin McNulty
Ms Karen Mullan
Mr Mike Nesbitt
Mr Matthew O'Toole
Mr Peter Weir
Miss Rachel Woods

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Order, members. Item 3 is a statement from the Minister of Education. The Speaker's Office received notification on 15 April that the Minister wished to make a statement to the Ad Hoc Committee at today's meeting. A copy of the statement that the Minister intends to deliver is included in your pack. I welcome the Minister of Education to the Committee meeting and invite him to make his statement, which should be heard by members without interruption. Following the statement, there will be an opportunity for members to ask questions.

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): Perhaps I should start by passing on my condolences, as other members have, to those who have lost their lives in recent days with this terrible virus.

I welcome the opportunity to update members on decisions that I have taken to ensure that young people in Northern Ireland, who were due to complete their GCSE, AS and A-level qualifications this summer, will be awarded grades that will enable them to move on to the next stage of their lives.

On 19 March, the First Minister and deputy First Minister announced a radical package of measures that the Executive were taking to deal with the unprecedented

challenges facing our society as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak. Amongst many other things that included the closure of schools from Friday 20 March for an unspecified period, something which is, in itself, unprecedented.

With schools closed and young people unable to complete all the work that is required for this year's public examination series, it was vital that consideration was given to how best to provide certainty to the system, particularly for those who were entered for examinations, as soon as practicably possible. I am very aware of the importance of those exams for the future of the young people who have been working so hard towards them. However, it was clear from the point at which the decision to close the schools was made that it would be very unlikely that the examinations could take place as scheduled. Therefore, following engagement with, and in line with ministerial colleagues in England and Wales, I announced on 19 March that GCSE, AS and A-level exams would not proceed.

From that point on, my priority was to ensure that we put in place a robust process that would provide the young people who are affected with fair and equitable results. Those results should reflect their hard work and effort. Equally, they should enable them to make judgements and decisions about the next stage in their education, training and employment. I am sure that everyone will agree that it is important that the 2020 cohort of students are not disadvantaged in comparison with those who went before them or those who will come after them.

Over the past few weeks, my officials have been working with the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) to develop a process that has fairness at its core; to the young people whose lives will be impacted by the current circumstances, to the teachers who have supported those young people along their journey and share their joys and disappointments, and to the families of those young people who are undoubtedly anxious about the potential impact that the situation may have on their children's future. The Department has received a number of queries from pupils, parents and teachers, who are all anxious to know what will happen. Today, I will provide the certainty that they seek about the process for awarding A-level, AS-level and GCSE qualifications.

I am also mindful that many young people in schools have been able to access a wide range of vocational

qualifications through the entitlement framework, and they, too, seek certainty. While I cannot provide that certainty today, I can assure members that we are working closely with officials in the Department for the Economy who lead on vocational qualifications policy. Collectively, we are very aware of the need to ensure that the young people who are taking those qualifications are, likewise, not disadvantaged. The Minister for the Economy will provide clarity on those qualifications in the next few weeks.

I have a detailed paper from CCEA that sets out a series of options for each of the qualifications that are under consideration. CCEA had undertaken an options appraisal, which included testing each of the options against four criteria: fairness; burden reduction; impact limitation; and minimising uncertainty. That advice was carefully considered by my officials and me, and subsequently tested with advisers in the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI).

As part of the process to develop proposals that would have the confidence of the education system, my officials consulted with representatives of head teachers and teaching unions, as well as other education stakeholders. I want to thank those organisations for their constructive engagement in these difficult circumstances. I have taken their views into account in arriving at my decisions. While I am sure that not everybody will agree with everything, I am hopeful that my decisions will continue to have the support of the education system. Everyone recognises that there is no perfect solution, but I am confident that we now have a process that will lead to our young people being awarded the results that they merit and which will enable them to progress to the next stage of their lives, whether that be on to further education or training or into the world of work.

Teachers, in particular, will have a key role to play in the alternative form of assessment. I will come to the detail of that in a minute. I believe that it is the right approach to take: who knows better the aptitudes, abilities and educational achievements of those young people than their teachers, who have guided them through the past few years on their educational journey? I want to pay tribute to all of our teachers for the way in which they have adapted to the current circumstances and for making every effort to ensure that teaching and learning continue in the best way possible. I also thank them in advance for helping to implement the arrangements that we are now putting in place for awarding qualifications to ensure that their students are able to progress.

Northern Ireland has an open qualifications market, which means that learners can choose qualifications offered by a range of examination bodies across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The GCSE and A-level brands also operate on a three-country basis. Scotland is in a slightly different position. Therefore, it is important, to ensure continued comparability and portability of these qualifications, that we are aligned, as far as possible, with the arrangements in England and Wales, while recognising that the approach also needs to reflect policy differences. I believe that the decisions taken provide for the appropriate alignment while also being in the best interests of young people in Northern Ireland.

Although 98% of young people in Northern Ireland's schools take CCEA GCSEs and 87% take CCEA A levels, a small number take qualifications offered by English and Welsh examining boards. Those qualifications will be

subject to the arrangements in the respective jurisdictions. The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) and Qualifications Wales have published guidance on their website setting out the relevant arrangements.

In relation to the qualifications offered by CCEA, which are taken by the vast majority of students, I can confirm that I have instructed CCEA as follows. Young people due to complete their full GCSE, AS and A-level qualifications will be issued a set of results this summer in order to allow them to progress to further study or employment. Unit-level results will not be provided to young people due to take a GCSE qualification module.

I will cover each of the four main general public examination series in turn, starting with A levels. Students due to complete an A level this year will, in the absence of examinations, receive a calculated grade. The grade will be based on a combination of teacher professional judgement, which includes grading and rank ordering by schools, and proven statistical modelling. This statistical modelling will also include a value-added element to take account of the impact that resits would normally have had on final A-level outcomes — these are AS-level resits that have already taken place. Students will not be required to take A-level examinations through an additional sitting such as an autumn series. However, if they wish to sit examinations, there will be the opportunity to do so in the summer of 2021. Effectively, those examinations would be in the form of resits.

In Northern Ireland, AS qualifications are not only stand-alone qualifications but contribute to A-level qualifications when combined with what are known as the A2 exams. For this year, the AS level in 2020 will be decoupled from the A2 A level. Therefore, those due to complete an AS level will receive a calculated grade. However, this will not contribute towards the awarding of an A level in the summer of 2021. The AS grade in 2020 will be calculated using a combination of teacher professional judgement, involving grading and rank ordering by schools, and pupils' prior performance, including GCSE mean scores.

In summer 2021, students who continue on to the A2 will have two options. They can choose to sit only the relevant A2 papers in the summer of 2021. In that case, the A level will be awarded on the basis of those papers, with the AS component treated as a missing paper. The marks will be retrospectively calculated using recognised statistical modelling. The process is one normally used when a student is, for example, unable to sit a paper due to illness or other unforeseen circumstances, so this is something that has been used in the past.

Alternatively, a student may choose to sit both AS and A2 papers to achieve an overall A-level grade. In this case, the AS component will be calculated using statistical modelling, as in the first option. Very importantly, I want to make clear that the overall A-level grade will be awarded on the basis of the higher of the two marks for the AS component: the actual performance in the paper or the calculated mark.

Young people who are completing components for their GCSE qualification and are due to complete those qualifications in 2020 — generally speaking, year 12 pupils — will receive a calculated grade. This will be based on a combination of teacher professional judgement, including

grading and rank ordering by schools, and the average centre performance over the past three summer series.

Finally, in relation to GCSE units, which are otherwise known as modules, GCSEs in Northern Ireland are modular and so enable students to take exams for units making up the full qualification at different times over the two-year course of study. Some continue to take all units at the end of the second year, but many year 11 students were due to take a number of units this year.

For those students taking units that will not lead to the completion of the GCSE qualification this year, no grades will be issued or awarded this year. Those learners will participate in the summer 2021 series and, for each GCSE, they will have the following options. Those learners not entered for any modules in a given GCSE in summer 2020 should aim to sit, as originally planned, the elements of the relevant GCSE in the next academic year, which could include some units being taken in November, January or March as part of the normal 2020-21 examination series.

Those learners entered for part of a GCSE in 2020, but not due to complete the qualification, will have two options in the next academic year. They may choose to sit only the outstanding units of their qualification, with the remaining units being treated as missed papers and marks calculated on the basis of the units taken in 2021, again using recognised statistical modelling to arrive at an overall calculated grade. Alternatively, students may choose to sit all units of their GCSE qualifications in the normal 2020-21 examination timetable. Calculated marks for the units for which they were entered in summer 2020 will also be generated. Again, the higher mark achieved for those units, either the calculated mark or the actual performance, will be used to arrive at the overall GCSE grade.

I appreciate that this is all very complex and technical in nature — members may realise that I have taken quite a long time to absorb it all myself — but CCEA will be providing more detailed advice and guidance to schools, parents and young people as a matter of urgency and has also published answers to frequently asked questions on the CCEA website.

In all the discussion of these options, I was conscious to keep learners at the centre of any solution. I believe that the solution that I have outlined does just that. It provides flexible options where possible to ensure that learners, particularly those in years 11 and 13, are not overburdened. Nevertheless, they do have the option of sitting exams for all parts of their qualifications if they so choose.

As I said earlier, teachers are a crucial part of this process. We will be relying on them for the information needed to arrive at calculated grades. Schools have a wealth of information to evidence the achievements of their students, including demonstrating progress over the current academic year. I am confident that they will be able to work with CCEA to provide students with fair and robust results. Again, I want to thank every teacher for their support in this process.

What are the next steps that need to be taken? First, CCEA will be issuing detailed guidance to schools, parents and young people highlighting the arrangements that I have just outlined. That will include more detail on the information that schools will have to provide to begin the process of collating the relevant information at the end of

May. CCEA will provide advice and support for teachers as required.

CCEA is also developing an appeals mechanism that will be as robust as possible. While it will not be possible to review marking in the normal way, it is nonetheless important that young people are able to appeal if they feel that the process has not been applied appropriately in their case. CCEA will take into account the steps that Ofqual and Qualifications Wales are taking in developing an appeals mechanism. As with normal processes, there will also be an opportunity for students to take examinations in summer 2021 should they wish to.

There are a number of other issues that need to be finalised, and work is continuing apace. For example, I will be considering a number of matters relating to data collection, an issue that is likely to be handled at UK level to ensure consistency of approach. In any examination process, confidentiality is paramount in producing robust and reliable outcomes. This process requires teachers to maintain that confidentiality, and they cannot share examination assessments with parents or pupils in advance of submitting those assessments to CCEA. Parents and pupils should not ask for, nor expect to receive, this information. Teachers have a complex task ahead of them, and they must be offered the opportunity to assess pupil performance objectively and holistically.

Another issue on which work is ongoing is in relation to private candidates. Those are students who have not been taught in school; they might be home-schooled, following distance learning programmes, or studying independently. Where a school or a centre has accepted entries from private candidates — that would often be from adults doing GCSEs or A levels — those students should be included in the data provided by the school where the head of centre, generally the principal, is confident that they and their staff have seen sufficient evidence of the young person's achievement to make an objective judgement.

CCEA is exploring whether there are alternative options for the small number of students who do not have an existing relationship with a school. Being honest, it may not be possible to find an acceptable solution for every private candidate.

Finally, I am confident that results in England, Wales and Northern Ireland will issue on the original published dates. Therefore, AS and A-level results will issue on 13 August and GCSE results will issue on 20 August. It is important that the results issue in the three jurisdictions at the same time, so that no one is placed at an advantage or disadvantage.

The proposals that I have outlined should provide schools, teachers, young people and their families with the clarity that they have been calling for in relation to qualifications. I hope that that will also show that fairness is at the heart of the approach that I have adopted, and that our young people can be assured that the grades that they receive will reflect the work that they have put in over recent years.

Extraordinary circumstances have necessitated the introduction of new arrangements to replace these examinations, which have been used over many years, but I am confident that the measures that we have announced today will enable our young people to continue on their journey through life despite the disruption created by the COVID-19 outbreak.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): I thank the Minister for his statement. I now invite members to question the Minister on the content of his statement. I have 19 members listed who wish to ask a question, so it is important that the questions are focused and are directly related to the content of the Minister's statement. The one person who will get a bit of leeway on that in this debate is the Chairperson of the Committee for Education, Mr Chris Lyttle.

Mr Lyttle (Committee Chair - Committee for Education): Thank you Principal Deputy Speaker, and I too thank the teachers, parents and pupils of Northern Ireland for the positive way in which they are responding to the public health emergency. Their sacrifice and compliance with social isolation and social distancing is, literally, saving lives, and we ask them to keep going.

I thank the Minister for his work on this challenging matter. The Minister has decided that grades will be based on a combination of teacher judgement, rank order of schools, statistical modelling and a resit factor. What exactly is meant by the rank order of school?

The Minister also said that grading will reflect the work that pupils have put in over recent years. Obviously, that cannot reflect the work that pupils would have done in preparation for exams, so why has the option of rescheduling examinations been discounted on this occasion?

Mr Weir: I thank the member for his comments. The member may have picked me up slightly wrong on rank order; it is rank order within in a school. So, if you are ranking a certain number of pupils in a particular subject, they are ranked. There will also be within the statistical modelling a certain level of indication of what you may call centre assessment. While we are trying to use as many statistics as possible, if the principle driver is the teacher performance, there has got to be some degree of cognisance that, while there would be very detailed guidance and it is not simply a predicted grade that will be given by CCEA to schools, it is human nature that some schools may, shall we say, treat their particular cohort of pupils either very strictly or more generously than others. So, there has got to be some level of adjustment within that. Probably the biggest single influence in this will be the teacher assessment — the grade that they will predict and notionally award for their pupil may not necessarily be the end grade, so that is why that has to be put in place.

On the other issue that the member raised about broad — preparation —

Mr Lyttle: It was about rescheduling of exams.

Mr Weir: Yes, sorry, rescheduling. That is a matter that was looked at, and there were a couple of issues. There is, obviously, an appeals mechanism. On principle value, the issue of resits will have the most direct relevance to a university place. If we were having a full resit, it would have to be right across the board on everything available and that would introduce considerable additional cost and complexity to the system. Also, by the time that we were able to produce resits, it would be past the post for anybody who, for example, was applying to a university. So, there will be the opportunity for a resit, if anybody wants it, as part of the normal process in the summer of 2021, but there is very limited value to providing resits in the autumn.

Members will see the complexity of the arrangements that have had to be put in place. To some extent, the position in Northern Ireland, particularly around A levels, is that we have much more of a statistical database than in England because there is no progression in England, as part of the overall process, from AS level to A level. That means that we can use the AS-level information, which can then be used in statistical modelling, whereas, in England, they have to base the grades purely on teacher assessment. There is an argument that because we are producing a more complex and, indeed, more data-driven process, it necessitated resits. Effectively, however, there is a safety net on two grounds: the appeals process, which will look at whether the process has been applied correctly; and, ultimately, the summer exams in 2021.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive statement on this very important issue. I also thank him for his time and commitment, in the most difficult of circumstances, over the last number of weeks.

Minister, the issue is vitally important to the young people, their parents and their teachers, and I take this opportunity, on behalf of my party, to thank the principals, teachers and all others in the education family for all their hard work and the responsible attitude that they have adopted over the last number of weeks. How will the appeals be considered? Will this be done by the Department of Education or CCEA? As you set out in your statement, these issues are complicated and complex. How, therefore, will the information be communicated to the learners, their families and teachers?

Mr Weir: Communication will be through CCEA whenever the detailed guidance is there. The initial stage of what has been announced today is being shared by CCEA directly to schools, more or less as we speak.

The appeals process will be organised by CCEA to ensure that we have a robust system to check the process rather than individual marking. That process will be agreed, largely speaking, to try to be aligned, as much as possible, with England and Wales so that we have a comprehensive system. It is important that there is comparability and portability, but also that our students, by way of an appeals process, are not disadvantaged in any way. Therefore, there has to be an appeals mechanism that mirrors what is in place elsewhere. If we had, for example, a more generous appeals system than in other jurisdictions, when universities are awarding places, they might assume that a grade was achieved only because of the particular appeals process. That is why the ongoing work to drill down into the detail of the appeals process will not just involve CCEA, but CCEA working closely with the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual), which is the overall examinations and qualification board for the United Kingdom.

Ms Mullan: I thank the Minister for his statement and for providing clarity on the summer examination arrangements. I would also like to thank the teachers and the unions that have supported the Minister in this work.

Minister, you will be aware of the issue around the levels of attainment of working-class boys and some others. That group of students would not have had access to the level of extra tuition that some of their peers would have had throughout the year. Has consideration been given to how we can reduce the extent to which these students may be

disadvantaged with regards to results and the admissions process?

Mr Weir: That is why it is vital in terms of attainment levels. The member will note that in each of the areas where grades are going to be awarded — be it A level, AS level or GCSE — although we have statistical data that will help to refine that, a lot of it will be based on teacher judgement and teacher indication. They will know, for want of a better word, where a student has got ability but has not been given the same advantages. There is an opportunity, if you like, to trust the individual assessment of teachers to be able to provide that. That should provide balance in producing the end results.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for his statement and answers so far. I pay tribute to teachers, principals, pupils, parents and all who are involved in education, who have had to reconstitute their roles completely in an entirely different education environment.

Earlier today, I spoke to the principal of a major school in Armagh. The city has been a centre of education for many centuries. He expressed concern about the impact of your proposals on those from certain socioeconomic backgrounds who may not have access to IT, computers or even broadband, and how they may be disadvantaged by that particular solution. I recognise that we are in uncharted territory. However, does the solution mean that some children from certain socioeconomic backgrounds will be disadvantaged?

Can you also clarify what you mean by “recognised statistical modelling”? Thank you very much, Minister.

Mr Weir: I will deal with the latter point about the statistical model. It is a technical device that is known as z-scores. That is the modelling that is used, and is, effectively, writ large, when, every year, a certain number of pupils, for reasons outside their control, are not actually able to participate in an examination. That might be due to illness or because, for example, on the eve of the exam, there is a family bereavement and they are unable to do it. Every year, through CCEA, there is a cohort of pupils at various levels who have missed a component of their exams. Analysis of past performance enables that to be calculated out and to, effectively, replace the missing element of it.

I live in Bangor, which could compete with Armagh for the title of “land of saints and scholars”, such is the background of those two great places. As the member mentioned — it comes back to the point that I made earlier to Karen Mullan — to some extent, the driver at the heart of it will be adjustments that can be made from the statistics, but teachers’ assessments will be absolutely critical to all elements of it. Teachers are in a good position to be able to evaluate on the basis of trying to take into account children’s socioeconomic backgrounds and attainment levels. Obviously, at the moment, one concern is the extent to which some pupils have been denied the same opportunities as others in the past few weeks. Statistics are based, largely, on historic information and what has happened until now. Therefore, to some extent, the problems of the past few weeks will not actually be to anybody’s detriment. Indeed, while we all want to see as much of a return to normal as possible, there may be an argument that, with regard to coaching, which is, quite often, for the purposes of an examination, the current

situation could create a more level playing field than would actually happen through examinations.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for his statement. Will the teachers’ assessments cover a specific period, or will that be left up to teachers? If it is left up to teachers, how can the Minister ensure that there is a level playing field right across the country?

Mr Weir: There will be detailed guidance. In many ways, the teachers will have to take a holistic view. Obviously, there will be elements, particularly with regard to A levels, where there is data that can be used very specifically. Therefore, the level of data will be the driver on each element of that. CCEA will issue detailed guidance to schools on how they are to collect, format and use data, and make those assessments. No school should be in the dark about the actions that it needs to take.

Ms C Kelly: Minister, thank you for your statement. The unprecedented times that we are in mean that we have had to make decisions and policy changes very quickly and without the level of consultation that we usually insist on. Did any international examples of best practice in the provision of exams inform your approach?

Mr Weir: CCEA has, I think, examined all the evidence. Part of the problem that we all face in a range of areas is that, as she rightly mentioned, policy issues that normally make months — indeed, they would be mulled over for years and deeply consulted on — are having to be made in weeks, days or, sometimes, even in hours. On consultation, we tried to go to, for instance, the main teaching unions in particular. We had lengthy sessions with them, and with a range of other educational stakeholders, such as the Education Authority, CCMS and the ETI, to highlight, effectively, what was being proposed and to make adjustments. To be fair, although some responses expressed concerns that little adjustments were needed, nobody felt that the direction of travel was wrong.

On consultation, I should say, for balance, that one criticism was that principals in England were able to announce their approach a week or two ago. We took a little longer because we wanted to make sure, as far as possible, that we had something that was fit for purpose and that we could bring people along. The A-level situation in England, because the AS level is entirely decoupled, was that the data-driven option was not there. Therefore, England was left with one option. It is very easy to make a decision when you have only one choice that can be made.

I should also say, as my statement mentions briefly, that, in arriving at this position, a range of options was developed and was available for each of the four cohorts. All were assessed against the key criteria. The option that produced the best possible outcome overall when judged against those criteria was selected. This has all been very carefully thought through, and the advice of others has been fully taken into account.

Mr K Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his statement. My question relates to A2 students who are finishing this year. Will there be any disadvantage to students from Northern Ireland who apply to universities in other parts of the United Kingdom?

Mr Weir: No. Universities have accepted and recognise the methodologies being used. There are particular Northern Ireland nuances, but we are probably in a

position that is very akin to that of Wales, and our approach is very similar. England is slightly different, but we do not envisage any disadvantage to anybody seeking a university place. I was pressing on this, as was the Welsh Government in particular, to try to ensure that, in as regulated a way as possible, all results will come out at the same time. That is also important. Only today, I think, has full agreement been reached that there will be a situation in which A-level results will come out on 13 August. Similarly, that agreement will apply to other results. That means that, when it comes to competing for university places, everyone should, as far as possible, be on a level playing field.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for his statement. I echo his heartfelt comments to the families recently bereaved through the pandemic.

Minister, your statement refers to this being pupil-focused, as you said repeatedly at the Education Committee, and I thank you for that. You said that there was a consultative process with the teaching unions. I was looking at the potential difficulties arising from this process. One that often raises its head is the pressure that is put on teachers. Teachers will now have predicted grades thrust upon them. Did the teaching unions raise any concerns about the pressures that teachers will find themselves facing?

Mr Weir: Meetings were held with different groups across the board, including the teacher unions. General issues and concerns and nuances were raised, and we have tried to build those in. I do not think that there was any particular disagreement with the general direction of travel and route that we have taken. One of the concerns will be to try to protect teachers both in terms of their workload — inevitably, this will involve a certain amount of additional work — and, as we have indicated, by ensuring that confidentiality is built into the grades that teachers give at least up to that point; indeed, there is provision for that under the regulations. Data protection is an issue that is being looked at on a UK-wide basis, because, again, we want to make sure that this is as robust a process as possible and one that does not sustain any form of malpractice or outside pressure.

Ms Anderson: I thank the Minister for his statement. I also express our condolences to all those who have died in hospital or care settings from the deadly COVID-19 virus.

Minister, I listened intently to what you said about the students of 2020 not being disadvantaged and having to move on with their lives. You then answered some colleagues' questions on universities. There will be more demand from students on our local universities because of everything that has happened. I would like to ask you about the collaborative work that is going on. You mentioned the Minister for the Economy. It will be crucial that you work together so that those students are not disadvantaged. You will not be surprised that Karen Mullan and I have focused primarily on Magee. We are looking at the medical school, and, God knows, we need it now more than ever. We have an excellent facility there for nursing students. For the students of 2020 whom you spoke about, it would be good to get an understanding of the work that is going on between the two Ministers to make sure that they are not discriminated against or disadvantaged.

Mr Weir: There is close cooperation. Obviously, Economy has the lead on university places and will do the more detailed work on that. It will also have to be done on a cross-jurisdictional basis. I appreciate that there are particular issues with Magee, and work has been done on that between the Economy Minister and the Health Minister. The fact is that all 2020 students are in a similar position. I mentioned one of the criteria being limiting the impact: part of that is about ensuring that the knock-on impact on 2020 students is kept to a minimum in respect of not just university places — for the most part, those competing for university places in the autumn of 2020 will be from the same cohort — but the jobs market in the years ahead. Somebody who left school in 2020 must not be seen as the poor relation. That is why we wanted to ensure that what was there was as robust as possible and did not lead to people having to play some level of catch-up. Inevitably, it is difficult to take any action without there being some forward impact, and that will be the case for many aspects of this. Fairness is probably the overriding impact issue. With those four criteria, we try to protect the 2020 cohort as much as possible.

Mr O'Toole: Thank you to the Minister for giving us an update. I echo his words on teachers, who have been very flexible and shown real leadership during the crisis.

Further to some of the previous questions, I want to ask him about conversations that his Department has had with UCAS on unconditional offers. Others have asked about that, and I know that university and HE policy sits with the Department for the Economy, but, clearly, this needs a joined-up approach. I understand that UCAS has extended the moratorium on unconditional offers. How has his Department engaged with UCAS in managing that process? How will that be communicated in a joined-up way to students who will be looking at this and thinking, "What does this mean for me in terms of how I interact with UCAS?"

Mr Weir: The principal point of contact with UCAS is through my colleague at the Department for the Economy. What is important and where UCAS have a critical role to play is that we do not want to see the universities have a competitive race against each other with a danger of a race to the bottom in wanting to suck in as many students as they can.

One area where there is a worry across the board in universities is that they will have difficulty in filling spaces in 2020, both because one of the impacts may be a damaging of the international market and because there may be a general perception across the world, in the UK and in the Republic that maybe it is best to hold off for a year, so that there will be higher proportion of students wanting to defer. Therefore, there is a degree of danger that universities try to act unilaterally, and UCAS is the key body that is trying to hold those together.

There is a wider conversation to be held about what support can be there for universities. As I said, if they feel that, economically, they could be in great difficulties next year, in the wider context that is something that is done not just on a Northern Ireland-wide basis but on a cross-jurisdictional basis.

Mr Nesbitt: I want to return to the idea that teachers will play a key role in the alternative form of assessment. The Minister said:

“This is, I believe, the right approach to take. Who knows better the aptitudes, abilities and educational achievements of these young people?”

When that regime was proposed as an alternative to an 11-plus style exam in choosing pupils post-primary school, teachers were dead set against that proposal. Are teachers entirely comfortable with this? Does it set a precedent of some sort?

Mr Weir: It is normally John O’Dowd who raises the 11-plus. I do not know whether the Member for Strangford is acting as a proxy on that.

I do not think that it sets a precedent for anything. It is undoubtedly the case that there has been consultation and work with the teacher unions. I think that all of us would accept that not only is this not the perfect solution, it is not something that would be put in place in normal times. However, it is clear that the principal driver, in terms of that level of knowledge, are teachers. This is a bespoke solution that is trying to deal with the overwhelmingly different circumstances that we face following the coronavirus. Therefore, I do not think it is right and would not like to see read-across into other situations. It is about trying to provide the best possible solutions in incredibly difficult circumstances.

At some stage, I am sure, the House will have debates during this term about what is done about post-primary transfer. We may all take our different positions on that. This is principally focused on students from years 11 to 14 and the particular solutions that are required in what, we hope, is a unique year. We hope that this will not have to be revisited next year or the year after. We hope that we are into brighter times by that stage.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome his attendance here.

Minister, you touched on England and Wales in your statement and your comments since: is the model that you have outlined today consistent in approach to the model that has been adopted in others places in the UK?

Mr Weir: Scotland is in a slightly different position because they have Highers and students are at different ages when they reach that point. Effectively, their university students start more or less a year earlier.

There has been close work by CCEA with Ofqual. We are in a different position in Northern Ireland, particularly as regards our A levels and the data that can be produced. The major contrast is the connection between AS results and A levels, whereas, in England, there is no relationship between the two. To that extent, it is about getting something that is fit for purpose for Northern Ireland but trying to get as much compatibility as possible. From that point of view, England is in a slightly different position from the rest of the UK. Northern Ireland and Wales have adopted a similar approach and there are similar positions between those jurisdictions, but all three are largely compatible, at least, with each other, and there is portability of exam results with those organisations. It should also be indicated that, as I mentioned, there will be a minority of students whose grades will come through boards that are based in England or Wales. That will be governed by the regulations that are there.

Mr Boylan: I also thank the Minister for his statement. I just want to go back to the appeal process and the fact that, obviously, we could see a high volume of appeals. Is there independent oversight? What would that look like? Can you define exactly what the process is now, typically and normally, against what will come from this?

Mr Weir: There will be more work to be done on the appeal process because we want to make sure that the process is compatible with what happens elsewhere. As I said, it is about ensuring that our students are not put at a disadvantage by having something radically different from what happens elsewhere. If we had a more generous position on appeals, that could count against our pupils because it might be regarded that they had, if you like, an easier route. That will be something that does not entirely stand alone in Northern Ireland; there will have to be continuing work by CCEA with Ofqual to develop that for the autumn. It will be largely based on process issues rather than someone simply saying, “I should really have got a better grade. I have much greater ability than that”, partly because the appeals process is likely to report for individuals in the autumn period. There is not a particularly great advantage to that individual in getting a change at that point, because the key point of entry will be for the following year for entry to university and students will also have an opportunity to take those examinations again.

Clearly, it will want to identify if there has been a flaw in the process, if there has been, for example, some problem in the data going from the school to CCEA or there has been some fundamental mistake made in that. The grounds for those appeals will likely be relatively narrow, but, as I said, we have the second safety net of students being able to do a resit. Particularly for years 11 and 13, there is a retrospective fitting from next year’s exams and the routes which they go down; if they go down both routes, the higher of those results will apply to them.

Ms Armstrong: I declare an interest as the mother of a year 13 pupil. Minister, a number of students will be very happy with you today; some will not be so happy. I know that, in my day, when you did mocks they usually marked them hard. There is no way that I would have got the grades that I got in the end if that had not scared the life out of me.

I will get to my question. Minister, CCEA obviously provided you with options, and you have taken the decision that you have taken. Can you outline what those options were and whether they were equality impact-assessed? On the basis of an equality impact assessment, normally, at this time of the year, teachers are preparing pupils for post-primary transfer. Will you take forward legislation to cancel that exam in the autumn? The GCSE, A2 and AS have been cancelled now. Let us have fairness for those P7 pupils.

Mr Weir: I will respond to a couple of points that have been raised.

With regard to options, obviously, there are bespoke solutions to each of the four bits. There was a range of options for each of those. For example, some could have involved almost purely statistical data, and some would have involved looking purely at the teacher bit. From memory, I think that, in each of the four areas, there was a minimum of three options provided. Each of those was then assessed against the four criteria of fairness,

reducing the burden on the overall system, limiting the impact on a future position and providing certainty. Effectively, there was a form of scoring mechanism and almost a sort of traffic light system for whether it was “Good”, “Fair” or “Poor”. The option in each case that came forward was then the recommendation from CCEA. I also had the full scoring mechanism of each of those, so I was able to go through each of those myself. In each case, I agreed with the preferred option that came from CCEA because, ultimately, it seemed to score best.

I do not intend to bring forward legislation on the post-primary transfer test. There are many things on which the House will agree and many on which it will not. I think that the post-primary transfer test might be the holy grail when it comes to seeking agreement, even with the best will in the world. As I am sure that the member is acutely aware, the post-primary examinations, which pupils can take or not, are offered by two private organisations, the Post Primary Transfer Consortium (PPTC) and the Association for Quality Education (AQE). From that point of view, the Department and I have no control over them. The extent to which I could prevent a private organisation doing a particular thing would be questionable anyway. Part of that would be based on an assessment of the timescale. The exams are normally scheduled for November. It is up to those organisations whether they would happen on the same timescale.

Part of the issue is the immediacy; the fact that students would have been going into exams in May and June. If, for example, we had had a situation in which the academic year followed the calendar year, I suspect that the decisions that are being made would not necessarily have happened on the same timescale and may not have happened at all, because there would have been time, if you like, for things to correct themselves. On 19 March, the decision was issued that there would not be examinations. It was important that, as soon as was practicable, arrangements were put in place. In particular, I felt that it was important that we did not have that uncertainty. If, for example, we had carried on hoping that exams would take place, and then, effectively, for want of a better term, pulled the rug from under people’s feet at the end of April and said that, given the circumstances, they could not actually take place, that would have been wrong as well. At this stage, I do not see any particular correlation between that and the post-primary transfer test.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his statement. The statement and discussion have been on academic qualifications and achievement. We have to recognise that it is an extremely stressful time for many young students. There is a lot of anxiety and confusion, and, I know — I have my own son — a lot of regret as well. There is also new pressure on teachers. It is a challenging time for them. They are still dealing with the new challenge of remote learning. Now, they will have that huge responsibility put on them to virtually dictate the future choices of their students or pupils. Has the Department or the Education Authority considered what additional support can be given to those whose mental well-being has taken a bit of a battering at this time, and how that support can be accessed?

Mr Weir: I am very cognisant of the issue of mental well-being. As part of that, we are looking at what additional support can be provided in general; particularly for young people but also for teachers. Sometimes, the focus, very

understandably, is on young people and we almost ignore the well-being of teachers. Moving forward, we need to look at what support can be provided next year against all the uncertainty that there is with regard to budgetary constraints.

Undoubtedly, in the current situation, we are looking at academic results. We have been able to bring in elements of data that can assist. If specific support is needed, as CCEA develops the process and works through it with schools, it will be given. In many cases, it is about actually using what is there at present. It will not be about finding any additional material but collating what is there. While that will create additional pressure on the teaching workforce, which I acknowledge entirely, it is not a unique situation. We are seeing it in other jurisdictions, where, perhaps, they do not have the data and can only, if you like, fall back on teachers’ assessments. From that point of view, I appreciate that it is a very tough time for everybody.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for his statement and for his attempts to resolve this conundrum: the difficulty that the educational establishment faces as a result of the imposition of social-distancing requirements to protect our young people and, indeed, the entire community.

Minister, you highlighted on a number of occasions today that teachers will play a vital role in this assessment. Can you advise when CCEA will give them detailed guidance so that they know what exactly is expected of them and when they will need to start to carry out their work to ensure that this vital work is done in an efficient manner?

Mr Weir: I am not saying that there will not be different layers of this at various times, but my understanding is that detailed guidance from CCEA to schools, which also relates to teachers, is going out today. I felt that it was important that, when a statement was being made in connection to this, everything had been brought into line so that it was not a question of my simply saying this in the Assembly. I appreciate that it is undoubtedly the case that my direct accountability is to the Assembly. Therefore, the Assembly had to hear this first. However, I also wanted to ensure that there was no gap between what I was saying and what CCEA was doing, so those two things have been aligned. As part of the detailed guidance, we will give a window of opportunity in which schools need to get information to CCEA. The detailed format of that will also be made clear to schools.

Miss Woods: Will the results that students receive, as outlined by the Minister, be capped in any way by the proportion of grades awarded to a school’s students in previous years?

Mr Weir: Are they capped?

Miss Woods: Will the grades that were given to a school’s cohort in the previous year create a cap? Does that mean that a school’s grades cannot go up or down at all?

Mr Weir: I am not sure that there will be a specific cap, as such. What will be taken into account is the statistical modelling of a centre’s performance. That has more to do with the fact that, as I said, although very clear guidance and instructions as to how this is to be done will be given to schools, we are talking, ultimately, about people making individual assessments. I am sure that anyone who has been on a panel and scored someone as part of an interview process will have found that, although the rankings created were similar, some people were more

generous in their assessment than others. Therefore, this modelling takes account of that. CCEA will develop quite a sophisticated statistical model. Ultimately, what is important is that there is comparability across the whole system so that no student is advantaged or disadvantaged. That is not simply within Northern Ireland; it applies to all who are, for instance, competing for university places.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for his statement. I join others in offering my condolences to the families of everybody who has died so far. During this meeting, I heard that today's death toll is the highest. I offer my sympathies to everybody.

My understanding, from what the Minister said, is that AS-level students will get a predicted grade that will not count towards their final A-level grade. Is that accurate? Can I get some clarity on that? Is the Minister confident that teachers will be protected from any accusations of unfairness or bias that might arise from this process? Is he confident that mechanisms are in place to seriously mitigate, if not stop, such accusations?

Mr Weir: I will pick up on the latter point. There are two aspects to that. There is a particular provision — a legal determination — to ensure that teachers' confidentiality is protected in the grading system. There are derogations that can and will be put in place. Across the UK, the wider context that will have to be considered is the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and freedom of information, because that is UK-wide legislation. That is being looked at across the jurisdictions. It is critical for teachers that their judgement is protected and that there are no potential repercussions. Teachers are a key component in being able to put this in place, but the position is not theirs alone.

Will the member remind me of his first question?

Mr Carroll: AS-level students.

Mr Weir: The position is that there is effectively a form of decoupling for one year. It will stand alone and, therefore, somebody could simply leave with an AS level if they want. There is not that direct linkage for every student anyway but there is for the vast bulk of students in Northern Ireland, and that is where we differ. The point is that, if someone is carrying on to their A2 level, the AS level can then be effectively retrofitted, for want of a better word. There is the opportunity either to sit those particular parts of it in 2021 or have a retrospective side of things. However, it does not become an automatic component that will lead simply to an A level.

This process has actually shown the advantage of the linkage between the AS- and A-level grades that Northern Ireland and Wales have operated. That linkage has enabled data to be put in place that is helpful. It has given us options that have not been available in England. However, realistically, this year, we are left with no other choice than to do that decoupling on the award of the AS level.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Thank you, Minister. I am mindful of the fact that we have about 17 minutes left.

Mr Weir: Do not tell me you are going to sing a song.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): No. As was the case in the previous session, if any member who has a pressing question that they wish to ask the Minister rises in their place, I will call them.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you very much, Minister; hopefully this is not too difficult. I asked about the 11-plus earlier. The reason why I brought it up is because I am very aware that we have key workers in society who are not at home with their children and are not able to hothouse them in the way that some others who have been furloughed or are working from have been. My concern is that, while there are children who are being prepared for the 11-plus test later in the year, our key workers — the very people who are keeping us alive, protecting our society and delivering essential services — are at work at the moment and not at home with their children. That is why I am asking for consideration in the 2020 cohort for next year's P7s. We need to consider the children of those essential workers.

Mr Weir: I understand that. Obviously, the tests are external to government and the Department of Education. I am sure that AQE and PPTC will give that detailed consideration. I appreciate that this is not an area where there is consensus, but there is a strong desire among quite a lot of people to retain academic selection. Schools will have to make a choice come the summer of 2021. Something that has perhaps not been touched on as yet is that there is likely to be some difficulty or disruption in placements into post-primary schools this year. We want to minimise the time frame in relation to that.

Ultimately, AQE and PPTC have ownership of those tests. I do not believe that it is my place to try to abolish those tests or create some one-year difference in them. Unfortunately, in life — education reflects this — there will always be an advantage for those who have financial resources and are able to throw that the way of additional tutoring or whatever. One of the decisions that I made in a previous incarnation was to remove any particular memo or restriction on schools being able to prepare their own pupils, because that undoubtedly created a less of a level playing field. We will not be in a perfect position on this issue, but I do not intend to bring legislation to abolish academic selection, even on a temporary basis.

Mr Lyttle: The Minister cited cost complexity and the university application process deadlines as reasons for discounting a rescheduling of exams to, for example, August. Can the Minister go into a bit more detail as to why those issues could not be overcome?

Mr Weir: On rescheduling — sorry. I am talking about resits in the autumn. England is in a slightly different position from us because they are having to rely purely on teacher assessment with no data. It likely that England will have some form of resits in the autumn. The point that I am making around that is that if universities, for instance, are making their admissions around about the same time, it could have an impact on autumn resits on a cohort entering in 2021. However, there will be the opportunity for pupils to take an examination again prior to the entries for 2021.

The issue is that because our data and our process, essentially, are more robust than elsewhere, we would have had to be able to provide resits for every pupil in every subject, driven by CCEA and others, which would have a cost element. Also, because students will have the opportunity to sit the exams in the summer of 2021, it would be a cost for something that would be of negligible benefit to pupils. That is on the basis of strong advice from CCEA and from discussing that with others.

I appreciate that some members have raised the issue of consultation. There has been, in contact from young people, no appetite for autumn resits or a postponement of exams to the autumn. It is an issue of the practical difficulties and the costs. Depending on how things go, because nobody can know the passage of the virus over the next period, we might find ourselves in a situation in the autumn, having set up exams in September or October time, with a second wave of the virus, meaning that we then have to have to come up with a further set of exams.

All these things can be kept under review, but I am not convinced of the merits of a separate resit in the autumn. I do not think that it would particularly benefit people but it would add cost and complexity to the situation.

Mr O'Toole: My question follows on from the Minister's remarks. While Ministers in the Executive have said in the past day or two, and I agree with them, that it is premature to start talking about when restrictions are lifted, it is also the case that, as he just mentioned, although we all hope and pray that the restrictions will be eased at some point, and sooner rather than later, there could be a second wave. Is his Department thinking about and planning how social distancing will be implemented inside schools and classrooms? It is unlikely that schools will return before the end of the academic year — the Minister has been clear about that, and I think that that is probably the right way to go — but, with his officials and the unions, is he thinking about how social-distancing measures can be implemented come September?

Mr Weir: That goes wider than the examination issue, but, as we move ahead, we will be looking to scope out how business can reopen in that broader sense. One of the issues that make that uncertain is — this is the view of those who have a much higher level of expertise than I have — that it may not necessarily be a linear move to a greater level of normality. It might involve some things that are geographically specific. It might mean that, to some extent, although restrictions will need to be kept tight in some areas of life, they might ease in other areas. It might also be the case, to some extent, that to be able to manage that in the best possible way, the tap will almost need to be turned on and off at various stages. All those things must be taken into account, and I will work with Executive colleagues, driven by health considerations in particular, to see how best they can be.

Thinking is ongoing, but I do not think that anybody wants to send out the signal that this is the time for a particular shift in opinion. As we have seen, and as the Executive have indicated, at a minimum, the lockdown will be in place for the next three weeks. I suspect that all of us anticipate that it will probably continue for a longer period. We are living in a very fluid situation where things can go, at times, in different directions. We have to be able to remain cognisant so that we can scope ahead and scenario plan to work out the best options at particular times.

Mr McNulty: I put on record my sincere condolences to the 18 families who have today lost loved ones to COVID-19.

Minister, you have put forward bold proposals around examinations. I know that it is uncharted territory and that there are no simple solutions. Maybe a more pressing matter is the issue of vulnerable and at-risk children. I have raised it on numerous occasions over the last number

of weeks. What liaison has your Department had with Barnardo's, Childline or other statutory agencies to try to ensure that every child is safe in their own home?

Mr Weir: I appreciate that it may be straying a little outside the remit of the statement to deal specifically with that, but the member will be aware that there is ongoing work. As part of that, we are working, particularly with Health, to get full and detailed guidance. We are also working with outside agencies. As I have indicated, I have written directly to schools to encourage them to reach out to vulnerable children. This is not just a local problem; it occurs [*Inaudible.*] I hope to be able to raise it to see where there is best practice. The next four nations summit on education will be next Wednesday. We will have an interesting conversation about what is happening with regard to vulnerable children in other jurisdictions, so that we can all learn as best we can from each other's experiences.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): No other members have indicated that they wish to ask a question. I thank the Minister for his statement and answers. Given the amount of concern that there was in the public about the matter, it is to the Minister's credit that he came to the House to make the statement rather than issuing a press release at 9.00 this morning that would have dominated the news headlines. He showed the House the courtesy to which it is entitled. I thank him for that.

Mr Weir: Are you saying that I could have dominated the news headlines?

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Uh-huh. As long as it is for the right reasons and not the wrong ones.

Agenda item 4 is the date, time and place of our next meeting. We have yet to receive confirmation from the Executive about when Ministers will next come to make a statement to the Ad Hoc Committee. As soon as that confirmation has been received, written notification of the time, date and place of the next meeting will be issued to members in the usual way. However, I remind members that a plenary session of the Assembly is scheduled to take place on 21 April and that Ministers may continue to make oral statements to the Assembly on sitting days.

That concludes the meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee. The meeting is adjourned. Stay safe, and God bless.

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

Budget 2020-21: UK Funding Available

Published at 12:30 pm on Monday 16 March 2020.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): The purpose of this Statement is to inform the Assembly of the UK funding made available for Budget 2020-21 as notified by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on 14 March 2020.

In line with my legal obligation under Section 64 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 I am required to lay before the Assembly a Statement detailing the amount UK funding provided for 2020-21 at least 14 days before laying a draft Budget for the financial year.

Our routine DEL allocations, taking account of the additional funding from recent Chancellor's Budget, are set out in the table below

£million	2020-21
Resource DEL	11,180.1
Ring Fenced Resource DEL	665.0
Capital DEL	1,480.6
Financial Transactions Capital	194.6

In addition, the Secretary of State has confirmed the following funding will be available under the Fresh Start Agreement

£million	2020-21
Shared and integrated education	120.7
Fraud and error	25.0
Tackling paramilitary activity	9.3
Shared future	12.0

The availability of funding for New Decade, New Approach was confirmed by the Secretary of State as an additional £523 million for 2020-21. This comprises £483 million of resource funding and £40 million of capital.

We have not yet received any certainty on the provision of the remaining funding due under the Confidence and Supply Agreement.

The Secretary of State has also confirmed that £293 million will be made available for Farm Support Direct Payments for 2020. £278.6 million of this can be incorporated into the Executive's 2020-21 Budget immediately.

Exceptionally, the Secretary of State has advised that we can proceed on the basis that we will receive £120 million of resource funding in relation to the Covid-19 response.

This brings the total UK funding available to

£million	2020-21
Resource DEL	12,108.0
Ring Fenced Resource DEL	665.0
Capital DEL	1,641.3
Financial Transactions Capital	194.6

It is my intention to lay a draft Budget for 2020-21 in the Assembly on the 30th of March. At this stage, as required by legislation, I will demonstrate that the amount of UK funding required by the draft Budget does not exceed the amount notified by the Secretary of State as set out in this statement.

Department of Finance

Transparency, Accountability and the Functioning of the Executive

Published on Monday 16 March 2020.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): The Executive is committed to greater transparency and improved governance arrangements, aimed at restoring and maintaining public confidence. This is set out in the New Decade, New Approach document.

We have taken a number of steps in recent days that we believe will make a real difference. These are issues which engage the whole Executive, and I am making this statement on behalf of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and I.

RHI Inquiry Response

The Executive has agreed the establishment of a dedicated sub-committee which will consider the findings of the RHI Inquiry and propose further reforms, in addition to those in the Agreement, to deliver the changes necessary to rebuild public confidence.

The Executive sub-committee will consider the RHI Inquiry Report and its recommendations in light of work already completed and relevant reforms set out in the Agreement. It will then recommend to the Executive any further work to be commissioned to rebuild public confidence, in addition to that already identified in the Agreement.

I shall chair the sub-committee, which will include the Ministers for the Economy, Health, Justice, Infrastructure and the Junior Ministers in the Executive Office.

The sub-committee will publish an action plan for implementation of recommendations flowing out of the RHI Inquiry report. I will keep the Assembly updated regularly.

Ministerial Standards

We have strengthened the codes that set standards of behaviour for Ministers. A new Code of Conduct for Special Advisers was introduced on 20 January, and my Executive colleagues and I have now agreed a revised Code of Conduct for Ministers, supplemented by new Guidance for Ministers in the exercise of their official functions.

The guiding principle behind these new Codes is that the highest standards should be expected and upheld by those in public office in order to ensure public confidence in government.

There should be increased openness about the mechanics of government. And there must be no conflict between public roles and private interests.

The revised versions of the Ministerial Code of Conduct and Guidance for Ministers are to be read in conjunction with each other. The Code of Conduct sets out high-level principles, and the Guidance expands upon those principles to inform their practical outworking.

Together they set out in greater detail the accountability of Ministers to the Assembly and the need for Assembly

committees to be provided with the information they require to discharge their role;

- they strengthen the requirements for the declaration of interests by Ministers and require the avoidance of conflicts of interest;
- they set out that Ministers are responsible for the management, conduct and discipline of their special advisers;
- they make clear the need to record ministerial meetings and decisions;
- they require the regular publication of declarations of relevant interests; details of meetings with external organisations; and gifts and hospitality received.

In order to ensure that the Ministerial Code of Conduct and the Guidance for Ministers are effective in guiding ministerial behaviour, a new mechanism for the **Enforcement of Ministerial Standards** is to be introduced.

Alleged breaches of the Ministerial Code, the Guidance for Ministers, or Conduct of Executive Business will be referred to a Panel for Ministerial Standards, one of whose members will be the Assembly Commissioner for Standards.

The Panel members will investigate and publish findings in respect of alleged breaches. They will complete their investigations quickly; within a recommended 15 working days of their receipt of a complaint. Their findings will include whether or not the Minister has been found to have breached the terms of the ministerial standards documents, and may make a judgement as to the relative seriousness of the breach.

The Panel will publish their findings and report to the Assembly and the Executive. In this way the published report of the Panel will provide the grounds upon which sanctions can be imposed by the Assembly or the nominating officer of the Minister's party.

We will start this appointment process within days.

The role of Assembly Private Secretaries has also been reviewed in light of this body of work, to ensure there is clarity around their role. This is reflected in a revised Protocol which sets out the obligations upon Ministers in respect of Assembly Private Secretaries.

The Executive has agreed to immediately adopt for ourselves the standards set out in the Ministerial Code of Conduct, pending the legislative process for the formal implementation of the revisions.

Civil Service Ethics

We will also be bringing forward proposed changes to the **NICS Code of Ethics** to ensure that the role of civil servants is explicitly clear, and that the values to which civil servants are committed are fully set out. The Code of Ethics applies to Special Advisers, except – as before – the requirements of impartiality and objectivity.

The Code has been revised to emphasise the responsibility of the Civil Service to serve the Executive as a whole.

It refers to the necessity of working collaboratively, keeping accurate official records, and handling information as transparently as possible and it refers to the development of a more comprehensive policy for addressing staff and public concerns going beyond the existing whistleblowing

policy, including reference to how a civil servant might raise concerns about a Minister or special adviser.

The NICS Code of Ethics is made by the Department of Finance, and the Department will be consulting with the civil service trade unions and the Civil Service Commission prior to issuing the new Code.

Special Adviser Codes of Conduct and Appointment

Members will recall that the Executive has also revised the Codes of Conduct and Appointment for Special Advisers. Together this new suite of documents can provide the basis on which the accountability and transparency of the Executive and its institutions can be improved.

Department of Justice

Response to Coronavirus

Published on Monday 16 March 2020.

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): I would like to explain to Members the arrangements that are being made within the Department of Justice to continue to deliver essential public services in the face of the challenges presented by Covid-19, and in particular the steps being taken in the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service and in the Northern Ireland Prison Service.

Contingency planning

At the outset I would like to reassure members that the wider justice family is working together to mitigate any risks and ensure the continued delivery of justice in Northern Ireland; not least on important matters pertaining to public safety and personal liberty.

Significant work has been undertaken across the Department's business areas, agencies and NDPBs, and contingency plans are in place, which will enable us to have the resilience to continue operating in the event of increased staff absence.

We have identified the highest priority public services that need to be maintained and will, if necessary, make resources available to maintain those services.

Alongside that we are taking proportionate steps, in line with PHA guidance, to safeguard staff wellbeing and have offered advice to consider the need for face-to-face meetings, reduce non-essential visits and take account of social distancing guidance.

Officials from the Department will later this week update the Justice Committee in more detail on the work that has been done to understand the risks across the Justice System, the Department, its Agencies, and other bodies, to ensure our readiness for the impact of Coronavirus.

Specific Risks

In Justice terms, one of the most significant risks relates to the Prison Service.

- The Prison Service take the threat presented by COVID19 extremely seriously and have undertaken significant work in preparation for the challenges an outbreak would bring.
- The Director General has put in place specific contingency planning structures and established a dedicated team to oversee planning arrangements and to support Governors.
- Preparations have included the purchase of additional protective clothing for staff and the preparation of areas within each prison where prisoners suspected and/or diagnosed with the virus can be accommodated.
- Both the Prison Service and their partners in the South Eastern Trust have been following guidance issued by the Public Health Agency which has also been provided to staff and prisoners.
- Notwithstanding the disruption and challenges ahead, which have the potential to impact the prison regime,

mitigations are being planned to support staff and ensure that keeping safe those in our care remains our primary focus.

- While there has not to date been a confirmed coronavirus case in any of our prisons, the latest position is that on Saturday 14th March six prisoners - four at Maghaberry and two at Hydebank Wood - were placed in specially located accommodation away from the general population. This was a precautionary move and in line with preparations to mitigate the impact of the virus.
- I want to commend all the staff who dealt with, and continue to support those people and the plans which had been developed over the past month worked as envisaged.

Looking at the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals' Service:

- Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunal's Service [NICTS] will continue to follow Public Health Agency (PHA) guidance and members of the public and others who engage with the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunal's Service have been notified through various communications channels about the procedures to follow.
- NICTS has a graduated response which depending on the prevailing circumstances and available resources would entail working with the judiciary and partners to slow down lower priority business.
- Officials are working closely with the Lord Chief Justice on practical arrangements to reduce the need for attendance at court, including the adjournment of cases administratively; dispensing with the requirement of parties to attend save for certain specified circumstances and staggering business across the day to reduce footfall at any given time. Further detail on these arrangements will be published imminently by the Lord Chief Justice's Office.
- Areas considered to be critical would include cases impacting on liberty (bail / custody); individual and public safety (Non-Molestation Orders and Emergency Protection Orders) and other types of urgent business.
- Ongoing jury trials will be managed to a conclusion where possible. No new jury trials will be commenced.
- NICTS will also have the option to temporarily reduce the number of hearing rooms at a venue or relocate business to other court venues based on the level of available resource or support services or specific buildings being out of action at any time.

In conclusion:

This is a fast evolving picture and we will continue to follow PHA guidance. If that guidance changes, we will move quickly to adapt our approach accordingly.

Department of Health

Health and Social Care Planning for the Period Mid-March to Mid-April 2020 During The Delay Phase for Coronavirus

Published at 2.00 pm on Thursday 19 March 2020.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I wish to make a statement to the Assembly, and through this statement to the wider public, of the actions we are taking across the Health and Social Care system to prepare for the impact of Novel Coronavirus COVID-19.

I would like to open by making two assertions that may seem contradictory, but which are in fact crucially important.

Firstly, I would like to provide some reassurance that, for the majority of people, COVID-19 will result in a mild illness from which they will quickly recover.

However, it is also the case that for some patients, potentially thousands, a diagnosis of COVID-19 will be a life-altering event, resulting in hospitalisation and, in some cases, loss of life. All of our efforts must be focused on protecting this part of our population.

My statement today is overshadowed by the sad news of a Coronavirus related death in a Northern Ireland hospital. My condolences are with the family and friends of the patient.

From the planning assumptions available to the HSC in a reasonable worst case scenario - if we fail as a community to take action to slow down the transmission of the virus in line with the recommended public health guidance - up to 80% of the Northern Ireland population will be infected during this epidemic. Up to half of these may occur in a period of three weeks centred around the peak. Simply put, no health service in the world is equipped to cope with the volume of cases that we will see if this scenario comes to pass.

However, we have the ability to reduce the potential impact of COVID-19 by protecting our families, friends, and all of the vulnerable people across Northern Ireland, by reducing social contact as much as possible and, if any of us have symptoms, to stay at home.

If social distancing and other measures are implemented by the population, with a combined effect they could reduce the peak by some 50% and reduce deaths by up to a third. Planning assumptions also indicate that 8% of infected people will require hospitalisation, 0.7% will require critical care, and 1% will die – although these figures will vary highly depending on age and other health factors.

There is no doubt that these measures come at a cost. They will be difficult for people to stick to. They will have significant social and economic impacts. But we must always remain mindful that they will save lives.

I am acutely aware of the anxiety felt by many older and vulnerable people who have been told that they are in one of the high risk groups. Many people live alone, already feel isolated from the community and are dependent upon social services to provide their day to day care and support. I want to reassure people that we will give priority to the continuation of essential services that allow people to remain independent in their own homes. My Department will be sending further detailed and targeted advice to

those of all ages at very high risk (40,000 people) in the days ahead.

This plan summarises the key actions taken by Health and Social Care (HSC) NI that will apply from mid-March to mid-April 2020 to ensure that there is sufficient capacity within the system to meet the expected increase in demand from patients contracting COVID-19 during this period. This is a dynamic plan and will be constantly refined in light of emerging issues.

I would like every member of this Assembly to be in no doubt that this approach is absolutely vital. It will protect our population, and it will also protect our staff, who will face enormous challenges in the weeks, and months, to come.

Nevertheless, even with these measures, we are undoubtedly facing the biggest public health emergency in our lifetime. Before detailing the work currently underway I want to express my thanks to every single member of staff across primary, secondary and community care, as well as our emergency services, for their total and unfailing commitment to help manage the impact of this pandemic.

In the coming weeks and months they will continue to need all of our support as they play a critical role in our response to COVID-19.

Our staff are the greatest asset we have. They are the NHS. As an Assembly, we must make sure that we provide them with every support and protection that we can to allow them to carry out their jobs safely and to the best of their abilities.

In respect of personal protection equipment, or PPE as it is commonly known, I want to reassure HSC staff that my officials are working closely with Business Services Organisation and HSC Trusts as well as national colleagues to maintain a secure and continuous supply of appropriate PPE. This does not mean that supply is not under pressure, it is, and through my officials I have made available to HSC Trusts volumes of product out of centrally held stockpiles albeit this must be carefully managed both at Trust level and by my Department to prevent early depletion. Supply of PPE is a challenge for all COVID-19 affected countries and some of those countries have even taken steps to ban the export of such products. This is a step that the Government has not taken to date, but is certainly complicating the work of those staff engaged in sourcing and securing certain products.

Guidance on PPE to be worn by staff has changed over the duration of this pandemic and naturally this is causing some worry amongst staff. Changes in guidance on PPE have been informed by the emerging experiences both within the UK and other countries. Staff should be reassured that this advice has been advised on and developed by experts in Infection Prevention and Control. HSC Trusts are following the latest guidance regarding PPE and will continue to apply current guidance if and when it is updated. Staff are understandably concerned however I would counsel against being influenced by social media, we have the best people in the country working on this crucial issue.

We have heard a great deal recently about the importance of testing for COVID-19. At the start of this outbreak, HSC laboratory services were processing around 40 tests. They have increased their capacity by a factor of 5 and now are capable of processing more than 200 tests per day. As at

09:00 on 19th March, they had processed 1,646 tests. I want to pay particular tribute to the laboratory staff for their response in addition to their normal workload.

We expect the demands to increase in the days and weeks ahead, and we are preparing to meet this by expanding our testing capacity even further. This will shortly increase our capability fourfold to around 800 COVID-19 tests per day and enable us to extend the availability of testing to our frontline health and social care staff, ensuring that they can continue to deliver vital services.

I am also taking action to increase physical capacity in our hospitals. We have increased inpatient capacity in designated wards that can treat up to 280 adult inpatients with coronavirus. This is only the very first phase of this work. In anticipation of inpatient numbers increasing further, all Trusts are continuing to assess the steps that may be needed to convert additional wards currently used by medical and surgical specialties into areas to treat patients diagnosed with COVID-19.

We have already significantly increased adult critical care beds across the region. There are 88 routinely commissioned adult critical care beds across the region. During normal operation, 56 of these are intensive care (ICU) beds, available for patients who require support from a breathing machine (ventilator), and 32 are high dependency (HDU) beds, available for patients who are critically ill but do not require the use of a breathing machine. If required, we have taken steps to ensure that the normal capacity of 88 critical care beds can be rapidly increased by a further 38 beds.

There are currently 139 mechanical ventilators available across the Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland. Some 40 additional mechanical ventilators (30 adult units and 10 paediatric units) have been ordered bringing the total available in Northern Ireland to 179 by the end of March. There is urgent work underway to purchase critical care equipment to ensure that we can respond to the potential number of people who will need such specialised care. We are working closely with NHS partners on a four nation basis to ensure adequate supply of ventilators as required.

It should be noted that the numbers of beds described assume availability of a full complement of specialist staff. It is predicted that health and social care staff absence could be as high as 21% during the peak weeks of an unmitigated pandemic.

An absence level such as this will require staff to be flexible and to be prepared to work wherever they are needed the most. Training of staff who will be redeployed from other areas is ongoing and will increase further as staff are released from their elective duties. The redeployed staff will require supervision from trained critical care staff.

We are also exploring more radical ways to enhance our workforce capacity. Today, I am pleased to announce that third year nursing and midwifery students within the last six months of qualifying will be redeployed to clinical care. This will happen in the next 10-14 days and will provide support of up to 880 senior nursing and midwifery students. We will follow this up with guidance for 1st and 2nd year nursing and midwifery students and AHPs in the coming days.

We are also pleased that approximately 236 Final Year Medical Student at QUB Medical School will join the Medical Register 4 months earlier than originally envisaged and will accordingly become immediately available to assist medical teams across our hospitals.

In addition, the HSC Trusts are actively developing opportunities to utilise the skills of our other medical students, in particular 3rd and 4th Year students, in temporary medical support technician roles.

I know that our students will be concerned about this move but you will be supported and supervised in your practice. I am very grateful to students, Universities and health and social care staff for making this happen in a very short timeframe.

As with other countries, the preparations for a surge in demand have required the cancellation or postponement of non-urgent appointments, investigation and procedures across outpatients, day case, inpatient and diagnostic services. This action is necessary to allow us to redeploy key staff to support the care of people admitted to hospital because of COVID-19. Outpatient appointments, day case and elective inpatient services will be maintained for urgent cases. Similarly, surgery for the treatment of cancer and other urgent procedures will continue.

Unfortunately this action is likely to result in a further adverse impact upon our already excessive and unacceptable waiting times for outpatient and inpatient services. Critically, however, as the pandemic progresses we must prepare ourselves for difficult decisions such as these. As our system comes under increased pressure, we will need to make hard choices about what services we can and cannot provide.

Our health service will fast become unrecognisable. Changes that would have seemed unthinkable weeks ago will become the new norm. Decisions that would previously have taken months or even years will be taken in hours.

Looking ahead, there will be a long period of recovery. Transformation will be needed more than ever. This will require significant new investment and commitment from the Northern Ireland Executive to health and social care services. It is clear, however, that as a result of this pandemic, some of services will be irrevocably changed.

A huge amount of work has gone in to the actions set out in the four weeks summary plan published today covering the period mid-March to mid-April. However, I need to emphasise that, if social distancing does not have the impact we hope, much more radical action will be required to respond to potentially extreme demand for acute care, particularly critical care, from mid-April to the summer months.

My Department is actively developing plans for this period and I will provide further updates to the Assembly as soon as these plans are ready to be implemented.

Finally, once more I would pay tribute to the staff who work across all health and social care disciplines in Northern Ireland for their commitment to patients and for rising to this unprecedented challenge. I am proud of you and I commit to giving you my full support in the days and months ahead. The words 'thank you' seem woefully inadequate in the circumstances but they still need to be said – on behalf of everyone across our society.

I also want to make a general appeal to the community. We all have the most onerous responsibility to do what we can to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

We all must continue to rigidly follow the advice on hand-washing and 'catch it, bin it, kill it' when we cough or sneeze and use a tissue. I cannot emphasise this enough. This will help keep more of our family members, neighbours and friends well and by doing so reduce pressures on our health service. As I have already stated publicly, doing the right thing is essential if the health and social care system is to get through this.

This also includes following all the social distancing guidance to the letter, not just today, tomorrow and next week but throughout the months ahead, for as long as it takes.

I would appeal to all Members to underline these vital messages on hygiene and social distancing to their constituents and the wider public at every opportunity.

Department for the Economy

Small Business Grants

Published on Thursday 26 March 2020.

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): In my oral statement in the Northern Ireland Assembly on Tuesday 24th March, I undertook to provide a written statement providing further details on the process the Department for the Economy and the Department of Finance is putting in place for the payment of the £370million in grants announced by the Executive for our small businesses and a companies in our beleaguered hospitality, tourism and retail sectors schemes.

These grants schemes will benefit some 27,000 small local businesses and a further 4,000 businesses in the tourism, hospitality and retail sectors.

Our aim has been to ensure that payments are made directly to businesses, for the benefit of businesses, as quickly as possible.

As outlined in my oral statement, the ratings system will be used as the mechanism to identify eligible businesses in Northern Ireland. Those businesses that are currently in receipt of Small Business Rates Relief (SBRR) will be eligible to receive a £10,000 cash grant payment.

Payment will be made directly into the bank accounts of those businesses which currently pay through direct debit. At present, LPS have now informed us that they hold bank details for approximately 7,000 small businesses who qualify for receipt of this grant. We will begin to process payments to these businesses today with first payment being received in bank accounts next week.

To enable payments to be made directly it will be necessary to collect the bank details from eligible businesses for whom we do not currently hold bank details. To facilitate this an online web portal has been developed and will go live today. The web page will be accessible on NI Business Info at:

[https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/
BusinessSupportGrantScheme](https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/BusinessSupportGrantScheme)

As soon as details are received, payment will be made directly into businesses' bank accounts.

We are also working hard to put in place processes for the £25,000 grant for our hospitality, tourism and retail sectors and I will announce further details on this as soon as possible.

Department for Infrastructure

Covid-19 Update

Published at 5.30 pm on Friday 27 March 2020.

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): This is not an easy time for any of us. We all need to play our part, right across society, by staying at home and following government advice strictly. This is about saving lives and protecting the health and well-being of everyone, particularly the most vulnerable in our society.

The advice is clear – all non-essential contact and non-essential travel must be avoided. In the context of that advice I want to set out for Assembly Members the steps that I and my Department are taking on three fronts: minimising the risks for our customers, staff and the wider public; securing connectivity for essential services and key workers; and supporting our health and social care system and our most vulnerable citizens.

Public Transport

The advice on public transport is very clear. It should not be used other than for essential journeys, and passengers should wherever possible avoid peak services. I have worked over the last two weeks to steer a careful course between maintaining public transport at a level needed to support and facilitate our essential workers while also dissuading other people from making unnecessary journeys.

I have agreed with Translink that it should move to operate a significantly reduced bus and train service. Buses are running on a holiday timetable and NI Railways on a Saturday timetable. Translink has also reduced its service timetable for Enterprise rail services.

These measures are in response to the clear public health advice to avoid all non-essential travel and also to the sharp downturn in passenger numbers as more and more people heed our advice to stay at home.

The service level that is continuing is designed to ensure that we can continue to provide public transport coverage across Northern Ireland while responding to the impact of reduced demand. The public should be assured - for those who need to travel, public transport will continue to operate and we will continue to ensure all those using public transport can do so safely in line with guidance on social distancing. I have also asked Translink to keep its service levels under close and constant review to ensure that those who absolutely need to travel can do so, that a strict social distancing policy of ensuring no more than 50% passenger capacity of a service is filled, and to have additional vehicles on stand-by if need arises. I will keep this situation under constant review and will update members and the public of any further changes to public transport.

Keeping our Water Infrastructure Working

Members know already about the pressures on our ageing water and wastewater infrastructure. NI Water has a well-tested major incident response regime in place to respond to operational emergencies and its priority continues to be ensuring the continued provision of water and wastewater services to customers while maintaining the safety and wellbeing of staff.

It is working tirelessly to make sure that supply interruptions are avoided or minimised, particularly at a time when we all need to be washing our hands regularly. It has also engaged in a public information campaign to remind people of the sorts of behaviours that could interrupt supplies, including through blockages caused by inappropriate flushing of items such as wipes. I would ask members to help NIW get this important message out to the public, especially at this critical time. I remain in close communication with NIW and am monitoring the situation closely.

Freight and Haulage

In recent weeks we all have had cause to recognise and acknowledge the vital job done by our freight and haulage industry. It is the drivers, operators and logistics teams in this sector on whom we all rely to keep our supply chains functioning, to ensure that medicines and medical equipment can get delivered on time to the right place and, of course, to keep our supermarket shelves well stocked.

I had previously informed the Assembly about changes I had made to the requirements relating to drivers' hours to secure deliveries to supermarkets. As a further step, I have now also relaxed drivers' hours' rules for home deliveries until 2 April, to ensure supplies can be delivered to the doors of those working remotely or self-isolating. These steps will help ensure that food, non-food such as personal care, household paper and cleaning products, over the counter pharmaceuticals and other essential items can be delivered directly to consumers' homes.

I will be keeping the situation under constant review and will ensure measures are taken to extend the relaxation further if required. I have also reminded the industry that these steps are to facilitate all of us but that the responsibility for ensuring the safety of drivers and other road users remains with the operators and they must use those flexibilities in a manner that ensures no compromising of safety.

Ports and Ferries

I am also very conscious of the crucial role of our ports and ferry operators in maintaining supply chains at this time. While my direct powers in relation to both are very limited, it is important that I hear from this sector about the challenges it is facing and important too that my officials work closely with those leading ports and ferry companies. To that end, I have this week had a series of tele conferences with all of our main ports and main ferry operators. I know they have many concerns linked to the impact of the Covid-19 emergency on their business and I will be reflecting those concerns to other Executive ministers and to the Secretary of State for Transport.

I also support the measures taken by the Rathlin Island Ferry company which has restricted movement to essential journeys only to protect the island community.

Community Transport

I have also taken action to protect the health and well-being of people that use and provide community transport services by asking operators funded by the Department to suspend all Disability Action Transport Services and to significantly restrict Dial-a-Lift services to essential journeys only.

Whilst recognising the very significant role community transport plays in bringing people together and addressing social isolation in particular, at this critical time I have to take every step I can to protect the public. This is not a decision which I have taken lightly. I want community transport operators to be able to contribute to wider efforts to support the most vulnerable so I will maintain their funding through this unparalleled period and my officials stand ready to enter into discussions with operators to establish what scope there is for them to support their members and wider society during these times.

Driver and Vehicle Testing

Keeping people safe at this concerning time will cause inconvenience to customers and businesses, but it is necessary.

That is why I have moved to suspend driving tests for three months until Monday 22 June 2020, but this will be kept under review. Where there are exceptional circumstances, for example, for emergency workers and essential service drivers needing a driving test, the DVA will make all reasonable efforts to accommodate these customers.

I have also suspended MOT tests with all vehicles eligible to be issued with a Temporary Exemption Certificate (TEC). The issuing of TECs has also been extended to include four-year-old cars due their first MOT to ensure they can remain on the road, if given the ongoing health advice, the journey to be made is essential. Four-year-old cars will be given a TEC for six months from the date that their MOT test should have been due. Issuing the certificates will take some time but the exemption will automatically apply from the due date. The PSNI has agreed to our request that given these exceptional circumstances, where PSNI detects a vehicle without a valid MOT certificate, it will in suitable cases, exercise its discretion under the law, in circumstances where there is no identified risk to public safety. It is important that drivers realise that they are responsible under the law for the roadworthiness of their vehicle at all times.

For taxis which require specific taxi licensing tests, new legislation would be needed to allow existing taxi licences to be renewed. Despite best efforts, this is proving challenging to resolve. However, I want to reassure taxi drivers that we are working urgently on options to help them at this difficult time. I recognise the taxi industry is being hard hit by this public health and economic crisis. I also am working with Executive colleagues and pushing hard for more support from the UK Government for the self-employed. While I only have responsibility for regulation, and financial support for the industry rests with other Executive colleagues, I have asked colleagues if we can work together to help the industry during this challenging time, including exploring possible options for redeployment of their services to support vulnerable people at home and our community during this crisis.

I am also ensuring those applicants that apply online to renew their driving licence are having their applications processed by staff working remotely. Unfortunately, those applications which cannot be processed online, will be prioritised and processed when it is safe to do so.

Planning

I have also written to councils to make it clear that they should not take unnecessary enforcement action against

public houses, restaurants and cafes operating takeaway services during the coronavirus crisis. These measures will provide vital flexibility to public houses, restaurants and cafes to keep operating and will ensure people are able to safely stay at home while still supporting local businesses.

I have asked my planning officials to urgently bring forward legislation to amend the requirement for public events as part of the pre-application process for major planning applications, given that they cannot happen at this time. This change will help the planning system to support our economy and ensure developments can be taken forward more quickly after this crisis has passed.

It is essential that my officials and local government officials work together to ensure the planning system responds as effectively as possible to this crisis. My Chief Planner has therefore provided an update containing information and advice to all council Heads of Planning on the implications of the Covid-19 emergency for the planning system.

Driving

With the sharp reduction in traffic volumes, and given the advice on staying at home, I took the view that we could not consider traffic enforcement officers to be essential workers. I therefore took the decision to suspend on-street parking enforcement in those areas where my Department has responsibility for parking enforcement and also to suspend on-street parking charges. However, we will continue to take action where illegal parking is unsafe or blocking access to emergency or essential services.

Those who need to be on our roads may have noticed that the Department's variable messaging road signs are also being used to deliver key public health messaging in response to the crisis.

For those essential workers who need to be on our roads, I am also appealing for extra care to be taken as they drive. They need, now more than ever, to be driving safely, obeying the rules of the road and paying attention to other road users. Our health service should not be having to deal at this critical time with the consequences of serious collisions.

Supporting our people

I have the privilege of being Minister for a Department of around 3,000 civil servants who deliver a wide variety of public services on which we all rely – and a responsibility along with my senior officials to make sure they too are being supported to follow the public health advice.

Wherever it is possible, staff have been facilitated to work from home. Where possible, we have also closed offices to members of the public. This all presents its own social and technological challenges, including in maintaining service delivery, but it is the right thing to do.

Where the functions our people deliver are essential and cannot be done away from the workplace, my senior team with the support of the NICS central HR team, has been working hard to make sure those staff have the advice and support to keep themselves and others safe. This is often challenging and I know that, like the rest of us, staff have many concerns – but we take our responsibilities seriously and continue to work constructively with staff and their union representatives and to ensure that Public Health Agency advice is communicated and followed.

I would like to place on record my thanks and appreciation to the DfI teams who are working so hard and determined to play their full part in helping us respond to this public health emergency.

Supporting our health and social care staff

Finally, I have worked to identify ways in which my Department can support our dedicated and hardworking health and social care staff, particularly those on the front line in our hospitals and care homes, putting their lives on the line to save ours.

I am pleased to report that I have been able to take some key actions in this area. Yesterday, in partnership with Translink and with the support of the Minister for Health and his Department, I announced that our health and social care workers would, during this emergency period, have free travel on all Translink services and also on the Strangford ferry. I hope this step is helpful in supporting them in their journey to work.

As a smaller and very practical step, I have opened the car park at the Crumlin Road Gaol, which my Department owns, for free for health service workers.

My department will continue to work with the Health Trusts and the Department for Health to explore other ways in which we can support front line staff during this difficult time.

Conclusion

In the coming days and weeks there is a lot to do – we have some answers – but not them all. I am proud of my Department's effort and the tireless work of my staff to do all we can to add to the effort.

I want to place on the record my thanks to all the stakeholders who are working collaboratively, in partnership with me and my Department to find a way through issues. I will continue to hold stakeholder teleconferences so I can hear concerns from those across the North. I know time is short and that everyone is working to get the answers we so desperately need. I want to assure people my priority is swift decision making and clear, consistent communication.

I appeal to people to be patient, to act to keep yourself and others safe – and to support those on the frontline. I promise to do all that I can, as quickly as I can, as we face into these dark and trying days together.

Finally, I wish to thank elected representatives and members of the public who are showing their support across Northern Ireland as I work to find solutions to protect our communities during this crisis.

Most importantly, I call on everyone to follow the advice to stay at home to save lives.

Department of Justice

Covid-19 – Temporary Release of Certain Types of Prisoners Who Have 3 Months or Less Remaining to Serve

Published at 12.00 noon on Monday 30 March 2020.

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): First of all I apologise to Members that it has not been possible to fully adhere to the timescales as set out in the Northern Ireland Assembly Plenary Procedures, Conventions, Rulings and Practice document but I trust you will appreciate the challenging circumstances that we are all operating in at present, the need to be responsive to a fast moving and ever changing situation and take timely decisions in our efforts to mitigate the impact of COVID19.

The developing public health emergency caused by the worldwide coronavirus (COVID19) pandemic is causing us to consider measures that only a few weeks ago would have been unthinkable. One such measure is the temporary early release of some sentenced prisoners.

Over the past few weeks the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) has been taking a series of incremental steps, including the suspension of visits, aimed at gradually closing down the prison estate to non-essential personnel and limiting movement within each prison. However, in anticipation of the time when we have a confirmed case among our prisoner population and our staffing levels, which are already under strain, come under further pressure, I now consider it necessary to release some prisoners early.

In doing so I recognise that to release a prisoner before he or she has completed their full sentence is a significant decision which should only be taken when there is no alternative. Such a move is contrary to the ethos of the justice system and will cause distress to victims and their families. However, in the context of the pandemic we are facing, and to ensure as far as possible the safety and wellbeing of staff and those in our care, it is I believe an appropriate and reasonable step.

Prisoner Population:

The Northern Ireland Prison Service today has 1,521 Individuals in our care, 1,050 of whom have been sentenced and 471 of whom are on remand. 1,367 are adult males, 75 are females and 79 are young men at Hydebank Wood. The overall figure represents an increase of 78 prisoners on this day last year.

If we are to manage the rapidly developing crisis we are facing, it is vital that we begin now to take steps to reduce our prisoner population. Pressure on staffing levels and the impact of confirmed cases within our prisons when that happens will have a detrimental impact on the level of regime we can deliver. This will present considerable risks for the Prison Service to manage and will have a significant impact on the people in our care.

In seeking to reduce the prisoner population I am mindful of the importance of ensuring the Prison Service is best placed to follow Public Health guidance in order to safeguard the health and wellbeing of both staff and prisoners. Reducing the prisoner population, in a

proportionate way that ensures public safety, is I believe a reasonable step.

In reaching my decision I am also conscious that 32% of our current population have mental health issues, 50% have addiction issues, and 55% have a history of self-harm. The processes we put in place to reduce suicide and self-harm are based on a person centred approach and have over the past year delivered very impressive results. In the type of environment we are now describing NIPS and the South Eastern Trust staff will have limited one to one contact with individuals and a person centred approach will be very challenging to deliver. Consequently, having fewer prisoners will help us to focus limited resources on those most in need.

I am also mindful that a smaller prisoner population will allow us to reduce doubling up, that is the number of individuals who are sharing cells. Currently, because of the increase in our population, we have been required to make greater use of the doubling up facility. In the context of the developing pandemic it is contrary to best practice health advice. Reducing the level of doubling up is a practical step I believe we must take in the fight against the spread of the virus within the prison estate. We could of course open empty accommodation Blocks at Maghaberry, but we would need additional staff to operate them and with the staffing pressures we anticipate this is simply not an option for us.

Powers to Release Prisoners on a Temporary Basis:

Turning to the actions I plan to take, the Department of Justice has a discretionary power to release certain prisoners temporarily for any period or periods and subject to any conditions. This power is exercised by the Northern Ireland Prison Service on behalf of the Department. This rule applies to prisoners other than those remanded in custody by any court; those committed to custody for trial; or those committed to be sentenced or otherwise dealt with before or by the Crown Court.

It is my intention to give approval for the Prison Service to use this discretionary power to release, on a temporary basis, and after applying a number of offence related exclusions those prisoners who are due to be released automatically during the next three months, i.e. between now and 30 June.

While each individual will be assessed against the criteria outlined below, the Prison Service anticipate the release of fewer than 200 individuals. These individuals will be subject to a number of NIPS applied conditions including a curfew, a requirement to follow all Public Health Agency guidance during the current emergency period, a ban on victim contact, an alcohol ban and a ban on having any engagement with the media. **It is important to note that prisoners released under Rule 27 may be recalled to prison at any time whether release conditions have been broken or not.**

Detail of Temporary Release Scheme:

I am conscious that where possible we must ensure the general public has maximum confidence in actions undertaken by the Prison Service. Therefore I am limiting those who can be released temporarily for the purpose outlined above by excluding certain sentence types, certain offences and certain prisoners from being considered. I consider this to be a measured and proportionate response to the current unprecedented pandemic created by coronavirus (Covid-19).

On this basis the following will be excluded:

- (i) a prisoner serving an extended custodial sentence, an indeterminate custodial sentence or a life sentence;
- (ii) a prisoner serving a sentence under a hospital order or transfer direction within the meaning of the Mental Health (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 (NI 4);
- (iii) a sentence that engages the notification requirements of Part 2 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003;
- (iv) a prisoner who is liable to removal from the United Kingdom at sentence completion point;
- (v) a prisoner who has been recalled from licence during their current sentence;
- (vi) a prisoner on a restricted transfer from another jurisdiction;
- (vii) a prisoner subject to management under public protection arrangements or judged to present a Risk of Serious Harm (ROSH); and
- (viii) a prisoner serving a sentence for an offence:
 - involving homicide or manslaughter – (including any offence which has contributed to or led to the death of an individual or individuals);
 - connected or related to terrorism;
 - involving the use or possession of explosives;
 - involving the possession or use of a firearm or the use of an offensive weapon;
 - involving domestic violence or cruelty; or
 - perpetrated on the grounds of race, religion or sexual orientation.

Finally, and in order to ensure that a prisoner released temporarily has adequate support in the community and/or does not present a danger to themselves or others, a prisoner will only be released if NIPS is satisfied that:

- (i) they have immediate access to accommodation in the community; and
- (ii) they are not being managed under NIPS's Supporting People at Risk (SPAR) Evolution programme at the time they are temporarily released.

I do not believe the Prison Service should release a prisoner if there are reasonable grounds for believing they would, upon that release, be likely to present as homeless; or present a risk to their own wellbeing; or breach any other aspect of Public Health Agency guidance during their period of temporary release.

Where a qualifying prisoner has a victim who is registered with the Prisoner Release Victim Information Scheme the same details will be provided to them that they would expect at any other time of temporary release and at final discharge i.e. month of release and conditions of release. In these cases temporary release will be explained in the context of the ongoing public health emergency.

I plan to keep this scheme under constant review. It will be closed when the current public health emergency is declared at an end by the United Kingdom Government and the Northern Ireland Executive. However, if conditions dictate I will continue this scheme on a month-by-month basis from the end of April. This means that we will look at releasing temporarily those qualifying prisoners who

are due to be released during the month of July at the beginning of May.

Conclusion:

The challenges over the coming days will be great and in closing it is right that I pay tribute to the staff of the Northern Ireland Prison Service who on our behalf are providing a vital public service in the most difficult of circumstances. The work of prison staff is seldom seen but it should never be underestimated.

Department of Finance

Covid-19 Response: Funding Allocations

Published at 12.45 pm on Thursday 9 April 2020.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): The purpose of this Statement is to inform the Assembly of the funding allocations agreed by the Executive as part of its response to COVID-19.

In order to respond rapidly to the COVID-19 situation the Executive is handling funding for the crisis outside its normal financial processes of budget and in-year monitoring exercises.

The Executive has received additional funding through the application of the Barnett formula to allocations to Whitehall departments for England only measures. As this is an evolving situation the funding situation is being kept under review and the figures are being updated on a regular basis.

The Executive has received Barnett consequentials of £933 million in relation to measures announced prior to 6 April 2020. This includes funding relating to the £5 billion COVID-19 Response Fund. This statement deals with the allocation of this funding.

The Treasury has also advised of a further £101 million of consequentials from new measures. The majority of this relates to an allocation to the Department for Transport for Emergency Management Agreements. As there are ongoing discussions with the British Government in relation to a number of transport related matters the Executive has agreed to hold this funding for allocation following the outcome of these discussions

In agreeing the allocations for the COVID-19 response the Executive's priorities have been ensuring our health service receives the funding it needs, maintaining key services and providing support for businesses and vulnerable people. This statement deals only with the allocation of the additional funding that has been provided. Departments will also be taking forward measures which will be funded from within existing budgets. The Executive may also decide to prioritise funding across departmental boundaries should it be required for a wider response. However, we are not yet at that stage.

You will be aware of a number of measures which have already been announced and the funding allocated to these is set out in the table below.

Dept	COVID-19 Response	£million
DfC	Discretionary Support	5.0
DfE	Small Business Grant (£10k for business eligible for Small Business Rate Relief) – benefiting 27,000 businesses.	270.0
DfE	Hospitality, Tourism and Retail Sectors Grant (£25k for business with a rateable value between £15k and £51k)	100.0

Dept	COVID-19 Response	£million
DE	Direct payment to families of 97,000 children who are entitled to free school meals.	18.9
DoF	Business Rates Holiday (3 months)	99.0
DoH	Includes but not restricted to: mobilising the health and social care response, including additional staffing, ramping up of testing, and securing essential personal protection and other equipment; and providing much needed support for primary and community care sectors and suspension of car parking charges for staff.	140.0
DoJ	Additional resources have been provided to the Prison Service to meet the challenges due to Covid-19.	1.9
Total		634.8

Further to this, the Executive has agreed to set aside £150 million for the purchase of vital personal protective equipment (PPE). While this is primarily for the Department of Health there are potential costs in other departments and this level of funding is considered appropriate at this stage.

As set out in the table above, the Executive has already announced business support schemes targeted at small businesses, the leisure, hospitality and tourism sectors as well as support for all business through the rating system. This in addition to the support provided at a UK wide level.

However, I am aware that a number of business will fall through the gaps in this support. I am keen that vital support can be provided for these businesses as quickly as possible. Working is ongoing in the Department for the Economy, assisted by my own department, to develop further schemes which will target support where it is needed most.

In light of this the Executive has agreed that £40 million is held centrally pending further consideration of the further support required by businesses.

The Executive has also agreed a number of smaller allocations for specific purposes, these are:

- £1.5 million to DAERA for Support for the Fishing Industry
- £3.3 million to DfC for NIHE response to homelessness;
- £2.0 million to DfC for the Community Support Scheme;
- £10.0 million DfC for Shielding Package for Clinically High Risk;
- £12 million to DE towards Emergency Childcare provisions;
- £0.4 million to DE to enable the Youth Service to support DfC to provide food for vulnerable young people; and
- £4 million to DOJ to allow the PSNI to maintain critical services

In addition £10 million will be held centrally for further interventions to support vulnerable members of our society.

It has been agreed that the balance of funding, some £65 million, be provided to the Department of Health at this time. There are significant challenges in forecasting health costs in an evolving situation and my officials will be working closely with colleagues in the Department of Health to keep the position under review as the situation develops.

I would like to conclude by assuring members that this Executive will do everything possible to ensure our health service, businesses and vulnerable people are supported throughout this crisis.

Department for Infrastructure

Taxi Licensing Regulations

Published at 3.15 pm on Friday 10 April 2020.

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): The outbreak of covid-19 has caused significant challenges and changes in our daily lives. No sector or individual is untouched by the scale of the pandemic. I am grateful to members and to the public for their support and patience while my department has been working tirelessly to find solutions for our communities.

I have previously advised Members and the public of a range of measures which I have put in place to exempt various types of vehicles from needing an MOT test so that people can stay on the road when they need to make essential travel journeys during this current emergency. These exemptions were needed due to the closure of MOT centres in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19 for customers and staff.

However, finding a means to exempt taxis from PSV tests has been more difficult and has required a temporary change to regulations which has now been put in place. I can confirm that the Taxi Licensing (Amendment) (Coronavirus) Regulations (Northern Ireland) become operational today.

The Regulations deal with taxi vehicle licences which expire during the current emergency. They provide for the automatic renewal of these licences – without prior testing. This will ensure that these vehicles can remain on the road during this period.

Licences that are renewed in this way will last for a 6 month period, and will be issued free of charge. They will be subject to a number of conditions. These largely require owners and drivers to follow statutory requirements and keep their vehicles in a roadworthy condition – or risk revocation of their licence. However these are not new conditions, they have always been in place.

In order to minimise administration for everyone, taxi drivers and operators will not need to apply for their new licences. My Department will issue automatically a 6 month licence - free of charge - for all vehicles whose licence is due to expire between 10 March 2020 and 9 October 2020, unless appointments can be put back in place earlier. This is a temporary measure reflecting the exceptionally challenging times of this current pandemic.

We will prioritise those licences that have recently expired or are due to expire shortly. However I aim to have all the licences dispatched within the next few weeks. This will mean that the majority of licence holders will receive their 6 month licence well in advance of the expiry date of their current licence.

I am pleased to be able to report positive progress on this complex issue which I know has been of significant concern to the taxi industry. While my responsibility for taxis only extends to the regulation of the industry, I am very aware of the increasing financial hardship this crisis is creating; with my Executive colleagues I pushed hard to secure the self-employed financial package announced by the British Government recently. This will go some way to helping self-employed people, like those within the

taxi industry, but in my view the package falls short in a number of respects and with Executive colleagues, I will continue to press for more assistance.

I also know that social distancing is a real concern and a challenge for those taxi drivers continuing to provide a service to the public. I have therefore been engaging with the Minister for Economy on this issue. The Department for Economy as the responsible Department on this issue has assured me that guidance on social distancing for taxi drivers is being prepared as quickly as possible. In my view this guidance is vital for drivers and customers to ensure health and safety is maintained as a priority at this time.

I wish to assure Members that I have been engaging with the taxi industry and recently wrote an open letter to taxi drivers to update them on my efforts to find a means of support for them.

With the numbers of taxi journeys greatly reducing, there is also now a real opportunity for taxi drivers to explore how they can play their part in taking the pressure off our vital services by helping the most vulnerable in our communities. To look at, for example, opportunities for delivering food, medicines and other vital supplies or to get patients to essential appointments. To help progress this, I have raised this with Executive colleagues to examine how taxis can be re-purposed to support the emergency efforts. The Department for Communities as the lead Department is working with my officials and local government to explore how this can be done.

Driving Licences – medicals

It has not been possible to resolve everything today. I am also very aware that a number of drivers are required to submit a medical report before a new taxi driver's licence can be granted, when applying for renewal of their taxi driver's licence. The COVID-19 situation means that it is increasingly difficult to gain access to a medical professional, given that healthcare resources are rightly being focussed on fighting the pandemic. Whilst some licences which require medical assessments are being processed, I am aware that this is not the case for everyone.

This issue is not restricted to taxi drivers – it also extends to bus and lorry drivers. A similar problem exists in Great Britain, and my staff are working urgently with colleagues in the Department for Transport to identify a possible way forward. I want to assure Members and the industry that my Department is focused on finding a solution to this issue and if it proves necessary to amend legislation locally, I will seek to do this and will provide an update as soon as possible.

Essential Travel

In all that I am doing, I am seeking to maintain connectivity and support key workers, such as our heroic nurses and doctors, to get to their work. I am mindful however that not all travel is essential and therefore solutions need to be put in place which focus on keeping vehicles on the road, safely and where it is essential to do so in the current emergency. I want to put on record my appreciation to my officials for all their hard work in responding to this crisis and finding solutions to the new challenges this crisis presents. I assure Members we will continue to play our part in working with others to fight back against COVID 19.

Department for Infrastructure

Failure of Lifts on DVA Test Centres: Publication of Audit Investigation Report

Published at 3.15 pm on Thursday 23 April 2020.

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): Members are aware that most vehicle testing services at MOT centres were suspended in late January, for safety reasons, given the faults identified in the scissor lifts across all of the MOT centres. At that time, I commissioned two independent reviews. The first was a short, review by independent engineers exploring the steps needed to return the MOT centres to full service operation; the second, a fuller investigation focusing on the timeline of events which led to the 55 lifts being taken out of operation.

I confirmed the outcome of the first review by the independent engineers to the Assembly in a Written Ministerial Statement on 27 February and have published the report on my Department's website. I also gave a commitment that the second independent report would be published to ensure full transparency on this issue. Unfortunately this process has been slightly delayed because of the COVID 19 pandemic and the focus on other urgent priorities. However, I am now in a position to publish this report and am, later today, placing a copy of it on my Department's website.

Key findings

This investigation was conducted by the NICS Group Audit Service, which is independent from my Department. It undertook a very thorough review to determine when the issue was first identified, what actions were taken to resolve the issue including the role of both DVA and the supplier and to understand how the operational management of the maintenance contract impacted on the issue.

As is the case with all audit reports, a copy of this investigation report has been provided to the Northern Ireland Audit Office.

The investigation has provided clarity on the timeline of events and the auditors concluded that it was reasonable for DVA to place reliance on the equipment manufacturer, supplier and maintenance contractor, MAHA, and the independent engineering insurance inspection reports.

As the Assembly will know, DVA was not alone in doing so and similar issues have arisen with similar lifts in test centres in the south and in other parts of Europe which other vehicle testing authorities have also had to deal with.

Nonetheless, the report does raise important questions around DVA's approach to some aspects of its lift maintenance and inspection regime, including in relation to setting target dates and timescales. They need careful attention so that lessons are learned and to prevent such disruption to the public from ever happening again.

It is also concerning that the report finds that the overall standard of record management observed within DVA was less than satisfactory. That is not acceptable, not least given the recent focus on the importance of good record keeping. I have already made clear that I expect to see clear improvement in this area within DVA but I also need

to be satisfied that similar problems do not arise across the Department and be provided with regular updates to ensure this never recurs.

Members will be aware that DVA is planning to transition to a new supplier of test centre equipment, with installation expected from 2022 and the intention was therefore to only replace any lift which had reached its absolute life end. To inform this, MAHA carried out a survey of all existing vehicle testing equipment, including the lifts, in October 2018. This survey showed that the lifts, whilst showing signs of wear and tear, were generally in good condition. The audit report finds that DVA took assurance from the 2018 survey that a major refresh of lifts would not be necessary and did not anticipate the scenario where all the lifts would be taken out of service at the same time.

The report also identifies wider learning which must be captured and applied in DVA and indeed more widely. Those lessons include ensuring that clear target dates are set for reporting back by inspectors, better record keeping, particularly with regard to the making of key decisions and the need for repairs to be carried out with prior approval.

Key lessons

In line with the findings of the independent engineer's report, I remain clear that an inadequate inspection regime and metal fatigue led to this situation. As I have noted above, lessons must be learnt and every step taken to ensure this situation does not happen again.

Under my instruction new contractual arrangements are being taken forward in partnership with the Department of Finance's Construction and Procurement Delivery (CPD) team for DVA to procure the independent engineering inspectors directly. Their reports will be provided directly to DVA's Health and Safety team. The Health and Safety team will take ownership of these reports and ensure any necessary follow up actions are implemented by MAHA, through the DVA Contract Management team, and closely monitored. Where there is an immediate health and safety issue arising from these inspections, the MOT Centre Manager and the Health and Safety team will be informed immediately by the inspector.

DVA is also liaising with MAHA with regard to the expected lifetime of an inspection lift taking into account the load collective / load distribution; vehicle weight; and the number of lift cycles / vehicles inspections. Based on this assessment, a thorough review of the condition of each vehicle lift will be conducted at an appropriate point in the lifetime of each lift. This condition survey will be externally verified to provide some further assurance as to the quality of the assessment and the reasonableness of any assumptions or recommendations. This will then inform a proactive lift replacement programme.

Turning to that replacement programme, the new lifts are now ready for installation on a phased basis. Members will be aware that I have offered all of our MOT centres to the Minister for Health and our Health and Social Care Trusts for use as COVID-19 testing centres or indeed for any other purpose that might be helpful as we fight back against the coronavirus and its devastating impacts. This has meant that the replacement programme requires very careful management and new lifts will only be installed in those centres that the Department of Health and the Trusts have confirmed will not be required as part of our

COVID-19 response. If, at some later point after lifts have been installed, those centres are needed I have assured the Health Minister and our health care workers that the offer still stands and that they will have priority use of our MOT centres for the duration of this crisis.

Next steps

I have asked my Permanent Secretary to ensure that the report's findings and learning are followed up robustly and at pace. The first step will be the development of an action plan with clear and specific actions and timescales and I am pleased to report that work to finalise this plan is well in hand. The plan will be signed off by me and only when I am satisfied that it is capable of addressing the issues and shortcomings that are identified in the report. I will also make this available to Members as soon as possible.

Progress in delivering the actions that the plan sets out will be monitored in the first instance by the DVA's Audit and Risk Assurance Committee which will provide a scrutiny and challenge function to ensure that actions are implemented in a timely manner. The Committee will also review the annual DVA Audit plan to ensure any control weaknesses highlighted in the report are reviewed during this financial year, with a particular focus on Contract Management.

Because of the seriousness of the issues in the report, and their wider application, the plan will also be directly and closely monitored by my Permanent Secretary in her role as Accounting Officer. I have made it clear that DVA will be required to provide regular monthly updates on progress in implementing the action plan and my Permanent Secretary and I will be scrutinising these carefully, with the assistance of the Department's own Audit and Risk Assurance Committee, to make sure that progress is not only made but sustained.

Additionally, my Permanent Secretary will be taking action to ensure that learning from the investigation, including in relation to contract management and record keeping, is applied more widely across the Department.

The fact that this situation arose is unacceptable and I want to assure Members and the public that I have taken all of the independent engineering, procurement and audit advice I requested, and steps and processes will continue to be put in place to ensure that this situation never arises again.

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 13 March 2020

Written Answers

The Executive Office

Mr Butler asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what discussions they have had with the Minister of Education regarding repealing the exemption of teaching from the Fair Employment and Treatment Order (Northern Ireland) 1998. **(AQW 876/17-22)**

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): We have not yet held discussions with the Minister of Education on this matter. However, consideration of this issue in due course will include consultations and discussions with Minister of Education.

Ms Dolan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what progress has been made in relation to implementing the regulations which govern the publication of gender pay gap information. **(AQW 1236/17-22)**

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: TEO officials are currently working with officials from the Department for Communities to consider how best to implement the gender pay gap provisions contained in Section 19 of the Employment Act (Northern Ireland) 2016.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) what is the staffing compliment of the Commission for Victims and Survivors; and (ii) what is its annual budget. **(AQW 1593/17-22)**

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill:

- (i) The staffing complement of the Commission for Victims and Survivors is 11 Full time Equivalent employees (excluding the Commissioner).
- (ii) The 2019/20 opening budget for the Commission for Victims and Survivors was £845,000.

Mr Lunn asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on their Department's Brexit preparations in line with the Northern Ireland protocol; and how many people are working on ensuring compliance with the protocol. **(AQW 1882/17-22)**

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: An Executive sub-committee on EU Exit issues has been established and will be a key structure in the co-ordination of our response to the out workings of the Withdrawal Agreement including the Northern Ireland Protocol.

We have written to the Prime Minister seeking a meeting regarding his Government's commitments in the New Decade, New Approach including those commitments associated with the Protocol and, in particular, the contradictory statements by the UK Government and the European Commission on the implications of the Protocol for the movement of goods from GB to NI.

To support the Executive sub-committee the Executive Office have set up a cross-departmental Trade and Protocol group to co-ordinate the work of officials across all the affected Departments. This group will help ensure that Ministers can provide strategic oversight and direction to meet key activities. The scope of this work includes understanding the implications and practical delivery of the Protocol and ensuring the Northern Ireland position is represented in the decision making structures in Whitehall.

We will engage closely, both at Ministerial and official level, with the Protocol workstream which we have asked the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to establish.

Five members of staff within the Executive Office have direct responsibilities for the work on the Protocol. Other departments have dedicated capacity for this work.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister in regard to the Written Ministerial Statement of 10 February 2020 on the Legislative Programme, are all Ministers committed to and required to support all the listed bills.

(AQW 2147/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: In accordance with Section (9) of the Pledge of Office, Ministers are required to support, and to act in accordance with, all decisions of the Executive Committee.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in regard to their appointment of Special Advisers, in each case (i) whether they independently chose their special adviser or an allocation was made by their party; (ii) how it was made known, and to whom, that the Ministers were seeking to appoint special advisers; (iii) whether a pool of candidates was considered; (iv) if so, how many were within the pool; (v) how any pool of candidates was assembled; (vi) what were the essential and desirable criteria set for the job; (vii) by what process was the choice made; (viii) what notes and records were made and kept of the process; (ix) how fair employment obligations were met; (x) on what date(s) was the job offered and accepted; (xi) what was the contractual start date; and (xii) was the range of available salary discussed with the appointee, or was the job offered and accepted without knowledge of the likely salary.

(AQW 2508/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: The appointment of our special advisers followed the requirements set out in the Code for the Appointment of Special Advisers agreed by the Executive and published by the Department of Finance on 20 January 2020.

Salary details were confirmed by the Department of Finance on 14 February.

Stephen McGlade, Philip Weir and Emma Little Pengelly were appointed with effect from 11 January 2020, Dara O'Hagan was appointed with effect from 3 February 2020 and John Loughran was appointed with effect from 5 February 2020. Kim Ashton was appointed with effect from Monday 02 March.

Mr Beggs asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister why they have committed £28million over the next three years from the Executive Office budget to the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression and its associated Commissioners.

(AQO 230/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: The £28 million figure is an estimate over 3 years as the development of these bodies is at an early stage.

Costs will depend on proposed work plans by the bodies, as agreed by Ministers.

The budgets will be set and agreed by Ministers in accordance with available funds.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail (i) the reason for the change in rules surrounding ammonia emissions from slurry tanks; and (ii) the legal basis for making the change.

(AQW 1712/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): The Department has not made any change to rules regarding ammonia emissions or to its advice to planning authorities on assessing the impacts of emissions from agricultural development. However, in light of recent case law and emerging evidence, my officials are currently undertaking a review of the operational protocol for such advice. I recognise the importance of clarity on this issue for the agriculture sector and planning authorities and will ensure that this work progresses in a timely manner. It is in everyone's interest to address environmental concerns while allowing sustainable agricultural development.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what measures are being taken to prevent further deterioration of protected sites, as legally required under the Habitats Directive.

(AQW 1939/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Department is taking action to avoid further deterioration of our protected sites through a range of programmes and measures designed to address key pressures and threats in order to restore to, or maintain at favourable condition.

We are developing conservation management plans for NI's Special Areas of Conservation (also designated as ASSIs) to inform the most appropriate management of these important habitats and species. These plans are well advanced and will enable us to target actions to improve condition on these sites.

We support actions on the ground by providing others who own and manage ASSIs with grant support and bespoke agreements through our Management of Sensitive Sites (MOSS) programme and the Environmental Farming Scheme, and through the INTERREG Va Habitats Programme.

Further protection of our sites is afforded through the Environment Order (NI) 2002 which provides a regulatory framework to reduce the risk of damaging operations, while planning applications and environmental permits and licences are subject to assessments to determine potential risks to site features.

The Department is also working to address wider pressures on protected sites, such as that posed by ammonia emissions through a review of the operational protocol on the assessment of air pollution impacts on sensitive habitats and the development of an Ammonia Action Plan.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs why his Department continues to provide funding to private landowners for the planting of non-native tree species.

(AQW 2101/17-22)

Mr Poots: The policy of my Department is to expand forest cover to increase the widest range of benefits they provide for the people of Northern Ireland. In promoting this policy grant aid is available to landowners for planting woodlands, which include native and non-native trees, in compliance with the UK Forestry Standard.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail (i) the number of farm businesses that receive income from the Basic Payment Scheme; (ii) the number of farm businesses which receive income from the Basic Payment Scheme which do not produce livestock or crops; and (iii) the cost for non-producing farm businesses, broken down by county.

(AQW 2119/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- (i) In the 2019 scheme year 23,819 farm businesses received a Basic Payment.
- (ii) Of the farm businesses who received a Basic Payment 1,107 did not hold cattle or sheep and all land declared was grass. The amount of Direct Payments made to this group represents 1.38% of the total amount of Direct Payments made for the 2019 scheme year.
- (iii) All farm businesses in receipt of Basic Payments must be actively farming the land for which they claim. Payment is based on the agricultural activity on the land and this is not restricted to having cattle and/or sheep or producing crops. There are other eligible agricultural activities such as the production of grass silage, grazing horses and contract rearing of livestock. Therefore, no farm businesses receive payment which are not carrying out agricultural activity.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs when he will publish an implementation timetable to establish a Contaminated Land Regime, provided for within Part 3 of The Waste and Contaminated Land (Northern Ireland) Order 1997.

(AQW 2143/17-22)

Mr Poots: I can advise that no decision has been taken on the introduction of a contaminated land regime in Northern Ireland.

I am currently considering the recommendations from a risk assessment conducted by the NIEA of the financial, environmental and health risks associated with not having a specific Contaminated Land regulatory regime in Northern Ireland.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the (i) cost; and (ii) impact of his Department still having legal responsibility for the Reservoirs Act 2015.

(AQW 2194/17-22)

Mr Poots:

(i) The costs.

The costs to the Department of still having the legal responsibility for the Reservoirs Act (2015) have been minimal due to the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) acting, as far as possible, as if the relevant transfer of functions from the former DARD had taken place. DfI has the necessary expertise and the staff to regulate reservoirs and DAERA doesn't.

Some costs have been incurred in terms of joint working, including exploring the means of transferring legal responsibility from DAERA to DfI in the absence of a sitting Assembly and Executive. These costs relate to staff time, which was not recorded separately.

(ii) The impact.

The impact on the Department of still having the legal responsibility for the Reservoirs Act (2015) has been minimal, again due to DfI acting, as far as possible, as if the relevant transfer of functions from the former DARD had taken place. Work undertaken between the departments to date has not been disruptive to DAERA.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail (i) the total amount spent in cleaning up the Mobuoy site; and (ii) the total amount paid by her Department in fines for failure to clean up the Mobuoy site, broken down each year since 2011.

(AQW 2308/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- (i) The illegal disposal of waste at Mobuoy Road is the subject of an ongoing criminal prosecution and the question refers to matters that are in evidence. Accordingly, I am unable to provide the information requested at this time.
- (ii) There have been no fines levied on the Department in relation to the Mobuoy site.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in regard to his appointment of a Special Adviser, (i) whether he independently chose his special adviser or an allocation was made by his party; (ii) how it was made known, and to whom, that he was seeking to appoint a special adviser; (iii) whether a pool of candidates was considered; (iv) if so, how many were within the pool; (v) how any pool of candidates was assembled; (vi) what were the essential and desirable criteria set for the job; (vii) by what process was the choice made; (viii) what notes and records were made and kept of the process; (ix) how fair employment obligations were met; (x) on what date(s) was the job offered and accepted; (xi) what was the contractual start date; and (xii) was the range of available salary discussed with the appointee, or was the job offered and accepted without knowledge of the likely salary.

(AQW 2509/17-22)

Mr Poots: The appointment of my special adviser followed the requirements set out in the Code for the Appointment of Special Advisers agreed by the Executive and published by the Department of Finance on 20 January. Salary details were confirmed to me by the Department of Finance on 14 February. Mark Beattie was appointed on 10 March 2020.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) for an update on (a) unauthorised access; and (b) dumping in aquaculture areas of Carlingford Lough; and (ii) to detail any investigations or enforcement measures undertaken by his Department with regard to breaches of Fishing Culture Licence conditions.

(AQW 2528/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Department has been aware for some time of difficulties between neighbouring licensees producing shellfish at Mill Bay in Carlingford Lough and has received reports of unlawful dumping of shellfish waste and breaches of licence conditions from different parties. Investigations continue in these areas, which will inform any appropriate enforcement action.

The Department is very keen to help resolve disputes between differing parties at Mill Bay in Carlingford Lough. A recent development is an approach from the Shellfish Association of Great Britain to act as a facilitator in discussions. I have asked my officials to expedite this as a priority.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he has plans to ban the sale of (i) household coal; and (ii) wet wood as part of the strategy to improve air quality.

(AQW 2529/17-22)

Mr Poots: There are no current plans to introduce a ban on the sale of household coal and wet wood in Northern Ireland.

I can confirm that my department has been working on developing a draft Clean Air Strategy. Officials have been collaborating with other Departments and are moving towards finalising the draft discussion document on the Clean Air Strategy. Once complete, I will consider the options for issuing the draft Clean Air Strategy discussion document for public consultation to seek views on a wide range of matters.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the direct payments paid to support each of the annual agricultural shows for the last three years.

(AQW 2569/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department currently provides sponsorship to a number of local shows. A total budget of £5000 is available each year. In addition to this my Department also participates at eight of the shows each year on a rotational basis and pays for the trade space and advertisements within the respective events catalogues. Tables 1-3 provide these details.

My Department also provides funding through the Northern Ireland Regional Food Programme (NIRFP) to support the promotion of high quality Northern Ireland produce. This is a competitive programme that some local agricultural shows have availed of over a number of years. The NIRFP funding provided over the last three years is summarised in Table 4.

DAERA is committed to supporting and contributing to the success of our local shows and will continue to work in partnership with them as we progress into the 2020 show season.

Name of Show	Date	Amount Awarded	Cost of Trade Space	Total
Mullahead	Feb 23	250.00	-	250.00

Name of Show	Date	Amount Awarded	Cost of Trade Space	Total
Ballymoney	June 2 & 3	300.00	197.00	497.00
Castlewellan	July 15	350.00	297.00	647.00
Lurgan	June 3	250.00	-	250.00
Ballymena	May 26 & 27	250.00	152.00	402.00
Newry	June 24	250.00	-	250.00
Antrim	July 27	250.00	-	250.00
Enniskillen	Aug 6/7	250.00	502.00	752.00
Londonderry/ Limavady	July 20	300.00	262.00	562.00
Cultra- Rare Breeds	Sept 7	250.00	-	250.00
Saintfield	June 15	250.00	-	250.00
Armagh	June 10	350.00	277.00	627.00
Omagh	June 30 & July 1	250.00	342.00	592.00
Clogher Valley	July 26	350.00	302.00	652.00
NI Ploughing Ass.	Sept 29 & 30	350.00	150.00	500.00
Balmoral	May 15-18	750.00	18079.80*	18829.80
Winter Fair	Dec 12	-	8272.12	8272.12

* Reduced amount paid in 2019 due to smaller exhibition space required and credit of £6500 from the 2018 Show.

Table 2. Sponsorship of Local Shows 2018

Name of Show	Date	Amount Awarded	Cost of Trade Space and Advertising	Total
Mullahead	25th Feb	250.00		250.00
Ballymoney	2nd & 3rd June	300.00	-	300.00
Castlewellan	15 July	350.00	200.00	550.00
Lisburn & Saintfield	17 June	250.00	-	250.00
Lurgan	3 June	300.00	240.00	540.00
Ballymena	26 & 27 May	250.00	210.00 (incl. £20 tickets)	460.00
Newry	24 June	250.00	90.00	340.00
Antrim	22 July	250.00	-	250.00
Enniskillen	1 & 2 Aug	350.00	226.00	576.00
Londonderry/Limavady	15 July	300.00	95.00	395.00
Cultra- Show & Sale	2 Sept	250.00	-	250.00
Armagh	10 June	250.00	190.00 (incl. £60 tickets)	440.00
Omagh	30 June & 1 July	250.00	158.00	408.00
Clogher Valley	26 July	300.00	270.00	570.00
NI Ploughing Ass.	28 & 29 Sept	350.00	150.00	500.00
Balmoral	16 – 19 May	750.00	34,333.20	35,083.20

Name of Show	Date	Amount Awarded	Cost of Trade Space and Advertising	Total
Winter Fair	13 Dec	-	8,118.22	8,118.22
Total		5,000.00	44,280.42	49,280.42

Table 3. Sponsorship of Local Shows 2017

Name of Show	Date	Amount Awarded	Cost of Trade Space and Advertising	Total
Mullahead	25th Feb	300.00		300.00
Ballymoney	2 & 3 June	300.00	-	300.00
Castlewellan	15 July	350.00	200.00	550.00
Lurgan	3 June	300.00	240.00	540.00
Ballymena	26 & 27 May	250.00	210.00 (incl. £30 tickets)	460.00
Newry	24 June	250.00	30.00	280.00
Antrim	22 July	250.00		250.00
Enniskillen	1 & 2 Aug	350.00	226.00	576.00
Londonderry/Limavady	15 July	350.00	85.00	435.00
Cultra- Rare Breeds	2 Sept	150.00	-	150.00
Lisburn / Saintfield	17 June	250.00	-	250.00
Armagh	10 June	250.00	240.00 (incl. £60 tickets)	490.00
Omagh	30 June & 1 July	250.00	128.00	378.00
Clogher Valley	26 July	300.00	270.00	570.00
NI Ploughing Ass.	29 & 30 Sept	350.00	150.00	500.00
Balmoral	10 – 13 May	750.00	33,660.00	34,410.00
Winter Fair	14 Dec	-	7,887.38	7,887.38
Total		5,000.00	43,326.38	48,326.38

Table 4. NI Regional Food Programme – Funding of Local Shows

Year	Show	Amount offered	Amount claimed
2019/20	Ballymoney	£1,743	£1743 claimed
	Antrim	£1,965	Claim has not yet been submitted.
	Clogher	£3,590	Claim has not yet been submitted.
2018/19	Ballymoney	£1,992	£1,992
	Londonderry/ Limavady	£1,800	Did not submit a claim
	Clogher	£4,612.50	£3432.90
	Armagh	£2,537.50	£2057.91
	Newry	£4,880	£4015.20
	Castlewellan	£5,000	£3825.24
	Antrim	£2,460	£2460

Year	Show	Amount offered	Amount claimed
2017/18	Ballymoney	£2,490	£2,490
	Londonderry/ Limavady	£1,640	Show withdrew their Letter of Offer
	Armagh	£4,038	£1,235.08
	Castlewellan	£3,400	£2,143.12
2016/17	Armagh	£4,000	£2,892.41
	Ballymoney	£2,450	£2,244
	Newry	£10,175	£10,175
	Clogher.	£9,000	£6,604

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the current policy for the maintenance and replacement of boundary fencing of areas of land under the control of Forestry Service.

(AQW 2571/17-22)

Mr Poots: The current policy is that Forest Service maintain and repair boundary fencing where it is necessary to meet sustainable forest management obligations and protect the public forest asset. As such, boundary fencing works are undertaken where there is a need to protect forests at particularly vulnerable stages of their development. This tends primarily to be where trees are not sufficiently established or robust to withstand browsing pressures from wild animals or livestock straying in the forest.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail (i) the average time from diagnosis to removal off-farm for bovine TB reactor cattle; and (ii) the measures that can be introduced to reduce this time.

(AQW 2572/17-22)

Mr Poots: For the last three months (1 November 2019- 31 January 2020), the average time from diagnosis to off-farm removal of bovine Tuberculosis reactor cattle was 15 calendar days. Herd keepers are required to isolate reactor animals from the rest of their herd from the time of notification by the testing veterinarian diagnosis until they are removed.

This average time is within the legislative requirement to slaughter within 30 days and the current internal Departmental target of 3 weeks. A reduction in the average time would require additional staff resources, in particular an increase in the number of valuation staff.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether his Department has any plans to improve and simplify the identification of animals for recording on APHIS.

(AQW 2573/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Department recently sought the views of stakeholders on a new numbering format as part of the preparatory work for the potential introduction of bovine electronic identification (bovine EID).

However the format of animal identification numbers recorded on APHIS identifies the holding of origin for animals which is important for the traceability which underpins food safety and disease control systems. As this is driven by EU legislation it is therefore unlikely to change in the near future.

Livestock Keepers currently record animal identifications (i.e. register cattle births) either directly onto APHIS using APHIS-on-line, through paper submission to DAERA or via a telephony service provided by DAERA. DAERA has recently released a series of usability improvements to APHIS-on-line and further changes to enhance its operability on mobile phones and tablets are planned to be released to farmers by May 2020.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he had any engagement with the Home Office to discuss the concerns of agriculture workers and producers about plans to introduce a points-based immigration system.

(AQW 2574/17-22)

Mr Poots: The UK Government's policy statement, released in February 2020, detailing the introduction of a points-based immigration system, included the announcement of a programme of engagement by the Home Office to begin in March 2020. While the Home Office is yet to release information on the specific content and structure of this programme, the aim is to increase understanding of the new system amongst impacted stakeholders and to understand stakeholder views on the implementation of the points-based system.

My department will be represented in these engagement sessions by officials and it is expected that stakeholders from our agri-food industry will participate also. I would also highlight that officials in my department routinely engage with counterparts in both the Department for the Economy and the Home Office on migration issues as they relate to the NI agri-food sector.

My department has been in correspondence with Executive colleagues who will be taking forward engagement with the Home Office to outline concerns and implications of the new immigration system for NI.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether his Department has had any engagement with the UK Government regarding the UK Shared Prosperity Fund.
(AQW 2575/17-22)

Mr Poots: The development and implementation of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) is of direct interest and concern for DAERA stakeholders and rural communities in Northern Ireland. My Department, through the Department of Finance, has therefore taken every available opportunity to engage with the UK Government in an effort to put forward Northern Ireland's position in respect of the design, implementation and delivery of the SPF.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he has requested that the UK Government funds a successor to the Priority 6 LEADER programme from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund.
(AQW 2576/17-22)

Mr Poots: Work is ongoing within my Department, and across the NICS, to develop measures and mechanisms to support rural society and address the challenges facing rural communities given that we have now left the EU and the UK will not be part of the next Rural Development Programming period (2021-2027). My Department will continue to engage with Department of Finance in relation to securing the necessary EU replacement funding for future financial periods.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether his Department has assessed the impact on (i) agricultural workers; and (ii) the wider food and drink processing industry, of the Home Office's plans to introduce a points-based immigration system.
(AQW 2577/17-22)

Mr Poots: In 2017 it is estimated that migrant employees accounted for 20 per cent of the paid agricultural labour force, with the substantial majority being employed on horticultural farms. As most of the demand for migrant labour in NI agriculture is low skilled in nature, the lack of a route for low skilled migration under the new system will mean that it will generally not be possible to recruit migrants to work on NI farms under the terms of the new system unless specific schemes, such as the current scheme for seasonal workers, are put in place.

The NI food and drinks processing industry has a greater reliance on lower skilled migrant labour relative to the NI economy as a whole and the wider UK agri-food industry. In 2017, an estimated 44 per cent of all employees in the NI food and drinks processing industry were migrant workers. The majority of migrant workers in this sector work in lower skilled roles, such as process, plant and machine operatives. Restrictions on low-skilled migration under the new system will negatively affect the supply of labour to the industry, which will likely increase costs to businesses.

Given the significant dependence on migrant labour within the agri-food industry and the continued free movement of goods between NI and the EU, there are concerns that restricted access to labour in NI could adversely affect the competitiveness of our agri-food businesses compared to those in EU countries that will continue to benefit from freedom of movement. This is particularly concerning for NI given the lower geographic barriers to trade with and similar sectoral structure to the Republic of Ireland.

Access to labour has been and remains important to ensuring that our businesses are able to continue to thrive in the both the near and long term future.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what measures (i) are being taken; and (ii) will be taken by his Department to arrest the decline in the bee population.
(AQW 2584/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Department provides guidance to landowners on the maintenance of habitats to support the bee and wider pollinator population. Official controls are implemented by the Department which includes monitoring honeybee apiaries and bee imports to detect the presence of harmful pests. An on-line database (Databees) has been introduced by the Department in 2018 to encourage voluntary registration of bee keepers to improve effectiveness of bee health and controls. The College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) facilitates preliminary courses for new entrants to beekeeping.

The Department is currently contributing to the on-going work of a coalition of interest groups aimed at the development of a Pollinator plan covering the years 2021 to 2025. This will inform future policy considerations of this Department regarding its role in supporting a healthy bee population.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail (i) the location; and (ii) annual volumes of commercial peat extraction in Northern Ireland.
(AQW 2615/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department does not hold information on the location or volumes of commercial peat extraction activities in the wider countryside. The power to grant permission for large-scale peat extraction rests with the Planning Authorities.

In relation to Department owned lands, commercial peat extraction occurs at Newferry, near Portglenone, under a lease arrangement. Volumes of extraction are unavailable.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) to detail the extent of unauthorised peat extraction in Northern Ireland; and (ii) to detail the enforcement action taken against unauthorised peat extraction in Northern Ireland in the last five years.

(AQW 2616/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department does not hold information on the extent of unauthorised peat extraction in the wider countryside. DAERA officials are aware of a number of incidents of unauthorised peat extraction on designated sites such as Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI). However there are no records of prosecutions relating to unauthorised peat extraction in ASSIs during this period.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for a timescale for bringing forward the Departments (Transfer of Functions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 in respect of reservoirs.

(AQW 2646/17-22)

Mr Poots: This process of transfer may take 3-6 months to complete.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail how many individuals purchased (i) an angling rod licence; (ii) a permit; or (iii) a day ticket, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2676/17-22)

Mr Poots:

(i) Angling Licences

2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
26,980	25,667	25,779	26,264	26,190	24,198

(ii) Angling Permit

2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
13,308	12,509	12,268	15,951	18,059	16,876

(iii) Day Ticket – River Bush

2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
800	743	847	823	907	515

The figures for 2019 have not been compiled yet. Day tickets are issued for 3 separate stretches of the River Bush.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to AQW 1163/17-22, how these levels compare to (i) Scotland; (ii) England; (iii) Wales; and (iv) Republic of Ireland.

(AQW 2744/17-22)

Mr Poots: The National Atmospheric Emissions Inventory estimates that Northern Ireland's ammonia emissions were 33.9 kilotonnes (kt) in 2017. This inventory estimates that Scotland's ammonia emissions were 31.7kt, England's ammonia emissions were 193kt and Wales' ammonia emissions were 23.6kt. Ireland's Transboundary Gas Emissions report estimates that ammonia emissions in the Republic of Ireland in 2017 were 118.5kt.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to AQW 784/17-22, to detail (i) the total envisaged number of staff; and (ii) the number of (a) departmental staff; and (b) other civil service staff, currently located at his Department's headquarters in Ballykelly.

(AQW 2745/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- (i) The Department plans to have a total of 407 staff located in Ballykelly by 2021. This number includes 323 DAERA staff already working there, and a further 84 posts consisting of vacancies and a number of posts due to transfer from Dundonald House.
- (ii) (a) As of 1st January 2020 there were 323 DAERA staff located in Ballykelly.
- (b) There are a further 2 staff from other Civil Service departments located in Ballykelly.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) for his assessment of the effectiveness of the Rural Needs Act; and (ii) whether he has plans to review the legislation.

(AQW 2746/17-22)

Mr Poots: I consider the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 to be effective in supporting the delivery of positive and meaningful benefits for rural dwellers and considering it has only been in operation for a short period of time I have no plans to review it at present.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail (i) how many appeals to awards under the Basic Payment Scheme were lodged by farm businesses in the North Antrim constituency; and (ii) the final outcome of each, in the last five years.

(AQW 2762/17-22)

Mr Poots: A total of 221 applications for a Review of Decision under the Basic Payment Scheme were lodged by farm businesses in the North Antrim constituency in the last five years. The final outcomes are broken down in the following table: -

Final outcome	Number of reviews
Allowed	61
Partially allowed	11
Disallowed	109
Withdrawn by farm business	28
Timebound*	3
Still being processed	9
Total	221

* Decision not reviewed as application was submitted after the deadline to request a review.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to AQW 2112/17-22, when will the review of the business case for the Environmental Farming Scheme be completed.

(AQW 2812/17-22)

Mr Poots: Following a review of uptake of the scheme so far, my Department has submitted an Addendum to the original Business Case for the Environmental Farming Scheme (EFS) to the Department of Finance (DoF).

My officials will be working closely with DoF officials to aim to achieve approval at the earliest opportunity.

Subject to the necessary approvals being in place, my Department plans to issue Tranche 3 agreements to successful applicants in mid-March.

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline (i) whether any costs incurred locally by measures in the new Environment Bill will be covered by either the Executive or Westminster; (ii) an estimation of the total (a) resource; and (b) capital costs associated with the Environment Bill; and (iii) a breakdown of who will pay for these.

(AQW 2821/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Bill provides a framework for a number of measures. The financial implications will be assessed on an individual basis as measures are implemented. A number have no direct financial implications, others will be self-funding and, in the case of the Office of Environmental Protection, the Northern Ireland costs will fall to the Executive.

Department for Communities

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister for Communities whether she will support a ban on sponsorship by gambling companies in local sport.

(AQO 283/17-22)

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): The current legislation in relation to gambling here dates back to 1985; I recognise that it is outdated and takes no account of the internet and other industry advances nor does it address the serious issue of problem gambling.

The Gambling Prevalence surveys carried out by my Department have demonstrated that there is a much higher rate of problem gambling here than in other jurisdictions.

My Department's consultation on the Regulation of Gambling closed on the 21 February. The purpose of the consultation was to seek views on the appropriateness of the current law and to identify areas of gambling activity which should be included in any future legislation.

My officials are analysing over 400 responses to the consultation and I expect to receive a report in a few weeks. Following engagement with the committee, I hope to be able to announce the way forward by the summer.

With regard to sponsorship by gambling companies of local sport, I recognise the great work sports clubs do, especially for young people and that many of them rely on advertising and sponsorship to raise funds. I am, however, also very concerned at the harm caused by problem gambling in our society.

I will want to consider the contents of the consultation report on this issue and take into account the health and economic impacts before coming to any conclusions on changes to the law.

Mr Lunn asked the Minister for Communities when she will bring forward legislation to reclassify housing associations.
(AQO 285/17-22)

Ms Hargey: In line with New Decade, New Approach I intend to bring forward legislation as soon as possible to facilitate reversal of the Office for National Statistics' classification of Housing Associations as Non-Financial Public Corporations. I am currently considering draft legislation.

This is a very urgent issue but finalisation of the draft legislation has only been possible since the return of the Executive. My officials and I are bringing this process to a close as quickly as possible so that I may seek agreement from the Executive to introduce the legislation into the Assembly.

My officials are also working with officials in the Department of Finance, in the meantime, to secure an extension from Treasury to the current derogation – due to end on 31 March, 2020. This derogation has so far deferred an effect of the decision by the Office for National Statistics – which otherwise would have required the borrowings of Registered Housing Associations to score against the Capital Budget of my Department.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities whether Post Office Card Account holders will be denied access to their accounts following the end of the contract in November 2021.
(AQO 289/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Payments of benefits and pension into mainstream accounts provides people with greater financial inclusion as these can provide access to services such as Direct Debit, ATMs and Chip & Pin. These services are not available through the Post Office card account.

The Post Office card account contract is due to end in November 2021, and following contract end, people will no longer be able to access or use their existing Post Office card accounts.

People are therefore encouraged to switch from their Post Office card account to a mainstream account. This is considered to be a safe and reliable method of payment, providing financial inclusion and giving people a greater choice about where and when they collect their money.

For those people unable to access or manage a mainstream account, my Department will offer a replacement payment exception service.

Support is available to help people choose a product that is right for their circumstances, which may be an alternative payment exception service.

A dedicated free telephone service has been set up within DWP which offers POca users the opportunity to ask questions and provides support in choosing an account that is right for their circumstances.

Contact details are provided in letters issued on to customers by DWP on behalf of the Department, and are also available on NI Direct.

Further support can be made available by contacting the Make the Call Service.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister for Communities how she will ensure effective rural proofing for departmental strategies.
(AQO 291/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The "New Decade, New Approach" document has detailed support for a new Programme for Government underpinned by key supporting strategies.

The Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 provides a statutory duty on all public authorities to have due regard to rural needs when developing, adopting, implementing or revising policies, strategies and plans, and when designing and delivering public services.

My officials have received training from the Rural Development Council on conducting a Rural Needs Impact Assessment and relevant information has been shared as appropriate so that all staff are aware of their statutory duties. I will of course ensure that all social strategies currently being developed by my Department are rural-proofed.

My Department also compiles information on the exercise of its duties in this regard and this is published in our Annual Report and Accounts and reported to DAERA for the purposes of their annual monitoring.

My officials will adopt a co-design, co-production approach when developing strategies for consideration by the Executive and in doing so will have due regard to the social and economic needs of persons in rural areas during both development and implementation.

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister for Communities for a timeframe for assessing the responses to the consultation on changes to gambling laws.

(AQO 293/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The current legislation in relation to gambling here dates back to 1985; I recognise that it is outdated and takes no account of the internet and other industry advances nor does it address the serious issue of problem gambling.

The Gambling Prevalence surveys carried out by my Department have demonstrated that there is a much higher rate of problem gambling here than in other jurisdictions.

My Department's consultation on the Regulation of Gambling closed on the 21 February. The purpose of the consultation was to seek views on the appropriateness of the current law and to identify areas of gambling activity which should be included in any future legislation.

My officials are analysing over 400 responses to the consultation and I expect to receive a report in a few weeks. Following engagement with the committee, I hope to be able to announce the way forward by the summer.

With regard to sponsorship by gambling companies of local sport, I recognise the great work sports clubs do, especially for young people and that many of them rely on advertising and sponsorship to raise funds. I am, however, also very concerned at the harm caused by problem gambling in our society.

I will want to consider the contents of the consultation report on this issue and take into account the health and economic impacts before coming to any conclusions on changes to the law.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for Communities whether she is considering alternative or additional methods of identifying and tackling poverty.

(AQO 290/17-22)

Ms Hargey: In line with New Decade, New Approach, I will be publishing a timescale for the delivery of a new Anti-Poverty Strategy in the coming weeks. The principles and practice of citizen and community engagement, co-design and co-production will be a key part of the development and delivery of this strategy.

Together with stakeholders and colleagues from other departments, steps will be taken to ensure that the Strategy targets and measures the things that will make a real difference in identifying and tackling poverty. I am committed to the delivery of an anti-poverty strategy that targets objective need and ensures that no one is penalised for being poor.

Currently the main source of data used to measure poverty here is the Family Resources Survey (FRS). The FRS collects information on the incomes and circumstances of around 2,000 private households. My department publishes Poverty Statistics annually using the FRS data. These statistics estimate the number and percentage of people living in low income households.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister for Communities how she will ensure effective rural proofing for departmental strategies.

(AQO 291/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The "New Decade, New Approach" document has detailed support for a new Programme for Government underpinned by key supporting strategies.

The Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 provides a statutory duty on all public authorities to have due regard to rural needs when developing, adopting, implementing or revising policies, strategies and plans, and when designing and delivering public services.

My officials have received training from the Rural Development Council on conducting a Rural Needs Impact Assessment and relevant information has been shared as appropriate so that all staff are aware of their statutory duties. I will of course ensure that all social strategies currently being developed by my Department are rural-proofed.

My Department also compiles information on the exercise of its duties in this regard and this is published in our Annual Report and Accounts and reported to DAERA for the purposes of their annual monitoring.

My officials will adopt a co-design, co-production approach when developing strategies for consideration by the Executive and in doing so will have due regard to the social and economic needs of persons in rural areas during both development and implementation.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Communities how she plans to reduce the waiting list for housing, particularly for people living in housing stress.

(AQO 292/17-22)

Ms Hargey: In line with New Decade New Approach, I intend to work with Executive colleagues to progress measures that aim to reduce the number of households in housing stress.

These measures will include:

- Enabling housing associations to continue building new social homes by bringing forward legislation to facilitate reversal of the Office for National Statistics' classification of registered Housing Associations as Non-Financial Public Corporations;
- Enhancing investment and agreeing a target for new social and affordable home starts. In fact, in 2019/20, £146 million has been allocated against a target to start building 1850 new social homes; and
- Tackling the maintenance backlog for Housing Executive properties.

In addition, housing will be an outcome for the Executive within the new Programme for Government, with a focus on ensuring every household has access to a good quality, affordable and sustainable home that is appropriate for its needs.

In support of this, I will bring forward as soon as possible my Housing Programme for the next two years.

Department of Education

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) how many applications for a statement of special educational needs exceeded the 26-week statutory time limit; (ii) how long these assessments took; (iii) and the reasons for the delay, for each year since 2016.

(AQW 2043/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education):

- (i) The numbers of applications for a statement of special educational needs which exceeded the 26 week statutory time frame are as follows:

2016/17:	2001
2017/18:	2139
2018/19:	2229
2019 to date:	865*

* Cases opened in the 2019/20 financial year to 14 February 2020 which exceeded the 26 week time frame.

- (ii) The average time to complete the assessments outlined in (i) is as follows:

2016/17:	42 weeks
2017/18:	47 weeks
2018/19:	47 weeks
2019 to date:	34 weeks**

** average time for statutory assessments which exceeded the 26 week time frame, opened and completed within the 2019/20 financial year to 14 February 2020.

- (iii) The reasons for the delay, for each year since 2016:

The EA does not have information regarding delays for reasons other than valid exceptions. Valid exceptions can be:

- a further advice needs to be sought by the EA to complete its assessment;
- b parents wish to provide advice to the EA more than 6 weeks after they were invited to do so;
- c advice from a school principal is delayed because of school closure;
- d advice sought from a Health Trust has not been provided within 6 weeks;
- e exceptional personal circumstances affect the child or parent;
- f the child or parent is away for at least 4 weeks during the 18 week period; or
- g an appointment for examination or test is not kept.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education does he anticipate any enrolment problems for year 8 enrolment in September 2020 across schools in North Down.

(AQW 2629/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department is planning for Transfer 2020 and it is the intention that additional places will be allocated to post-primary schools in North Down to address potential oversubscription for Year 8 admission. Schools will shortly be informed of the increases to be allocated.

These additional places reflect the fact that it is likely that schools in North Down will be oversubscribed in 2020. These places will address oversubscription and my Department may seek to provide further places if there is a requirement to increase numbers further in advance of September.

My priority is to ensure that there are sufficient places across Northern Ireland to meet demand so that the stress on families associated with transferring from primary to post-primary education is kept to an absolute minimum. As such, the best interests of children will take precedence over the interests of individual institutions.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to provide details of the budget for each school in North Down.
(AQW 2630/17-22)

Mr Weir: The table below details the budget allocated to schools in the North Down constituency, through the 2019-20 Common Funding Formula (CFF) only.

School	CFF Budget 2019-20* £
Bangor Central Nursery	217,206
Hollywood Nursery	168,617
Trinity Nursery	180,675
Ballyholme Primary	1,605,897
Ballymagee Primary	1,123,056
Ballyvester Primary	370,219
Bangor Central Integrated Primary	1,712,052
Bloomfield Primary	1,310,039
Clandeboye Primary	1,086,744
Crawfordsburn Primary	578,954
Donaghadee Primary	1,170,156
Glencraig Integrated Primary	617,927
Grange Park Primary	1,059,023
Hollywood Primary	1,298,155
Kilcooley Primary	662,584
Kilmaine Primary	1,729,620
Millisle Primary	689,111
Rathmore Primary	1,679,799
St Anne's Primary, Donaghadee	226,107
St Comgall's Primary, Bangor	841,851
St Malachy's Primary Bangor	1,232,721
St Patrick's Primary Hollywood	834,910
Towerview Primary	1,148,434
Bangor Academy and 6th Form College	7,119,548
Bangor Grammar School	4,036,512
Glenlola Collegiate	4,284,361
Priory Integrated College	2,898,470
St Columbanus' College	3,042,516
Sullivan Upper School, Hollywood	4,987,641

* Data source: CFF 2019-20, which included funding to mitigate the increase in Teachers' Employer's Superannuation costs effective from 1 April 2019.

This excludes special schools, as these schools are not funded through the CFF.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of primary school children who have presented with mental health issues in each of the last three years; and (ii) outline the referral pathway for dealing with such cases.
(AQW 2641/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority has advised that it does not hold this information centrally, as the recording of these pupils is the responsibility of the school concerned.

If a school had a concern about a primary age child and their mental health, the parent would be contacted and asked to seek a GP appointment for referral to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of employees in his Department who currently earn less than £25,600.
(AQW 2642/17-22)

Mr Weir: The number of employees in the Department of Education who currently earn less than £25,600 per annum is 201. This includes some part-time staff whose full time rate of pay would be higher than this amount.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education to outline what his Department is doing to promote gender equality and equality of opportunity within the selection processes of the Craigavon Dickson Plan system of education.
(AQW 2652/17-22)

Mr Weir: Public authorities are subject to the equality duties arising from Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and schools have a responsibility not to discriminate against pupils on the protected grounds of sex, sexual orientation, race and disability.

Any reform of the system of transfer within the Dickson Plan area that would be significant would be for the schools' managing authorities to consider in the first instance. A Development Proposal would be required and as Education Minister I would be the ultimate decision-maker on any proposal. I do however want to assure people locally of my continued support and assurance of the continuation of the Dickson Plan system.

The operation of the current selection processes are a matter for Boards of Governors and not one in which my Department can intervene.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education what plans his Department has to reform the existing selection processes used for selection within the Craigavon Dickson Plan area at age 14.
(AQW 2653/17-22)

Mr Weir: Public authorities are subject to the equality duties arising from Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and schools have a responsibility not to discriminate against pupils on the protected grounds of sex, sexual orientation, race and disability.

Any reform of the system of transfer within the Dickson Plan area that would be significant would be for the schools' managing authorities to consider in the first instance. A Development Proposal would be required and as Education Minister I would be the ultimate decision-maker on any proposal. I do however want to assure people locally of my continued support and assurance of the continuation of the Dickson Plan system.

The operation of the current selection processes are a matter for Boards of Governors and not one in which my Department can intervene.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 1738/17-22, (i) what is meant by statutory holiday periods; (ii) does this include summer holidays; and (iii) is the service available over the summer period for pupils and parents.
(AQW 2654/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) Statutory/public holidays are closure days recognised by the Education Authority (EA). A list of statutory / public holidays for 2020/21 is due to be published by the EA to all support staff during March 2020.

For information, the 2019/20 statutory/public holidays were as follows:- Easter Mon/Tue, May Day, Late Spring Bank Holiday (May), July 12th & 13th, Late Summer Holiday (Aug), Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, Boxing Day, New Year's Day and St Patrick's Day.

- (ii)/(iii) The Education Welfare Service is available to schools, pupils and parents during school holiday periods (including summer holidays), excluding weekends and EA statutory/public holidays.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education to detail how many children, per constituency, are in Education Other Than at School (EOTAS).
(AQW 2662/17-22)

Mr Weir: The table below details the number of pupils enrolled in EOTAS centres by constituency of the pupil's residence, as per the 2018-19 School Census.

Belfast East	48
Belfast North	82
Belfast South	27
Belfast West	74
East Antrim	35
East Londonderry	31
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	21
Foyle	65
Lagan Valley	25
Mid Ulster	24
Newry And Armagh	25
North Antrim	20
North Down	36
South Antrim	38
South Down	20
Strangford	38
Upper Bann	28
West Tyrone	36
Invalid Address/Postcode	3
Total	676

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Education how many primary and post-primary schools in North Belfast are paying for counselling support from their school budgets.

(AQW 2683/17-22)

Mr Weir: Under the Local Management of Schools (LMS) arrangements, schools receive fully delegated budgets which enables resources to be used in accordance with their individual needs and priorities. My Department does not hold information relating to these delegated budgets and the provision of counselling support.

I can however confirm the position in relation to the funding provided for the Extended Schools (ES) programme - according to Action Plans submitted by schools for 2019/20, 15 primary and post primary schools and a further 4 cluster groups located in North Belfast are currently offering counselling with the aid of ES funding. In addition, the Belfast Boys' Model School and the Belfast Model School for Girls both provide counselling with funding allocated through the Full Service Extended Schools programme.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of school infrastructure in South Down.

(AQW 2686/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department has invested in improvement and maintenance works to upgrade the schools estate and keep it in a safe and serviceable condition. This financial year, the budget for minor works improvements is in excess of £83 million. In addition to minor works, further capital investment is directed through the Major Works, School Enhancement and Fresh Start Programmes.

There are currently 3 Major Capital projects in the South Down constituency. These are Down High School, Downpatrick, Iveagh Primary School, Rathfriland and St Columban's Primary School, Kilkeel.

In May 2018, Knockevin Special School was included in the first tranche of projects announced to advance in design under the second call to the School Enhancement Programme (SEP2)

In March 2016 it was announced that Shimna Integrated College would be amongst the first tranche of projects funded under the Fresh Start Programme. The approved business case identified the preferred option for a new build on the existing site. Design is well advanced and construction is expected to be completed in spring 2024.

However, despite the increasing investment in capital projects, significant demand for further improvement remains. The implementation of further major works and SEP's over the next five years will therefore be an important element of improving the overall health of the estate in the medium and longer term.

My Department will continue to bid for additional capital budget and invest all of the funding allocated.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Education to outline what emergency preparations his Department is making with other Department's in respect of potential outbreaks and spreading of Coronavirus in Northern Ireland schools.

(AQW 2711/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department has been working closely with colleagues in the Department of Health (DoH) and the Public Health Agency (PHA) on COVID – 19 (Coronavirus).

Although primarily a health issue, my Department is leading on the issue of relevant and appropriate advice and guidance to schools and education partners provided by DoH and PHA.

On 26 February I personally wrote to all school Principals and education sector partners enclosing the link to the PHA website which is being updated as the situation develops and have emphasised the importance of monitoring the website regularly. I have encouraged schools to follow the guidance; in particular, the need to practise good hand hygiene among staff and pupils; and reiterated that PHA are available to speak to individual schools which may have specific concerns in relation to COVID – 19 (Coronavirus).

Included in this email was the updated Chief Medical Officer (CMO) advice and link to GOV.UK latest guidance and advice.

The welfare, health and safety of pupils and staff is paramount and my Departmental officials, in collaboration with DoH and PHA, continue to monitor the evolving situation daily and will update schools where appropriate.

Mr McCann asked the Minister of Education for an update on the extended provision for youth groups, post 31 March 2020.

(AQW 2726/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority launched its new funding scheme for Regional and Local Voluntary Youth Organisations on 3 March. This is based on identified needs and expected outcomes in line with existing policy and to support local and regional services to address strategic, development and project work in line with the Priorities for Youth policy.

The new funding scheme will ensure that essential youth work previously funded under the Extended Provision Scheme will continue to be supported from the 1 October – 31 March 2021 and up until March 2023; specifically through Local Area Funding and Local Project Funding.

Transitional funding arrangements, including a full 6 months allocation of 2019-2020 funding from April to September 2020, will ensure continued extended provision in the interim period. Full details of transitional arrangements are provided on the youth funding website.

Specifications detailing key outputs and outcomes required of the voluntary sector to meet the previous Extended Provision Scheme outcomes are available on the dedicated youth funding website in relation to the above funding streams (www.eanifunding.org.uk). The website also includes full details of transitional funding arrangements which will be in place up to March 2022.

Statutory youth services in receipt of Extended Provision funding will be embedding essential work within their core delivery plans.

Budgets for 2020-21 have not yet been confirmed and final decisions in relation to all funding applications will be dependent on the available budget.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education whether he has seen a formal constitution of the Dickson plan system of academic selection; (i) will he make that constitution publicly available; and (ii) if there is no formal constitution can he begin the process of establishing one in consultation with stakeholders.

(AQW 2735/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority, Managing Authority for the Controlled schools included in the Dickson Plan has provided my Department with historical papers in relation to its establishment. These include the original Dickson Plan scheme dated 5 February 1965, a paper written by W.J. Dickson, Director of Education at that time and a copy of the former Ministry of Education's decision dated 15 February 1967, in relation to the reorganisation of secondary education in the Craigavon area.

I have arranged for the information requested to be placed in the Assembly Library.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount of money spent on (i) autism support units; and (ii) learning support centres in mainstream schools in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2742/17-22)

Mr Weir: It is not possible to disaggregate expenditure on Autism Support Units from Learning Support Centres (LSCs) as the Education Authority records all expenditure against the LSCs classification. The expenditure on LSCs in mainstream schools in the last 4 financial years is therefore reflected in the table below.

	2015-16 £m	2016-17 £m	2017-18 £m	2018-19 £m	2019-20 £m
LSCs	N/A*	13.1	15.1	15.34	16.77**

* Due to differences in reporting structures within the legacy Education & Library Boards this information is unavailable.

** The figure provided for 2019-20 is a forecast.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Education to outline his Department's plans to address the increased pressures on staff in special schools.

(AQW 2776/17-22)

Mr Weir: I fully recognise the pressures that staff within special schools are facing.

In 2019-20, my Department secured additional funding of £25.3m to address Special Educational Needs (SEN) related financial pressures during in-year monitoring exercises, of which the Education Authority (EA) allocated £4.4m to Special Schools.

It is the responsibility of each employing authority to monitor and manage their workforce. The EA, Special School Principals and the Board of Governors meet annually, on an individual school basis, to agree the teaching and non-teaching staff requirements, in line with increasing pupil enrolment figures.

Teachers' Health and Wellbeing is a matter of the utmost importance to me and it is important to address these additional pressures faced by teachers in our schools. My Department, the employing authorities and the teachers' unions are working together, through the Teachers' Negotiating Committee in order to ensure we retain a committed, motivated and healthy teaching workforce.

My Department continues to work with colleagues in EA to address accommodation pressures in Special Schools through the Major Works, School Enhancement and Minor Works Programmes. There are currently two major work programmes ongoing and I am pleased that there have been a further ten announced to advance in design under the School Enhancement Programme Second Call (SEP2).

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education what action his Department can take to help schools tackle bullying.

(AQW 2781/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department has provided a clear lead through the "Addressing Bullying In Schools Act (NI) 2016", which will ensure greater consistency on how bullying is addressed by schools. I hope to be in a position to announce the commencement of this legislation in the near future.

Guidance has been produced to support commencement; along with information for parents, carers and young people. This guidance will explain how complicated issues such as bullying between pupils from different schools can be addressed. It also includes case studies on how schools could tackle these situations.

My Department funds the Northern Ireland Anti-Bullying Forum (NIABF) which is available to provide advice to parents around bullying concerns. Protocols are in place for sharing, with parental consent, information with the Education Authority so that appropriate support is put in place.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education what measures are being taken with regards educating teenagers about mental health in schools.

(AQW 2813/17-22)

Mr Weir: Mental health and wellbeing is included within the statutory 'Learning for Life and Work' area of learning at post-primary level. This provides pupils with the opportunity to develop an understanding of how to maximise and sustain their health, self-esteem and wellbeing including managing emotions and reactions to on-going life experiences. The curriculum encourages innovative and customised approaches to ensuring that young people are well informed about all the issues they face in modern society. The Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment provides curricular guidance and teaching support materials for use in schools and also signposts schools to a range of voluntary and community organisations should they need additional support.

My Department is working collaboratively with the Department of Health, the Public Health Agency, the Health and Social Care Board and the Education Authority to develop a Framework which will build on existing support structures and multi-disciplinary working to ensure that systems and pathways are in place to provide individualised support. The Framework will place an emphasis on promotion, prevention and early intervention with the aspiration that fewer children and young people will require specialist intervention from Mental Health Services.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount spent on school crossing patrols in each of the last four years.

(AQW 2826/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority has advised that the total amount spent on school crossing patrols in the last four years is £10,690,672. This is broken down by financial year in the table below.

Financial Year	Amount
2015/2016	£2,613,255
2016/2017	£2,704,480
2017/2018	£2,639,621
2018/2019	£2,733,316

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of instances of bullying in (i) primary; and (ii) post-primary schools, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 2827/17-22)

Mr Weir: This information is not held by the Department.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education whether he plans to legislate on school transfer tests.

(AQW 2828/17-22)

Mr Weir: I have no plans to bring forward legislation in relation to transfer tests. Opinions on academic selection vary and until agreement is reached, post-primary schools are permitted to set their own admissions criteria and to decide whether to use the results of transfer tests as part of this process.

My Department has had no engagement with schools concerning transfer tests but I understand that those schools that wish to use academic selection as part of their admissions criteria are currently working together to examine options for a single test. I will follow with interest the progress made in this area.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Education what actions his Department has taken to encourage and facilitate the development of Crumlin Integrated College.

(AQW 2875/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department has a statutory duty to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education. Responsibility for developing individual schools rests with the respective Board of Governors of that school in the first instance.

My Department also funds the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education to encourage and promote integrated education. This body works closely with all schools across the integrated sector.

In response to requests from Crumlin Integrated College for further support in enhancing local community confidence, my Department provided £8,000 to support the school in delivering this aim, recognising certain circumstances that the school was seeking to address.

At the same time, the Education Authority (EA) allocated a post-primary advisor from its School Development Service for a period of time to support the principal and Board of Governors effect improvement within the school.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Education how many children leave the Crumlin area to attend post-primary schools in other areas; and what is the total annual cost of school transport for these children.

(AQW 2876/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority has advised that they provide transport for 846 pupils with addresses in the Crumlin area to attend post primary education outside of Crumlin. For the 2019/20 academic year costs are estimated at £674,993.57

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Education whether his Department has any plans to expand nursery and playgroup provision at Crumlin Integrated Primary School.

(AQW 2877/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority has responsibility for Early Years provision at Crumlin Integrated Primary School. The EA's Annual Action Plans contain details of the work programme of the planning and managing authorities to address specific issues at a local level. There are no proposed actions in the Strategic Area Plan for School Provision - Action Plan 2019-21 relating to this school.

Significant changes to statutory education provision, including the expansion or establishment of nursery schools and nursery units, are subject to a statutory process. This is mainly set out in Article 14 of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986 (as amended) and requires the publication of a Development Proposal.

Voluntary and private pre-school providers are managed independently. Decisions about the establishment or expansion of these settings are a matter for the settings' management committees/owners: the Department has no role in these decisions, which are not subject to the Development Proposal process.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister of Education whether the final location for the rebuild of Bangor Central Integrated Primary School has been finalised.

(AQW 2883/17-22)

Mr Weir: Departments must prepare business cases in line with the Department of Finance's NI Guide to Expenditure Appraisal and Evaluation (NIGEAE), Managing Public Money NI. Business cases set out the options and provide justification for the proposed expenditure to ensure the proposal is sound and represents value for money. They take account of the comparison of the costs, risks and benefits of all the options.

The Education Authority submitted a business case for Bangor Central Integrated Primary School to my Department for review on 2 March 2020. The preferred option for the project will be confirmed when the review is completed and the business case is approved.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister of Education whether the proposed location for the rebuild of Bangor Central Integrated Primary School has the full support of the school management team.

(AQW 2884/17-22)

Mr Weir: The preferred option will be confirmed when the business case has been approved. Representatives from the school on the Project Steering Group have expressed some concerns about the possibility of the school being relocated. The business case takes account of the comparison of the costs, risks and benefits of all the options, and the scoring of the non-monetary benefits element of the business case was carried out by the school representatives themselves.

I have arranged to meet with representatives from the school management team to discuss the project on 18 March 2020.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister of Education whether any consultation has been conducted with the parents around the proposed new site for Bangor Central Integrated Primary School and, if so, what has been the outcome.

(AQW 2885/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department does not consult directly with parents on the proposed options considered within the business case for a capital investment project. The interests of the school stakeholders are represented throughout the project by school representatives on the Project Steering Group.

The school community has input to the selection of the preferred option in the business case through school representatives providing scores to the non-monetary benefits elements for each option considered. Ultimately, the best value option is identified following the ranking of the options on the basis of a balance between the cost of each option and the non-monetary benefit scores.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister of Education whether he has any concerns that the proposed new location for Bangor Central Integrated Primary School will have any adverse impact on the future enrolment of Bloomfield Primary School.

(AQW 2886/17-22)

Mr Weir: The preferred option for Bangor Central Integrated Primary School will be confirmed when the business case is approved by my Department.

Where the Department determines that the relocation of a school will not materially change its pupil catchment area, as is the case with all options being considered for Bangor Central Integrated Primary School, a Development Proposal is not considered necessary.

There is no evidence of sustainability issues affecting Bloomfield Primary School and any impact on pupil numbers at this school is unlikely to be of a scale that would require any consequential planning action by the Education Authority, as managing authority for this school.

The future enrolment of both schools, and others in the area, will be determined by the expression of parental preference through the admissions processes.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education what engagements his Department has had with the Education Authority over their proposal to consolidate Craigavon Senior High School on the Portadown site; (i) whether he can confirm that an economic appraisal was completed on this preferred option; and (ii) was there an economic appraisal conducted on the rejected options that was the preferred by stakeholders.

(AQW 2905/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) are the planning authority for the Controlled sector. If the EA decides that a significant change to Controlled post-primary provision is required in the best educational interests of children, there is a statutory process which must be followed. This involves bringing forward a Development Proposal (DP) or Proposals requesting a change, having taken account of the wider area context.

My Department will only become formally engaged in the DP process after a DP is published by the EA. If, following consideration of the DP, I approve a change to provision in an area, only at that point would the economic appraisal for delivery of any revised accommodation needs be developed.

The EA has confirmed that no economic appraisals have yet been undertaken as there is currently no published DP for Craigavon Senior High School.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to outline the schools his Department has assessed as unsustainable and outline plans for their future.

(AQW 2907/17-22)

Mr Weir: It is the responsibility of the statutory planning authorities (the Education Authority and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools), working in partnership with sectoral support bodies through the area planning structures, to identify sustainability issues at schools and determine actions to address them. These actions are published in the Education Authority's action plan, currently covering the period April 2019 to March 2021.

When these planning actions result in published Development Proposals, my Department becomes directly engaged. The advice I receive from Area Planning officials within the Department includes an assessment of sustainability drawing upon all available evidence, including the proposer's own assessment contained within the Case for Change that supports a Development Proposal.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to detail the funding for the Critical Incident Response Team in each of the last three years.

(AQW 2908/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) received the following funding from the Department of Education (DE) over the last three years for the Critical Incident Response Team (CIRT):

- 2017/18 – no funding provided
- 2018/19 – through a pressure bid £15,000 was provided by DE for CIRT staff induction training.
- 2019/20 – through a pressure bid £20,000 was provided by DE for CIRT staff induction training.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education whether the 25 instances the Critical Incident Response Team has been deployed were due to suicides in schools.

(AQW 2909/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) have advised that their Critical Incident Response Team (CIRT) do not use the term 'suicide' as it should not be used until it is determined by the Coroner's Office.

Instead a suspected suicide is referred to as a 'sudden death'. In some instances 'sudden death' is most appropriate as the details of the nature of a pupil's death are not always shared with school management or there may be some ambiguity in relation to this.

It is therefore not possible to confirm whether the 25 instances the Critical Incident Response Team has been deployed were due to suicides in schools.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of times the Critical Incident Response Team has been deployed in schools, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2910/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) has advised that their Critical Incident Response Team (CIRT) introduced a single regional management information system in September 2017. Prior to this date, information was recorded differently in each of the five legacy areas, therefore it is not possible to provide an EA response prior to September 2017.

The EA CIRT have been deployed in the academic years (September – August) as follows:

- 2017/2018 – The EA CIRT was deployed to respond to 44 critical incidents in Nursery, Primary, Post Primary and Special Schools.
- 2018/2019 – The EA CIRT was deployed to respond to 53 critical incidents in Nursery, Primary, Post Primary and Special Schools.
- 2019/2020 – The EA CIRT was deployed to respond to 37 critical incidents in Nursery, Primary, Post Primary and Special Schools (up to 03/03/2020).

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to outline whether his Department has engaged with schools concerning transfer tests.

(AQW 2911/17-22)

Mr Weir: I have no plans to bring forward legislation in relation to transfer tests. Opinions on academic selection vary and until agreement is reached, post-primary schools are permitted to set their own admissions criteria and to decide whether to use the results of transfer tests as part of this process.

My Department has had no engagement with schools concerning transfer tests but I understand that those schools that wish to use academic selection as part of their admissions criteria are currently working together to examine options for a single test. I will follow with interest the progress made in this area.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education to outline (i) how many full time staff are engaged by CCEA in the Irish language team; (ii) what audit has been conducted as to cost effectiveness and value for money; and (iii) what is the role of this team.

(AQW 2919/17-22)

Mr Weir: I am advised that there are currently twelve full time permanent members of staff within CCEA's Irish Medium (IM) team as well as an education manager with responsibility for languages qualifications. All substantive IM programmes of work are subject to Post Project Evaluations (PPEs) and the IM team also contributes to wider CCEA project PPEs. The team supports my Department in fulfilling its statutory duty to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish Medium Education.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 2578/17-22, to breakdown these figures by (i) teacher vacancies; (ii) sickness absence; and (iii) substitution.

(AQW 2986/17-22)

Mr Weir: The breakdown of substitution costs, including (i) teacher vacancies, (ii) sickness absence and (iii) other substitution reasons, are given in the table below.

Categories for substitution analysis	Cost Per Year (£)		
	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Vacant Posts	14,790,837.67	13,641,937.31	13,523,650.31
Sickness	15,327,442.28	14,619,280.15	15,186,955.97
Maternity/Adoption/Paternity	14,827,593.22	13,864,678.46	13,681,190.78
Training/Curriculum/Literacy/Numeracy	5,251,479.36	4,649,400.02	5,277,082.86
Special Education	3,308,614.04	2,821,657.37	2,250,458.21
Relief for Teaching Principals	3,406,128.48	2,764,612.71	2,737,274.22
Union Business	84,608.29	136,450.85	118,959.77
Personal Business	1,183,225.83	1,054,723.77	1,040,089.23
Career Break/Secondment	4,982,520.38	4,374,035.92	4,817,690.07
Initiatives	8,781,555.05	9,376,425.07	8,996,632.90
Public Representation/Consultation	66,544.18	41,168.04	67,884.76
Suspension	239,783.35	376,748.49	354,557.69
Education Visits/School Trips	482,417.17	472,729.05	455,813.06
CCEA	861,714.79	814,254.80	666,977.40
Total	73,594,464.09	69,008,102.01	69,175,217.23

Source: Teacher vacancies, sickness absence and substitution statistics in grant-aided schools in Northern Ireland, 2018/19.

Notes:

- 1 Figures supplied are in financial years i.e. April to March.
- 2 Figures exclude voluntary grammar schools.
- 3 CCEA includes Qualifications Development and Conduct, Curriculum and Assessment Development and Training, Statutory Assessment Operations, and Accreditation and Regulation of Qualifications.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 224/17-22, whether any bids have been received.

(AQW 2987/17-22)

Mr Weir: I am advised by the Education Authority that no bids have been received for the former Strabane Grammar School site.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQO 204/17-22, to detail the terms of reference and budget for this framework.

(AQW 2988/17-22)

Mr Weir: The objectives of the Project are to develop a framework for children and young people's emotional health and wellbeing that will:

- Provide an agreed cross cutting model of promotion, prevention and early intervention to support the emotional health and wellbeing of children and young people;
- Clarify the agreed roles and responsibilities of each relevant government department and agency, including the Department of Education, the Department of Health, the Public Health Agency, the Education Authority and the Health and Social Care Board and Trusts.
- Provide clarity around agreed protocols and referral pathways for schools or other educational settings in respect of those children and young people presenting with a potential need for specialist support.
- Identify the key priorities areas required to further develop services and support.

I am unable to detail the budget for this Framework as budgets beyond this current financial year are not yet known, therefore no decisions have been taken in relation to future years.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 2276/17-22, why the Education Authority, as the hiring body, does not hold this information.

(AQW 2992/17-22)

Mr Weir: When a person applies for a classroom assistant position, they are asked to provide details for the pre-employment checks and experience necessary for that specific post.

As Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) would not be a requirement for a classroom assistant post, this status does not have to be provided on the application form. Therefore, information held by the Education Authority would not provide an accurate representation of individuals holding QTS who are employed as classroom assistants.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education to outline the basis in which post-primary schools can give preference to pupils from traditional feeder schools in admissions criteria, over children from geographically closer schools.

(AQW 2993/17-22)

Mr Weir: Article 16 of the Education (NI) Order 1997 (as amended) requires Boards of Governors of grant-aided schools to draw up admissions criteria. These criteria are used to establish which children may be admitted in the event of a school being oversubscribed with applications. It is the sole responsibility of the Boards of Governors of schools to set the criteria they wish to prioritise to select children for admission.

My Department publishes guidance in respect of school admissions and Boards of Governors have a legal duty to 'have regard to' this guidance. Guidance to post-primary schools states that a 'feeder school' criterion may be used, however it should not be used to prioritise children from one primary school over those from another primary school of the same sector which is geographically closer. This is intended to ensure that the criterion is used to prioritise children attending a post-primary school's local primary schools.

The content of admissions criteria, however, including the use and content of a 'feeder school' criterion, is a matter for each school's Board of Governors.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education what is the current work stream and product of the Irish language team in CCEA and how much moderating is performed in respect of literacy and numeracy.

(AQW 3001/17-22)

Mr Weir: In addition to translating and adapting CCEA's curricular resources for use in Irish Medium schools the IM team develops curricular resources. This includes support for statutory key stage assessment arrangements involving standard setting, moderation, school support and the development or translation of assessment materials. Key stage assessment arrangements, including moderation, have been significantly impacted by industrial action with no schools choosing to participate in 2019.

CCEA's translation and editorial team translates examination papers and related materials, including student scripts. This includes in excess of 150 question papers and associated resources and the translation of approximately 1,100 student scripts from Irish into English. Translation activity also covers controlled assessments, coursework and oral translations for the moderation of a number of vocational subjects.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education what is the comparative staff compliment in CCEA in respect of the Irish language sector and other sectors, both in terms of moderating functions and otherwise.

(AQW 3002/17-22)

Mr Weir: I am advised that CCEA has 309 permanent staff 12 of whom work in the IM team. CCEA's staffing complement is not otherwise broken down by sectors. The IM team comprises four education managers, five translators, two editors and one translation and editorial lead. There is also an education manager who is responsible for languages qualifications, including Irish. CCEA has advised me that it is not possible to provide comparative staffing figures for the translation and editorial team, due to the specialised nature of this work.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education to quantify the submissions for moderating school work in literacy and numeracy which has been submitted to CCEA in the last year, in respect of each of the maintained, controlled, integrated and Irish language sectors.

(AQW 3003/17-22)

Mr Weir: Statutory key stage assessment arrangements, including moderation, have been affected by action short of strike. I am advised that, in 2019, the breakdown for schools participating in moderation was as follows:

School Type	Communication	Using Mathematics	Using ICT
Controlled	2	6	9
Maintained	7	1	6
Integrated	0	0	1
Voluntary Grammar	0	0	1
Irish Medium	0	0	0
Special	0	0	1
Independent	1	0	1

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education what progress has been made to establish an expert group to examine and propose an action plan to address links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background, as outlined in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 3050/17-22)

Mr Weir: My officials are progressing work regarding the establishment of an Expert Group to examine and propose an action plan to address links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background, including the long-standing issues facing working-class, Protestant boys.

Tackling educational underachievement is critical to improving the life chances of children and young people and it is important that we progress this work swiftly. Proposals regarding how the Expert Group is to be established and the timescales involved will come before the Executive as soon as possible.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education to provide an analysis of the use of the BMX facility at the Epicentre in Armagh city and to advise (i) the capital cost of the project; (ii) the usage figures per month since the facility opened; (iii) the opening hours of the facility to the general public; and (iv) the process for the public, youth and community groups accessing the facility.

(AQW 3053/17-22)

Mr Weir:

(i) the capital cost of the project

The BMX track situated within the grounds of the Epicentre in Armagh was completed at a total cost of £499,495.

(ii) the usage figures per month since the facility opened

The Epicentre BMX track is an advanced track and, due to the associated risks with BMX biking, requires specialised qualified staff. The EA has advertised for specialist staff 3 times over the past 14 months but has been unable to successfully recruit to these posts. The centre therefore has not opened to date.

To address the inability to recruit suitably qualified staff going forward, and increase the capacity of the Outdoor Learning Service, the EA has developed a Pathways Programme with the Ulster University for young adults with a view to employment within the youth service. The programme provides training in both outdoor learning (including BMX biking) and youth work.

(iii) the opening hours of the facility to the general public

The track is not currently open to the public due to the lack of suitably qualified staff.

(iv) the process for the public, youth and community groups accessing the facility.

The EA is working with Cycle Ireland and Cycle Ulster to agree a partnership which will facilitate training for EA staff and volunteers and therefore site use. A final meeting regarding this is scheduled for Monday 9 March 2020. The partnership

will provide access to the site for Cycle Ireland and Cycle Ulster at no cost (subject to verification of insurance and a Memorandum of Understanding being complete) and this is expected to be operational by 1 May 2020.

Cycle Ulster will be given access to the site during Saturdays and Sundays initially, with extended weekly usage in the summer when not used by the EA.

The EA Youth Service plan to use the site from 1 June 2020, when staff trained by Cycle Ireland and Cycle Ulster are in place. EA usage will extend to local schools from September 2020 and to youth service during the summer period from July 2020.

In addition, the BMX track will be open to registered EA youth groups who will be able to book the facility and EA will provide a qualified instructor to deliver a programme including bike basics; safe operation and risk awareness from 1 September 2020. This service will be provided to EA registered groups at no cost.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education to outline (i) how many children in Northern Ireland are eligible for home to school transport in 2019/2020; and (ii) how much this costs the Department.

(AQW 3064/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority has advised that the figures for the number of children in Northern Ireland in receipt of home to school transport and the cost of this transport for 2019/2020 are not yet available.

The number of pupils in receipt of home to school transport in the academic year 2018/2019 was 84,390 and the cost to the Education Authority was £86,102,581

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education what steps his Department is undertaking to encourage after school sports at primary school level.

(AQW 3066/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Extended Schools (ES) programme enables approximately 500 schools serving the most disadvantaged communities to provide a range of interventions and additional learning opportunities outside of the traditional school day. Of the overall budget of £9.1m in 2019/20 the programme distributed around £5.53m to its 331 eligible primary schools.

The aim of the programme is to reduce underachievement and improve the life chances of children and young people by enhancing their educational development and fostering their health, well-being and social inclusion through the integrated delivery of the support and services necessary to ensure every child has the best start in life.

Each individual school determines how to use ES resources in line with the assessed needs and circumstances of the learners in their school community. There is therefore a wide range of activities and services supported under the ES programme, each specific to the school/cluster. Typically, this may include additional literacy or numeracy support; physical or emotional health and well-being provision; activities to enhance personal development and skills such as arts, music, sport, or drama; parental or family support programmes; and facilitating community use of school premises, amongst many others.

The Extended Schools Annual Report 2018/19 compiled by the Education Authority shows the general pattern of activities offered under the programme, with sports remaining one of the more popular categories of provision. A total of 159 activities were offered in the "sport and sporting" skills category and another 268 in the "health and fitness" category.

Schools are asked to evaluate the impact of the programme within their Annual Report and 91% reported evidence that the programme helped to foster health, well-being and social inclusion in their school.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education what progress has been made to publish and implement a childcare strategy, as outlined in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 3137/17-22)

Mr Weir: The first phase of the Executive's Childcare Strategy, 'Bright Start – A Strategic Framework and Key First Actions' was launched in 2013. Following extensive engagement, the former OFMDFM consulted on a draft Childcare Strategy in 2015. Policy responsibility for childcare transferred to my Department in May 2016 and a detailed analysis of the consultation responses was undertaken and published.

The Strategy has been updated to reflect the current context for childcare, the analysis of responses to the 2015 consultation, the policy priorities aimed at supporting families reaffirmed in the 'New Decade, New Approach' agreement and developments in early education and care services for families in other jurisdictions.

There are significant policy and resourcing issues to be decided in order to finalise the Strategy, including how we can deliver extended, affordable, responsive and high quality early education and care for families with children aged 3 to 4.

The Childcare Strategy is an Executive Strategy and therefore requires Executive consideration and approval to publish in final form. I plan to bring an updated Childcare Strategy to my Executive colleagues for consideration in due course.

Publication of the Strategy requires the Executive's consideration of the budget and resources available to deliver all the actions, including an extended offer. Progressing to publication and implementation is predicated on securing the resources required.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of school buildings which have asbestos as part of the fabric of the school structure; and (ii) any planned works to remove asbestos from schools.

(AQW 3145/17-22)

Mr Weir: There are currently 1036 properties within the Education Authority (EA) Estate which have some type of Asbestos Containing Materials (ACM). This number does not include schools within the Voluntary Grammar or Grant Maintained Integrated estates.

The EA is continually removing Asbestos from its Estate as part of its refurbishment and demolition programmes. ACM is also removed throughout the EA Estate when the risk assessment dictates that removal is required. The approximate cost of Asbestos removal is in the region of £3-5m annually.

Unfortunately it is not possible to be absolutely certain all ACM have been removed from a building until that building is demolished as ACM was used extensively in the structure of buildings constructed before the year 2000.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education, in light of the outbreak of coronavirus across Europe, whether he will (i) issue guidance to principals of schools that have ski trips planned to Italy in the next 6 weeks; (ii) provide details of the number of pupils due to travel from Northern Ireland on school-organised ski trips to Italy during March and April; (iii) consider bringing forward a scheme to compensate schools that take a precautionary approach and cancel planned trips; and (iv) advise if his Department have carried out risk assessments on the potential risk to school and community life in allowing such planned ski trips to go ahead.

(AQW 3146/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) My Department has been working closely with colleagues in the Department of Health (DoH) and the Public Health Agency (PHA) on COVID – 19 (Coronavirus).

On 3 March and 9 March my Department wrote to all school principals providing guidance in relation to school trips and the Coronavirus (COVID – 19) outbreak.

This guidance reiterated that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) is responsible for providing Government advice to all parts of the United Kingdom on travel abroad and, consequently, any decision to proceed with or cancel any school trip should be taken by the school in line with the latest FCO advice (available at: <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice>).

The guidance went on to say that schools should also contact the travel agency through which they booked their ski trips and seek their advice and guidance on this matter.

- (ii) Details of the number of pupils due to travel from Northern Ireland on school-organised ski trips to Italy during March and April are not readily available.

Any decision to proceed with or cancel any school trip should be taken by the school in line with the latest FCO advice which is available at: <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice>.

- (iii) [//www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice](https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice). Schools should also contact the travel agency through which they booked their ski trips and seek their advice and guidance on this matter. At present I have no plans to bring forward a scheme to compensate schools that take a precautionary approach and cancel planned trips.

- (iv) Risk assessments are central to the management of health and safety within a school. Within schools, line managers (principals, vice principals, heads of departments) have a responsibility to carry out risk assessments and ensure that they are suitable and sufficient. The Education Authority provides guidance and templates to schools in relation to both school and off-site risk assessments.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education how he is working with the Open University to ensure that school leavers are informed about Open University as an option for higher education.

(AQW 3152/17-22)

Mr Weir: Careers Education is part of the statutory Curriculum in Northern Ireland. It is included in the Employability element of the Learning for Life and Work area of learning. It is the responsibility of schools to provide all learners with high quality careers education and guidance to help inform their decisions and ensure that they are fully aware of their potential options and pathways into further education, higher education, training and employment. This guidance should, where appropriate, include the various university options available.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Education whether he plans to increase the number of autism support units in mainstream schools west of the Bann.

(AQO 315/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority is responsible for the provision of autism support units.

Any significant change to a school such as the addition of an autism support unit would require the publication of a Development Proposal, which is a statutory process.

The EA's current proposals for change are listed in its Action Plan 2019-21 by Local Government District.

The Action Plan contains a number of actions in relation to autism specific provision in schools in Local Government Districts west of the Bann, namely Derry and Strabane, Mid-Ulster and Fermanagh and Omagh.

This includes the establishment of such provision in primary schools in the Omagh town and surrounding area as well as in Devenish College, St Kevin's College, Lisnaskea and for the Strule Campus. It also includes actions to change General Learning Support Centres to autism specific provision at Holy Trinity Primary School, Cookstown and Lisneal College.

These changes will form part of a regional approach to reconfiguring special schools and pupil support provision at mainstream schools.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Education to outline his plans to improve sports facilities in the Controlled School sector. **(AQO 316/17-22)**

Mr Weir: Sports facilities are funded through a variety of capital programmes – the Major Works Programme, the School Enhancement Programme (SEP) and the Minor Works Programme.

The Department is currently funding major works at a total of 19 Controlled schools. These projects are at various stages of design or construction and each will ultimately be delivered with sports facilities in line with the DE Handbook (assuming sufficient land is available for the full pitch complement).

Under the first call to the School Enhancement Programme only one controlled school applied for sports facilities. Following an investment of £1.5m, a new Sports Hall for Saintfield High School was opened by the then Education Minister, John O'Dowd, on 11th February 2016. Details of the projects to be delivered under the current SEP2 programme remain in development.

Applications from schools for minor capital works are prioritised in three categories:

- Priority 1 - statutory e.g. health & safety, fire protection, DDA
- Priority 2 - essential to ensure integrity of the estate e.g. boilers, roofs, windows etc.
- Priority 3 - supply of unmet curricular needs e.g. pitches, halls, ancillary space etc.

Unmet need in respect to sports provision falls into Priority 3. Unfortunately, given the current levels of demand for Priority 1 and 2 projects, Priority 3 projects are not currently being funded. This position will be reviewed when the Department's capital budget for future years becomes available.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Education for an update on the new build for St Ronan's College, Lurgan. **(AQO 317/17-22)**

Mr Weir: The RIBA Stage 3 (Developed Design) for this project is approved and the procurement of the Develop & Build Integrated Supply Team commenced in February.

The current programme would indicate an award of contract in November 2020 and following completion of the RIBA Stage 4 (Technical Design & Pre-construction Services) moving on site for the main construction works in early summer of 2021.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Education whether he will engage with teacher training institutions to introduce autism-specific training for teachers. **(AQO 318/17-22)**

Mr Weir: All BEd and PGCE programmes in NI, include compulsory modules covering Inclusion and the Special Educational Needs Framework (SEN), including autism.

Following the passing of the Assembly Motion on 3 February, I committed to consider how best to take this forward, to ensure that we have sufficient autism training for our teachers and educational workforce. My officials have commenced this work and should Initial Teacher Education (ITE) SEN modules need strengthened in the area of autism; my officials will engage with the various institutions to do so; in discussion with the Minister for the Economy, who is responsible for funding ITE.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education what action he will take to address educational underachievement amongst children in the Dickson Plan area that do not attend selective post-primary education. **(AQO 320/17-22)**

Mr Weir: Educational underachievement is a persistent and challenging issue, which as a society we must continue to address, particularly given its strong link to poverty. The factors that contribute to educational underachievement can affect pupils in any sector irrespective of the admissions criteria applied.

A range of interventions are currently in place to tackle underachievement across Northern Ireland and outcomes for children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds continue to improve. For example, there was a significant improvement in the reading score of our most disadvantaged pupils between 2009 and 2018 in the PISA international study of the attainment of 15 year old pupils.

The commitment in "New Decade, New Approach" to establish an Expert Group to examine the link between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background will also provide a vital opportunity to further explore and

address the long-standing issue of underachievement. I am currently considering options in respect of establishing the Expert Group. I want to move quickly on this work given its importance and I would wish to see the development of an action plan prioritised.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Education to outline the number of times the Critical Incident Response Team have been deployed in schools since 2014.

(AQO 321/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) have advised that the EA Critical Incident Response Team (CIRT) introduced a single regional management information system in September 2017. Prior to this date, information was recorded differently in each of the five legacy areas. Therefore it is not possible to provide an EA response prior to September 2017.

However since September 2017 the EA CIRT have been deployed to 38 Primary Schools, 76 Post Primary Schools and 15 Special Schools. The CIRT also provided telephone advice and resources to 12 post primary schools during March 2019 in response to the critical incident in Cookstown.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education whether he plans to reduce nursery and pre-school hours for children in special schools.

(AQO 322/17-22)

Mr Weir: There are no plans at present to reduce nursery and pre-school hours for children in special schools. If there was an unprecedented demand for pre-school places in Special Schools, revisions would be made on an individual school basis, in agreement with the Special School Principal and through targeted engagement with parents who are likely to be impacted by the decision.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Education how he intends to address the lack of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) provision at key stage 2 in the Newry area.

(AQO 323/17-22)

Mr Weir: The need for additional primary specialist mainstream provision, including autism provision, within the Newry area will be reviewed and considered as part of the next tranche of strategic priorities. As part of the strategic approach, the Education Authority is committed to exploring all options and remains dedicated to working in partnership with stakeholders in relation to the out workings of its Strategic Area Plan for 2017-2020.

Department of Finance

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Finance (i) to detail the amount of public money allocated by Executive Departments to areas affected by the Primark fire in August 2018; (ii) who made the decision to provide the money; and (iii) for the rationale for providing that money.

(AQW 2434/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): The following allocations were made by Executive Departments to provide support in the wake of the Primark fire:

- £500k from Department for Infrastructure to Translink for subsidy fares during the Christmas period;
- £400k from Department for the Economy to Tourism NI for marketing; and
- £100k from Department for Communities to Belfast City Council for regeneration

In addition, in October 2018, the British Chancellor announced that £2 million would be made available to help towards the recovery of Belfast City Centre. The additional Treasury funding was allocated to Belfast City Council's Resilience Fund, channelled via the Department for Communities.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance why there are no minimum standards in Northern Ireland for daylighting in buildings.

(AQW 2552/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Instead of directly requiring a minimum standard for daylighting, Part F (Conservation of fuel and power) of the Building Regulations considers the contribution of daylight when calculating the lighting and overall energy requirements of a new building.

In addition, technical guidance to Part F requires consideration of provision of adequate levels of daylight and points to assessment under BS8206-2 2008 Code of Practice for daylight, when designing a new dwelling.

Building Regulations only set minimum standards when building work occurs. Other requirements, such as government procurement policies, may also apply and designers are always free to consider other best practice standards.

Retrospective minimum fitness standards for existing buildings, where building work is not occurring, are a matter for other legislation.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Finance to detail the number of businesses that have confirmed to his Department their intention to cease trading as a direct result of the outcome of Reval2020, broken down by district council area.

(AQW 2679/17-22)

Mr Murphy: None.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance how many businesses in each council area have (i) applied for Hardship Relief in respect of their rates; and (ii) been successful in their application, in each of the last 5 years.

(AQW 2754/17-22)

Mr Murphy:

(i) Number of applications for Hardship Relief by council area in each of the last 5 years:

Council	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Armagh City Banbridge and Craigavon		2		2	1
Antrim and Newtownabbey			2		
Ards and North Down			2	4	
Belfast	2	5	4	122	12
Causeway Coast and Glens	1	1	2	3	1
Derry City and Strabane District			8	9	
Fermanagh and Omagh		1	1		
Lisburn and Castlereagh					2
Mid and East Antrim		3	2		2
Mid Ulster			1		
Newry Mourne and Down		3			

(ii) Number of applications for Hardship Relief by council area that resulted in relief being awarded in each of the last 5 years:

Council	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Armagh City Banbridge and Craigavon		1	1		
Antrim and Newtownabbey					
Ards and North Down					
Belfast	1			41	9
Causeway Coast and Glens					
Derry City and Strabane District					
Fermanagh and Omagh					
Lisburn and Castlereagh					
Mid and East Antrim					
Mid Ulster					
Newry Mourne and Down		1			

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Finance to provide a breakdown of how many people are not in training, further education or employment, for each constituency.

(AQW 2764/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Labour Force Survey can be used to provide estimates of the number of people not in education, employment or training (NEET). Statistics are typically produced for those aged 16-24.

Estimates of how many people are not in training, further education or employment for each constituency are not available. This is because the type of educational institution currently attended is not captured in the Labour Force Survey.

Table 1 below however provides Labour Force Survey based estimates of the number of people aged 16 and over in each constituency who are not in education, employment or training. The most recent data available are for the period January-December 2018.

Table 1: Estimated number of people aged 16 and over in each constituency who are not in education, employment or training, 2018.

Parliamentary Constituency	Estimated number of people aged 16 and over not in education, employment or training*
Belfast East	31,000
Belfast North	27,000
Belfast South	25,000
Belfast West	27,000
East Antrim	25,000
East Londonderry	36,000
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	28,000
Foyle	28,000
Lagan Valley	31,000
Mid Ulster	27,000
Newry and Armagh	32,000
North Antrim	36,000
North Down	25,000
South Antrim	27,000
South Down	30,000
Strangford	26,000
Upper Bann	33,000
West Tyrone	26,000
Total	518,000

Source: Labour Force Survey, 2018.

*Numbers are rounded to the nearest thousand and are subject to sampling error.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Finance whether his Department intends to ring-fence money generated through the Soft Drinks Industry Levy to spend on addressing obesity and type 2 diabetes.

(AQW 2834/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Money generated through the soft drinks industry levy is paid to HM Customs and Revenue (HMRC).

The Executive receives Barnett allocations based on any additional spend in England financed by the soft drinks industry levy. Barnett consequentials are not ring-fenced for a specific purpose and it is for the Executive to allocate funding in line with local needs and priorities.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Finance how much money has been generated locally by the Soft Drinks Industry Levy.

(AQW 2835/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Money generated through the soft drinks industry levy is paid to HMRC and you may wish to contact HMRC for details of what money has been generated in the North.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Finance whether he intends to resume the Small Business Rate Relief scheme; and, if so, what plans he has made for its resumption.

(AQW 2836/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Small Business Rate Relief scheme was extended annually by my Department from April 2017 on the basis that it retained the existing policy position that existed prior to the absence of a functioning Assembly.

I am considering the options for all rate relief provision for 2020-21 and beyond in the context of the recent Business Rate consultation, the wider budgetary issues that face us as an Executive and the decisions around the 2020/21 Regional Rates.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Finance how many people of working age in each constituency are not in employment, further education or training.

(AQW 2867/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Labour Force Survey can be used to provide estimates of the number of people not in education, employment or training (NEET). Statistics are typically produced for those aged 16 to 24.

Estimates of how many people of working age in each constituency who are not in employment, further education or training are not available. This is because the type of educational institution currently attended is not captured in the Labour Force Survey.

Table 1 below however provides Labour Force Survey based estimates of the number of people of working age (i.e. those aged 16 to 64) in each constituency who are not in education, employment or training. The most recent data available are for the period January-December 2018.

Table 1: Estimated number of people aged 16 to 64 in each constituency not in education, employment or training, 2018.

Parliamentary Constituency	Estimated number of people aged 16 to 64 not in education, employment or training*
Belfast East	15,000
Belfast North	13,000
Belfast South	15,000
Belfast West	16,000
East Antrim	12,000
East Londonderry	16,000
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	14,000
Foyle	17,000
Lagan Valley	13,000
Mid Ulster	14,000
Newry and Armagh	16,000
North Antrim	16,000
North Down	12,000
South Antrim	12,000
South Down	13,000
Strangford	10,000
Upper Bann	16,000
West Tyrone	13,000
Total	254,000

Source: Labour Force Survey (LFS), 2018.

*Numbers are rounded to the nearest thousand and are subject to sampling error.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Finance whether he plans to introduce a single person discount for rates bills.

(AQW 2889/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I have no plans to introduce a single person discount.

The introduction of a single person discount was considered as part of the 2007 review of the domestic rating system. At that time it was concluded that such a widespread discount would be difficult to justify in terms of cost, need and vulnerability to widespread fraud.

Anyone struggling with their rates can apply for help through the Rate Rebate Scheme or contact Land & Property Services to discuss a payment plan. The Lone Pensioner Allowance is also available.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance what properties or land are currently surplus to requirements within his Department. (AQW 2947/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Department of Finance (DoF) currently has 4 properties declared surplus which are in the process of disposal. The details of these are noted below.

- 9-11 Mount Crescent, Downpatrick, a former Social Security Office currently on the open market asking offers around £125,000.
- 4-6 Killane Road, Limavady, former offices the sale of which is progressing as a Community Asset Transfer to a local enterprise agency.
- 29 Hillhead Road, Ballyclare is an open market sale of former offices, currently sale agreed.
- Northland House, Frederick Street, Belfast is an open market sale of a substantial office building with car parking, currently sale agreed.

Land & Property Services (LPS) is managing these disposals in accordance with the LPS guidance on the Disposal of Surplus Public Sector Property in Northern Ireland October 2018, a link to which is included below.

<https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/publications/disposal-surplus-land-and-property-publications>

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance what steps have been taken, and what steps remain to be taken, toward the development of a central translation hub aimed to provide language translation services for the Executive Departments, arm's-length bodies, local government and public bodies, as outlined in New Decade, New Approach. (AQW 2956/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I would refer you to the answer provided for AQO 337/17-22.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance whether the functions of the Fiscal Council will be as set out in paragraph 4.1 of Fresh Start. (AQW 3000/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My officials are currently examining the options for establishing a Fiscal Council that will deliver on the commitments as set out in New Decade New Approach and the Fresh Start Agreement.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance what proportion of households currently pay domestic rates bills in instalments via Direct Debit. (AQW 3030/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As at 1st March 2020, 51.1% of domestic occupancies pay their rate bill via Direct Debit where an occupancy represents a liable ratepayer at a property at a given time. Housing Executive and Housing Association domestic properties are not included in this figure as the rates on these properties are paid through a different process.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance what contingency plans are in place if rates bills cannot be issued for collection in April 2020. (AQW 3031/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Preparations for the issue of the 2020/21 rate bills are well advanced and on schedule.

A key component of the billing process is the availability of a Regional Rate to allow rate bills to be calculated. LPS has administered the delivery of rate bills in each of the last three years with a degree of uncertainty over when a Regional Rate would be struck and made available. As a consequence, LPS has well developed contingency plans in place to accommodate any potential delays. These include:

- billing delivery plans for a range of dates when a Regional Rate might be available;
- liaison with suppliers for a series of bill generation, printing and post delivery slots; and
- communication plans to keep ratepayers informed if delays are expected to be significant.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Finance how many staff are employed in the NI Direct call handling centre. (AQW 3041/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The NI Direct call handling centre is operated by British Telecom (BT) as a service of the NI Direct Strategic Partnership contract. The staffing of the NI Direct Contact Centre is managed by BT and the staff requirement is based on their operating model. BT Full Time Equivalent (FTE) numbers in the contact centre are currently 145.5 which includes some temporary contact centre agents to cope with the current high demand (as at 09/03/2020).

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Finance what is the cost of staffing and infrastructure for the NI Direct advice service. (AQW 3042/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The NI Direct call handling centre is operated by British Telecom (BT) as a service of the NI Direct Strategic Partnership contract. This contract was awarded in 2012, and will continue to operate until contract expiry in October 2022.

The staffing of the contact centre is managed by BT.

Infrastructure used for the provision of contact centre services is partially owned by NICS (software), and partially by BT (hardware). Following contract expiry, the NICS owned infrastructure will be available for use by other NICS business areas if required.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Finance whether a review has taken place around the efficiency of the NI Direct call handling centre.

(AQW 3043/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The efficiency of the NI Direct call handling centre is, and has been reviewed throughout the term of the NI Direct Strategic Partnership contract. This is effected through the governance procedures which were put in place following contract award in 2012.

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the progress of the Civil Service pay claim.

(AQW 3087/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I have been working closely with departmental officials to resolve the NIPSA dispute and progress the 2019/20 pay award for all civil service staff as a key priority.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance how much the Civil Service has paid Stonewall in each of the last five years; and to detail for what purpose the money was paid.

(AQW 3092/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The NICS signed up to the Stonewall Diversity Champions Programme in July 2018. There is an annual cost for membership of the Stonewall Diversity Champions Programme. In addition, a number of NICS colleagues have attended the Stonewall LGBT Leadership Programme which takes place twice per year.

A breakdown of payments from DoF centrally to Stonewall is provided below:

Financial year 2018/19

Diversity Champions Membership 2018/19	£2,500
Stonewall LGBT Leadership Programme November 2018	£1,905
Total	£4,405

Financial Year 2019/20

Diversity Champions Membership 2019/20	£2,500
Stonewall LGBT Leadership Programme July 2019	£2,590
Stonewall LGBT Leadership Programme November 2019	£1,595
Total	£6,685

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance to outline the rationale for the 10 per cent discount available to landlords owning multiple rental properties; and whether he intends to remove this discount.

(AQW 3123/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Under rates legislation all landlords of rented properties with a rateable capital value of £150,000 or less, and houses in multiple occupation, are directly liable for rates. The discount was introduced to compensate landlords for any costs associated with collecting rates from their tenants on behalf of LPS and for the risk of any default. It is intended to encourage prompt payment on a large number of rate accounts where there could otherwise be significant administrative overheads to LPS.

I am reviewing all reliefs and discounts.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance on how many occasions Civil Service employees have been issued with Stonewall workplace equality surveys.

(AQW 3172/17-22)

Mr Murphy: One Stonewall Workplace Equality Survey has issued to NICS employees.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Finance whether the move towards multi-year budget plans will filter down to the community and voluntary sector.

(AQW 3180/17-22)

Mr Murphy: While I am keen to move to a position where the Executive will announce multi-year budgets for Departments, it should be noted that although a multi-year budget, the allocation will still be managed and controlled on an annual basis.

In responding to your question, it would not be not for the Finance Minister to dictate how the budget allocation is managed at a Departmental level.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Finance when Civil Service staffing codes relating to (i) freedom of religion and belief; (ii) language or translation rights; (iii) LGBT rights; (iv) political activism or membership; and (v) association or membership of other external organisations, were last updated.

(AQW 3238/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The NICS Staff Handbook, previously known as NICS Pay and Conditions of Service Code "The Code", was last updated as follows:

Category	Associated policy	Date Last Updated
(i) freedom of religion and belief	6.05 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion	June 2015
	6.09 Dignity at Work	November 2007 (currently under review)
(ii) language or translation rights	Not included in NICS Staff Handbook	-
(iii) LGBT rights	6.05 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion	June 2015
	6.09 Dignity at Work	November 2007 (currently under review)
	6.13 Trans Equality policy and Transitioning at work guide	April 2019 (first issued)
(iv) political activism or membership	Standards of Conduct	September 2011
	Section 19 Political Activities	
(v) association or membership of other external organisations	Standards of Conduct	April 2014
	Section 7 Membership of Organisations (Non-Political)	

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance how much the Executive is committing to Belfast Region City Deal projects; and whether there will be matched funding of Treasury contributions.

(AQW 3468/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Please refer to AQO 185/17-22 and AQO 192/17-22.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Finance what procedure is in place to appoint staff to his Department's Private Office.

(AQW 3473/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The policy 1.05 Career Opportunities and Promotion in the NICS HR Handbook sets out the range of procedures available to appoint staff to the Department's Private Office. In addition, the recall of previous Private Office staff, internal departmental expressions of interests and redeployment of staff with the necessary skills and experience have all been utilised to fill posts on a temporary and substantive basis.

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Finance for the timeline for the establishment of the central translation hub as set out in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQO 337/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The New Decade New Approach (NDNA) document committed the Executive to establishing in the Department of Finance a central Translation Hub within three months of an agreement. My Department is currently examining options including looking at how others provide these services, for example in Wales, Scotland and Ireland as well as in local government here. I intend to have the hub established in accordance with the time commitment set out in NDNA.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Finance when the decision on funding for the Derry and Strabane City Deal will be made.

(AQO 336/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The decision to match fund the Derry and Strabane City Deal rests with the Executive and I will shortly be taking this matter to the Executive for consideration.

However, I would like to take this opportunity to express my support for the match funding of both the City Deal and the Inclusive Futures Fund for Derry and Strabane.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Finance for an update on Civil Service pay negotiations.
(AQO 335/17-22)

Mr Murphy: While the NICS has not yet made any offer regarding 2019 pay, I met with officials from NIPSA, who represent non-industrial civil servants, on 22 January. Since that meeting, discussions between departmental officials and trades unions have continued.

I am working closely with departmental officials to progress and resolve the NICS 2019/20 pay award for all civil service staff as a key priority and have brought my proposals to Executive colleagues for consideration.

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister of Finance what action he intends to take in relation to revenue raising.
(AQO 334/17-22)

Mr Murphy: In the course of agreeing a Budget for 2020-21 the Executive will consider the options available to address budgetary pressures. This may include revenue raising, however it is for individual Ministers to examine the options for revenue raising within their policy areas as part of that process.

In addition, I am intending to establish a fiscal commission which will consider any additional revenue powers which may be available.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Finance when funding from the Dormant Bank Account Fund will be available to the community sector.
(AQO 332/17-22)

Mr Murphy: In September 2019, the Department of Finance, directed the National Lottery Community Fund, to establish a Dormant Accounts Scheme to distribute funds to a range of organisations including community & voluntary groups and social enterprises, under the key themes of building capacity, resilience and sustainability.

The Lottery has consulted with stakeholders and published the outcome on 28 February. This will be used to inform a Strategic Plan which will be laid in the Assembly. It is intended that the fund will be open to application early in the new financial year.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Finance whether the Minister for Infrastructure will be given the funding required to deal with the backlog of street lighting repairs.
(AQO 331/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I appreciate that this is a very real concern for our citizens particularly in respect of safety concerns.

In view of this, the Executive allocated an additional £1.8 million in January Monitoring for the replacement of ageing street lighting columns. This was followed by a further £3 million in February for wider road maintenance activities which includes street light repairs.

Going forward, I have met with the Minister for Infrastructure, as part of the 2020-21 Budget setting process, to discuss the pressures facing her Department. This included the backlog of street lighting repairs.

It is for the Executive to agree the overall resource and capital budget allocations for each Department. It is for individual Ministers to prioritise capital investment within those allocations.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Finance what actions his Department has taken in response to the estimated £833.9m cost of division reported in the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre independent audit, 2016.
(AQO 333/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Cost of Division report outlined the significant complexity in the cost of delivery of services in the North – costs that cannot be merely attributed to the context of a divided society.

The report found that, whilst the cost of public service provision is generally higher than in comparative regions, the costs typically fall within the range of costs identified in other regions, with the exception of policing.

In any Executive, all Ministers, including myself, will be focused on reducing the cost of public services, especially where there are significant budget pressures.

Ultimately, in my view the best way to deal with the cost of division across the island is to create a society which is united, and underpinned by rights and equality.

Department of Health

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health what action has been taken in each Health and Social Care Trust to recruit domiciliary care workers; and how many posts are to be filled in each Trust.

(AQW 1968/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): My Department is currently considering a number of recommendations from the Power to People report recognising the skills, values and attributes of people who work in adult social care as well as pay and conditions across the social care workforce.

Each Trust is individually responsible for managing their own recruitment and are continually seeking such recruitment through a range of approaches.

Currently vacancies for domiciliary care workers are as follows:-

- Belfast Trust has 88 vacancies;
- Northern Trust has 67 vacancies;
- Southern Trust operate a rolling recruitment process which fills vacancies as and when they occur. They are seeking to employ an additional 30 WTE domiciliary care workers during a planned recruitment drive in April 2020;
- South Eastern Trust has 30 vacancies; and
- Western Trust has 12 vacancies

Ms Dolan asked the Minister of Health to outline the range of services provided by the Health Service for premature babies and their families.

(AQW 2425/17-22)

Mr Swann: Care of premature babies and babies with complex surgical or medical needs at birth in Northern Ireland is delivered by a single tertiary Neonatal unit in Royal Maternity, alongside four units which also provide intensive care (Craigavon, Antrim, Ulster and Altnagelvin) and two special care units based in Daisy Hill & the South West Acute Hospital.

The tertiary service aims to look after the smallest and most vulnerable babies (those less than 27 weeks) in the tertiary unit before repatriating these patients to their home unit when clinically appropriate. This movement of babies is dependent on the NI Specialist Transport and Retrieval service to transfer babies between the different units and in and out of the regional unit.

Some units make provision for parents to be able to stay in the hospital with their babies prior to their discharge.

Babies and families will benefit from input from a range of professionals including allied health professionals, and neonatal nurses supported by Paediatric doctors. Psychology input for families and breastfeeding support for mothers is available in some units.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health to list the statutory and community organisations he has met since his appointment.

(AQW 2451/17-22)

Mr Swann: Since my appointment as Health Minister on 11 January 2020 I have met with the following statutory and community organisations:

- | | |
|--|--|
| ■ Community/Voluntary Organisation | ■ Service Users re Reform of Adult Social Care |
| ■ Action Mental Health | ■ The Houben Centre |
| ■ Air Ambulance | ■ Trocaire |
| ■ Commissioner for Older People | ■ VOYPIC |
| ■ Families & Friends of Haemophilia Northern Ireland | ■ Waterside Neighbourhood Partnership |
| ■ Family Voices Forum | ■ Woodvale Residence Buildings |
| ■ Haemophilia Northern Ireland | ■ Health and Social Care Board |
| ■ Have you seen that girl? | ■ Northern Health & Social Care Trust |
| ■ Healthy Places | ■ South Eastern Health & Social Care Trust |
| ■ Inspire | ■ Southern Health & Social Care Trust |
| ■ Knitted Knockers | ■ Belfast Health & Social Care Trust |
| ■ Mid & East Antrim Borough Council, PCSP | ■ Western Health and Social Care Trust |
| ■ Mindwise | ■ Northern Ireland Ambulance Service Trust |
| ■ MS Society | ■ NI Assembly Health Committee |
| ■ PiP, Newry & Mourne | ■ Brexit Sub-Committee |
| ■ Public Health Agency | |
| ■ Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority | |
| ■ Samaritans | |

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health whether he will consider introducing legislation to control where electronic cigarettes are sold, and how they are promoted in shops, to make them less attractive to children and teenagers.

(AQW 2489/17-22)

Mr Swann: The European Union's Tobacco Product Directive (2014/40/EU) legislates for, amongst other matters, the regulation of nicotine containing electronic cigarettes. It has been transposed into United Kingdom law by the UK Tobacco and Related Products Regulations 2016. The legislation introduced measures to regulate e-cigarettes to reduce the risk of harm to children through rules on product safety, labelling and restrictions on most forms of advertising.

Draft regulations to prohibit the sale of nicotine inhaling products (e-cigarettes) to under eighteens were consulted on in 2017, but could not be progressed in the absence of the NI Assembly. Officials are currently revisiting the draft regulations and I expect those to be presented to me soon.

Current data indicates that regular use of e-cigarettes among young people remains low and concentrated among those who have already smoked. The Department recognises the importance of continued monitoring of the evidence and data on youth vaping.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to detail the current budget deficits of each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 2502/17-22)

Mr Swann: All of the Department's Health and Social Care Trusts are required to live within available resources, whilst also ensuring that services are delivered in a safe, sustainable and effective way.

The scale of budgetary pressures that the Health and Social Care Trusts faced in 2019/20 has been considerable, against a backdrop of rising service pressures and demand. My Department has sought to manage these pressures by working closely with all parts of the HSC system and by engaging with the Department of Finance to secure additional allocations from the in-year monitoring rounds.

Trusts are currently forecasting year end break even position, with the exception of the Western Health and Social Care Trust, for which the Department has authorised an overspend of £21.7m which is part of a multi-year financial recovery process to address the Trust's historic deficit.

As the financial year is not yet over, this position continues to be closely monitored.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health to detail the pay scales, grades and number of domiciliary care workers in each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 2506/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number of domiciliary care workers employed in each Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust at 31 December 2019, broken down by grade and 2018/19 Agenda for Change (AfC) pay scales (those in place at the time) is detailed in the table below.

Domiciliary Care Workers at 31 December 2019

HSC Trust	Grade	2018/19 AfC Pay Scale	Headcount
Belfast	Band 2	£16,943 - £18,309	528
	Band 3	£17,406 - £20,246	75
Northern	Band 3	£17,406 - £20,246	956
South Eastern	Band 2	£16,943 - £18,309	533
	Band 3	£17,406 - £20,246	35
Southern	Band 2	£16,943 - £18,309	83
	Band 3	£17,406 - £20,246	1,062
Western	Band 2	£16,943 - £18,309	475
	Band 3	£17,406 - £20,246	13

Source: Health & Social Care (HSC) Trusts

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health how many cases of mumps have been diagnosed in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust in each of the last eighteen months, broken down by (i) age; and (ii) patient outcome.

(AQW 2514/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the outcome of patients diagnosed with mumps is not available. Information on the number of laboratory confirmed cases of mumps in the Northern Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust can be found in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Number of laboratory confirmed cases of mumps within the Northern HSC Trust (Aug 2018 – Jan 2020).

Month	Age-band (Years)								Total
	0-4	5-9	10-14	15-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	>=35	
Aug-18	0	0	0	0	*	0	0	*	*
Sep-18	0	0	0	*	*	0	0	0	*
Oct-18	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Nov-18	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Dec-18	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Jan-19	0	0	0	*	*	0	0	0	*
Feb-19	0	0	0	0	*	0	0	*	*
Mar-19	0	0	0	*	*	0	*	0	6
Apr-19	0	0	0	*	7	*	0	0	16
May-19	0	0	0	*	*	0	*	*	9
Jun-19	0	0	0	*	*	*	*	0	6
Jul-19	0	0	0	*	*	*	*	*	6
Aug-19	0	0	0	0	0	0	*	0	*
Sep-19	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Oct-19	0	0	0	*	0	0	*	0	*
Nov-19	0	0	*	5	*	*	*	0	12
Dec-19	0	0	*	5	5	*	0	*	17
Jan-20	0	0	*	17	11	5	*	0	36

Source: Public Health Agency, Enhanced Surveillance Dataset

Note. Figures fewer than 5 have been suppressed in order to avoid personal disclosure. Where a suppressed cell could be deduced from the total, additional cells have been suppressed.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health for an update on the impact and operation of the new gynaecological unit at the Causeway Hospital.

(AQW 2515/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Meadows is a purpose built, two-bedded treatment suite for gynaecological outpatient and day case treatments in Causeway Hospital.

The new treatment suite means a range of procedures usually given under general anaesthetic in a theatre, can now, when appropriate, be safely offered as outpatient procedures with the use of oral or local medication. This gives women a safer and more positive experience through avoiding the complications of having a general anaesthetic. It greatly modernises the services and facilities for women undergoing intimate and sometimes distressing assessment and procedures, providing comfortable facilities with immediate access to private changing and bathroom facilities.

The Meadows is part of the Northern Trust's work towards modernising and reforming the delivery of Gynaecology services into the future. The new facilities support the transfer of gynaecological treatment from other hospital sites, with cross-Trust working for medical staff. This new service model helps give direct access to hospital care as agreed between the GP and hospital specialists, which should avoid hospital admissions, Emergency Department attendances and give shorter lengths of stay in hospital. Overall there now exists a more responsive service for patients.

The Meadows offers a number of outpatient clinic services including:

- Bladder Botox;
- Hysteroscopy;
- Truclear;
- Recurrent Miscarriage;
- Colposcopy;
- Minor Ops;
- Vulval Skin;
- Mirena Coil; and
- Gynae Ward Attenders.

A number of Nurse Led Clinics have also been introduced:

- Early Pregnancy;
- Telephone Triage;

- Urodynamics;
- Smear;
- Pessary; and
- Intermittent Self Catheterisation.

During 2019, over 1600 women attended this facility and feedback from service users has been very positive about the services offered, the quality of care and the environment.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health to detail the level of funding and staffing provided by the Northern Health and Social Care Trust to Farm Families Health Checks Programme, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2516/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Family Health Check Programme is jointly funded by the Public Health Agency and The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. The Northern Health and Social Care Trust (NHSCT) has received the following funding to deliver the programme:

2019/20	£181,255
2018/19	£176,626
2017/18	£172,625
2016/17	£168,126
2015/16	£150,000

The NHSCT employ a full time band 7 nurse coordinator, a part time band 6 nurse (30 hrs per week) and a 21 hr band 4 programme administrator. In addition, the programme is supported by a pool of band 5 nurses across each Trust area, who support the coordinator to deliver the programme locally.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health to detail the level of capital and resource funding provided to Causeway Hospital in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2517/17-22)

Mr Swann: The table below provides the capital spend on Causeway Hospital projects over the last five years.

Year	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Spend £000's	551	318	412	952	733

The Causeway Hospital may also have been in receipt of capital funding for Trust wide schemes for which figures are not separately available.

The table below provides the resource funding for the Causeway Hospital over the last five years.

Year	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Spend £m	50.67	51.37	54.44	55.46	56.78

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Health how much each Health and Social Care Trust spent on taxis for (i) patients; and (ii) staff, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2525/17-22)

Mr Swann: The information requested could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Health how much each Health and Social Care Trust spent on public transport in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2526/17-22)

Mr Swann: Health and Social Care Trusts do not capture costs on public transport separately, in view of this, information could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Health whether he has any plans to ban conversion and reparative therapy.

(AQW 2530/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department of Health does not fund any organisation to carry out reparative or conversion therapy. Statutory services within Health and Social Care do not prescribe reparative or conversion therapy.

On 3 July 2018, the UK Government published its LGBT Action Plan: Improving the Lives of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People to set out the steps that government will take to tackle discrimination in this area.

The Action Plan contained 75 actions to improve the lives of LGBT people, including a plan to end conversion / reparative therapy in the UK.

While it is a national Action Plan, it covers some policy areas that are devolved to Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. My Department will be closely monitoring the Action Plan, including the action to ban reparative therapy.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Health to detail the (i) number of social worker hours filled via agency staff; (ii) cost per year paid to agencies to fill these social worker vacancies; (iii) the total number of Health and Social Care (HSC) employed social workers; and (iv) total cost of HSC-employed social worker salaries, in each of the last five years, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 2556/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) Information on number of social worker hours filled via agency staff is not recorded;
- (ii) The amount paid to agencies within the category social work in each of the last five financial years, by Health and Social Care Trust, is given below;

HSC Expenditure on Agency Social Workers

Year	HSC Trust				
	Belfast	Northern	South Eastern	Southern	Western
2014/15	£1,132,323	£409,235	£612,100	£70,531	£628,572
2015/16	£1,672,647	£452,343	£1,197,799	£166,538	£1,112,357
2016/17	£2,198,926	£1,017,111	£999,314	£358,757	£1,504,848
2017/18	£3,137,994	£1,111,000	£1,479,708	£368,391	£2,291,630
2018/19	£3,467,033	£1,178,000	£1,664,049	£323,735	£3,581,657

Source: HSC Trusts

* May include some expenditure on Band 5 agency staff working in social care.

Agency expenditure may not solely relate to filling vacancies, and may be used for other reasons, for example covering sickness absence

Information on the number of social workers employed in each HSC Trust is published annually in the HSC Workforce Census, detailing the position at 31 March each year. This information for the most recent year (2019), and previous years, can be found at <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/staff-numbers>.

- (iv) The total cost of HSC-employed social worker salaries, in each of the last five years, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust, is given below;

HSC Employed Social Workers

Year	HSC Trust				
	Belfast	Northern	South Eastern	Southern	Western
2014/15	£50,735,584	£45,750,000	£32,989,698	£31,544,000	£26,977,322
2015/16	£51,790,006	£47,800,000	£33,475,360	£33,943,000	£29,208,696
2016/17	£52,643,882	£50,000,000	£35,614,062	£35,428,000	£30,625,776
2017/18	£54,162,359	£51,260,000	£36,873,527	£35,996,000	£32,231,116
2018/19	£55,739,371	£52,700,000	£40,253,299	£38,439,000	£32,125,298

Source: HSC Trusts

* May include some expenditure on Band 5 agency staff working in social care.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Health what plans he has to ensure adequate training and guidance is provided to all relevant staff and professionals regarding the deprivation of liberty section of the Mental Capacity Act (NI) 2016.

(AQW 2557/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department commissioned the Clinical Education Centre to develop and co-ordinate multi-level classroom-based training modules in relation to the new Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards (DoLS) provisions under the Mental Capacity Act (NI) 2016. This training was provided free of charge and delivered regionally during the period September to December

2019. Attendees included HSC Trust staff, GPs and staff from the independent sector. During this time around 6,500 individuals attended training across 16,000 training instances. E-learning versions of three key modules were also developed to support staff who were unable to attend classroom-based training. There have been over 40,000 hits on the basic e-learning module.

Staff were seconded from the five HSC Trusts to deliver the regional DoLS training programme, ensuring that the expertise built up by the trainers during this period would remain within the Trusts after the regional training programme was completed.

Following the completion of the regional programme, the Department provided the training packages to each Trust for them to deliver their own DoLS training in future. These packages are also available to independent training providers on request to the Department.

The Department has produced a number of other resources to support staff in relation to DoLS, including a Code of Practice, forms manual, scenarios, information leaflet and process maps.

The Department also hosted a regional DoLS Conference on 27 January 2020 which brought expert speakers from NI and the rest of the UK together to increase awareness and understanding of deprivation of liberty issues.

Officials continue to liaise regularly with DoLS Lead Directors from the HSC Trusts and future training or support needs can be raised and considered at this forum.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Health to outline the assessments and measurements used to aid his decision to proceed with the roll out of the Multi-disciplinary Teams (MDT's) model of primary care; and what future MDT's will look like, where they will be placed and when they are likely to be operational.

(AQW 2558/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department has recently completed the procurement process for evaluation of the MDT model across the five areas. The evaluation will last at least two years, with an action learning approach throughout this time to help bring benefits to patients at the earliest opportunity and shape the model of MDTs as it expands to new areas.

Under the terms of the New Decade New Approach Agreement, the Executive has committed to extending the MDT to cover a further 100,000 people. I will be working my colleagues across the Executive to ensure that sufficient resources are made available for this work.

Once the necessary resources are in place I will make a decision on the location for the further roll out. Subject to the availability of these resources, it is currently estimated that roll out across the remaining GP Federation areas will be completed around 2026.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to detail the level of sickness rates among Northern Ireland Ambulance Service staff in each month of the last three years.

(AQW 2581/17-22)

Mr Swann: The following information has been provided by the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service -

2017	Sickness Absence	2018	Sickness Absence	2019	Sickness Absence
Jan	12.01%	Jan	13.55%	Jan	11.78%
Feb	9.86%	Feb	11.38%	Feb	11.57%
Mar	8.69%	Mar	10.83%	Mar	12.21%
Apr	8.18%	Apr	9.70%	Apr	10.77%
May	7.82%	May	10.02%	May	10.47%
Jun	8.36%	Jun	13.09%	Jun	12.41%
Jul	9.30%	Jul	12.57%	Jul	12.06%
Aug	11.24%	Aug	11.50%	Aug	10.70%
Sep	11.25%	Sep	12.32%	Sep	9.96%
Oct	11.05%	Oct	11.05%	Oct	10.35%
Nov	10.13%	Nov	9.98%	Nov	9.89%
Dec	14.05%	Dec	12.09%	Dec	11.11%

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, in regard to his appointment of a Special Adviser, (i) whether he independently chose his special adviser or an allocation was made by his party; (ii) how it was made known, and to whom, that he was seeking to appoint a special adviser; (iii) whether a pool of candidates was considered; (iv) if so, how many were within the pool; (v) how

any pool of candidates was assembled; (vi) what were the essential and desirable criteria set for the job; (vii) by what process was the choice made; (viii) what notes and records were made and kept of the process; (ix) how fair employment obligations were met; (x) on what date(s) was the job offered and accepted; (xi) what was the contractual start date; and (xii) was the range of available salary discussed with the appointee, or was the job offered and accepted without knowledge of the likely salary.

(AQW 2594/17-22)

Mr Swann: The appointment of my special adviser followed the requirements set out in the Code for the Appointment of Special Advisers agreed by the Executive and published by the Department of Finance on 20 January. Salary details were confirmed to me by the Department of Finance on 14 February. A formal offer of employment was made on 17 February, with a start date of 11 January. This was accepted by the SPAD on 19 February 2020.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health whether he will roll out the Farm Families Health Checks Programme to all Health and Social Care Trusts.

(AQW 2598/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Farm Families Health Checks Programme is currently delivered in all Health and Social Care Trust areas by the Northern Health and Social Care Trust (NHSCT). The programme attends marts on a biannual basis, agri-food suppliers and rural community events. The programme is supported by Steering Group with representatives including rural support networks, Ulster Farmers Union and Young Farmers, who actively promote the programme.

To date this year, 32 events (with 493 clients seen) have been delivered in the NHSCT area, 42 events (746 clients) in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust area, 19 events (457 clients) in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust area, and 33 events (526 clients) delivered in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health how the impact of the Towards Zero Suicide Patient Safety Collaborative will be assessed and recorded; and whether this will allow regional trends to be collected and analysed and local patient data, outcomes and observations to be recorded.

(AQW 2599/17-22)

Mr Swann: A full Evaluation Framework for the Towards Zero Suicide Patient Safety Collaborative is scheduled for development. A Research and Information Workstream is also being established to develop methodology to track and measure improvement and change.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health how many registered nurses in nursing homes in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust have completed bespoke training via the REaCH service since its inception; and what this figure represents as a percentage of the overall staff nursing complement working in these environments.

(AQW 2600/17-22)

Mr Swann: There is a high level of turnover in this nursing workforce group, so training delivery is frequent in order to meet the care home requirements. Currently across the 58 care homes in the Northern Trust area there are 203 active nurse champion participants with training provided to over 400 nurses across care homes in Antrim, Ballymena, Causeway, East Antrim, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey localities since the inception of REaCH

The REaCH service in the Trust does not have the detail on what proportion this is of the total number of care home registered nurses.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health how many children were adopted by people resident in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area in each of the last five years; and what this figure represents as a percentage of the Northern Ireland rate.

(AQW 2601/17-22)

Mr Swann: It is assumed that this question relates to children adopted from care.

The number of children adopted from care by people resident in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area in each of the last five years is set out in Table 1.

Over the period 2014/15 – 2018/19, 438 children have been adopted from care in Northern Ireland. Of this figure, 122 children, or 28%, have been adopted by people resident in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust.

Table 1: The number of children adopted from care by people resident in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust (2014/15 – 2018/19)

	Total number of children adopted in Northern Ireland	Number of children in the Northern HSCT adopted by people resident in the Northern HSCT	Number of children from other HSCTs adopted by people resident in the Northern HSCT	
2014/15	72	12	101	
2015/16	89	29		
2016/17	120	40		
2017/18	84	15		
2018/19	73	16		
Total	438	122		28%

1 During 2014/15 – 2018/19, a total of 10 children from other HSC Trusts, were adopted by adopters resident in the Northern HSC Trust.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Health what plans he has to address the backlog of occupational therapy services cases in the Western Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 2602/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Western HSC Trust has received non-recurrent funding in 2019/20 to undertake additional activity to reduce the backlog of patients waiting for occupational therapy. As a result of this investment, the number of patients waiting longer than 13 weeks from referral to commencement of occupational therapy has reduced from 1,776 at the end of March 2019 to 1,064 at the end of January 2020.

Addressing waiting times for occupational therapy services is challenging due to a regional and national shortage of Occupational Therapists. While the Trust has experienced difficulties it continues in its endeavours to recruit staff to improve waiting times for patients.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister of Health when a new permanent MRI scanner will be installed and functioning in the Downe Hospital.

(AQW 2607/17-22)

Mr Swann: The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust has submitted a proposal for an MRI scanner for the Downe Hospital as part of a Departmental capital planning review exercise. I will consider this proposal alongside other capital investment priorities. My ability to take forward new capital projects will depend on additional capital resources being made available to me.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) the target time; and (ii) current waiting time, to see a neurologist in each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 2609/17-22)

Mr Swann: The 2019/20 Draft Ministerial waiting time target, states that:

“By March 2020, 50% of patients should wait no longer than 9 weeks for a first outpatient appointment; with no patient waiting longer than 52 weeks.” This target is the same for all outpatient specialties, including Neurology.

The current waiting times (at 31st December 2019) for a first consultant-led outpatient appointment with a neurologist are shown in the table below.

The number of patients waiting to be seen for a first consultant led outpatient appointment with a Neurologist at 31st December 2019 by HSC Trust and length of wait

Trust	Time waiting in weekly time bands							Total
	0-6	>6-9	>9-12	>12-15	>15-18	>18-52	>52	
Belfast	552	267	212	235	210	1,084	2,594	5,154
Northern	112	49	57	56	46	321	1,344	1,985
South Eastern	193	110	91	96	71	882	2,568	4,011
Southern	221	107	107	109	84	792	2,523	3,943

Trust	Time waiting in weekly time bands							Total
	0-6	>6-9	>9-12	>12-15	>15-18	>18-52	>52	
Western	163	83	83	91	86	719	3,025	4,250
Total	1,241	616	550	587	497	3,798	12,054	19,343

Source: Departmental CH3 Return

I am committed to the immediate goal that no-one waiting over a year at 30 September 2019 for outpatient or inpatient assessment/treatment will still be waiting on a list by March 2021. The ability to deliver this commitment is heavily dependent on my Department securing the required level of additional funding, estimated to be £50m. That is why the outcome of the current budgetary discussions are of such utmost importance.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Health for an update on the roll-out of the Human Papilloma Virus vaccine for boys and girls aged twelve to thirteen.

(AQW 2617/17-22)

Mr Swann: The HPV vaccine has been offered to all boys aged 12-13 years of age, while they are in school year 9, since September 2019.

Data on vaccine uptake for boys will be published later this year.

Girls aged 12 to 13 have been offered the HPV vaccine since 2008 and the most recent data available (August 2019) shows that for the academic year 2018/19, 76.6% of girls in Year 9 had received the two doses, while 82.8% of girls in year 10 had received the two doses.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health on which authority the Consent to Release practice is based, whereby lead clinicians can review patient files and stop information governance officers releasing those files without clinician approval.

(AQW 2621/17-22)

Mr Swann: The management of Subject Access Requests for patient information is undertaken in accordance with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018. Applications for access to deceased records are handled in accordance with the Access to Health Records (NI) Order 1993.

Medical records are reviewed to ensure that there is no 3rd party information contained within the record and to ensure that release of any part of the record would not cause any harm to the physical or mental health of the person seeking the data, or to another individual.

In all cases the Data Protection Officer of the organisation will take advice from appropriate professionals on any potential redactions.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health why the Public Health Agency is yet to publish its report on vaginal mesh, following the issue of a draft report to MLAs in summer 2018.

(AQW 2622/17-22)

Mr Swann: The report on vaginal mesh is currently being finalised by the Public Health Agency and will be sent to the Department of Health in mid-March 2020.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health whether any steps have been taken to contact Dr Dionysios Veronikis to outline a business case for the viability of providing affected women with full and safe removal of vaginal mesh surgery.

(AQW 2623/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department remains focused on the development of local health and social care expertise to provide these services. The Department is however monitoring the findings of the work commissioned by the Health Minister in Scotland in relation to Dr Veronikis and will be keeping the position under review.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health whether local clinicians who are performing full vaginal mesh removal surgery requiring groin dissection have had proper training, accreditation and validation.

(AQW 2624/17-22)

Mr Swann: There is no formal accreditation process for surgical mesh removal requiring groin dissection in the UK or further afield. The expertise of surgeons here in this surgery is currently being acquired through professional collaborations with other surgeons in the UK to inform best practice and specialism in this field.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health how many people employed by his Department and its arm's-length bodies earn less than £25,600.

(AQW 2640/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department of Health has 5 Administrative Assistants, 39 Administrative Officers and 43 Executive Officer IIs, totalling 87 staff, who earn less than £25,600. All other pay bands earn in excess of £25,600 (full-time).

In the HSC, as at 31st December 2019, there were 35,326 staff in post earning less than a full-time equivalent basic salary of £25,600 (i.e. not including extra pay from allowances, overtime etc). This count is on the basis of the pay values that were in place at the time (i.e. 2018/19 pay circular values).

It is important to note that some staff, both in the Department of Health and the HSC, may earn below this due to part-time working arrangements, however, the Department is only able to supply information by grade.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health what proposals he has to reduce waiting lists via waiting list validation.
(AQW 2666/17-22)

Mr Swann: Trusts have been allocated non-recurrent funding this year to support waiting list validation to ensure that waiting lists are accurate and include only those patients who require assessment and/ or treatment. This validation exercise is currently underway within each Trust. In parallel with and complementing the Trust led validation, a primary care led waiting list validation has been established whereby GP practices will carry out a clinical validation of their own patients currently on a waiting list for a first outpatient appointment across a range of specialties. Both exercises are funded until the end of March 2020.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health to detail his proposals to meet the April 2021 target established in New Decade, New Approach for waiting lists.
(AQW 2667/17-22)

Mr Swann: Achievement of the New Decade, New Approach commitment on waiting times is dependent on additional investment. Once the amount of additional funding available in 2020/21 is confirmed, an action plan will be developed to ensure that available capacity is maximised to reduce waiting times.

The scale at which I will be able to tackle the unacceptable waiting times will be greatly influenced by the outcome of the current budgetary discussions.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health what discussions he has had with the Minister for Infrastructure to ensure that disabled people seeking to attend hospital or health centre appointments can book taxis on the same basis as anyone else.
(AQW 2668/17-22)

Mr Swann: I have had no discussions on this matter with the Minister for Infrastructure as the Disability Discrimination (Transport Vehicles) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 place a duty on transport providers operating a taxi to ensure that disabled people are not treated less favourably than other people when using their services.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health to outline his plans to ensure that sufficient numbers of podiatrists are recruited over the period of the Transformation of Health and Social Services, as outlined in Delivering Together; and what resources exist for additional training which may be required.
(AQW 2669/17-22)

Mr Swann: I expect to receive shortly the recommendations of the Podiatry Workforce Review currently being concluded by my Department. I anticipate that these will address the level of pre-registration and post-registration training commissioned by my Department.

I will be able to consider the affordability of these recommendations once the Department's budget for 2020/21 has been agreed.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health how many Continuing Healthcare awards were made (i) during the 2018/19 financial year; and (ii) between 6 April 2019 and 5 January 2020.
(AQW 2670/17-22)

Mr Swann: There have been no continuing healthcare awards made during this time.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Health (i) for an update on the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) Prevention pilot; (ii) the number of people accessing pre-exposure prophylaxis PrEP; and (iii) whether he has any plans to extend and enhance the pilot through community provision.
(AQW 2694/17-22)

Mr Swann: I refer the member to the answer to AQW 2223/17-22. There are currently no plans to extend and enhance the pilot through community provision.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health what was the process of accreditation for the mesh centre in Belfast; and what external system of approval of standards and quality of care is in place to monitor the work of this regional clinic.
(AQW 2701/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Belfast Mesh Centre was accredited by the British Society of Urogynaecology (the sub-specialist society on urogynaecology of the Royal College of Gynaecologists). Accreditation criteria included demonstrating the availability of the full complement of staff in the related specialties of urogynaecology, colorectal, urology and pain management together with a multi-professional team working structure.

There is no specific quality standard arrangements for a mesh centre however they follow the relevant NICE clinical guidelines and are monitored by the same clinical governance measures used across all HSC services and those put in place following the pause in mesh surgery.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how much revenue was generated from car parking charges in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, in the last financial year.

(AQW 2702/17-22)

Mr Swann: The table below provides the level of revenue generated from car parking charges in each Health and Social Care Trust.

Health and Social Care Trust	Revenue Generated (£'m)
Belfast	3.2
Northern	1.2
South Eastern	1.8
Southern	0.6
Western	0.7

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how much revenue was generated from car parking charges in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust, in the last financial year.

(AQW 2703/17-22)

Mr Swann: The table below provides the level of revenue generated from car parking charges in each Health and Social Care Trust.

Health and Social Care Trust	Revenue Generated (£'m)
Belfast	3.2
Northern	1.2
South Eastern	1.8
Southern	0.6
Western	0.7

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how much revenue was generated from car parking charges in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust, in the last financial year.

(AQW 2704/17-22)

Mr Swann: The table below provides the level of revenue generated from car parking charges in each Health and Social Care Trust.

Health and Social Care Trust	Revenue Generated (£'m)
Belfast	3.2
Northern	1.2
South Eastern	1.8
Southern	0.6
Western	0.7

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how much revenue was generated from car parking charges in the Western Health and Social Care Trust, in the last financial year.

(AQW 2705/17-22)

Mr Swann: The table below provides the level of revenue generated from car parking charges in each Health and Social Care Trust.

Health and Social Care Trust	Revenue Generated (£'m)
Belfast	3.2
Northern	1.2
South Eastern	1.8
Southern	0.6
Western	0.7

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how much revenue was generated from car parking charges in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, in the last financial year.

(AQW 2706/17-22)

Mr Swann: The table below provides the level of revenue generated from car parking charges in each Health and Social Care Trust.

Health and Social Care Trust	Revenue Generated (£'m)
Belfast	3.2
Northern	1.2
South Eastern	1.8
Southern	0.6
Western	0.7

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health for an update on the provision of 3 funded cycles of IVF treatment, as outlined in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 2715/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am pleased that the New Decade, New Approach agreement committed to providing three funded IVF cycles for eligible women.

While I have previously highlighted capacity constraint with the Regional Fertility Centre, I am establishing a Project Board to take this project forward and consider what is needed to enable implementation of the three cycles for eligible women. I will provide further details when the Project Board reports back to me.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health to detail the budget for the GP Out Of Hours Service for the Southern Health and Social Care Trust in each of the last three financial years.

(AQW 2718/17-22)

Mr Swann: The table below gives the budget details for the GP Out Of Hours service for the Southern Health and Social Care Trust for the last three years.

	Financial Year 2019/20 (as at 28.02.20)	Financial Year 2018/19	Financial Year 2017/18
GP OOH Budget	£4.7m	£4.4m	£5m

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health whether the (i) Northern Health and Social Care Trust; and (ii) Western Health and Social Care Trust have established panels to consider cases under The Mental Capacity (Deprivation of Liberty) Regulations (Northern Ireland 2019); and, if this is not the case, to outline the rationale for these decisions.

(AQW 2736/17-22)

Mr Swann: Both the Northern Health and Social Care Trust and the Western Health and Social Care Trust have established trust panels to consider applications for deprivations of liberty in accordance with the Mental Capacity Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 and the Mental Capacity (Deprivation of Liberty) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health whether he has any plans to introduce NHS Continuing Healthcare, as provided in England and Wales; and to outline the rationale for this decision.

(AQW 2737/17-22)

Mr Swann: A public consultation on continuing healthcare was launched on 19 June 2017 and ran for a period of 13 weeks. A total of 43 consultation responses were received and analysed. I am considering the consultation responses and will announce next steps in due course.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health whether people are asked to state their sexual orientation before giving blood.
(AQW 2749/17-22)

Mr Swann: Potential donors are not asked to state their sexual orientation when giving blood.

A link to the “can I donate section” on the NIBTS website is below. This replicates much of the content of the Donor Healthcheck Questionnaire.

<https://nibts.hscni.net/donating-blood/can-i-donate/>

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health to outline the timescale for implementation of the recommendations in the Physiotherapy Workforce Review, completed in 2019.

(AQW 2751/17-22)

Mr Swann: I expect to receive shortly the recommendations of the Physiotherapy Workforce Review currently being concluded by my Department. I anticipate that these will address the level of pre-registration and post-registration training commissioned by my Department.

I will be able to consider the affordability of these recommendations once the Department's budget for 2020/21 has been agreed.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health how many consultant surgeons are in each of the surgical specialties in each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 2752/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number of consultant surgeons in each surgical specialty, broken down by Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust, as at 3rd March 2020, is detailed in the tables below.

Belfast HSC Trust

Consultant Surgeons by Surgical Specialty	Headcount	Whole Time Equivalent
Cardiothoracic surgery	11	11.0
General surgery	23	23.0
Neurosurgery	10	10.0
Oral & maxillofacial surgery	3	3.0
Otorhinolaryngology (ear, nose & throat surgery)	9	8.9
Paediatric surgery	7	7.0
Plastic surgery	4	3.0
Trauma & orthopaedic surgery	44	43.2
Urology	8	8.0
Vascular surgery	9	8.5
Total	128	125.6

Northern HSC Trust

Consultant Surgeons by Surgical Specialty	Headcount	Whole Time Equivalent
General surgery	14	14.0
Breast surgery	3	3.0
Otorhinolaryngology (ear, nose & throat surgery)	5	5.0
Total	22	22.0

South Eastern HSC Trust

Consultant Surgeons by Surgical Specialty	Headcount	Whole Time Equivalent
General surgery	14	14.0

Consultant Surgeons by Surgical Specialty	Headcount	Whole Time Equivalent
Oral & maxillofacial surgery	6	5.6
Otorhinolaryngology (ear, nose & throat surgery)	4	4.0
Paediatric surgery	1	0.4
Plastic surgery	11	10.8
Trauma & orthopaedic surgery	9	8.3
Urology	4	4.0
Total	49	47.1

Southern HSC Trust

Consultant Surgeons by Surgical Specialty	Headcount	Whole Time Equivalent
General surgery	13	12.3
Otorhinolaryngology (ear, nose & throat surgery)	7	6.8
Trauma & orthopaedic surgery	11	11.0
Urology	6	6.0
Breast surgery	2	2.0
Total	39	38.1

Western HSC Trust

Consultant Surgeons by Surgical Specialty	Headcount	Whole Time Equivalent
General surgery	12	11.6
Oral & maxillofacial surgery	4	4.0
Otorhinolaryngology (ear, nose & throat surgery)	5	5.0
Trauma & orthopaedic surgery	13	13.0
Urology	8	8.0
Total	42	41.6

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health how many permanent or temporary staff were employed by Lifeline, in each of the last five financial years.

(AQW 2759/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Lifeline Crisis Reponse service was provided by a third party provider, Contact NI, between April 2008 and March 2018. Details on staffing levels during this period are provided in the table below:

Financial Year	Staff Numbers
2014-2015	Information not available
2015-2016	As of 15 December 2015 92 Permanent Staff 0 Temporary Staff
2016-2017	As of 31 March 2017 74 Permanent Staff 0 Temporary Staff 9 Subcontracted counsellors
2017-2018	As of 31 March 2018 68 Permanent staff 0 Temporary Staff 9 Subcontracted counsellors

On 1st April 2018 the service transferred to Belfast HSC Trust and details on staffing levels in 2018 -2019 are shown in the table below:

Financial Year	Staff Numbers
2018-2019	56 Permanent Staff (19 full time and 37 staff part-time) 0 Temporary staff

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health how each Health and Social Care Trust decides upon the rate that will be charged for car parking on hospital grounds.

(AQW 2767/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department's policy on car parking aims to ensure the effective provision of car parking across all of the Health Estate for patients, visitors and staff. It is for each Health and Social Care Trust to determine the way that the policy is applied to enable them to recover the costs of car parking at each of their sites.

Car parking rates are set by each Trust at a level to recover costs by weighing up local environmental considerations such as the price of any adjacent car parks, the demand for space, the availability of alternative forms of transport and the rural or urban nature of the site.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health whether he can provide the waiting times for people with a disability to receive dental treatment.

(AQW 2768/17-22)

Mr Swann: Waiting list figures for dental treatment are not broken down in relation to disability.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Health for an update on progress of the roll-out of the new multi-disciplinary teams in Primary Care in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 2772/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Primary Care Multi-disciplinary Teams (MDTs) model reflects a partnership approach, with the local GP federation employing mental health professionals, and the relevant HSC Trust employing the physiotherapists, social workers, social work assistants, and additional nursing staff who fulfil the remainder of the new roles.

In October 2018, it was announced that the MDT model would be extended beyond the Down, Londonderry and West Belfast GP Federation areas, into Causeway and Newry & District.

Since that time, the Southern HSC Trust has appointed the following staff:

Role	Allocation for 2019/20 (whole time equivalent)	Appointed
Physiotherapy manager	1	1
Physiotherapists	2.5	3.5*
Social work manager	1	1*
Social workers	5	5*
Social work assistants	2.5	2.5*
Health visiting staff	14.9	3.9*
District nursing staff	11	4*

* not yet in post as at 29 February 2020

Departmental officials will continue to engage with the SHSCT regarding recruitment of the remaining staff allocation for the 2019/20 year.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Health whether any of the additional £32m, identified by his Department in the Power to People report as being required for reform of adult social care, has been set aside for the provision of extra domiciliary care packages.

(AQW 2773/17-22)

Mr Swann: The expert panels report Power to People which was published in 2017 identifies the pressures and challenges in meeting demand within the current system but does not identify any specific expenditure or costs for additional domiciliary care packages.

At this time, a budget has not yet been allocated for the Reform of Adult Social Care.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health to list the community and voluntary groups in Belfast that receive funding for the provision of counselling services.

(AQW 2777/17-22)

Mr Swann: Funding for the provision of suicide prevention counselling services is allocated by either Belfast HSC Trust or the Public Health Agency to the following groups:

- Albert Street Community Centre Ltd (Heart Project)
- Ashton Community Trust – Bridge of Hope
- Aware Defeat Depression
- Ballynafeigh Community Development Association
- Barnardo's
- Belfast Central Mission
- Cancer Lifeline
- Charter NI
- Counselling All Nations
- Community Wellbeing Alliance
- East Belfast Community Counselling
- East Belfast Independent Advice Centre
- Extern
- Fall's Women's Centre
- Healthy Minds Coaching
- Holy Trinity Centre
- Trinity Counselling
- Hollywood Family Trust
- Inspire
- Lenadoon Community Forum
- Lenadoon Counselling
- Lighthouse
- LORAG/Shafesbury Recreation Centre
- MACS Supporting Young People
- New Life Counselling
- Oasis Caring in Action
- Praxis Care
- Rainbow Project
- Relate NI
- Start 360
- Survivors of Suicide
- Wave Trauma Centre
- Windsor Womens's Centre

There are a wide range of existing services and supports city wide and locally available; a listing of all the services available for the city of Belfast is available at <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications/directory-services-help-improve-mental-health-and-emotional-wellbeing>

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health to detail the counselling services funded by the Health Service in the greater Shankill area for each of the last three years, including the amount of funding provided to each group.

(AQW 2780/17-22)

Mr Swann: Due to data confidentiality and commercial sensitivity, it is not possible to provide financial breakdowns for each service.

Belfast Health and Social Care Trust and the Public Health Agency provide funding for the following groups and services in the Greater Shankill area to assist suicide prevention counselling:

Group	Programme/Area of Work
Ashton Community Trust	Complementary Therapies
Aware Defeat Depression	Training – Mental Health First Aid and Mood Matters
Barnardos	Bereavement Support for Children
East Belfast Community Counselling	Outreach Services
Extern	Family Support, Suicide Prevention and Crisis Response
Holy Trinity Centre	Counselling services and Self Harm counselling
Lenadoon Community Forum	Counselling services and Self Harm counselling
Lighthouse	Family Support Services
New Life Counselling	Therapeutic Counselling Services
Oasis Caring in Action	Befriending service

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how many calls for ambulances were unable to be answered over the last two year period.

(AQW 2784/17-22)

Mr Swann: 999 calls for ambulances are answered by the Public Emergency Call Service operated by British Telecommunications plc (BT). The BT Emergency Call Operator then connects the call to the NIAS Emergency Ambulance Control.

If NIAS are unable to answer calls, for instance when an unplanned volume of calls or other disruption occurs, the calls are redirected to the Scottish Ambulance Service. Calls received by the Scottish Ambulance Service are then passed electronically to NIAS Emergency Ambulance Control for ambulance dispatch.

In the last two year period 656 calls were answered by the Scottish Ambulance Service and then passed to the NIAS Emergency Ambulance Control.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health how many home care packages are currently in place in each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 2802/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department collects and publishes information on Domiciliary Care Services for Adults in Northern Ireland annually. The number of domiciliary home care packages and percentage delivered by the (i) Trust; and (ii) independent sector can be found in Table 1 below.

Table 1. The number of domiciliary care packages delivered 8th - 14th September 2019.

HSC Trust	Statutory		Independent		Total
	Number	%	Number	%	
Belfast	1,914	39%	2,991	61%	4,905
Northern	2,373	40%	3,509	60%	5,882
South Eastern	1,249	23%	4,218	77%	5,467
Southern	2,055	41%	2,994	59%	5,049
Western	1,243	29%	3,028	71%	4,271

Source: CC7b domiciliary care survey

These figures were released on the 18th December 2019 and can be found at the following link:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/dcs-adults-ni-19.pdf>

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health to detail the percentage of home care packages in each Health and Social Care Trust that are delivered by the (i) Trust; and (ii) independent sector.

(AQW 2803/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department collects and publishes information on Domiciliary Care Services for Adults in Northern Ireland annually. The number of domiciliary home care packages and percentage delivered by the (i) Trust; and (ii) independent sector can be found in Table 1 below.

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<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/dcs-adults-ni-19.pdf>

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQO 214/17-22, whether his Department has any plans to invest in the development and expansion of Carrickmore health centre.

(AQW 2824/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Western Health and Social Care Trust have submitted a proposal for Carrickmore Health Centre as part of a Departmental capital planning review exercise. I will consider this proposal alongside other capital investment priorities. My ability to take forward new capital projects will depend on additional capital resources being made available to me.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to list the suicide crisis centres in Northern Ireland; and whether there are plans for more centres.

(AQW 2829/17-22)

Mr Swann: There is a crisis de-escalation pilot in Belfast Health and Social Care Trust operating until 31 March 2020. There is a Derry and Strabane District Council led Crisis Intervention Service operating in Londonderry until 31 March 2020. A multi-agency meeting is planned to establish if funding can be secured to extend the Londonderry pilot.

The Protect Life 2 Strategy for Preventing Suicide and Self harm, includes a new action to provide timely, accessible de-escalation services for those in emotional crisis or despair. A crisis de-escalation service workstream will shortly be established under the Protect Life 2 Strategy to consider the evaluations from current projects and determine options for future provision.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Health to detail the (i) target; and (ii) actual waiting times for urgently referred colonoscopy procedures at each (a) Health and Social Care Trust; and (b) hospital.

(AQW 2831/17-22)

Mr Swann: The current ministerial target for all diagnostic tests states that 'by March 2020, 75% of patients should wait no longer than 9 weeks for a diagnostic test and no patient waits longer than 26 weeks'.

The latest provisional average completed waits, relating to quarter ending September 2019, for colonoscopy procedures in each trust and hospital are given in the table below. These completed waits provide the time waited from the decision to admit to the procedure taking place. The times presented do not take account of any suspensions from the waiting list. It should also be noted that patients who are admitted non-electively do not have a date waiting. The department cannot currently disaggregate this information by routine and urgent referrals for completed waits.

Average number of weeks waited for colonoscopies taking place in HSC hospitals during quarter ending September 2019 (Provisional).

Trust	Hospital	Mean Completed Wait (Weeks)
Belfast	Belfast City	39.2
	RBHSC	25.8
	Royal Victoria	32.0
	Mater Infirmorum	27.4
	Belfast Trust	35.2
Northern	Causeway	28.6
	Whiteabbey	15.0
	Mid Ulster	34.1
	Antrim	19.9
	Northern Trust	22.2
South Eastern	Ulster	21.9
	Lagan Valley	20.9
	Downe	25.6
	South Eastern Trust	23.0
Southern	South Tyrone	30.5
	Craigavon Area	24.5
	Daisy Hill	28.1
	Southern Trust	28.6
Western	Altnagelvin Area	28.0
	South West Acute	19.5
	Omagh	21.2
	Western Trust	25.2
Northern Ireland		26.9

Source: Hospital Inpatient System, Department of Health.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health what progress has been made on cross-departmental proposals to improve dental health and on addressing obesity and type 2 diabetes.

(AQW 2833/17-22)

Mr Swann: The current cross-government obesity prevention framework, A Fitter Future for All 2012-2022, was launched in 2012. It incorporates action on food & nutrition and physical activity to tackle the issue of overweight and obesity.

The multi-sectoral Obesity Prevention Steering Group, which leads the development of the framework and oversees its progress, agreed short term new outcomes for implementation during the final stage of the framework from June 2019 - June 2022 in October 2019: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/fitter-future-sto.pdf>

A Diabetes Prevention Programme was launched in April 2019 and has been rolled out across all Health and Social Care Trust areas. The programme is aimed at people who have been identified as pre-diabetic and helps participants reduce their risk of developing type 2 diabetes through weight reduction, healthy food choices and increased physical activity. At January 2020, almost 2,000 patients had been referred to and engaged in 100 programmes being delivered across Northern Ireland.

The HSC sector continues to collaborate with the Department of Education to promote good dental health in children. Happy Smiles is a preventative programme which was delivered to almost 17,000 pre-school children in 2018/19. Delivery is targeted to the most vulnerable sections of our population and aims to instil good habits early rather than change behaviours at a later stage. We also collaborate to collect oral health data which provides important background information that helps inform policy development and benchmarking with other UK nations for the prevalence of dental caries.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health to outline the timetable under which legislation to ban smoking in cars when children are present will be brought forward for approval by the Assembly.

(AQW 2838/17-22)

Mr Swann: Draft regulations to prohibit smoking in private vehicles carrying children were consulted on in 2017 but were unable to be progressed in the absence of an Executive and Assembly. Officials are currently revisiting the regulations and I expect those to be presented to me soon.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health whether a commitment to a smoke-free Northern Ireland by 2035 will appear in any forthcoming strategies.

(AQW 2839/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department's 10-year Tobacco Control Strategy for Northern Ireland was published in 2012. While it does not have a smoke-free target date, it has the overall aim of a tobacco-free society.

The Department will, however, consider the appropriateness of a smoke-free target date for Northern Ireland in the development of any future tobacco control strategy.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health to outline his proposals for enhanced mental health services for young people.

(AQW 2840/17-22)

Mr Swann: I refer the member to the answer given to AQO 85/17-22 on 10 February 2020.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health for an update on minimum unit pricing on alcohol.

(AQW 2841/17-22)

Mr Swann: The harms caused by the misuse of alcohol are a major public health issue in Northern Ireland. Minimum Unit Pricing for Alcohol has the potential to be a key population-level health measure to reduce these harms and I will give this consideration as part of the development of a new substance misuse strategy for Northern Ireland.

I am also keen to learn from the evidence generated in Scotland, where early evaluation results are now being published on the real world impact of Minimum Unit Pricing for Alcohol legislation since its introduction in 2018, and in due course from Wales also where the measure became law on 02 March 2020.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health whether he will bring forward proposals for an opt-out organ donation system, as in the rest of the UK and Ireland.

(AQW 2842/17-22)

Mr Swann: In 2016, the then Northern Ireland Assembly voted not to proceed with legislation to introduce an opt out system for organ donation.

However, in December 2018, my Department launched a Policy Statement, "Promoting Human Organ Donation and Transplantation in Northern Ireland", which has the two primary objectives of encouraging positive actions and behaviours in relation to organ donation and developing appropriate training for healthcare professionals to increase levels of consent.

Work on implementing the Policy Statement got underway last year with the establishment of an Organ Donation Steering Group to oversee its implementation. Arrangements are also being finalised to appoint a Regional Organ Donation Promotion

Manager/Co-Ordinator, whose role will involve encouraging positive behaviours in relation to organ donation, including working with local councils, and to establish a sub-group for charities to further help to implement the Policy Statement.

I am also keen to keep the issue of a soft opt out system for organ donation under close review.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Health what (i) volume; and (ii) value of dispensing of branded medicines is carried out at a loss of revenue by community pharmacies, after clawback discount has been applied by his Department.

(AQW 2851/17-22)

Mr Swann: An ongoing survey provides an estimate of the annual percentage profit margins for branded and generic medicines dispensed by community pharmacies. Results for the last three years are as follows:

	Branded medicines	Generic medicines
2016/17	-0.4%	37.9%
2017/18	-1.2%	25.6%
2018/19	-1.8%	23.3%

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health to provide detail on each project his Department plans to develop using Financial Capital Transactions Funds.

(AQW 2866/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department has funded one project using Financial Transactions Capital in 2019/20. The funding of £43k was allocated through the GP Loan Scheme to part fund the extension of a GP practice premises to allow for the inclusion of multi-disciplinary teams as well as the expansion of GP training facilities.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Health for an update on the number of people on waiting lists for the (i) adult gender identity service; and (ii) Knowing Our Identity - Gender Identity Development Service.

(AQW 2880/17-22)

Mr Swann: The number of patients on waiting lists for (i) the adult gender identity service, and (ii) the Knowing Our Identity - Gender Identity Development Service on the 31st January 2020 is outlined in the table below.

	Weeks Waiting				Total Waiting
	0-3 weeks (0-21 days)	>3-6 weeks (22-42 days)	>6-9 weeks (43-63 days)	>9 weeks (64+ days)	
Belfast HSC Trust					
i) Adult Gender Identity Service	3	4	5	416	428
(ii) Knowing Our Identity – Gender Identity Development Service	0	1	1	12	14

Source: Belfast HSC Trust

Mr Allen asked the Minister of Health how many patients are waiting to receive Dexcom Glucose monitors; and what is the average waiting time in each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 2931/17-22)

Mr Swann: There is one patient waiting for a Dexcom Glucose monitor and is expected to receive it imminently. Where this treatment option is deemed clinically appropriate, it would be funded subject to available resources. There are no patients approved for this treatment who are awaiting a monitor.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health how many ventilators are available to treat COVID-19 patients with Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome; and how many of those ventilators are currently in use for other patients.

(AQW 2960/17-22)

Mr Swann: Equipment, such as ventilators, is utilised as required and is not held for patients with particular conditions, for example COVID-19.

The number of patients requiring ventilation changes very frequently, as new patients are admitted and others' clinical condition changes; it is therefore not possible to provide specific numbers at any given time.

Sufficient equipment, such as ventilators, is held by the Trusts and critical care units for routine as well as for increased levels of demand, but Trusts have been asked to confirm any requirement for additional equipment, including ventilators, to support an increase in demand from COVID-19. This action is in progress.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 1453/17-22, whether the revised business case for a perinatal mental health inpatient unit and community services has concluded, including an assessment of additional funding.
(AQW 3034/17-22)

Mr Swann: The revised business case for enhanced community perinatal mental health services for the region has recently been received by the Department and my officials are currently considering the detail of the business case.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health whether he will visit Ravenhill Nursing Home in Carrickfergus.
(AQW 3130/17-22)

Mr Swann: Should an invitation be extended to visit any nursing or residential care home in Northern Ireland, I'll give it suitable consideration.

Department for Infrastructure

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on (i) what budget remains available for 2019/20 street light maintenance; and (ii) whether additional resources are required to continue normal street light maintenance within the Eastern Division for the remainder of 2019/20.
(AQW 688/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): The 2019/20 Street Lighting repair budget of just under £1m was largely spent out at the end of September 2019 due to budget shortages, with remaining funding directed to safety only repairs.

I welcome the additional allocation of £3m for Winter Service protecting gritting services up to the end March and for urgent Street Lighting (outage) Repairs and Road Maintenance following a Treasury redistribution of funding in February.

I have allocated £1.2m of this £3m specifically to street lighting repairs, and £0.3m of this will be for Eastern Division. This will address the current backlog, together with providing a normal street light maintenance service between now and 31 March 2020. I have raised the need for sustainable funding for these services with the Department of Finance in advance of the new budget being set.

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans she has to fund street light repairs in the Western Division.
(AQW 1544/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I understand and share the concerns of the public affected by street light outages and am working with my Departmental officials to address this issue as quickly as possible.

I am pleased to inform the Member that I have recently allocated £1.2m to address the current outage backlog and future outages up to 31 March 2020 across all divisions. Western Division has been allocated £300,000. My Department's internal and external contractors have commenced work on outage repairs in all Divisions.

I have been raising the need for additional investment with the Finance Minister, as part of the 2020/21 budget discussions, in order to maintain our roads to a better standard and deal with other growing pressures facing my Department.

Mr Lynch asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the legal advice given to her regarding biennial vehicle testing.
(AQW 2029/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can confirm that I sought general legal advice on a range of options in respect of vehicle testing so as to inform my decisions on how to address the current difficulties and mindful of the need to improve the MOT system and network. That advice confirmed that testing at two year intervals is consistent with European Directive requirements on testing frequency and could be achieved by amending existing primary road traffic legislation – specifically, Article 63 of the Road Traffic (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. I will be carefully considering all options before taking policy decisions in this area.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline what plans her Department has to restructure the junction at the Park and Ride at the Lough Road, Lurgan.
(AQW 2184/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can confirm that a number of options for providing additional park and ride spaces in the vicinity of the existing Park and Ride site are being considered.

My officials are working with colleagues in Translink to consider different alternatives and bring forward a preferred option. Therefore there are no plans to alter the junction until this exercise has been completed and any potential impacts have been fully assessed.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Infrastructure what is the average waiting time to repair a faulty streetlight, from the date of which it is reported to when it is repaired.

(AQW 2242/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I understand and share the concerns of the public affected by street light outages and am working with my Departmental officials to address this issue as quickly as possible.

Due to budgetary constraints, my Department was operating a limited street lighting maintenance service since 1 October 2019. As a result outages were taking an average of 8-10 weeks to repair from the date of initial reporting.

I am pleased to inform the Member that I have recently allocated £1.2m to clear the current outage backlog and future outages up to 31 March 2020. My Department's internal and external contractors have now commenced work on outage repairs in all Divisions.

I have been raising the need for additional investment with the Minister for Finance as part of the 2020/21 budget discussions, in order to better maintain our roads and deal with other growing pressures facing my Department.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether there are plans to resurface, either part or in full, Loughanmore Road between Antrim and Parkgate.

(AQW 2278/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am pleased to advise that carriageway resurfacing on Loughanmore Road, from Greystone Road to Burnside commenced on 2 March 2020. The scheme is expected to take 8 weeks to complete.

The most recent inspection was carried out in January 2020, and identified that the rest of the road is in an acceptable condition. My officials will continue to inspect this road on a 3 month cycle and any actionable defects will be programmed for repair in accordance with current maintenance standards.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment on how Mobuoy Dump will impact the delivery of the A6 road upgrades.

(AQW 2321/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Mobuoy waste site has not affected the construction of any of the current works on the A6, which are progressing well. There are plans for phase 2 of the A6 Dungiven to Derry scheme to continue the dual carriageway from Drumahoe to Caw roundabout on the A2. Part of these works would encroach on the Mobuoy waste site, and this will need to be taken into account in the final design of the engineering works. I will be considering all factors as soon as practically possible.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) whether the Just Park app data breach has been fully resolved; and (ii) how she will ensure that it will not be repeated.

(AQW 2403/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The data breach did not relate to the JustPark app, On 7 February 2020, a data incident occurred with JustPark where, due to human error, one corporate client (a cleaning business in Belfast) was given elevated permissions to the JustPark's back office system, which allowed them to see parking sessions and a limited amount of data relating to other corporate clients. This was resolved on the same day by JustPark, who revoked the customer's elevated permission levels.

JustPark have assured my Department they have implemented a number of measures to prevent this incident from recurring. These measures include: removing the ability to set up elevated permission levels; revising standard operating procedures; introducing additional quality assurance steps to ensure corporate client customer account set ups are rigorously tested before going live; and retraining JustPark staff involved in setting up corporate client customer accounts and permission levels.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on plans to improve the park and ride facilities in North Down.

(AQW 2410/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am supportive of the provision of Park and Ride facilities to encourage a move towards more sustainable modes of travel.

Within the North Down area, officials are considering options for Park and Ride facilities at Newtownards, Comber and Tillysburn. The way forward is likely to involve the purchase of sites and it is not possible at this stage to provide any further detail until more clarity is received on the extent of the allocation made available to me in the forthcoming budget.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail her plans for additional funding for streetlight repairs in the Western Division.

(AQW 2433/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I understand and share the concerns of the public affected by street light outages and am working with my Departmental officials to address this issue as quickly as possible.

There are currently 12,085 street lighting outages reported on the street lighting management system. However, I am pleased to inform the Member that I have recently allocated £1.2m to address the current outage backlog and future outages up to 31 March 2020. My Department's internal and external contractors have commenced work on outage repairs in all Divisions.

£300k of this funding has been allocated for outage repairs in Western Division.

I have been raising the need for additional investment with the Minister for Finance as part of the 2020/21 budget discussions, in order to better maintain our roads and deal with other growing pressures facing my Department.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the review of Class C taxi classification.

(AQW 2477/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I recognise the important role that the taxi industry plays, both to transport networks and also to commuters by providing a valuable service every day to people and businesses in our cities, towns and rural communities.

I recognise that there are a range of issues relating to taxis and the taxi industry that need discussion. I will be exploring these in coming weeks and have arranged to meet with representatives from the taxi industry and other stakeholders.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure when she plans to implement Directive (EU) 2018/645.

(AQW 2486/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Department for Transport is consulting on amendments required by Directive (EU) 2018/645, and is planning to publish the consultation on this matter in March 2020, with relevant regulations in place by the transposition deadline of 23 May 2020.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline what changes her Department will make to the guidance on driving minibuses, issued in April 2018, following the introduction of Directive (EU) 2018/645.

(AQW 2487/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Department for Transport is consulting on amendments required by Directive (EU) 2018/645. My Department will analyse the responses to the consultation and any potential impact on public guidance to ensure that it is consistent with current legislation and I will then consider the way forward.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department will consider reducing the speed limit to 20mph outside Abbey Primary School, Newtownards.

(AQW 2488/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Speed limits are currently considered and assessed using the guidelines set out in my Department's publication 'Setting Local Speed Limits in Northern Ireland'. This document can be viewed at www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/setting-local-speed-limits-northern-ireland-rsppg-e051

My officials carried out a review of the speed limit on Movilla Road, in the vicinity of Abbey Primary School in Newtownards, in conjunction with PSNI. Having taken account of the nature of the road, the amount of development and collision history, they concluded it did not warrant a reduction to a 20mph speed limit. I have asked officials to keep the situation under review and to advise me of any changes in circumstances that might point to the need for a different approach.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 1961/17-22, whether the allocations across the Rural Community Transport Partnerships will be allocated on need in each area for 2020/21, rather than data from 2015.

(AQW 2499/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I recognise the key role of community transport in supporting our Programme for Government ambitions and I can assure you of my determination to protect this important service, particularly for those most in need. However, severe constraints in my Department's budgets over recent years has resulted in significant pressures across my Department. I will therefore be considering the way forward for community transport alongside the full range of pressures across my Department reflecting on my priorities, the commitments in "New Decade: New Approach" and the budget made available for the period ahead.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of expanding rail services west of the Bann.

(AQW 2503/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am committed to improving connectivity for the benefit of our economy and communities across Northern Ireland. In that regard, I am clear that our rail network, presents a unique opportunity to improve the sustainability of our transport operations.

I will be assessing the pressures across my Department reflecting my priorities, the commitments in the "New Decade: New Approach" and the budget made available for the period ahead. My Department is also developing proposals for a new Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan which will inform priorities for future development of the main road and rail networks. Tackling regional imbalance and connecting communities are priorities for me.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 625/17-22, whether records are kept of (i) unregistered; and (ii) unadopted land that requires maintenance.

(AQW 2523/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department does not keep records of land or property that it does not own, or of land and property that it has no responsibility for maintaining.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will review the quality of the risk assessments carried out for reservoirs.

(AQW 2532/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department has produced reservoir inundation mapping, and more detailed reservoir flood risk mapping, that takes into account potential flood water depths and velocities, in the event of an uncontrolled release of water from a reservoir. These risk maps are used to inform our responses to Planning Authorities, in relation to proposed development in the potential inundation zones of reservoirs, particularly at this time, as the full regulatory framework envisaged by the Reservoirs Act (Northern Ireland) 2015, is not yet in place.

The standard methodology used to produce this mapping is a recognised way of measuring flood risk to people and my officials will consider, as necessary, any valid information that would inform any modification of this approach.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether there are any plans to increase the Glider fleet.

(AQW 2533/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Phase 1 of the Belfast Rapid Transit (BRT) system was successfully completed and the new Glider system was introduced to service in September 2018, connecting communities in East and West Belfast. The new service has proved to be a huge success. It has achieved over 13.6 million passenger journeys to date. This has been an increase in over 45,000 passenger journeys per week in comparison to the previous Metro services.

Consequently Translink has identified the need for two additional vehicles. The Department approved a Business Case for the two Gliders in January 2020 and Translink will now begin the process of ordering and purchasing them. Subject to future funding, I will be exploring all options to deliver cleaner, greener, sustainable transport.

Phase 2 of BRT, which will connect North and South Belfast, is at the early stages of planning.

Although too early to be definitive on the number of vehicles which would be required for Phase 2, I can confirm that the implementation of BRT 2 will lead to an increase in the Glider fleet.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) how she intends to use the extra £3m funding for winter conditions; and (ii) whether the winter gritting schedule can now be expanded for times of adverse weather.

(AQW 2540/17-22)

Ms Mallon:

- (i) The Finance Minister announced an additional £3million of funding in February to fund winter gritting services, urgent street lighting repairs and road maintenance. I have allocated £1m to winter gritting services, which will protect the existing winter gritting schedule up to 31 March 2020; £1.2m to street lighting (outage) repairs; and £0.8m to road maintenance.
- (ii) In general, my Department salts main through routes carrying more than 1,500 vehicles per day. In exceptional circumstances, roads with difficult topography carrying between 1,000 and 1,500 vehicles per day will also be salted. The application of this policy ensures that 28% of the total road network, which carries around 80% of traffic, is salted at an average cost of around £6.7 million each year. Any extension of the schedule to cover 90% or 100% of traffic volumes would double or quadruple the annual cost respectively.

I would like to be able to expand our gritting service to many other routes, but it is simply not feasible to do this at present due to the severe budget constraints and many other pressures faced by my Department. I have been raising the need for additional investment with the Finance Minister, in advance of the 2020/21 budget.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the number of gullies in the Fermanagh area; and the number of these gullies that are cleaned (i) once; and (ii) twice per year.

(AQW 2570/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There are approximately 15,100 gullies in Fermanagh.

In the past, my Department aimed to inspect and clean, where necessary, all gullies in urban areas twice each year and gullies in rural areas once each year. This sought to ensure that a reasonable level of maintenance was being carried out to drainage systems, taking account of the Department's finite funding and staff resource levels. In addition, inspection and cleaning of gullies was undertaken at locations where fallen leaves presented ongoing problems at certain times of year, or where there was a history of gullies becoming blocked for other reasons. However, due to ongoing severe funding pressures, my Department has had to restrict this service and is currently only able to deliver a limited service across a range

of functions, including gully emptying. As a result, my Department currently aims to inspect and clean, where necessary, all gullies once annually.

As you will be aware, I have been raising the need for additional funding with the Finance Minister in advance of the 2020/21 budget, as I am cognisant that proactive rather than reactive maintenance is much more cost effective and represents better value for money in the longer term.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister for Infrastructure when she will engage additional teams and resources to address the backlog of faulty streetlights.

(AQW 2606/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I understand and share the concerns of the public affected by street light outages and am working with my Departmental officials to address this issue as quickly as possible.

I am pleased to inform the Member that I have recently allocated £1.2m to address the current outage backlog and future outages up to 31 March 2020. My Department's internal and external contractors have commenced work on outage repairs in all Divisions.

I have been raising the need for additional investment with the Minister for Finance as part of the 2020/21 budget discussions in order to better maintain our roads and deal with other growing pressures facing my Department.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether there are any plans to carry out a review of potentially unsafe trees along main arterial routes, given the risk posed to the public as a result of falling trees during recent storms.

(AQW 2608/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department does not have a statutory duty regarding the condition of trees that are on land beside the adopted road network. However, it does have a statutory duty to maintain the public road network, which includes ensuring that boundary trees or hedges do not overgrow the roadway and footway, thereby impeding road users and pedestrians.

My officials usually identify overgrown trees and hedges that endanger or obstruct road users, during our routine maintenance inspections. If a tree is suspected of being a hazard or if a tree-related accident has occurred, owners / occupiers are identified and are requested to co-operate in removing or cutting the trees or hedges, to address any concerns in relation to public safety. If they do not do so, my Department has powers under Article 50 of the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993 to serve a notice on the owner/occupier requiring them to remove or cut back the tree or hedge, so as to remove the danger or obstruction. Where an owner / occupier does not comply with the requirements of the notice, my Department may carry out the necessary works and seek to recover costs.

In view of the procedures already in place, there are currently no plans to carry out a review of potentially unsafe trees along arterial routes.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of the effectiveness of flood mitigation measures carried out along the River Finn to protect properties in Clady village, Co.Tyrone, and adjoining areas.

(AQW 2614/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The flood defences at the Finn River, which are predominantly earthen flood banks, were constructed around 60 years ago and provide some degree of protection to properties in Clady village and the surrounding area. My Department has carried out a flood study to assess the level of risk to properties in this area, to determine if a viable flood alleviation scheme to enhance the level of flood protection to properties could be taken forward.

Unfortunately, an overall flood alleviation scheme, to reduce flood risk to properties in Clady Village and outlying areas along the Urney Road from the River Finn, is not economically viable. However a smaller, more localised flood alleviation project, on the Donnygowen Burn, where it joins the River Finn, is economically viable and is due to commence in 2020. This project, which is estimated to cost £300,000, involves the construction of floodwalls and will, to some extent, reduce the risk of flooding to six properties in the immediate vicinity of Clady Bridge.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure how her Department will proceed with the development of a new community and youth facility in the Greater Glen Area, which has been delayed due to its proximity to a reservoir.

(AQW 2620/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Planning permission for this application was refused by the Planning Committee of Derry city and Strabane District Council on 12 August 2018. The application was refused because it did not satisfy the requirements of 'Planning Policy Statement 15 Planning and Flood Risk'.

The proposed community and youth facility lies in the inundation area of Creggan upper and Creggan lower reservoirs. At this stage, the developer has been unable to demonstrate that the condition, management and maintenance regime of either of these reservoirs is appropriate to provide sufficient assurances regarding reservoir safety. I am advised discussions with the Reservoir Manager will continue to encourage them to voluntarily comply with all of the legislative provisions foreseen in the Reservoirs Act.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure when will legislative provisions for the Review of Old Mineral Permissions will be commenced.

(AQW 2648/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The commencement of these legislative provisions contained within the Planning Act (NI) 2011 is currently under consideration. This will require an up to date assessment of the operational effectiveness of the legislation, as well as further engagement with stakeholders to consider the practical impacts of ROMPs, including the resourcing implications for planning authorities and operators.

The commencement of ROMPs notwithstanding, there is currently a range of enforcement powers available to councils in their role as local planning authorities to deal with any operator who operates beyond the scope of an existing planning permission. In addition, there are powers introduced under the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act (NI) 2011 which councils can exercise to deal with a range of nuisance issues which could give rise to complaints relating to the operation of older permissions.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in relation to the annual LTSM programme for 2020-2021, will her Department provide a pedestrian crossing on Brownhill Link Road, Irvinestown,

(AQW 2649/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I would refer the Member to my answer to her question AQW 2337/17-22.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how much Translink spent on new buses, between 2015 and 2019.

(AQW 2665/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Between 2015 and 2019, Translink purchased 266 new buses costing just over £70m. The new buses included Goldline coaches, Glider vehicles and single and double deck vehicles for both Metro and Ulsterbus as per the table below:

BRT Glider Vehicles	32 Buses
BRT Feeder Minibuses	18 Buses
High Capacity Goldline Coaches	24 Buses
Goldline Coaches	30 Buses
Double Deck Buses	97 Buses
Single Deck Buses	27 Buses
Minibuses	38 Buses
Total	266

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) when the consultant's report of the review of renewable energy planning policy will be published; and (ii) whether a copy will be placed in the Assembly Library.

(AQW 2671/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department commissioned external consultants to undertake research to inform the future direction of strategic planning policy for renewable energy development. I will be considering this issue in the coming weeks and will reflect on all relevant matters, including the consultant's report in considering the best way forward. I will then ensure that a copy of the independent research report is made public and is placed in the Assembly Library in due course.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in relation to the announcement of a review of renewable energy planning policy by the Minister of the Environment on 16 June 2015, why are renewable applications still being determined on the strength of policy drafted when applications such as large scale solar farms and battery storage facilities were not in anticipation.

(AQW 2672/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In my response to the member's previous Assembly Question (2055/17-22), I indicated that current regional planning policy for assessing development proposals as set out in the Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) which was published September 2015, as well as supporting supplementary planning guidance, provides a robust policy framework against which to assess planning applications of all types, including proposals of the nature to which your question refers, through the planning process.

I appreciate, however, that renewable energy development is a complex and technical policy area and there are key factors at play in terms of the pace of technological change; the dynamics of the energy market and wider economic factors. You are aware that my Department commissioned independent external consultants to undertake research to inform the future direction of strategic planning policy for renewable energy development. I will be considering this issue in the coming weeks and will reflect on all relevant matters, including the consultant's report in considering the best way forward.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure how are (i) the Strategic Planning Policy Statement; and (ii) the Planning Policy Statement 18 still considered adequate to decide on planning applications, such as large scale solar farm proposals. (AQW 2673/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In my response to the member's previous Assembly Question (2055/17-22), I indicated that current regional planning policy for assessing development proposals as set out in the Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) and supporting supplementary planning guidance, provides a robust policy framework against which to assess planning applications of all types, including those for renewable energy.

The SPPS, Planning Policy Statement 18: 'Renewable Energy' and its Best Practice Guidance provide policy and guidance for the assessment of a range of renewable energy technologies, including solar energy. Existing policy and guidance also provides general planning principles in relation to the assessment of noise, residential and visual amenity, cumulative impact and health and safety, which are material considerations associated with such developments, and are assessed on a case by case basis.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline (i) the challenges identified for possible necessary expansion for checks and inspections at Warrenpoint Port in the post-transition period; and (ii) how she intends to address this issue. (AQW 2696/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My department has no responsibility for checks and inspections at ports. From the International Agreement, the protocol is clear that the Departments with key responsibility for checking goods, either in NI or in GB will be:

- a DAERA in NI or Defra in GB for SPS checks;
- b HMRC for customs checks.

If checks are required at NI ports as a result of the deal protocol in the post-transition period, this could require additional space/facilities to be made available at ports including at Warrenpoint.

As part of EU exit preparation last Autumn, my Department ran a grant funding scheme to assist ports in preparing for no deal /deal scenarios and to allow them to enhance port resilience to maximize post EU exit opportunities. Warrenpoint Port was successful and was awarded funds to undertake works to clear space and improve traffic management in anticipation of checks. This work is reaching completion.

At this stage it is unclear how checks on goods will be managed, but my Department will continue to work with Warrenpoint Harbour to provide assistance when required.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline plans for the installation of ramps through Park View, Cloughogue, Newry. (AQW 2697/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department recognises the importance of traffic calming and road safety measures and is committed to exploring solutions that deliver better for communities and improve lives across Northern Ireland. I can confirm my officials have previously assessed Park View, Cloughogue for traffic calming measures, and it remains under consideration for potential inclusion in a future works programme.

While I would like to do more in relation to improving safety within our communities, the severe budget constraints that I have inherited, limit my capacity to do so. I have raised this issue with the Department of Finance and Executive colleagues, in advance of the new budget being set.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister for Infrastructure in relation to the Continuous Household Survey in 2018/19, whether she will consider the implementation of 20mph zones outside schools. (AQW 2698/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister responsible for promoting and improving road safety, I want to work actively with partners to reduce death and serious injuries on our roads. I believe that reducing the maximum speed traffic can travel at on some of our roads, particularly those near schools, can help. This is a view shared by the majority of respondents in the recently published 'Road Safety Issues in Northern Ireland 2018/19' report.

My Department is committed to introducing measures that reduce the speed of traffic on our roads. We are currently trialling an arrangement of signs that is intended to allow the introduction of more part-time 20mph speed limits at schools. We are also trialling the effectiveness of 'signed only' 20mph limits. These would be more economical and could be used more widely in appropriate environments, such as residential areas with schools, than would be possible with the current approach of providing 20mph limits along with traffic calming features. I am expecting receipt of the findings of the trial in the next month or so, and I fully intend to see what potential there is to build on the work already undertaken.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Infrastructure how she will ensure planning regulations will be updated to achieve zero emissions by 2030 for (i) businesses; (ii) homes; and (iii) government venues. (AQW 2721/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There are no planning regulations to update in relation to the energy and environmental performance of new buildings, including businesses, homes and government venues. Such matters are governed by building regulations for which the Department of Finance (DoF) has primary responsibility.

DoF has advised that target carbon dioxide rates for new buildings are dealt with in Building Regulations and the need is recognised for these rates to continue to be reduced as part of the work to achieve the net zero carbon target.

DoF officials are fully aware of relevant consultations on proposals for amendments to Building Regulations in England, of similar proposals for Wales, and of recent uplifts in the Republic of Ireland and are progressing proposals here with these in mind.

Whilst there are no planning regulations to update, I am nevertheless strongly committed, within the areas of my responsibility, to working to ensure that the planning system and my Department plays its part in achieving the net zero carbon target. Regarding my Department's responsibilities under the two tier planning system, regional guidance in the Regional Development Strategy 2035 (RDS) and regional planning policy contained in the Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS), already emphasises how planning authorities should mitigate and adapt to climate change. This includes, encouraging increased use of micro-generation in new buildings and requiring the siting, design and layout of all new development to limit likely greenhouse gas emissions and minimise resource and energy requirements.

Mr McCann asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans she has to deal with parking saturation in many parts of West Belfast.

(AQW 2728/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I understand that a number of requests for residents' parking within the Belfast area have already been received by my Department. I can assure the Member that my officials are assessing these in the context of developing a new approach to residents' parking schemes that incorporates the learning from the first scheme.

The first residents' parking scheme in Rugby Road / College Park Avenue, Belfast came into operation during April 2018. A review of the scheme, which reflects the needs, experiences and feedback of residents, is currently underway. I will want to make sure that any lessons learnt from this scheme inform wider policy on implementing residents' parking schemes for the benefit of communities.

Mr McCann asked the Minister for Infrastructure when there will be restrictions on non-residential parking implemented in Stockmans Lane, including the extension of double yellow lines.

(AQW 2729/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am keen to see action to address the concerns of residents about parking issues and pleased to note that work is already in hand.

You will be aware the first residents' parking scheme in Rugby Road / College Park Avenue, Belfast came into operation during April 2018. A review of the scheme, which reflects the needs, experiences and feedback of residents, is currently underway. I will want to make sure that any lessons learnt from this scheme inform wider policy on implementing residents' parking schemes.

I understand that a number of requests for residents' parking within the Belfast area have already been received by my Department. I can assure the Member that my officials are assessing these in the context of developing a new approach to residents' parking schemes that incorporates the learning from the first scheme.

As I think you are already aware from discussions with my officials in Roads Eastern Division, progress has already been made in implementing a number of corner restrictions in Stockmans Lane but action to implement other waiting restrictions does require a legislative process.

The proposed Parking and Waiting Restrictions (Belfast) (Amendment) Order, which includes the proposed waiting restrictions in Stockmans Lane, is currently going through the legislative process which will include a consultation period in due course.

Mr McCann asked the Minister for Infrastructure how much was spent by her Department on grass and weed removal from streets in West Belfast, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 2730/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Costs associated with the treatment of grass and weeds is not recorded by constituency areas and therefore the information requested is not available. I can, however, confirm that my Department's local road maintenance office which covers the north and west areas of Belfast City Council has spent £87k in 2017/18, £90k in 2018/19 and in 2019/20 £95k (forecasted) on treating weeds. This was supplemented with some manual removal of weeds which was carried out by our in-house Operation and Maintenance team. The costs of these operations are not recorded separately from other road maintenance activities. Grass cutting, which does not include removal of cuttings, is carried out by the in-house Operation and Maintenance team and the costs are not separated out from other road maintenance activities.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQO 105/17-22, whether (i) she intends to bring the issue of wider developer contributions to regional infrastructure beyond site-specific mitigation to the Executive; and (ii) a community infrastructure levy, similar to that in operation in England, might be considered.

(AQW 2733/17-22)

Ms Mallon: This is a broader matter for consideration by the Executive. I intend to write to the Finance Minister asking him for his views and my Department may have a role in contributing to taking this forward. The way forward could include consideration of the models already in place in other jurisdictions such as the Community Infrastructure Levy.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the outcome of discussions her Department has had with the manufacturer of the faulty lifts installed at the MOT Centres.

(AQW 2734/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I announced on 27 February an order for 52 new vehicle lifts following receipt and detailed consideration of expert engineering, procurement, audit and legal advice. These lifts have been purchased under an accelerated production programme. They will begin to be operational from late April with all lifts in place by July which will return our MOT centres to full capacity.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she plans to introduce penalties to e-carNI vehicle users who park their car at e-car charging points longer than the required time to fully charge.

(AQW 2738/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The following legislation provides for the on street and off street use of a parking place for electric vehicles respectively:

- 1 The Parking Places on Roads (Electric Vehicles) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012; and
- 2 2000 No. 384 ROAD TRAFFIC AND VEHICLES Off-Street Parking Order (Northern Ireland) 2000.

These Orders set out the authorisation, use of parking places and parking bays and the maximum period of waiting for electric vehicles. When the driver of an electric vehicle uses a parking bay reserved for an electric vehicle, the electric vehicle must be connected to an electric vehicle charging post and the driver must adhere to the specified time restrictions in relation to that parking place. It is a parking offence if time limits are contravened, enforceable by means of issuing a Penalty Charge Notice. The amount of the Penalty Charge is currently £90 which can be reduced to £45 if paid within 14 days.

I have no plans, at present, to introduce penalties for electric vehicle users who leave their electric vehicles at e-car charging points longer than the required time to fully charge their vehicle.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Infrastructure when she plans to introduce purchase charges at e-carNI charge points.

(AQW 2739/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The e-car public charge point network in the North is owned by the Electricity Supply Board (ESB). At present, ESB does not charge e-car drivers for charging an electric vehicle at a public charge point. To date, the Utility Regulator has set a Maximum Resale Price (MRP) on the electricity cost of charge points, whereby any commercial operator cannot charge above cost price of electricity supply. Over the next few months, the Utility Regulator will be publishing its findings from the recent consultation on whether to remove the Maximum Resale Price (MRP) of Electricity as it applies to electric vehicles.

I look forward to the outcome of the consultation exercise which will give clarity for operators wishing to provide commercial services in the North. I fully recognise the importance of having modern, reliable public electric vehicle charging infrastructure in providing confidence for users of ultra-low emission vehicles and in respect of the connectivity improvements this would bring. In recognition of this, I recently made a joint commitment with the DAERA Minister to work collaboratively to promote the use of electric vehicles and improve the charge point network across the North.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) whether e-carNI charge points are classed as parking spaces; (ii) whether they are subject to parking charges introduced by local councils; and (iii) in relation to the limited network and mileage restrictions, for her assessment of the impact of parking charges at e-carNI charge points on e-car vehicle users.

(AQW 2740/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Parking spaces or bays are situated within the parking place and are defined in legislation as “a space which is marked out in a parking place for the leaving of a vehicle” (Road Traffic and Vehicles Off-Street Parking Order (Northern Ireland) 2000 & The Parking Places on Roads (Electric Vehicles) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012). As such, e-carNI charge points are not classed as parking spaces.

Electric vehicle (EV) drivers are subject to the same parking charges in council car parks as drivers of internal combustion engine vehicles. They can avail of EV charge points located within the car park, at no extra cost, having paid for their allocated time to use the council car park.

At present, the Department does not charge EV drivers for parking their vehicle on-street in a parking place for electric vehicles. The impact of parking charges for EV drivers using council car park facilities are no different to other users of these

car parks given that, at present, ESB does not charge e-car drivers for using their network of charge points in the North. There is no evidence to suggest that parking charges at e-carNI charge points has any impact on e-car vehicle users.

There are currently just under 3,000 EVs registered in the North and 337 public charge points. The number of EVs coming to the market is increasing year on year with significant increases in vehicle range. I fully recognise the importance of having a modern, reliable public electric vehicle charging infrastructure which provides confidence for users of ultra-low emission vehicles.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the overall cost to Translink of the new Milewater service centre. (AQW 2747/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The new Milewater Service Centre was built in advance of the introduction of the Glider service in September 2018. The total cost of the construction of the new facility was £26.6m.

Part funding of just less than £14m for the project was received from the European Regional Development Fund – Investment for Growth and Jobs Programme for Northern Ireland 2014-2020.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update of the review of renewable energy planning policy, announced by the Minister of the Environment on 16 June 2015. (AQW 2755/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Department issued a 'Call for Evidence' in March 2016 and subsequently commissioned independent consultants to undertake research to inform the future direction of strategic planning policy for renewable energy development. I will be considering this issue in the coming weeks and will reflect on all relevant matters, including the consultant's report in considering the best way forward.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 1600/17-22, (i) what the criteria is for Townscape Character; and (ii) what will happen to the kerbstones that have been lifted by contractors. (AQW 2765/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Areas of Townscape Character (ATC's) are referred to in the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan - Plan Strategy & framework - Volume 1, Part 3, – Urban Environment and states that Regional planning policy in relation to our built heritage is contained in Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 6: Planning, Archaeology and the Built Heritage, and the Addendum to PPS 6:

(i) Areas of Townscape Character.

The addendum to PPS 6 - Areas of Townscape Character provides additional planning policies relating to ATC's for a) demolition of buildings, b) new development and c) the control of advertisements.

General issues to be taken into account when considering development within an ATC include: developments should be in harmony with, or complementary to, its neighbours having regard to the adjoining architectural styles. The use of materials generally matching those which are historically dominant in the area is important, as is the need for the development not to have a visually disruptive impact on the existing townscape.

(ii) Any re-useable granite kerbs are brought into the Department's storage yard for re-use, where required, on the public road network, primarily on main roads and in conservation areas.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Infrastructure what discussions she has had with the Minister for Communities to ensure there are no impediments to the delivery of social housing. (AQW 2766/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Although the lead role on housing policy and consequently the provision of affordable housing (social and intermediate), rests with the Department for Communities (DfC), as Minister for Infrastructure I am committed to improving social housing provision by ensuring that my Department plays its part in supporting the delivery of social housing on the ground.

I have written to the Minister for Communities to arrange a meeting to discuss the need for more social and affordable homes to be built across the North and the essential infrastructure required to facilitate and enable this to happen. I believe there are very real opportunities for our departments to work together to deliver on this ambition.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline plans to implement a pedestrian crossing on Chapel Road, Meigh, for access to St. Joseph's Primary School. (AQW 2775/17-22)

Ms Mallon: A traffic survey for the purposes of considering the need for provision of a controlled pedestrian crossing on Chapel Road, Meigh, at St. Joseph's Primary School, was completed in June 2018.

When assessed against the current policies that I have inherited from previous Ministers, the analysis of need indicated that it fell well below the minimum criteria required to warrant further development for provision of a pedestrian crossing.

As my Department is unaware of any significant changes to alter this assessment, there are no immediate plans for a pedestrian crossing, but I have asked officials to keep this situation under review for any change in circumstances.

While I would like to do more in relation to improving safety within our communities, the severe budget constraints that I have inherited limit my capacity to do so. I have raised this issue with the Department of Finance and Executive colleagues, in advance of the new budget being set.

Mr Irwin asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline a timescale for the repair of the subsidence damage to Mullalelish Road, Richhill.

(AQW 2787/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can confirm that my Department is currently working on the design of a suitable repair for the collapsed verge and road edge at this location.

A timeframe for the repair cannot be determined until this design work has been completed, but is likely to take several months, depending on whether land needs to be acquired and if technical approvals are necessary.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how regular the new independent inspections will be for vehicle lifts at MOT centres.

(AQW 2788/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The current disruption to the vehicle testing services at the Driver and Vehicle Agency's (DVA's) test centres is not acceptable and I have worked to minimise the disruption and to return to a safe and fully operational testing service as quickly as possible. This has included the immediate issuing of Temporary Exemption Certificates, extending the opening hours at DVA test centres and commissioning two independent reviews to provide me with expert advice on the next steps.

Based on expert engineering, audit, procurement and legal advice, on 27 February I announced that an order for 52 new lifts had been placed with an accelerated production programme. The new lifts will begin to be installed from April, with all lifts to be in place by July. Once the new lifts are installed, this will return the MOT centres to full capacity. I have asked my officials to prepare an implementation plan for the new lifts which will be installed on a phased basis from April and the plans for each centre will be confirmed as soon as possible.

The timing of the new independent inspections on all vehicle lifts is currently being considered in conjunction with Department of Finance's Construction and Procurement Delivery (CPD) and the contractor and they will be in place from 1 April 2020. These new arrangements will provide a robust assurance on the maintenance and condition of vehicle lifts to ensure this situation does not occur again. The safety of staff and customers remains my top priority.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the new inspection measures for vehicle lifts at MOT centres.

(AQW 2789/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The current disruption to the vehicle testing services at the Driver and Vehicle Agency's (DVA's) test centres is not acceptable and I have worked to minimise the disruption and to return to a safe and fully operational testing service as quickly as possible. This has included the immediate issuing of Temporary Exemption Certificates, extending the opening hours at DVA test centres and commissioning two independent reviews to provide me with expert advice on the next steps.

Based on expert engineering, audit, procurement and legal advice, on 27 February I announced that an order for 52 new lifts had been placed with an accelerated production programme. The new lifts will begin to be installed from April, with all lifts to be in place by July. Once the new lifts are installed, this will return the MOT centres to full capacity. I have asked my officials to prepare an implementation plan for the new lifts which will be installed on a phased basis from April and the plans for each centre will be confirmed as soon as possible.

The details of the new independent inspections on all vehicle lifts are currently being developed in conjunction with Department of Finance's Construction and Procurement Delivery (CPD) and the contractor and they will be in place from 1 April 2020. New measures will include the introduction of an improved equipment replacement cycle and a review of the contract management regime to be deployed by DVA with MAHA. Improvements will also be made to the maintenance and inspection regime and reporting by MAHA.

Additional regular independent robust inspections and assurances will be arranged by DVA, adding an additional layer of protection. These new steps are being put in place to ensure this type of incident does not occur again.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether (i) she intends to review the qualifying age for a Senior SmartPass; and (ii) she has any plans to restrict the times of the day that a SmartPass can be used.

(AQW 2808/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I recognise the multiple benefits delivered by the Concessionary Fares Scheme and I am determined to preserve the travel discounts offered on public transport to the most vulnerable groups in society despite the severe constraints in my Department's budget.

I have met with the Smart Pass Equality Campaign to better understand how travel concessions can impact on vulnerable groups, however the Concessionary Fares Scheme, as with many areas across my Department, is already under significant

pressure, reflecting the severe and challenging budget constraints under which my Department has operated over recent years. Therefore, in advance of taking decisions, I will be assessing the full range of pressures, reflecting on my priorities, the commitments in "New Decade: New Approach" and the budget made available for the period ahead.

I am continuing to engage with my Executive colleagues to ensure sustained levels of recurrent funding going forward to maintain high quality public transport including support for concessionary travel. This is essential to maintain the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of the region.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail what plans she has to review the SmartPass system to enable people (i) with visual impairments; (ii) who are registered blind; and (iii) who are unable to drive to be able to access free travel.

(AQW 2809/17-22)

Ms Mallon: People who are registered blind currently enjoy access to free travel on public transport through the Concessionary Fares Scheme.

I recognise the multiple benefits delivered by the Concessionary Fares Scheme and I am determined to preserve the travel discounts offered on public transport to the most vulnerable groups in society despite the severe constraints in my Department's budget.

I have met with the Smart Pass Equality Campaign to better understand the impact of half fare travel concessions, however the Concessionary Fares Scheme, as with many areas across my Department, is already under significant pressure, reflecting the severe and challenging budget constraints under which my Department has operated over recent years. Therefore, in advance of taking decisions, I will be assessing the full range of pressures, reflecting on my priorities, the commitments in "New Decade: New Approach" and the budget made available for the period ahead.

I have raised the need for additional investment in infrastructure with the Finance Minister and Executive colleagues, and as this is an Executive scheme I will be having discussions with Executive colleagues to address budgetary pressures in my budget.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) when she will publish the report on the 20mph project outside rural schools; and (ii) whether the Schools (Part-Time 20mph Speed Limit) Order (Northern Ireland) 2018 will be extended to all schools.

(AQW 2810/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister responsible for promoting and improving road safety, I want to work actively with partners to reduce death and serious injuries on our roads. I believe that reducing the maximum speed at which traffic can travel on some of our roads, particularly those near schools, can help.

My Department is committed to introducing measures that reduce the speed of traffic on our roads. We are currently trialling an arrangement of signs that is intended to allow the introduction of more part-time 20mph speed limits at schools. I am expecting receipt of the findings of the trial in the next month or so, and plan to make them publicly available after I have given them due consideration.

Further changes to legislation will be considered in due course.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister for Infrastructure what her Department is doing to improve the bus service from Newry to Portadown.

(AQW 2815/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is currently developing proposals for a new Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan which will help inform my priorities for future development of the main road and rail networks, including the potential for new bus services. I expect to consider draft proposals and options in the coming weeks.

While I am committed to addressing regional imbalance and better connecting communities across Northern Ireland through our public transport network, given the severe budget constraints under which my Department has operated over recent years many of our existing services are already under considerable pressure, including our existing public transport network. I, therefore, will be assessing the full range of pressures across my Department reflecting my priorities, the commitments in "New Decade: New Approach" and the budget made available for the period ahead before taking decisions on new or additional bus services on the public transport network

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister for Infrastructure, regarding 20mph residential areas, how many are (i) advisory; and (ii) mandatory.

(AQW 2832/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister responsible for promoting and improving road safety, I want to work actively with partners to reduce death and serious injuries on our roads. I believe that reducing the maximum speed traffic can travel at on some of our roads can help.

Most 20mph limits here are mandatory and there are 717 locations where a mandatory speed limit of 20mph has been applied, most of these are in residential areas. There are also 21 mandatory part-time 20mph speed limits at schools, most of

which are on rural roads where the national speed limit applies. Current records would indicate there are 33 locations where an advisory 20mph speed limit is in place, which are mostly in the Greater Belfast area.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the number of compensation claims in respect of (i) faulty street lighting; and (ii) roads and footpaths in a state of disrepair, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2859/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The table below details the total number of public liability claims received in each of the last five full financial years, where personal injury or vehicle damage is alleged to have occurred as a result of street lighting issues/defects, and carriageway or footway issues/defects.

Alleged Cause	Year				
	2014/2015	2015/ 2016	2016/ 2017	2017/ 2018	2018/ 2019
Street lighting issues/defects	18	17	12	6	7
Carriageway or footway issues/defects.	1,830	2,816	2,194	4,703	3,514

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in relation to third party contractors with permits to work on footpaths and roads, how many have been deemed to be unsatisfactorily repaired, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2860/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Utility companies, with statutory authority under their operating licences, and contractors, working on their behalf, do not require a permit from my Department to undertake installation or repair of their apparatus in roads or footpaths. However, they are required to provide notification of their intention to carry out works and to provide subsequent notifications of completed reinstatements.

The following table sets out details of numbers of works reinstatement notifications that have been recorded for utilities in each of the last five years, together with the number of reinstatements that failed to meet the required standard at inspection:

	Number of Works Notified	Number of Reinstatement Inspections	Number of failed reinstatements
2015/16	46175	9825	684
2016/17	56452	9785	670
2017/18	52258	9859	1062
2018/19	47166	9463	920
2019/20 (to end Feb)	47548	9169	991

My officials will follow-up each failed inspection to ensure the relevant utility company carries out any necessary repairs to the required standard.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many permits have been issued to third party contractors to work on footpaths and roads, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2861/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Utility companies with statutory authority under their operating licences and contractors working on their behalf do not require a permit from my Department to undertake installation or repair of their apparatus in roads or footpaths. They are however required to provide notification of their intention to carry out works and to provide subsequent notifications of completed reinstatements.

The following table sets out the numbers of works notifications that have been recorded for utilities in each of the last five years.

	Number of Works Notifications
2015/16	46175
2016/17	56452
2017/18	52258
2018/19	47166
2019/20 (to end Feb)	47548

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given individuals have still not received their Temporary Exemption Certificate and their tax is now up for renewal, whether these certificates will be provided immediately.

(AQW 2868/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have put in place arrangements to make sure that those vehicles whose MOT certificates have expired or will expire are granted an automatic Temporary Exemption Certificate (TEC) from the date of expiry. This will give a temporary exemption from the legal requirement to hold an MOT certificate up to the new date on the TEC and allows the vehicle to be taxed and used on the road.

The exemption will be automatically recorded in the DVA system and the paper copy of the certificate, with the new expiry date, will be sent to the registered keeper's address which could take up to 10 days. Customers can still drive their car before the TEC is received, as DVA records will be automatically updated to enable vehicle tax to be paid, if necessary. Customers can check the status of their vehicle on <https://www.gov.uk/check-mot-status>.

However, a TEC can only be granted for tests already booked by customers and cancelled by the DVA. It is therefore very important that people contact the DVA to book an MOT appointment when they receive a reminder letter in the first instance. It also remains the responsibility of the vehicle owner to make sure their car is in a roadworthy condition to be used on a public road.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the current status of enforcement notice EN/2016/0048.

(AQW 2878/17-22)

Ms Mallon: This notice is one of 7 in effect at the Mobuoy Road site. The time periods for compliance, with the remediation steps is 22 September 2021 and therein have not yet expired.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure how her Department has resolved the environmental concerns raised in Planning Appeals Commission reports (i) 2015/E0050; and (ii) 2015/E0052.

(AQW 2879/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is aware of the concerns raised in the PAC reports as they relate to the implementation of remedial steps in the enforcement notice. A person responsible for complying with an enforcement notice is required to comply with applicable national laws, when implementing those steps and carrying out operations.

My Department has also been working closely with DAERA (NIEA) on the remediation strategy for the entire site.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline what criteria is applied when a decision is made to allow a driver with 12 penalty points to continue to drive.

(AQW 2890/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department has no role in determining the criteria which is applied when a decision is taken to allow a driver with 12 penalty points to continue to drive. Article 40 of the Road Traffic Offenders (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 provides that a court may determine upon conviction not to disqualify an offender if it is satisfied that there are mitigating circumstances. A court may consider grounds of exceptional hardship, in making its determination. Exceptional hardship is not defined in road traffic legislation, and is therefore a matter for the court.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the process for allowing an exemption from disqualification for a driver who has received 12 penalty points.

(AQW 2891/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department has no role in the process for allowing an exemption from disqualification for a driver who has received 12 or more penalty points. Whether or not a driver can continue to drive following such a conviction is at the discretion of the judiciary, in accordance with the provisions of the Road Traffic Offenders (Northern Ireland) Order 1996.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the commitment in the Northern Ireland Road Safety Strategy to 2020 to develop a programme of part-time 20mph speed limits at rural schools.

(AQW 2921/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister responsible for promoting and improving road safety, I want to work actively with partners to reduce death and serious injuries on our roads. I believe that reducing the maximum speed traffic can travel at on some of our roads, particularly those near schools, can help.

My Department is committed to introducing measures that reduce the speed of traffic on our roads. We are currently trialling an arrangement of signs that is intended to allow the introduction of more part-time 20mph speed limits at schools. I am expecting receipt of the findings of the trial in the next month or so, and I fully intend to see what potential there is to build on the work already undertaken.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) for her assessment of the UKCP18 climate projections noting sea levels in Belfast Lough in 2100 could rise by up to 94cms; and (ii) to outline the work of her Department in relation to sea defences and other measures to mitigate against rising sea levels in coastal areas.

(AQW 2941/17-22)

Ms Mallon:

- (i) Allowances for climate change, in relation to flood risk in Northern Ireland, are currently based on research findings from the UK Climate Impacts Programme, known as UKCP09. My Department is currently assessing the latest UKCP18 projections, to determine the most appropriate allowances that should be made for future sea level rise and for river flooding. While UKCP18 projections indicate that sea levels in Belfast Lough could rise by up to 94cms by 2100, this value represents the upper end of the potential 'high emissions' scenario and a lesser extent of sea level rise may be more likely.
- (ii) My Department is currently responsible for the inspection and maintenance of approximately 26 kilometres of sea defences in Northern Ireland. In addition the Northern Ireland Flood Risk Assessment (NIFRA) 2018 identified Belfast, Derry and to a lesser extent, Newry and Larne as areas that will require further studies to be undertaken to determine if additional sea defences are necessary.

In relation to Belfast, a tidal flood alleviation scheme is currently being developed to provide a long term approach to tidal flood risk management for Belfast City Centre, from Belfast Lough to Stranmillis Weir. It is estimated that the scheme will provide flood protection for up to 1,500 properties, will extend to over 8.5km and is estimated to cost in the region of £18million.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of the draft Belfast Bicycle Network plan.

(AQW 2948/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As an important part of my focus on improving the lives of people here, I want to increase the proportion of everyday journeys made by walking and cycling right across the North. I also want to see what I can do to remove the barriers for people who want to walk and cycle more as they go about their everyday lives.

My predecessor announced a public consultation on a draft Belfast Bicycle Network in January 2017. My Department has since done further work on developing an active travel feasibility study for north and west Belfast. Over coming weeks I want to consider carefully how the provision and enhancement of dedicated cycle routes can assist as part of my vision to enable infrastructure that provides safer, sustainable transport that connects communities and improves lives. Once the Budget process provides clarity on the resources available, I will be able to firm up my objectives for cycling.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many sites fall under the Review of Old Mineral Permissions and have not submitted updated conditions surrounding their compliance of environmental standards.

(AQW 2949/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The legislative provisions for the review of old mineral permissions were brought forward in 2006 as an amendment to the then Planning (NI) Order 1991 and were subsequently included within the Planning Act (NI) 2011. The proposed introduction was delayed following the consideration of concerns expressed by the quarrying industry in relation to the potential economic impact on that sector and on the construction sector at a time of economic downturn. The issue of commencing these provisions remains under consideration and I can assure you that I am committed to protecting the environment.

The commencement of ROMPs notwithstanding, there is currently a range of enforcement powers available to councils in their role as local planning authorities to deal with any operator who operates beyond the scope of an existing planning permission. In addition, there are powers introduced under the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act (NI) 2011 which councils can exercise to deal with a range of nuisance issues which could give rise to complaints relating to the operation of older permissions.

Mr Wells asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many vehicle owners have been prosecuted for having bull bars on their (i) cars; and (ii) vans, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2967/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There is no specific criminal offence concerning the fitment of bull bars on a vehicle. While an offence could potentially arise where bull bars expose sharp edges or are deemed insecure, and the vehicle may therefore be considered unroadworthy, there have been no such prosecutions initiated by the Department in the last five years.

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will install warning signage in tourist areas alerting drivers to drive on the left lane, similar to those found in the Republic of Ireland.

(AQW 2978/17-22)

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 the careful and considered provision of traffic signs can help.

The PSNI has confirmed that driving on the wrong side of the road is thankfully fairly rare and I am therefore not sure whether the provision of such traffic signing is warranted. It is also questionable whether such signing, while extremely well intentioned, would actually be effective in preventing such occurrences.

My Department is, however, mindful of the needs of visitors. We have provided advice through NI Direct for visitors driving in Northern Ireland, including the requirement to drive on the left. While there are no current plans to provide warning signing in tourist areas, my Department will keep the issue under consideration.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the current legal status of the use of e-scooters.
(AQW 2989/17-22)

Ms Mallon: You will be aware of my recent announcement to bring forward, as soon as possible, the necessary legislation which will remove Electrically Assisted Pedal Cycles (EAPCs) from legislative scope. In relation to electric scooters, it is illegal to use these vehicles on public roads in Northern Ireland, and at present they have not been licensed in any part of Great Britain for use on public roads. I have no plans to change this.

I am, however, aware of the ongoing debate in many countries, in particular about the significant increase in the use of electric scooters, mainly in large towns and cities. It is important to consider the potential environmental and health benefits that these type of vehicles can deliver. I am also very mindful of the safety implications their use may have for both the rider and the wider public, given there has been a number of fatalities and serious injuries occur of both riders and members of the public. I understand that in GB the Department for Transport, as part of a wider transport review, is considering consulting on the use of electric scooters on public roads.

I have asked my officials to keep a watching brief on any developments.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the amount of compensation paid by her Department as a result of damage to vehicles by potholes, in the last three years, broken down by constituency.
(AQW 3017/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department does not record claims according to constituency areas but instead records claims by Section Office area, which broadly align with Council areas.

The NICS accounting system does not differentiate between the causes of incidents which result in vehicle damage claims. Therefore, the following table provides details of the total compensation amount paid for all Vehicle Damage claims, regardless of defect type, that have been settled since 1st April 2016, up to and including 31st March 2019.

Please note that claims received in a financial year are not always concluded in the same financial year. Therefore the figures will include compensation paid for claims received in prior financial years:

Section Office	Financial Year			Grand total
	2016/2017	2017/2018	2018/2019	
Antrim & Newtownabbey	£18,049.99	£15,511.80	£55,855.49	£89,417.28
Ards & North Down	£26,198.76	£25,315.71	£63,733.74	£115,248.21
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon (East)	£7,526.59	£5,729.58	£40,510.40	£53,766.57
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon (West)	£33,350.46	£10,349.83	£50,295.02	£93,995.31
Causeway Coast & Glens (East)	£7,271.67	£8,038.35	£17,206.02	£32,516.04
Causeway Coast & Glens (West)	£10,149.86	£3,745.66	£41,251.28	£55,146.80
Fermanagh & Omagh (East)	£13,236.44	£8,357.17	£40,629.01	£62,222.62
Fermanagh & Omagh (West)	£10,474.55	£10,607.51	£30,483.16	£51,565.22
Lisburn & Castlereagh	£36,806.89	£18,126.09	£115,811.74	£170,744.72
Londonderry & Strabane	£7,859.02	£8,277.09	£28,091.85	£44,227.96
Mid & East Antrim	£22,956.77	£14,628.70	£76,856.89	£114,442.36
Mid Ulster (North)	£29,014.77	£12,400.38	£84,926.57	£126,341.72
Mid Ulster (South)	£6,911.85	£8,608.34	£15,689.39	£31,209.58
New Belfast North	£6,196.44	£4,651.71	£27,879.91	£38,728.06
New Belfast South	£7,427.92	£1,782.52	£20,599.10	£29,809.54
Newry Mourne & Down (East)	£23,441.99	£15,603.02	£32,048.73	£71,093.74
Newry Mourne & Down (West)	£52,226.07	£15,891.62	£108,352.66	£176,470.35
Grand Total	£319,100.04	£187,625.08	£850,220.96	£1,356,946.08

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline any plans for a wider roll out of eCar charging points.
(AQW 3029/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There are currently 320 22kWh (Fast) charge points at 160 locations and a further 17 50kWh DC rapid charge point in the North. The e-car public charge point network is owned, operated and maintained by the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) and the market is also open to other commercial operators who would wish to provide charging infrastructure. Over the next few months, the Utility Regulator will be publishing its findings from the recent consultation on the Maximum Resale Price (MRP) of Electricity as it applies to electric vehicles. This should give clarity for operators wishing to provide commercial services in the North. I look forward to the outcome of the consultation exercise and, ultimately, to a solution that will strengthen network provision and contribute to the Northern Ireland Executive's commitment to reducing carbon emissions.

I am committed to seeing this infrastructure increased as part of my Department's climate change action and I have met with the DAERA Minister to begin working collaboratively to promote the use of electric vehicles and specifically to improve the charge point network across the North. I fully recognise the importance of having modern, reliable public electric vehicle charging infrastructure in providing confidence for users of ultra-low emission vehicles and in respect of the connectivity improvements this would bring. My Department closely monitors funding opportunities for the installation of additional infrastructure and is liaising with commercial providers and the Office for Low Emission Vehicles (OLEV) to ensure the charging infrastructure continues to remain fit for purpose, commensurate with growth.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many potholes have been reported, broken down by constituency, over the last three years.

(AQW 3035/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department does not maintain records by constituency. However, the following table provides details of the number of carriageway, hard shoulder and layby surface defects (which includes potholes, cracking, depressions etc.) recorded and listed for repair, in each of the last three years (1st January 2017 to 31st December 2019), by council area:

Surface Defects Recorded for Repair

Councils	2017	2018	2019
Antrim and Newtownabbey	3211	7113	4973
Ards and North Down	2014	3631	4116
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon	9070	18921	16258
Belfast	6081	6924	5059
Causeway Coast and Glens	4031	7917	8145
Derry City and Strabane	5057	10542	8178
Fermanagh and Omagh	8624	15411	10322
Lisburn and Castlereagh	3210	8002	5186
Mid and East Antrim	4381	10051	7638
Mid Ulster	8733	15571	11653
Newry, Mourne and Down	11122	23042	20991

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the measures in place to notify customers of how to receive an MOT vehicle exemption.

(AQW 3044/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have put in place arrangements to make sure that, where possible, those vehicles whose MOT certificates have expired or will expire soon, are granted an automatic Temporary Exemption Certificate (TEC). I have also ensured that measures are in place to communicate this clearly and effectively to customers.

These measures include a dedicated page on the NIDirect website (www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/ongoing-issues-mot-centres), as the primary source where the public can access information about the ongoing situation with vehicle testing, including specifically on the temporary exemptions. The measures also include the regular use of the departmental and NIDirect social media channels to issue updates and signpost customers to the relevant information, and a call handling system put in place to address customer queries regarding vehicle testing. I and the Chief Executive of DVA have also given a number of media interviews and have issued a number of statements outlining the process. I remain committed to updating the public regularly to ensure that disruption to customers is minimised and information is widely and readily available.

Mr Lunn asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in relation to her statement on 27 February, whether she will contemplate action against the contractors who supplied and maintained the vehicle lifts over the past number of years.

(AQW 3086/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have taken QC legal advice which confirmed that legal proceedings against the contractor who supplied and maintained the vehicle lifts could be protracted, costly and would not guarantee a resolution for the public. Independent advice from Construction & Procurement Delivery (CPD) in the Department of Finance confirmed that the quickest way to install new lifts was to use the existing contract. To use another supplier would significantly delay the installation of new lifts. I have placed an order for 52 lifts through an accelerated production programme, which will ensure new lifts will be installed from late April, with all lifts to be in place by July. A revised maintenance and inspection contract will be put in place from 1 April 2020 which will provide the necessary arrangements to ensure this type of incident does not occur again.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister for Infrastructure how much funding has been provided by her Department towards road safety campaigns, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 3111/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The road safety campaign spend for the last five financial years is as follows:

Year	Spend
2015/2016	£1.556m
2016/2017	£1.302m
2017/2018	£1.310m
2018/2019	£1.069m
2019/2020	£988k

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the criteria used by her Department for selecting Belfast City Council representatives to serve on the board of Belfast Harbour Commissioners.

(AQW 3112/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The 2002 Harbour Orders sets out provision for a number of persons appointed to the Board of the three Ports to be members of the respective Council. For Belfast Harbour Commissioners (BHC) this allows up to four Councillors to be appointed.

For this recent appointment process, Belfast City Council nominated seven Councillors. All nominees were asked to complete a short application before being interviewed. The Independent Selection Panel explored with each nominee their understanding and any experience of corporate governance and the responsibilities of being a member of a Board, probity and conflicts of interest and the time commitment involved in the appointment.

The Independent Selection Panel assessed applicants on the basis of this criteria. On conclusion of the interview process I was provided with an alphabetical list of applicant summaries and invited to make my selection.

I selected four Belfast City Councillors for appointment based on the Independent Panel's assessment.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline, if a car dealer buys into stock a vehicle for which the previous keeper has been issued with a Temporary Exemption Certificate (TEC), whether (i) the TEC carries over to the new keeper; or (ii) they need to get a new MOT certificate before selling the vehicle.

(AQW 3136/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Motor Vehicle Testing Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003 provide for the issuing of a Temporary Exemption Certificate (TEC). These certificates relate specifically to the motor vehicle and may be passed to the new owner or registered keeper. Therefore car dealerships may legitimately sell a vehicle with a valid TEC.

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Infrastructure for a breakdown of her Department's staffing structure by (i) division; and (ii) roles, including the number employed in (a) management; and (b) manual roles.

(AQW 3175/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Staff within the Department for Infrastructure are structured under three Groups: Transport and Resources; Planning, Water and the Driver & Vehicle Agency; and Roads and Rivers. As of the 3 February 2020, the full time equivalent (FTE) staffing for these Groups was 302.3, 832.7 and 1738.1 respectively. For the purposes of this question, staff in 'management roles' are defined as permanent staff at grades analogous to Executive Officer II and above and staff in 'manual roles' are defined as permanent staff working in industrial grades. These two classifications do not cover all staff. At this date, 1425.4 FTE were in management roles and 561.9 FTE were in manual roles. All of the Department's industrial staff are within the Roads and Rivers Group.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 2245/17-22, how much was spent on repairing potholes, for each year from 2016-17.

(AQW 3208/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The table below provides details of the expenditure incurred by my Department on repairing carriageway surface defects (which includes potholes, cracking, depressions etc.), for each year from 2016-17:

Year	Carriageway Patching £m
1 Apr 2016 – 31 Mar 2017	11.2
1 Apr 2017 – 31 Mar 2018	11.2
1 Apr 2018 – 31 Mar 2019	16.1
1 Apr 2019 – 31 Mar 2020 (forecast)	14.8

Mr Buckley asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether the recommendations have been followed from the publication of the Alan Strong Report into the Review of Winter Flooding in 2015/16.

(AQW 3212/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As a result of the exceptionally heavy rainfall that occurred during the 2015-16 winter period a number of areas were significantly impacted by flooding. In addition to a number of properties that were impacted, some agricultural land and roads adjacent to Lough Erne and Lough Neagh were flooded for a prolonged period of time. An independent review was carried out by Professor Alan Strong and was published in December 2016. The report made 10 headline recommendations which covered a number of areas that would help to further improve Government and society's ability to manage and respond to flooding.

Recommendations included a review of the management of water levels in Lough Neagh, which concluded that any alternative operation of flood gates other than the procedure carried out by the Department would not have reduced water levels on Lough Neagh significantly. The review also recommended the further development of community resilience approaches that have been developed by the Department and the benefits of natural flood risk management techniques. Improvements in communications, education and emergency planning were also identified. All recommendations have now been addressed and many positive benefits have already been realised as a result, in the management of flood risk.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline (i) the current operational condition of the sluice gates into the River Bann at Toome; (ii) the length of time they have been out of operation due to breakdowns in the past four years; and (iii) details of broken flood control gates on Lough Neagh.

(AQW 3270/17-22)

Ms Mallon: All five of the sluice gates that control the outlet of Lough Neagh to the Lower Bann river at Toome have been fully functional since February 2019. During the past four years, all the gates have been fully functional except for a period from October 2017 to January 2019 when one of the gates was damaged, and again in February 2019 when one gate was closed for a week, due to minor damage.

The loss of ability to operate a gate due to mechanical failure, or during routine maintenance when individual gates are being serviced, has had no overall impact on my Department's ability to control the water level of the Lough during the past four years. During periods when water levels on the Lough are high, in addition to water discharging through the sluice gates, flows can spill over fixed concrete weirs at either site of the sluice gates.

Department of Justice

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice to outline (i) what aftercare and support is provided to those leaving her Department and the Northern Ireland Prison Service, who are suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder; and (ii) how many people are currently receiving such aftercare support.

(AQW 2561/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): Medical conditions that may cause of a member of staff to leave the Department, including the Prison Service, are confidential. However any former member of staff who leaves early on medical retirement is signposted to three areas:

- Welfare Services.
- Inspire Counselling Services up until their last day of service.
- The Charity for Civil Servants.

In addition, the Prison Service Central Benevolent Fund and the Prison Service Trust provide additional support services for their members.

Neither the Department or the Prison Service hold information, other than employment history information on former members of staff.

I greatly value the contribution made by prison officers - past and present – and believe it is important that there is equivalence with police colleagues in terms of support, especially with regards to issues such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Therefore I have commissioned an urgent review into support services available to former prison officers which will report to me by the end of June. The review will examine the current provision of services available to former prison officers. It will identify if additional service provision would be appropriate and, if so, propose a costed approach for delivery.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice, in regard to her appointment of a special adviser, (i) whether she independently chose her special adviser or an allocation was made by her party; (ii) how it was made known, and to whom, that she was seeking to appoint a special adviser; (iii) whether a pool of candidates was considered; (iv) if so, how many were within the pool; (v) how any pool of candidates was assembled; (vi) what were the essential and desirable criteria set for the job; (vii) by what process was the choice made; (viii) what notes and records were made and kept of the process; (ix) how fair employment obligations were met; (x) on what date(s) was the job offered and accepted; (xi) what was the contractual start date; and (xii) was the range of available salary discussed with the appointee, or was the job offered and accepted without knowledge of the likely salary.

(AQW 2596/17-22)

Mrs Long: The appointment of my special adviser followed the requirements set out in the Code for the Appointment of Special Advisers agreed by the Executive and published by the Department of Finance on 20 January.

The responsibility for choosing a Special Advisor lies solely with me as Minister. The appointment was made independently by me. In choosing a Special Adviser, I considered the range of skills and experience which I deemed necessary for the role and appointed Claire Johnson, who fulfilled those requirements, on 19 February 2020. I had no role in setting the salary, did not make any representations in that regard nor have I been formally notified of her salary.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice what action her Department has taken to address antisocial behaviour in city centres.
(AQW 2814/17-22)

Mrs Long: My Department recognises the negative impact which anti-social behaviour (ASB) can have on our communities and the importance of partnership working to deliver swift and co-ordinated responses by the relevant agencies.

Therefore, addressing ASB is a strategic priority for Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs) who have a pivotal role in developing partnership working at a local level, and in supporting communities in developing solutions to issues of local concern, such as city centre ASB.

PCSPs support a number of initiatives in Armagh, Belfast, Derry~Londonderry, Lisburn and Newry city centres aimed at addressing ASB and promoting wider safety issues. They include provision of Safer Neighbourhood Officers or Community Safety Wardens services which act as a deterrent to ASB, support night-time economy patrons and assist retail security and police in prevention / detection of crime. Derry and Strabane PCSP also manage the CCTV cameras contract for Derry city centre which is funded by Council, PSNI and The Executive Office.

Lisburn PCSP have also established a pilot scheme with Exodus, based in Lisburn City Centre, to provide a safe environment to 13 – 16 year olds after school on Fridays and on Saturday evenings.

These core activities sit alongside the wider activities undertaken by PCSPs to address ASB which is of concern in their local area and complement the work which is being taken forward by a range of local partners such as councils, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, homeless support / drug outreach groups and businesses to make the city centres a safer and more welcoming environment.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice (i) whether the report by Dr Jacqui Bates-Gaston into the Prison Officers Association (POA) work-related stress and well-being survey has been made available through the Assembly Library; and (ii) if not, when will it be made available.

(AQW 2816/17-22)

Mrs Long: As this report was not accepted by Prison Service Management Board it was not made available through the Assembly Library. I have no plans to place the report in the Assembly Library at this time.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice to outline (i) whether the Northern Ireland Prison Service has received the report by Dr Jacqui Bates-Gaston into the Prison Officers Association (POA) work-related stress and well-being survey; (ii) what date the report was received; (iii) their response to the report; and (iv) her assessment on the report.

(AQW 2817/17-22)

Mrs Long: This Report was received by the Prison Service Management Board on 31 October 2013 and following discussion the report was not accepted by the Board.

My assessment is that the work undertaken by the Northern Ireland Prison Service in developing and implementing the Prisons 2020 programme is addressing the recommendations contained in this Report.

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister of Justice what support is provided to individuals serving custodial sentences who are suffering from gambling addiction.

(AQW 2818/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) has engaged with Gamblers Anonymous to provide support to people in their care who have indicated that gambling is an area of concern. This service has been provided on a voluntary basis by Gamblers Anonymous in Maghaberry Prison. At present, due to a change in personnel at Gamblers Anonymous, no volunteers are currently available to deliver the service. However, Gamblers Anonymous have recently appointed new volunteers and these individuals are currently going through security clearance to work within a prison establishment. We expect that support for those within our care will recommence once clearance has been achieved.

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister of Justice what support is provided to individuals suffering gambling addiction who have served custodial sentences and are being supervised by probation.

(AQW 2819/17-22)

Mrs Long: Decisions relating to the support provided to individuals suffering gambling addiction who have served custodial sentences and are being supervised by probation is an operational matter for the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI). I am committed to respecting the operational independence of the PBNI.

You may, therefore, wish to direct your question to the PBNI.

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister of Justice (i) whether her Department has conducted any assessment of the connection between gambling addiction and criminal activity; and (ii) if not, whether she would be willing to commission research in to this.

(AQW 2820/17-22)

Mrs Long: My Department has not, to date, conducted any assessment of the connection between gambling addiction and criminal activity.

The Northern Ireland Prison Service complete a Prisoner Needs Profile interview with individuals following their committal into custody. As part of this interview, individuals are currently asked if they have addictions they are concerned about.

Over the last five years, between 4% and 5% of respondents have stated they are concerned about a gambling addiction.

Following a recent review of the Prisoner Needs Profile, additional questions relating specifically to gambling addiction, including how often the respondent gambles and if they feel gambling contributed to their offending, will be added to the interview from mid-2020.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Justice to outline the attrition rate for individuals making formal allegations of serious sexual assault in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2854/17-22)

Mrs Long: From information available, it is not possible to directly answer the question asked. There is no specific definition of what constitutes a 'serious' sexual offence. Therefore, the information provided is in relation to all sexual offences. Additionally, figures across different Criminal Justice Organisations are recorded on differing bases, some at incident level, and some at file or case level, appropriate to the needs of their particular business functions. However, figures compiled by the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) and by the Department of Justice, in relation to prosecutions and convictions at courts, may give some indication of outcomes in relation to sexual offence cases at individual stages of the criminal justice process.

Recorded Crime figures published by the Police Service of Northern Ireland show the following numbers of sexual offences for the period 2014/15 to 2018/19.

Sexual offences recorded by police, 2014/15 – 2018/19

Year	Offences recorded
2014/15	2,729
2015/16	3,030
2016/17	3,147
2017/18	3,434
2018/19	3,547

Similarly, outcomes for sexual offences recorded by the PSNI during the period 2015/16 – 2018/19 have been provided in the following table.

Outcomes (%) that have since been assigned to sexual offences recorded 2015/16 to 2018/19 by outcome group

Outcome (%)	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Charged / summonsed	13.1	11.9	10.8	8.9
Taken into consideration (TICs)	-	-	-	-
Out-of-court (formal)	0.6	0.7	0.5	0.4
Out-of-court (informal)	0.2	0.3	0.2	0.1
Prosecution prevented or not in the public interest	3.9	4.5	2.8	1.5
Evidential difficulties (suspect identified; victim supports action)	20.1	19.7	20.1	16.9
Evidential difficulties (victim does not support action)	37.7	34.9	35.2	29.8
Investigation complete - no suspect identified	14.9	14.7	12.2	13.3
Action undertaken by another body / agency	5.1	6.9	5.0	5.2
Offences not yet assigned an outcome	4.3	6.3	13.3	23.9

Notes:

- 1 Outcomes show the action taken in relation to each crime recorded. This is regardless of the number of suspects identified in relation to each crime. Therefore the figures cannot be used to comment on suspects or offenders.
- 2 Figures relate to all recorded sexual offences reported to police during the period specified.
- 3 Equivalent figures for 2014/15 are not available.
- 4 While every crime should eventually be assigned an outcome, this may take some time due to ongoing investigations. Therefore, these figures are subject to revision, as investigations are completed and as outcomes continue to be assigned. This is particularly applicable to the most recent period, 2018/19, and to sexual offences, as they show the highest proportion of crimes for which an outcome has yet to be assigned (ie still under investigation).

Figures published by PPS, in relation to prosecutorial decisions for cases involving sexual offences have been provided in the following table.

Prosecutorial Decisions Issued by Decision Type for cases involving sexual offences, 2015/16 - 2018/19

Year	Prosecution/Diversion	No prosecution	Prosecution rate (%)
2015/16	375	772	31.2
2016/17	342	633	33.1
2017/18	327	1,152	21.3
2018/19	412	1,249	23.9

Note:

- 1 Equivalent figures for 2014/15 are not available.

The Department holds information on prosecutions and convictions at courts as part of its datasets and therefore has provided information on cases dealt with at courts, where there was a prosecution or conviction for a sexual offence. The most recent year for which information is available is 2018.

Prosecutions and convictions for cases involving sexual offences at all courts, 2014 - 2018

Year	Prosecutions	Convictions	Conviction rate (%)
2014	362	192	53.0
2015	288	170	59.0
2016	317	185	58.4
2017	350	172	49.1
2018	356	194	54.5

Notes:

- 1 Figures relate to initial disposal at court. Results of appeals are not included.
- 2 Figures relate to cases dealt with at court which included at least one sexual offence.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Justice to confirm how many custodial prisoners were granted temporary leave to attend family funerals or other events, in each of the past five years, and to specify the legislation governing this process.

(AQW 2856/17-22)

Mrs Long: Temporary release from Northern Ireland Prison Service is governed by Rule 27 of the Prisons and Young Offenders Centre Rules (Northern Ireland) 1995. The table below details the number of prisoners who have been released under this rule in each of the last 5 years:

Year	Total
2015	389
2016	495
2017	642
2018	516
2019	500

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice how many front line Prison Officers attended the Department of Justice wellbeing week on each of the days it ran.

(AQW 2903/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Department of Justice Wellbeing week took place from 24th - 28th February 2020 and was open to staff across DOJ, including its agencies. In total 384 staff registered to attend the events however they were not required to indicate which business area they worked in and therefore it is not possible to say how many front line Prison Officers attended the events.

In addition to DOJ initiatives, NIPS launched their own bespoke employee wellbeing programme, Prisons WELL, in March 2019. To date over 20 events and initiatives have been provided for NIPS staff as part of the programme and a series of events to mark the one year anniversary will take place throughout March 2020.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice whether physiological injuries suffered by prison officers, which result in absence, are viewed differently from physical injuries which result in absence; and (i) would she expect those returning to work following a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder to receive a written warning due to absence.

(AQW 2906/17-22)

Mrs Long: Prison Officers are civil servants, therefore sickness absence in the Northern Ireland Prison Service is managed in line with the NICS Sickness Absence Policy. That policy requires every case to be considered on its own merit.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice to detail progress on a parental alienation policy for Northern Ireland in relation to family court proceedings.

(AQW 2950/17-22)

Mrs Long: Where alienation is suspected in family proceedings, it is for social workers to advise the court which will consider evidence of alienation alongside all other evidence when deciding what is in the best interests of the paramount consideration of the welfare of the child. I understand the Department of Health proposes to build on existing practice and will consider guidelines for social services on parental alienation as part of the new cross-departmental Family and Parenting Support Strategy. The Strategy will also provide us with an opportunity to collectively consider how to better support relations between parents and parents and children more generally. Key to that work will be early intervention and my Department is already working with the Department of Health to consider actions which might be introduced to reduce acrimony and negative behaviours to improve outcomes for families and children.

I also expect the Domestic Abuse Bill I will shortly bring forward will assist where alienation is evident. The Bill will make behaviour that is coercive or controlling or which amounts to psychological or emotional abuse a criminal offence. Abusive behaviour can be indirect and where the victim is under 18, a child sees, hears or is present during an incident of abusive behaviour or is used to abuse a victim, the Bill will provide for the offences to be treated as aggravated and increased sentencing may apply.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice to outline the number of medical retirements in the Prison Service in each year since 2016.

(AQW 2952/17-22)

Mrs Long: The table below sets out the number of medical retirements since 2016.

Year	Number
2016	46

Year	Number
2017	49
2018	37
2019	33

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of days lost due to sick absence; (i) in each year since 2016; and (ii) in each Prison Service establishment.

(AQW 2954/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency publishes sickness absence statistics for the Northern Ireland Civil Service. These are available at:

<https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/ni-civil-service-human-resource-statistics/sickness-absence-statistics>

These figures are held at an overall level and are not broken down by business area. Any further statistical breakdown would have to be provided by NISRA through the Department of Finance.

Year	Average Working Days Lost due to sickness absence
2016/17	19.6
2017/18	20.9
2018/19	19.3

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice what method exists in the Prison Service for reporting absence due to ill health as a result of post-traumatic stress disorder.

(AQW 2976/17-22)

Mrs Long: Prison Officers are civil servants, therefore sickness absence is managed in line with the NICS Sickness Absence policy.

If staff are unable through illness to attend work they must speak to their line manager, or a more senior officer, as early as possible on the first day of absence stating the nature of their illness. For periods of sickness absence lasting 7 calendar days or less, staff must complete a self-certification form with the reason for absence. Once the sickness absence exceeds 7 calendar days, staff must produce medical evidence in the form of a Statement of Fitness for Work completed by a registered medical practitioner.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice (i) how many domestic violence reports were made in 2019; (ii) how many of those reported resulted in a criminal conviction; and (iii) how many of those convictions resulted in a prison sentence.

(AQW 2977/17-22)

Mrs Long: Latest figures published by the Police Service of Northern Ireland record that there were 31,705 domestic abuse incidents reported to the police in 2019. Of these, there were 15,110 incidents where one or more crimes were recorded. Equivalent figures for 2018 record there were 31,306 domestic abuse incidents reported to the police in that year. Of these, there were 13,796 incidents where one or more crimes were recorded.

Outcomes for offences with a domestic abuse motivation, recorded by the PSNI during the period 2017/18 – 2018/19 have been provided in the following table

Outcomes that have since been assigned to crimes with a domestic abuse motivation recorded in 2017/18 to 2018/19

Outcome group	Percentages	
	2017/18	2018/19
Charge/summons	24.5	23.6
Taken into consideration	0.0	0.0
Out-of-court (formal)	2.0	1.6
Out-of-court (informal)	1.6	1.3
Prosecution prevented or not in the public interest	1.4	0.5
Evidential difficulties (suspect identified; victim supports action)	16.1	18.2
Evidential difficulties (victim does not support action)	44.4	41.1

Outcome group	Percentages	
	2017/18	2018/19
Investigation complete - no suspect identified	1.4	1.5
Action undertaken by another body/agency	2.6	2.9
Total offences that have since been assigned an outcome	94.0	90.7
Offences not yet assigned an outcome	6.0	9.3
Total offences %	100.0	100.0

Notes:

- 1 Outcomes show the action taken in relation to each crime recorded. This is regardless of the number of suspects identified in relation to each crime. Therefore the figures cannot be used to comment on suspects or offenders.
- 2 While every crime should eventually be assigned an outcome, this may take some time due to ongoing investigations. Therefore, these figures are subject to revision, as investigations are completed and as outcomes continue to be assigned. This is particularly applicable to the most recent period, 2018/19, as they show the highest proportion of crimes for which an outcome has yet to be assigned (ie still under investigation).

From information held by the Department, it is not possible to say how many of the crimes recorded by police resulted in a criminal conviction. However, for cases dealt with at courts in 2018, the most recent year for which information is available, 1,778 cases where there was a domestic violence motivational factor, as recorded by either the PSNI or the Public Prosecution Service, resulted in a conviction. Of those, a custodial sentence was handed down in 368 cases.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister of Justice to outline what support her Department is providing to victims of domestic abuse within the Foyle constituency.

(AQW 3016/17-22)

Mrs Long: I can advise that the support services provided to victims of domestic violence and abuse by my Department are available to all across Northern Ireland, including those in the Foyle region. The support services that my Department funds, or part funds, include the provision of a 24 hour domestic and sexual abuse telephone helpline and funding towards the Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) process. My Department also provides funding to Victim Support NI for the provision of services for three core areas, that is emotional and practical support; witness support services at court; and assisting with criminal injuries compensation applications. NPSCC are also funded to provide a witness support services for young people. Services from both organisations are available regardless of the crime type.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice what are the proposed financial limits of an unexplained wealth order.

(AQW 3068/17-22)

Mrs Long: One of the requirements for the making of an unexplained wealth order in respect of any 'property' is that the value of the property in question is greater than £50,000. There is no upper limit. The qualifying threshold was reduced to £50,000 during the passage of the Criminal Finances Bill in the House of Lords. At the point of introduction of the Bill the qualifying threshold was originally £100,000.

Property is defined under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 as all property wherever situated and includes money; all forms of property, real or personal, heritable or moveable; things in action and other intangible or incorporeal property.

Where an unexplained wealth order is made in respect of property comprising more than one item of property, the respondent's interest in the property is calculated to be the total value of those items.

Mr Lynch asked the Minister of Justice to provide an update on the custody suite at Enniskillen Police Station.

(AQW 3069/17-22)

Mrs Long: Decisions relating to the custody suite at Enniskillen Police Station are an operational matter for the Chief Constable, who is accountable to the Northern Ireland Policing Board. I am committed to respecting the operational independence of the Chief Constable and the role of the Northern Ireland Policing Board. You may, therefore, wish to direct your question to the PSNI.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Justice to confirm whether she will introduce stalking legislation in Northern Ireland and, if so, indicate a timeline.

(AQW 3097/17-22)

Mrs Long: I can confirm that I will be introducing stalking legislation in Northern Ireland.

This is a priority for me as Justice Minister. My Department is currently developing a draft Stalking Bill that will create a specific offence of stalking and provision for the introduction of Stalking Protection Orders in Northern Ireland. I intend to introduce this Bill to the Assembly in the autumn.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Justice to outline an indicative timeline for the introduction of the Domestic Homicide Review (DHR) model in Northern Ireland.
(AQW 3100/17-22)

Mrs Long: I intend to bring forward a Commencement Order, under Section 9 of the Domestic Violence, Crimes and Victims Act 2004, to introduce Domestic Homicide Reviews locally by the autumn. A recruitment exercise to identify suitable individuals to Chair the Domestic Homicide Reviews will be finalised in the coming weeks. Once appointed we will ensure that the Chairs, alongside a multi-agency panel, have access to a period of appropriate training before commencing reviews.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 714/17-22, what remedial action will the Department take to assist victims of trafficking in obtaining compensation.
(AQW 3107/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Department of Justice contracted support providers will signpost potential adult victims of human trafficking to Compensation Services. Information leaflets are available in different languages to assist applicants in making a claim for compensation. I can also advise that additional training and awareness is planned to be delivered to Compensation Services' decision-makers as part of the Department's strategic training for statutory partners on modern slavery and human trafficking.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice, since January 2017, (i) how many cases have been prosecuted in which human trafficking was an original element, but was later dropped or amended; and (ii) in each instance, state the nature of the accompanying or other offences which were successfully prosecuted.
(AQW 3109/17-22)

Mrs Long: The information requested is outlined below. The most recent year for which finalised information is available is 2018.

During the period 2017 – 2018, there were 7 cases dealt with at courts where there was a prosecution, but a not guilty finding, for any human trafficking offences. A conviction was secured for other offences in 2 of these cases, for controlling prostitution for gain offences.

Notes:

- 1 Figures relate to initial disposals at court. Appeals are not included.
- 2 Human trafficking offences considered include offences prosecuted under the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 and other offences where the offence description related to human trafficking.
- 3 Figures for convictions relate to cases in which there was no conviction for a human trafficking offence.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of convictions since the introduction of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015.
(AQW 3214/17-22)

Mrs Long: In the period to the end of 2018, the most recent year for which finalised information is available, there were three convictions at courts for offences under the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015. All occurred in 2018.

Notes:

- 1 Figures relate to initial disposals at court. Appeals are not included.
- 2 The figure provided relates to cases where there was a conviction for at least one of the offences specified.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of attacks carried out on prison officers inside Northern Ireland prisons in each of the last three years.
(AQW 3215/17-22)

Mrs Long: There have been a total of 166 assaults on prison staff by prisoners in the last three years. In 2017 there were 66 assaults, in 2018 there were 58 assaults and in 2019 there were 42 assaults.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice how many people have been (i) prosecuted; and (ii) convicted for animal cruelty in the last two years.
(AQW 3217/17-22)

Mrs Long: The information requested is outlined below. The most recent year for which finalised information is available is 2018.

Prosecutions and Convictions at courts for animal cruelty offences, 2017 – 2018

Year	Prosecutions	Convictions
2017	76	51
2018	97	68

Notes:

- 1 Figures relate to cases prosecuted by PPS on behalf of PSNI or other bodies.
- 2 Figures relate to initial disposal at court only. Results of appeals are not included. 3. Figures relate to cases with a prosecution or conviction for at least one animal cruelty related offence.
- 4 Animal cruelty offences included are relevant offences under Welfare of animals Act 1972, Wildlife Act 1985, Welfare of Animals (Transport) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006, Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (NI) 2011, Welfare of Animals Act 2011, Welfare of Livestock Regulations (NI) 1995, Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012, Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000 and Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1996.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice what has been the change in the cost to the public purse of a prisoner place in the last five years.

(AQW 3218/17-22)

Mrs Long: The average annual cost for each prisoner place for the last five years is set out in the table below.

Financial Year	£
2014/15	58,387
2015/16	57,643
2016/17	53,408
2017/18	52,814
2018/19	54,893

It is anticipated that the cost per prisoner place in Northern Ireland in 2019/20 will be £44,112.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice whether she will review the Access NI application process to investigate whether it would be possible to allow a single application and certificate to demonstrate an individual's suitability for multiple roles, rather than requiring several separate applications for each organisation that the individual is involved in.

(AQW 3244/17-22)

Mrs Long: Addressing the issue of regular / repeat disclosure checks is something that AccessNI has been considering for some time. An effective NI standalone technical solution is complex to develop, and likely to be expensive. This could impact on the AccessNI charges to the public as they are based on a costs recovery model. AccessNI is currently exploring other options to deliver greater 'portability' for disclosure checks – this includes discussions with the Disclosure & Barring Service (DBS) in England and Wales to join with their Update Service, however a viable technical solution is likely to be some way off.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice to outline the implementation period of the recommendations made by Jackie Bates-Gaston regarding prison officer welfare.

(AQW 3323/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Report completed by Jackie Bates-Gaston was received by the Prison Service Management Board on 31 October 2013 and, following discussion, it was not accepted by the Board.

My assessment is that the work undertaken by the Northern Ireland Prison Service in developing and implementing the Prisons 2020 programme is addressing the recommendations contained in the Report.

Department for the Economy

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy whether her first day brief included explanation of the circumstances whereby 788 biomass boilers were admitted into the DETI non-domestic Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) Scheme during 2015, when the Department did not have the required financial authority to do so.

(AQW 1331/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): The circumstances relating to the admission of these 788 installations were not specifically addressed in the first day brief.

Ms C Kelly asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) what plans her Department has to review the use of non-disclosure agreements in higher education institutions; (ii) the cost of non-disclosure agreements for the past 5 years; (iii) the number of students subject to these arrangements; and (iv) the prevalence of these arrangements relating to issues such as sexual harassment, misconduct or alleged sexual crime.

(AQW 1987/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Universities are institutionally autonomous. This means my Department does not have access to, or hold, any information on the use, or cost, of settlements containing non-disclosure agreements for review. The Universities generally utilise Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs) to ensure confidentiality between parties and the costs associated with them relates mainly to severance packages. This is designed to prevent employees from sharing commercial or sensitive technical information if they changed roles, notably in research, which is legitimate in areas such as protecting intellectual property. I have sought and received assurances from the Universities that NDAs are not used in relation to students, or for issues such as sexual harassment, misconduct or alleged sexual crime. It should be noted that signing any agreement including a non-disclosure clause does not prevent staff or students from reporting criminal acts to the police or regulatory bodies, or from making a public interest disclosure (whistle-blowing). My Department will review legislative changes currently being considered in England in the wider context of employment rights and I will announce any plans in due course.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for the Economy whether Invest NI was aware charitable donations were being made from Wright Bus to Green-Pastures Church, before it approved a £2.5m loan to the company in June 2019.

(AQW 2025/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Invest NI knew that Wrights Group Ltd paid dividends to its parent company, Cornerstone Group Ltd. The decision to make charitable donations to Green Pastures Church was taken by the Directors of Cornerstone Group. The £2.5m Rescue Aid secured loan to Wrights Group Ltd was jointly approved by Invest NI and the Permanent Secretaries of the Department for the Economy and the Department of Finance. Invest NI and the Departments were aware of the charitable donations made by the Cornerstone Group to Green Pastures Church before the £2.5m loan was approved.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy how her Department is adopting a trauma-informed approach when developing policy and legislation.

(AQW 2121/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department follows Central Government guidance on policy development. This is built around a 'policy cycle' framework focused on 'Rationale, Objectives, Appraisal, Monitoring, Evaluation and Feedback'.

At present there are no plans to adopt a trauma-informed approach when developing policy and legislation in respect of economic development.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister for the Economy to confirm whether the funding for Project Stratum is secured.

(AQW 2192/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I am aware of recent commentary on the withdrawal of the Confidence and Supply funding following the New Decade New Approach Agreement. However, I can confirm that broadband remains a key priority for the Executive.

It is important that we remove any doubt in relation to the funding and I have, therefore, written to my Executive colleagues, asking that the funding be confirmed for the next four years.

There is nothing to suggest that the funding will not be made available to implement the project as planned.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy what her plans are to implement the previous Executive's Economic Inactivity Strategy.

(AQW 2249/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: 'Enabling Success' was the previous Executive's strategy for addressing the high level of economic inactivity rate in Northern Ireland. This was a joint strategy between the former Department for Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the former Department for Employment and Learning (DEL).

Following Departmental restructuring in 2016, responsibility for the Enabling Success Strategy transferred to the Department for Communities. Although the Strategy is no longer active, the broad principles remain relevant given the current level of economic inactivity across Northern Ireland. Key components of the Strategy are being progressed by the Department for Communities within the 'Employability NI' Programme and my officials are members of the Programme Board.

Through the development of a new Northern Ireland Skills Strategy, to cover the period 2021-2030, my Department will continue to work closely with the Department for Communities on measures to reduce economic inactivity, providing support and opportunities so that everyone can contribute to and benefit from our growing economic prosperity.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy what representation she is making to the Executive for Apprenticeship Levy Funds, generated in Northern Ireland, to be re-invested in apprenticeships or other forms of upskilling.

(AQW 2250/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Apprenticeship Levy, a fiscal policy and reserved matter for the UK Parliament, was introduced by the UK Government in April 2017. Whilst Northern Ireland receives the Barnett Consequential from the levy this had no significant impact on the block grant.

Although the collection of the levy is a reserved matter, with no scope for derogation for Northern Ireland, the delivery of Apprenticeships is a devolved matter.

In Northern Ireland Apprenticeships are delivered through my Department's ApprenticeshipsNI and Higher Level Apprenticeship programmes. My Department provides funding to support the cost of apprenticeship training for private sector employers regardless of whether they pay levy contributions. These are demand led programmes, and I encourage all employers to avail of these Programmes to drive forward business growth.

I am also focused on ensuring the apprenticeships system best meets the needs of employers and participants in Northern Ireland. The Strategic Advisory Forum and Sectoral Partnerships are working on an ongoing basis to ensure employers play a central role in policy development and curriculum design.

I have met with a number of employers and representative bodies to understand the impact of the levy and opportunities to enhance our apprenticeships system. I am committed to consider the issues raised by NI employers that I have engaged with and during the consultation on the impact of the levy in NI, including policy changes around the current age related criteria, potential public sector apprenticeships, and how to improve transparency for employers on the level of funding support they are currently availing of through participation in our apprenticeship programmes. I intend to engage with the Executive in due course to outline plans to further enhance our Apprenticeship system.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for the Economy (i) how much money was loaned to the Presbyterian Mutual Society; (ii) what is the outstanding amount of the loan; and (iii) whether any other mutual societies, banks or credit unions have been given loans by the Department of Finance.

(AQW 2299/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) Under the Scheme of Arrangement, loan funds of £226 million were received by PMS on 1 August 2011. This was made up of a £175 million secured loan from the Northern Ireland Executive, £25 million from HM Treasury, £25 million from the former Department for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and £1million from the Presbyterian Church Ireland.
- (ii) Of the £175 million loan facility, £77.25 million remains outstanding.
- (iii) I have been advised by my Ministerial colleague with responsibility for Finance that there are currently no loans issued from the NI Consolidated Fund to mutual societies, banks, or credit unions. The Department of Finance currently has no record of any loans issued in the past.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy what action her Department will take to support the hospitality sector to overcome the impact of the Corvid 19 (Coronavirus), which has resulted in 3,000 hotel room cancellations from January to March 2020.

(AQW 2378/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I am very aware of concerns among Northern Ireland tourism businesses, and the tourism and hospitality industry in general, in relation to the potential impact of the spread of the Coronavirus, COVID-19.

My officials are closely monitoring what is a fluid and developing situation, and in particular how the spread of the virus might affect visitor confidence and forward travel bookings.

I have asked to be kept informed of developments in respect of the tourism and hospitality industry (and also the wider economy) and will consider, where possible, what actions might be appropriate to help offset any negative economic impact arising from the COVID-19 outbreak.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for the Economy what discussions her Department has had with Northern Ireland ports and airports about making bids for freeport status.

(AQW 2380/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My officials are working on a cross departmental basis to engage with the UK Government's Freeport policy proposals. The UK Government has only recently added momentum to this policy area and therefore my officials have had only limited and general discussions with ports and airports.

Ms Ennis asked the Minister for the Economy what is the current legislation in relation to the maximum span length (in metres) between 33kV overhead electricity lines; and on what date did this legislation come into effect.

(AQW 2404/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: There is no legislation in place regarding the maximum span length between 33kv overhead electricity lines. Matters pertaining to 33kv power lines are governed by technical specifications and are the responsibility of NIE Networks.

Mr M Bradley asked the Minister for the Economy what plans her Department has to promote the Atlantic Link Enterprise Campus, Coleraine, to potential investors.

(AQW 2454/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council (the Council) lead on the promotion of the Atlantic Link Enterprise Campus in Coleraine.

The Department's role is to ensure that the Campus is developed by the Council with the clear aim of attracting capital intensive companies. The Department has an agreed framework in place for monitoring and evaluating the development of the Campus.

Invest NI is represented on the Council's Steering Group, set up to assist with promoting the Campus. Invest NI has assisted with promotional events to potential investors.

I have also asked Ulster University how they could collaborate more with the Enterprise Zone.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department received the 2018/19 Financial Statement from the Ulster University.

(AQW 2483/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department received the 2018/19 draft Financial Statements from Ulster University on 2 December 2019.

The university has advised its signed Financial Statements will be provided to the Department in March.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for the Economy whether the European Investment Bank (EIB) or the Ulster University withdrew from the borrowing agreement with the EIB to provide £50m for the university's Greater Belfast project.

(AQW 2484/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The University's agreement with the European Investment Bank was for up to £150 million towards the Greater Belfast Development project. The terms of the agreement expired as the University had not drawn down any of that funding against the project by February 2017.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for the Economy whether she is satisfied that the alleged latent defects, which were discovered during the maintenance period of the Ulster University basement contract, will not further delay or jeopardise the university's Greater Belfast Project or lead to increase costs for the project.

(AQW 2485/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Ulster University has advised and the Department's advisors have confirmed that the University has secured a resolution to the defects in the advanced sub-structure contract as part of an overall agreement with the above ground works contractor to complete the Greater Belfast Development Project. The Department's advisors' view is that the risk of such defects causing further delay or increases in costs beyond this agreement is low.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for the Economy what measures her Department is taking to address the skills deficit.

(AQW 2585/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department works closely with employers, education providers and the local community to ensure that Northern Ireland has a Skills System that is dynamic and flexible enough to meet the needs of the rapidly changing economy. By helping students, workers and those not currently engaged with the workplace move further up the skills ladder, we support individuals' earning potential, health and wellbeing.

Since taking up my role I have engaged with a wide range of employers, business groups and InvestNI to ensure that skills are aligned to the correct and future needs of the Northern Ireland economy.

Over the last ten years, through the implementation of the Northern Ireland Skills Strategy "Success through Skills – Transforming Futures", we have ensured that technical skills are firmly on the agenda, with increases against all population goals, including those with a level 3 qualification, which is up from 55% in 2011, to 67% now, and those with a level 4 qualification, up from 33% to 44% now.

This has been achieved through a number of Departmental initiatives, outlined below, and in partnership with the Department of Education and Department for Communities.

This collaboration continues, as my Department leads on the development of a new Skills Strategy, which will set the skills agenda for the period 2021-30. This has brought together key stakeholders from industry, local government and education institutions to consider the key challenges around lifelong learning, skills imbalances and the skills required for the modern workplace.

Implementation of the new Skills Strategy will be supported by short, medium and long term implementation plans, which will align provision to the achievement of the objectives set out in the Industrial Strategy and the Programme for Government, with a specific focus in addressing Outcome 6 of the draft Programme for Government – ‘We have more people working in better jobs’.

Skills Initiatives

During 2019/20, my Department has up-skilled 227 people through the Assured Skills programme, in areas such as financial services, cyber security, business skills, corporate travel and a number of IT academies, through which 190 people have secured employment. Unfortunately, Bridge to Employment has seen a reduction in the number of applications to the programme. Currently, the Department is working with the Department for Communities to promote Bridge within the Jobs & Benefits Office network. As at 31 December 2019, 2,409 employees have been up-skilled or re-skilled through Skills Focus, a programme which increases the work skills of existing employees. In addition, through the InnovateUS programme, my Department has undertaken 249 new projects, increasing the skills of small businesses in products, processes or services.

Further Education

The six Further Education (FE) Colleges in Northern Ireland have established strong and effective relationships with businesses, industry and employers, through seven Curriculum Hubs. These Hubs ensure that the curriculum provision and the programmes delivered are fully aligned to the priority and growth sectors’ current and future skills needs.

Apprenticeships, Careers and Vocational Education

The Department currently supports skills development through the ApprenticeshipsNI (Levels 2 & 3) and Higher Level Apprenticeship (HLA) (Level 4+) programmes. ApprenticeshipsNI and HLA are demand led, work-based programmes, designed around the needs of employers, which offer recognised training and qualifications to new employees and existing employees who are taking on new roles that require significant training and development.

As of October 2019, 9,514 individuals were enrolled on a DfE funded Apprenticeships.

The Department has also sought to put employers at the centre of future provision development by establishing employer-led Sectoral Partnerships across key sectors to inform apprenticeship pathways, content and curriculum. Through Sectoral Partnerships, employers work with FE Colleges and Universities to design and agree curriculum and content for apprenticeships in each occupational area, ensuring that provision and content meet employers’ needs and the needs of the wider economy.

Through its Training for Success (TfS) programme, the Department provides a training opportunity for 16 to 17 year olds who are not in education or full time employment, with extended eligibility for those with a disability, or from an “in care” background. Training is available from Levels 0 to Levels 3, with most undertaking programmes at Level 2. Training is provided by FE Colleges and private training organisations. Between August and October 2019, there were 4,301 participants on the programme.

On a phased basis, from September 2020, the Department plans to introduce a series of reforms to the Youth Training system, as outlined in ‘Generating Our Success - the Youth Training Strategy for Northern Ireland’. It proposes a new, full-time Level 2 vocational education programme, the NI Traineeship. The proposed new programme will provide high quality, vocational education and training at Level 2, combined with structured work-based learning and numeracy & literacy qualifications to young people who are not yet in employment, but who are ready and able to engage and achieve on a challenging programme in their preferred occupational area.

The Department is also developing a new vocational training programme (Skills for Life and Work) aimed at those not yet ready to commence a Traineeship, or Level 2 Apprenticeship.

The Department’s careers advisers use the Skills Barometer data as part of the guidance process to inform young people and adults about skills and demand

InvestNI

Skills development remains an area of critical focus for Invest NI, in terms of ensuring that the region continues to benefit from new economic opportunities.

Invest NI is committed to ongoing partnership working with relevant Government Departments, Councils, industry and the academic sector, to ensure continued curriculum alignment and ‘joined-up’ thinking in relation to the development of a future skills pipeline.

Invest NI also provides a portfolio of tailored skills solutions, targeted at both indigenous and FDI companies, and which allows for the upskilling of existing and new staff.

Over the past five years, Invest NI has offered support to 1,300 skills based projects, with £51 million of support contributing towards total investment of £200 million.

Higher Education

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 some of the largest undersupply predicted in STEM 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% a Broad STEM related subject. In 2018/19, these figures had risen to 25.9% and 50.5% respectively.

My Department 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.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for the Economy what measures her Department are taking to ensure good practice and cooperation between business and further/higher education sectors.

(AQW 2586/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department is committed to ensuring good practice and cooperation between business and the further and higher education sectors through a variety of initiatives.

The Further Education (FE) sector directly engages with businesses and industry across Northern Ireland to drive improvement in productivity, innovation and creativity, supporting a more competitive local economy. The six FE Colleges currently provide a range of bespoke business services and support approximately 10,000 local businesses annually. The FE Colleges have established strong and effective relationships with businesses, industry and employers specifically in priority growth and employment sectors, through seven College Curriculum Hubs. These Hubs ensure that the curriculum provision and programmes delivered are fully aligned to the sectors' current and future requirements. Dedicated Business Support Teams support collaboration with industry and the Colleges also host sectoral focus groups and clusters to seek employer insight into current and future skills requirements.

The FE Colleges also collaborate through an economic engagement working group to share employer insights and best practice across Northern Ireland to ensure the FE sector provides a relevant offering which serve the needs of industry. The group also looks for new opportunities and new ways to support the business community and is tasked with raising the profile of the FE sector amongst the business community and key economic stakeholders.

In addition, the Colleges are a springboard for providing the skilled workforce for the future through the offer of Foundation Degrees, Apprenticeships, Higher Level Apprenticeships, Assured Skills Academies and quality work placements. All developed and delivered in cooperation with business.

In regards to the Higher Education sector, my Department continues to address the challenges facing the economy by directly supporting the innovation agenda in Northern Ireland's universities. Through the Higher Education Innovation Fund, my Department provides funding in the region of £4 million per annum to assist universities in translating their high quality research base into benefits for the business sector and wider society through Knowledge Exchange.

In addition, the Connected programme enables local companies to access world-class expertise, technology and research from within the Higher and Further Education sectors, assisting them to boost their competitiveness, develop new products and increase market opportunities. Connected is unique to Northern Ireland and funded at £1.1 million per annum. 83% of the 700 projects undertaken during the scheme's last round of funding was undertaken with companies with no previous university or college engagement. Going forward, the scheme will place an increasing focus on re-engaging companies to embed innovation in their business models.

Ms C Kelly asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department will consider adopting measures similar to those implemented in Scotland, whereby higher education institutions offer automatic places to care experienced students whose grades have met minimum entry requirements.

(AQW 2605/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I recognise the very challenging context in which care experienced Higher Education (HE) applicants have made their achievements. A key priority for my Department is to ensure that those most able but least likely to participate in HE are given every opportunity to do so, regardless of their background.

During my time in office, I am keen to work with officials, the HE sector and other relevant stakeholders to review the current strategy for widening participation in HE to review what more can be done for under-represented and disadvantaged groups, including care experienced individuals.

Admissions criteria is a matter for individual HE providers. However, I will ensure that my Department considers best practice from other jurisdictions, including measures implemented in Scotland, in developing a strategic vision and action plan for the future.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for the Economy to provide a comparison on how legislation governing mining practices differs in Northern Ireland to other regions on these islands and in Europe.

(AQW 2643/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: In Northern Ireland, the Mineral Development Act (Northern Ireland) 1969 vests most minerals in the Department. There are three main exceptions, gold and silver, as they are vested in the Crown; minerals which were being worked at the time of the 1969 Act; and construction materials (aggregates, sand and gravel), clay and soil. The Department may grant prospecting licences for exploration and mining licences for commercial extraction of those vested minerals.

Planning permission from the Department for Infrastructure/Local Council is required before an application for a mining licence for extraction can be made.

Before granting a mining licence, the Department, in accordance with the provisions of the 1969 Act, conducts due diligence checks, investigates the technical and financial resources of the applicant and consults with relevant statutory bodies and the public. Advice is also taken from consultants who have expertise in mining to ensure that the proposed mine design is based on adequate geological data and that potentially hazardous conditions have been located and defined. The Department consults the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland about the safety aspects of the proposed mine, and the Valuation and Lands Agency on the question of land ownership to ascertain entitlement to royalties. Every application for a mining licence or lease is treated on its own merits and in accordance with the provisions of the 1969 Act.

In addition, an environmental impact assessment and a feasibility study to determine the viability of extraction is required and, depending on the mining process, further environmental permissions including pollution control will also be required from Department of Agriculture, Environment & Rural Affairs (DAERA).

In GB the legislative position is different. With the exception of oil, gas, coal, gold and silver, all other minerals are held in private ownership. Mineral and mine development is regulated through the planning process – there is no separate mineral licensing legislation such as exists in NI. The Coal Authority has ownership of almost all coal and may grant licences for coal exploration and extraction. All mining proposals are also subject to environmental assessment and permissions depending on the nature of the extraction process.

Across the whole of the UK, the Crown holds the rights to gold and silver. The mines of these metals are known as 'Mines Royal'. In Scotland, Crown Estate rights were devolved to Crown Estate Scotland. The Crown Estate, including the Crown Estate Scotland, grant exclusive options to take a lease of 'Mines Royal' for a specific area. This would equate to a mining licence.

In Ireland, the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment is responsible for regulating mineral development (including mining). Similar to the position in Northern Ireland, most mineral rights, with the exception of stone, gravel, sand and clay, are vested in the state. The Minister may issue mining licences provided they are satisfied that the proposed mining plan is feasible and that the nominee company has the financial resources, technical ability and insurances to carry out the plan, and planning permission has been granted in respect of the development comprised in the application. An Integrated Pollution Control Licence is also required for all but small developments on non-metallic minerals to prevent or reduce emissions to air, water and land, reduce waste and use energy or resources efficiently.

My Department is currently undertaking a review of our mineral and petroleum licensing regimes to help inform our future policy on exploration and extraction of our natural resources. This review will include an assessment of legislative regimes across, not only these islands and Europe, but across other appropriate jurisdictions across the world. Information on the legislation governing mining practices in Europe has not yet been gathered, as initial benchmarking has concentrated on the position in GB and Ireland.

I have recently given approval for my Department to commission independent research in this area. The aim of this research is to develop our understanding of the potential economic, environmental and societal impacts of petroleum and mineral activities, and to consider what might be required in terms of a policy, and licensing regime taking account of the climate action and environmental commitments outlined in the New Decade, New Approach.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the number of homes in Fermanagh that will benefit from Project Stratum.

(AQW 2658/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: There are 8,839 premises in County Fermanagh within the Project Stratum target intervention area.

While the actual number and location of premises that will benefit will not be known until the procurement is complete and a contract has been awarded, expected in September 2020, my Department's objective is to maximise the number of premises to benefit from the funding available.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy whether Project Stratum funds will be used solely for rural homes.

(AQW 2659/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Following the receipt of updated broadband coverage data received from suppliers during the procurement process, the number of premises in the Project Stratum target intervention area has been reduced to just under 79,000.

Over 95% of the revised target intervention area is rural, defined using NISRA guidelines as Band H – villages with a population of less than 1,000, and premises in open countryside.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy when question AQW 1167/17-22 will be answered.

(AQW 2660/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I am considering all aspects of Youth Training reform and will respond in due course.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 1426/17-22, for an explanation why it would not be appropriate to provide the requested breakdown since other Departments have provided such information.

(AQW 2674/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The response to AQW 1426/17-22 was based on legal advice. The nature of the Department for the Economy's participation in the RHI Inquiry is different to that of other participants which may explain why other Departments may take a different approach.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for the Economy to provide a breakdown of all Invest NI property/leases across each of the 18 constituencies.

(AQW 2684/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Invest NI owns property, by way of both industrial estates offering serviced industrial land and a small number of buildings, for the purpose of supporting business development across Northern Ireland. The organisation will only intervene in the commercial property market where there is clear evidence of market failure.

Invest NI also leases space in a number of properties to house its regional office team in 6 locations across Northern Ireland.

A breakdown of Invest NI's property assets by parliamentary constituency is provided within the following tables (figures correct to 31st December 2019).

Table 1: Table showing Invest NI owned industrial land by parliamentary constituency

Parliamentary Constituency	Industrial Estate	Total of Landholding (Acres)
Belfast East	No landholding	No landholding
Belfast North	Glenbank Industrial Estate	11.06
	Northgate	5.39*
Belfast South	Adelaide Industrial Estate	3.31
	Broadway	3.61
Belfast West	Springbank Industrial Estate	76.18*
	Springvale Industrial Estate	47.91*
	Forthriver Business Park	23.08
	Glen Road Industrial Estate	16.95
	Whiterock Industrial Estate	12.13*
	Ballygomartin Industrial Estate	10.81
	Kennedy Way Industrial Estate	2.89
East Antrim	Trooperslane Industrial Estate	108.06
	Millbrook Industrial Estate	34.37
	Bay Road	1.33
East Londonderry	Wattstown Business Park	74.19
	Aghanloo Industrial Estate	51.34
	Ballycastle Road	0.17
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	Carran Business Park	65.50
	Lackaghboy Industrial Estate	57.70
	Granville Industrial Estate	50.85
	Dungannon Business Park	40.29
Foyle	Campsie Industrial Estate	244.52
	Skeoge Industrial Park	75.18
	Maydown Industrial Estate	66.34
	Springtown Industrial Estate	26.23
	Lenamore	0.92
	Culmore	0.69

Parliamentary Constituency	Industrial Estate	Total of Landholding (Acres)
Lagan Valley	Dunmurry Industrial Estate	78.85
	Knockmore Hill Industrial Estate	75
	Lissue Road Industrial Estate	66.32*
	Aghnatrisk Road	7.04
	Ballinderry Road	6.28
Mid Ulster	Creagh Industrial Park	54.20
	Ballyreagh Industrial Estate	31.33
	Station Road Industrial Estate	17.97
	Derryloran Industrial Estate	6.97
Newry and Armagh	Edenaveys Industrial Estate	24
	Hamiltonsbawn Road Industrial Estate	14.34
	Tassagh Road	4.66
	Greenbank Industrial Estate	3.57
	Crossmaglen	0.53
	Loughgall Road	0.32
North Antrim	Woodside Road Industrial Estate	80.64
	Garryduff Road Industrial Estate	12.75
	Leyland Road Industrial Estate	4.90
	Larne Road	4.17
	Cushendall	1.13
	Queen Street	0.65
North Down	Balloo South Industrial Estate	51.17
	Balloo North Industrial Estate	8.90
South Antrim	Global Point Business Park	149.72
	Hightown Industrial Estate	125.82
	Antrim Technology Park	75.13*
	Newpark Business Park	32.61
	Monkstown Industrial Estate	4.95
	Rathenraw Industrial Estate	2.70
	Glenville Industrial Estate	0.77
South Down	Carnbane Business Park	138.24
	Down Business Park	81.87
	Carnbane East Industrial Estate	24.54
	Killough Road Industrial Estate	23.56
	Milltown Industrial Estate	3.96
	Hilltown	0.95
	Newcastle	0.85
	The Harbour	0.64
	Armagh Road	0.55

Parliamentary Constituency	Industrial Estate	Total of Landholding (Acres)
Strangford	Ballyharry Business Park	21.40
	Dundonald	9.25
	Corry Street Industrial Estate	5.65
	Jubilee Road Industrial Estate	4.45
	Newtownbreda	4
Upper Bann	Mandeville Industrial Estate	99.0
	Halfpenny Valley Industrial Estate	60.37
	Charlestown Road Industrial Estate	60.16
	Silverwood Industrial Estate	44.12
	Craigavon Food Park	43.36
	Scarva Road Industrial Estate	25.13
	Shaerf	1.79
	Portadown Road	0.06
West Tyrone	Doogary Industrial Estate	46.79
	Strabane Business Park	43.10
	Orchard Road Industrial Estate	25.26
	Dublin Road Industrial Estate	3.92

* Located within these industrial estates are buildings within which Invest NI can rent space to support business development. Further detail can be viewed in Table 2.

Table 2: Table showing a breakdown of Invest NI owned buildings by parliamentary constituency

Parliamentary Constituency	Industrial Estate	Number of Buildings
Belfast North	Northgate	1
	Glenbank Industrial Estate	1
Belfast West	Springbank Industrial Estate*	1
	Springvale Industrial Estate**	1
	Whiterock Industrial Estate	1
South Antrim	Antrim Technology Park	13
Lagan Valley	Lissue Road***	1

* There is one security hut owned by Invest NI not included within the total

** There are two security huts owned by Invest NI not included within the total

*** This property has been declared surplus to Invest NI requirements and a sale is expected to complete within a four week period

Table 3: Table showing Invest NI Regional offices

Parliamentary Constituency	Property
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	Intec Centre, East Bridge Road, Enniskillen
Foyle	Timber Quay, Strand Road, Londonderry
North Antrim	4 Greenmount Avenue, Ballymena
South Down	Drumalane Mill, The Quays, Newry
Upper Bann	Southern Regional College, Lurgan Road, Portadown
West Tyrone	Kevlin Avenue, Omagh

Ms Rogan asked the Minister for the Economy how many properties in South Down do not have access to high speed or superfast broadband.

(AQW 2688/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: There is no official definition of high speed broadband. In its latest Connected Nations Report, Ofcom indicates that 4,500 premises in South Down cannot access speeds of 10 Megabits per second or greater. Ofcom defines superfast broadband as 30 Megabits per second or greater. From analysis of data received through the Project Stratum Open Market Review and subsequent public consultation, my Department has identified 9,211 premises within the South Down constituency that do not have access to speeds of 30 Megabits per second or greater.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister for the Economy how the roll-out of Project Stratum prioritises improvements to internet connectivity in rural areas with the least access to superfast broadband, particularly in relation to the South Armagh area.

(AQW 2700/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Project Stratum aims to improve internet connectivity for those premises currently unable to access superfast broadband speeds of 30 Megabits per second or greater.

Following the receipt of updated broadband coverage data received from suppliers during the procurement process, the number of premises in the target intervention area has been reduced to just under 79,000.

Over 95% of the revised target intervention area is rural, defined using NISRA guidelines as Band H – villages with a population of less than 1,000, and premises in open countryside.

Analysis undertaken by my Department and advice from independent advisors indicates that it is not possible to prioritise specific geographical areas without potentially sacrificing overall coverage, increasing costs and slowing delivery.

There are 8,327 premises within the Newry and Armagh Parliamentary Constituency included in the Project Stratum target intervention area. While the precise number and location of premises that will directly benefit will not be known until after contract award, the aspirations of my Department continue to be to maximise broadband coverage from the funding available.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy what regulations govern the design, construction and operation of milk tanker meters.

(AQW 2756/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Milk tanker meter measuring instruments are not currently prescribed by Regulations in Northern Ireland or the rest of the UK. There are therefore no prescribed error limits, no specific technical requirements governing their design, construction and operation, and they do not require testing or stamping before being legally used for trade. Consequently, neither Trading Standards nor the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy's Office of Product Safety and Standards (OPSS), have the capability to test milk measuring systems at present.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy to outline the reasons why Trading Standards do not calibrate and monitor milk tanker meters, and will she address this gap in consumer protection, particularly in the interests of dairy farmers.

(AQW 2757/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Milk tanker meter measuring instruments are not prescribed equipment in Northern Ireland or the rest of the UK. Therefore such systems do not require testing. However, all measuring equipment (including milk tank meters) used for trade are covered by Article 15 of the Weights and Measures (Northern Ireland) Order 1981. Under this Article it is an offence to use any such equipment in a fraudulent manner.

In 2015, the UK legal metrology expert panel raised the issue of milk measurement from farms to dairies with the National Measurement and Regulation Office, which is now part of the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy's Office of Product Safety and Standards (OPSS). A project was initiated to establish if there was a problem that was sufficient to warrant government intervention, new regulation or further testing work to be carried out in the milk measurement process. Part of the review was intended to establish if such measurement capability needed to be developed by government or could the industry effectively regulate itself. The project concluded that the dairy industry can effectively regulate itself and that regulatory bodies, such as Trading Standards and OPSS, will work with them to enable this.

Although milk tanker meters are not prescribed equipment, there are statutory protections in place for consumers and businesses under The Weights and Measures (Packaged Goods) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (PGRs). The PGRs provide for the 'average weight system'. This system applies to most goods which are pre-packed in pre-determined quantities by weight or volume, including most foodstuffs, such as milk, and non-foodstuffs. This creates a system where the purchaser may buy with the confidence that he is protected against short weight or measure, while businesses are protected against unfair competition. It is the duty of my Department's Trading Standards Service (TSS) to enforce these Regulations.

TSS ensures compliance with the PGRs by carrying out average weight visits at both retailers and packers' premises. Trading Standards Officers will conduct screening tests and carry out reference tests on milk products in order to check levels of compliance. In serious cases, a breach of the PGRs may result in formal enforcement action being taken by TSS, including prosecutions.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy whether she can confirm that the £165m for Project Stratum is still in place. (AQW 2770/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I am aware of recent commentary on the withdrawal of the Confidence and Supply funding following the New Decade New Approach Agreement. However, I can confirm that broadband remains a key priority for the Executive.

It is important that we remove any doubt in relation to the funding and I have, therefore, written to my Executive colleagues, asking that the funding be confirmed for the next four years.

I am aware that the Department of Finance is engaging with HM Treasury on this matter.

There is nothing to suggest that the funding will not be made available to implement the project as planned.

Ms Ennis asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) how much it cost to establish the Newry Invest NI office; (ii) the annual running costs of that office; and (iii) her assessment of the benefit of having that office in Newry for the local economy. (AQW 2798/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) In February 2005 Invest NI paid £180,824.27 (inclusive of VAT) to the Landlord for fit-out of the new Invest NI Newry office. A further payment of £26,304.97 (inclusive of VAT) was subsequently made for furniture, other equipment, removals, etc.
- (ii) The running costs of the office for the year-ended March 2019 were £183,728.66 (excluding staffing costs).
- (iii) Invest NI's Southern Regional Office, which covers the Ards & North Down Borough Council, Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council and Newry, Mourne & Down District Council areas and is based in Newry, is a focal hub for all of the organisation's activities in the area. Over the past 5 years, Invest NI has made 4,281 offers of support to businesses in the Southern Regional Office area. These offers aim to support over 5,000 jobs and bring total planned investment commitments of £529 million to the area.

Staff based in the office work directly with local businesses to help them to start up and grow their businesses in external markets providing opportunities for the local workforce and entrepreneurs.

In addition, staff work closely with local economic stakeholders to strategically plan and implement strategies to grow prosperity in the area. The local knowledge, networks and expertise of the staff based in that office has been a key contributor to the many successful outcomes delivered by Invest NI in the area.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy what progress has been made toward banning zero hours contracts as outlined in New Decade, New Approach. (AQW 2799/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I have asked my officials to develop policy proposals in relation to the New Decade New Approach statements on zero hours contracts. In developing these proposals I will wish to take account of the views of stakeholders. Any proposals to ban or limit the use of zero hours contracts would be subject to public consultation prior to the introduction of new legislation in the Assembly.

Mr Storey asked the Minister for the Economy how many projects, in each district council area, applied to the European Social Fund Programme 2014-2020 and its predecessor schemes. (AQW 2852/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The European Social Fund Programme 2014-2020 and 2007-2013 invited applications for funding over 2 funding calls. Applications across these calls are listed in the tables below.

Council Area	European Social Fund Programme 2014-2020 Call 1	European Social Fund Programme 2014-2020 Call 2
Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council	2	3
Ards and North Down Borough Council	0	4
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council	7	1
Belfast City Council	70	47
Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council	5	8
Derry and Strabane District Council	24	13
Fermanagh and Omagh District Council	4	4
Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council	6	4

Council Area	European Social Fund Programme 2014-2020 Call 1	European Social Fund Programme 2014-2020 Call 2
Mid and East Antrim Borough Council	3	2
Mid Ulster District Council	6	5
Newry, Mourne and Down District Council	5	2

Council Area	European Social Fund Programme 2007-2013 Call 1	European Social Fund Programme 2007-2013 Call 2
Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council	4	4
Ards and North Down Borough Council	1	4
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council	2	2
Belfast City Council	50	70
Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council	5	7
Derry and Strabane District Council	10	13
Fermanagh and Omagh District Council	2	5
Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council	3	1
Mid and East Antrim Borough Council	0	2
Mid Ulster District Council	2	3
Newry, Mourne and Down District Council	2	3

Mr Storey asked the Minister for the Economy how many projects successful in applying to the European Social Fund Programme 2014-2020 subsequently exited the scheme of their own volition in comparison with its predecessor schemes, broken down by (i) stated reason for exit; and (ii) district council area.

(AQW 2853/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: To date in the European Social Fund Programme 2014-2020, 5 projects have chosen to leave the Programme. The reasons for exit and the district council area are as follows:

Project	Reason for exit	District Council Area
1	Change in organisational priorities	Belfast/Derry & Strabane/Antrim & Newtownabbey
2	Change in organisational priorities	Belfast
3	Merger with another project	Causeway Coast & Glens
4	Change in organisational priorities	Derry & Strabane
5	Unable to secure match funding	Belfast

Under the European Social Fund Programme 2007-13, 4 projects chose to leave the programme. The reasons for exit and the district council area are as follows:

Project	Reason for exit	District Council Area
1	Operational decision	Belfast
2	Operational decision	Belfast
3	Operational decision	Derry & Strabane
4	Operational decision	Derry & Strabane

Mr M Bradley asked the Minister for the Economy, in relation to the high-profile events that have been cancelled or have received reduced funding within the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council area, whether she would offer any financial assistance to these events.

(AQW 2857/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Through Tourism NI, financial support is provided to tourism events that can generate economic benefit for Northern Ireland through increased visitor and participant numbers, spend and bed nights.

Tourism NI's Tourism Event Funding Programme consists of two schemes offering financial assistance, the International Tourism Events Fund and the National Tourism Events Sponsorship Scheme. This programme operates annually and is on an open call competitive basis.

For events taking place between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021 the call for applications to the International Tourism Events Funding Programme closed on 13 January 2020, and the National Tourism Event Sponsorship Scheme closed on 10 February 2020. Tourism NI is in the process of considering all applications to the Tourism Event Funding Programme 2020/21.

Tourism NI received one application from Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council to the National Tourism Event Sponsorship Scheme 2020/21 for Air Waves Portrush. Officials from Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council formally withdrew the application to the scheme on 26 February 2020.

Officials in Tourism NI understand that the decision taken by the Council not to proceed with the Air Waves Event was taken on value for money grounds as the event delivered limited additional economic benefit within the Borough.

The event is not only funded by the Council, it is also dependent upon significant manpower and technical expertise from council officials to allow the event to take place. Without both the financial and "in kind" support being available from Causeway Coast and Glens Council there is little which the Department for the Economy can do to ensure the event takes place in the future.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQO 163/17-22, (i) whether she has any plans to review legislation for (a) mineral; and (b) petroleum licensing; and (ii) for a timescale of any such review.

(AQW 2881/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) I can confirm that a strategic review of both petroleum and mineral licensing policy is underway. The review will be informed by the outcome of planned independent research. The results of this research will inform the development of a policy position on mineral activities and a policy position on petroleum activities. When a policy position is developed, my Department will review the relevant licensing legislation in line with that position.
- (ii) The strategic review will be an iterative process dependent on consideration of the results of the independent research and so it is not possible, at this early stage, to estimate the timescale for completing the review process. However, my Department is committed to the timely delivery of the strategic review.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for the Economy what oversight her Department has taken to ensure that all jobs created and assisted by Invest NI comply with the Executive's good jobs index.

(AQW 2974/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department for the Economy is developing a Better Jobs index, which would assess employment opportunities against a series of measureable data. This has not yet been finalised.

In its absence, Invest NI presently targets and monitors the salary associated with the jobs that it supports against the NI Private Sector Median (NI PSM) basic wage, as calculated through the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings. Over the period 1 April 2017 to 31 March 2019, c70% of all the jobs supported by Invest NI aim to pay salaries above the NI PSM. Invest NI will liaise closely with the Department to ensure that its future approach is aligned to the finalised Better Jobs index.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of the impact on job creation prospects, particularly in North Antrim, if the project to deliver the third runway at Heathrow Airport does not proceed and the Heathrow Logistics Hub opportunities are lost.

(AQW 3004/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I am watching the situation with interest. The lead for this project will be those at Heathrow. They will be diligent in assessing the landscape and deciding next steps. As this is a live legal process it would be inappropriate for me to make any uninformed comment.

In relation to the potential impact on jobs, unless and until there is a decision on the next steps and on the location of the hubs, any job impacts remains hypothetical.

I am, and remain positive about the role Northern Ireland can play in this expansion of Heathrow and have instructed that my officials continue to explore and promote the opportunities for all of Northern Ireland through this process in innovative partnership with local stakeholders.

Mr Frew asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 2597/17-22, has the System Operator for Northern Ireland (SONI) responded to the Utility Regulator's formal request for information under the SONI transmission license in full, answering all questions asked in the request.

(AQW 3008/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The System Operator for Northern Ireland responded to the information request on 27 February 2020 and provided a response to each question asked. The Utility Regulator will be seeking further clarification on a number of points.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) all of Invest NI's land holdings in South Down; (ii) how long they've been in ownership of this land; and (iii) what discussions Invest NI have had in the last 12 months about maximising the economic output of this land.

(AQW 3026/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Invest NI holds approximately 275 acres of land in the South Down constituency in support of its business development role. A breakdown of these landholdings, including availability and year of acquisition, is as set out in the following table.

Invest NI Estates/Industrial Area	Town	Landholding (acres)	Land Availability (acres)	Year of Acquisition
Carnbane Business Park	Newry	138.24	41.70	1996, 1997 and 2010
Carnbane East Industrial Estate	Newry	24.54	0	1992
Milltown Industrial Estate	Newry	3.96	0	1976
Armagh Road	Newry	0.55	0	1962
Down Business Park	Downpatrick	81.87	20.09	1998
Killough Road Industrial Estate	Downpatrick	23.56	11.34	1974
Hilltown	Hilltown	0.95	0	1975
Newcastle	Newcastle	0.85	0	1950, 1964 and 1971
The Harbour	Kilkeel	0.64	0	1972 and 1980
Total		275.16	73.13	

Invest NI works closely with businesses to support their growth plans and, where companies have an identified requirement for new land, the agency can provide support to meet this need.

In the last 12 months the organisation has met with 16 businesses that have expressed an interest in acquiring land within its business parks in the South Down constituency and will continue a process of engagement as the companies continue to develop their plans.

In the same 12 month period three companies have entered into an agreement to acquire approximately 10.7 acres of land within Invest NI's Carnbane Business Park for the purpose of developing new purpose built facilities.

Mr Frew asked the Minister for the Economy what reasons were given by the System Operator for Northern Ireland (SONI) or Eirgrid in missing the deadline set by the Utility Regulator on their formal information request on SONI governance.

(AQW 3096/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: In responding the day after the deadline SONI apologised for the delay, stating only that it was important for SONI to get the additional details requested.

Mr Frew asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW2597/17-22, (i) who did she consult with in the Department; and (ii) which outside bodies did she consult with.

(AQW 3174/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) I referred AQW 2597/17-22 to Energy Group officials within my department, who liaised with the Utility Regulator to provide the published answer.
- (ii) I did not consult with any outside bodies.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy to outline (i) the total size of the local green economy, including details of employment figures and GDP in gross terms and as a percentage of total employment and total GDP; and (ii) to provide a definition about what is classified as the green economy.

(AQW 3186/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Northern Ireland Executive does not have an agreed definition of the green economy. However the green economy is widely regarded as being low carbon, resource efficient and socially inclusive.

While there is presently no dedicated measurement for Northern Ireland that captures the entirety of the green economy, my Department co-funds a UK-wide survey entitled the 'Low Carbon and Renewable Energy Economy survey' which is conducted by the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

The latest published results from this survey relate to 2018 and show that private sector businesses, active in the low carbon and renewable energy sector in Northern Ireland, employed 5,400 full-time equivalents and had turnover of £1.1bn.

For an approximate comparison to the whole economy in Northern Ireland, this sector provides 0.95% of the full-time private sector jobs and 1.61% of total turnover.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy whether she is aware of the massive sub-regional disparity in qualifications and skills across Northern Ireland, as laid out in the Assembly's Research and Information Service briefing paper (NIAR-47-2020); and what action her Department intends to take to correct this imbalance.

(AQW 3193/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I am aware that there is some regional disparity in the qualifications and skills held by individuals in Northern Ireland. The data provided in the briefing paper highlights some trends across both urban and rural constituencies, with areas as diverse as Belfast North and Fermanagh and South Tyrone having similar skills and employment profiles.

This is something that we see from a young age, with the proportion of school leavers attaining five GCSEs at grades A* to C (including English and Maths) ranging from a high of 81% in East Antrim, to a low of 60% in Belfast West.

To address these gaps for our young people, my Department offers a range of interventions, including Training for Success and ApprenticeshipsNI, through a network of training providers across Northern Ireland. Our Further Education colleges also offer a range of academic, vocational and leisure courses to school leavers, as well as adult learners.

My Department is leading on the development of a new, all-of-government Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland, which will set the skills agenda for the period 2021-30. Since taking up my role, I have engaged with key stakeholders from industry, local government and education institutions to consider the major challenges around lifelong learning, skills imbalances and the skills required for the modern workplace.

Lifelong learning, in particular, aligned with the work taken forward in partnership with the Department of Education and Department for Communities, will be key in addressing some of the skills and qualifications imbalances. We recognise the importance for citizens to upskill and continue learning throughout life for their own individual benefit, as well as addressing the needs of the local economy.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy (i) has she seen the Buglass and Cornwall reports in respect of RHI issues; (ii) can she confirm these reports are as originally presented without alteration at the behest of the Department; and (iii) can she confirm that these reports are being reviewed by staff other than those who signed off regulatory impact assessments determining that there would be no adverse economic, rural or hardship impacts arising from their recommendations to the Secretary of State that she bring forward the 2019 legislation.

(AQW 3233/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) I have received a copy of the Cornwall Insight Tariff Review Report. I have not yet received Andrew Buglass' report on hardship.
- (ii) When Cornwall Insight and Andrew Buglass shared draft versions of their respective reports with the Department, officials considered the content and provided feedback on points of factual accuracy and clarity. The Department has not requested alterations to the conclusions of either piece of work.
- (iii) Yes.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 20 March 2020

Written Answers

The Executive Office

Mr Nesbitt asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for a list of stakeholders that the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition have engaged with..
(AQW 939/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): Please see attached, at Annex A, a list of stakeholders that the Commission engaged with.

Annex A

- 174 Trust
- ACT
- ACT Mid Ulster
- Aims Project
- Ainsworth Residents Group
- Alliance Party
- Ancient Order of Hibernians
- Andersonstown Residents
- Antrim & Newtownabbey Borough Council
- Apprentice Boys of Derry
- Apprentice Boys of Derry Parent Club
- Ards & North Down Borough Council
- Ards Community Network
- Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon Council
- Armagh Bands Forum
- Arts Council
- Artsetka
- Attorney General
- Avenue Road Residents Committee
- Ballycarry Community Association
- Ballycastle Church Action
- Ballymena Guardian
- Ballymoney Churches Forum
- Ballymurphy Residents
- Ballysillian Cultural Society
- Beat Carnival
- Belfast City Council
- Belfast Community Relations Consortium
- Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium
- Belfast Feminist Network
- Belfast Giants
- Belfast Health Trust
- Belfast Interface Project
- Belfast Jewish Community
- Belfast National Graves Association
- Belfast Trades Council
- Bredagh GAC
- Bridge of Hope – Ashton Community Trust
- British Broadcasting Corporation
- Broughderg Area Development Association
- British Truth Forum
- Cairdeas Eoghain
- CAP Arts Centre
- Carrick Forum
- Carson Project
- Catholic Church
- Caw/Nelson Drive Action Group
- CBS Glen Road Fund
- Charter for Northern Ireland
- City Grand Lodge
- Clanmil Housing Association
- Clonard Residents
- Clonoe GFC
- Coiste
- Cookstown Ancient Order of Hibernians
- Committee on Administration of Justice
- Community Dialogue
- Community Foundation NI
- Community Relations Council
- Community Restorative Justice Ireland
- Con Community Groups
- Confederation of Ulster Bands
- Conflict Resolution Services Ireland
- Conradh na Gaeilge
- Cookstown Irish National Foresters
- Co-Operation Ireland
- Council for Catholic Maintained Schools
- Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and

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| Assessment | ■ Joint Ventures |
| ■ Corrymeela Community | ■ Kabosh |
| ■ Cultúrlann | ■ Limavady Community |
| ■ Decorum NI | ■ Lisburn & Castlereagh Council |
| ■ Department for Foreign Affairs | ■ Londonderry Bands Forum |
| ■ Department for Infrastructure | ■ Lower Oldpark Community Association |
| ■ Department of Education | ■ Lower Shankill Community Association |
| ■ Department of Justice | ■ Loyalist Community Council |
| ■ Derry City and Strabane District Council | ■ Maiden City Accord |
| ■ Dessertmartin Community Development Ltd | ■ Maiden City Festival |
| ■ Droury Road Development Group | ■ Malone College |
| ■ Drumbeg and Carryduff Parish | ■ Market House Culture Group |
| ■ Early Years | ■ MediateNI |
| ■ East Belfast Community Initiative | ■ Methodist Church |
| ■ East Belfast Mission | ■ McGurks Bar Committee |
| ■ Education Authority | ■ Mid Armagh Community Network |
| ■ Education Training Inspectorate | ■ Mid & East Antrim Council |
| ■ Equality Commission | ■ Mid Ulster Council |
| ■ Extern Group | ■ Mill Community Residents Group |
| ■ Falls Community Council | ■ Murray Parent Club |
| ■ Falls Residents | ■ National Museums NI |
| ■ Family Works | ■ Newry, Mourne & Down District Council |
| ■ Families Research and Policy Unit | ■ Nerve Centre |
| ■ Farset | ■ NICIE |
| ■ Féile an Phobail | ■ NICCY |
| ■ Fermanagh and Omagh District Council | ■ NICVA |
| ■ Fermanagh Rural Community Network | ■ NI Electricity |
| ■ Fern Trust | ■ NI Environment Agency |
| ■ First Larne Presbyterian Church | ■ NI Housing Executive |
| ■ Foras na Gaeilge | ■ NI Human Rights Commission |
| ■ Foyle Women's Info Network | ■ NI Football League |
| ■ Gertrude Star | ■ NI Local Government Association |
| ■ GRACE | ■ NI Screen |
| ■ Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland | ■ Northern Ireland Office |
| ■ Greater Shankill Partnership | ■ NIRWN |
| ■ Greater Village Regeneration Trust | ■ North Belfast Interface Network |
| ■ Greater Whitewell Community Surgery | ■ North West Cultural Partnership |
| ■ Green Party | ■ Northern Ireland Policing Board |
| ■ Greyabbey LOL | ■ NSPCC |
| ■ Healing Through Remembering | ■ OFCOM |
| ■ Hollywood Shared Town | ■ Oifigeach Forbartha na Gaeilge |
| ■ Humane Society International | ■ Orange Institution Staffordstown |
| ■ Hummingbird Project | ■ Orange Trust |
| ■ Iarchumí Dhoire Theas | ■ Parades Commission |
| ■ Indian Community Centre | ■ P2P Lisburn |
| ■ Institute of Conflict Research | ■ PCSP |
| ■ Institute of Irish Studies | ■ Peace Walls Project |
| ■ Integrated Education Fund | ■ POBAL |
| ■ Intercomm | ■ Presbyterian Church |
| ■ Irish Athletic Boxing Association | ■ Prime Cut Productions |
| ■ Irish Council of Churches | ■ PSNI |
| ■ Irish Football Association | ■ PUP |
| ■ Islandmagee Residents Association | ■ QUB |

- Rainbow Project
- Randalstown ABOD
- Randalstown Cultural Awareness Association
- Randalstown Ulster-Scots
- REACT
- Regenerate
- Relatives For Justice
- Rowing Ireland
- Royal Black Institute
- Royal Yachting Association NI
- Rugby League Ireland
- Rural Community Network
- Science Foundation Ireland
- SDLP
- Shankill Extra
- Shankill Women's Centre
- Sinn Fein
- South Londonderry Act
- South Belfast Partnership Board
- South Belfast Residents Against Flags
- South East Fermanagh Foundation
- South West College
- Southern Regional College
- Sperrin Cultural Awareness Association
- Sport NI
- St Eugene's PS
- St Malachy's Church
- St Mary's UCB
- Strathroy Community Organisation
- Suffolk Lenadoon Interface Project
- Tar Isteach
- Teach Na Failte
- TG4
- The Apprentice Boys of Derry Parent Club
- The Welcome Project
- Thornhill Duncairn Kinsella
- Tides Training
- TUV
- UKIP
- Ulster GAA
- Ulster Political Research Group
- Ulster-Scots Agency
- Ulster-Scots Community Network
- Ulster University
- US Consulate
- UUP
- Victims Forum
- Villages Together
- Walker Parent Club - ABOD
- West Belfast Athletic & Cultural society
- Western Health and Social Care Trust
- West Winds Social & Cultural Institution
- Women's Institute NI
- Women's Resource & Development Agency
- WW1 Society

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) whether they anticipate that the Irish Language Commissioner and his staff will all be Irish speakers; and (ii) if so, how will fair employment provisions be honoured.

(AQW 972/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: Consideration is currently being given to the detail of the arrangements to bring forward the language proposals in the New Decade New Approach Agreement. Any recruitment processes will adhere to the requirements in employment legislation.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) what is the staffing compliment of the Equality Commission; and (ii) what is its annual budget.

(AQW 1594/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: The Equality Commission staffing complement is 69.9 full-time equivalent staff. The 2019/20 opening budget for the Commission was £5,042,000.

Mr Humphrey asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the proposed role of the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression.

(AQO 8/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: The New Decade, New Approach agreement sets out the strategic aims of the new Office of Identity and Cultural Expression.

These include the promotion of:-

- cultural pluralism and respect for diversity, including Northern Ireland's ethnic, national, linguistic and faith communities;
- building social cohesion and reconciliation so that everyone has a sense of belonging;
- building capacity and resilience on how we address our unresolved cultural identity issues; and
- celebrate and support all aspects of Northern Ireland's rich cultural and linguistic heritage, recognising the equal validity and importance of all identities and traditions.

Consideration is currently being given to the arrangements to bring forward the Rights, Language and Identity proposals in the 'New Decade, New Approach' agreement, including the creation of the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression.

Further details will be made available to Members in due course.

Mr Givan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the protocol for the Equality Commission when choosing to support a client through with legal action.

(AQW 2480/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: The Commissions Policy on the Provision of Legal Advice and Assistance is available on their website.

<http://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Individuals/Leaflet-GuideEqualityCommission.pdf>

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 975/17-22, (i) for their assessment of the status of the English language; and (ii) where is same specified.

(AQW 2758/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: Clause 78F (3) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (Amendment No. 2) Bill states that the status of the English language is not affected by the provision made in the Bill.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, following the Mills Review in 2013, to detail what actions have been carried out to address (i) criminality; and (ii) organised crime, in the waste industry.

(AQW 2264/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): A range of actions have been carried out to address criminality and organised crime in the waste industry, which include:

- Restructuring to create a single Directorate, Resource Efficiency Division, bringing together regulatory and enforcement functions in waste and water management. This provides a more coordinated and streamlined approach in addressing non-compliance in the waste sector.
- Changes to the Environmental Crime Unit (ECU), now Enforcement Branch (EB), included restructuring into separate, dedicated sections with oversight against small scale, low risk waste crime incidents and larger scale, higher risk organised waste criminality respectively. An Assessment Section was also created, which was enhanced with the recruitment of a dedicated waste crime analyst.
- Improved, targeted recruitment and training, ensuring the necessary aptitude, skill set and experience, supplemented by in-depth induction and accredited training courses. EB now has an additional 5 criminal investigators with specialist skills in conducting criminal investigations, financial investigations and investigative practices.
- Introduction of a 'risk based matrix' inspections model for all waste management sites, focusing resources on sites which are non-compliant or at risk of becoming non-compliant.
- Changes to the 'Fit & Proper Person' test. Waste licence holders now have to meet more stringent rules to demonstrate their fitness to manage waste facilities including Criminal Record (CRO) checks and obtaining up-to-date technical certification every 24 months.
- The implementation of the Regulatory Transformation Programme (RTP). RTP is reforming the existing water, waste and industrial permitting regimes into a single streamlined framework which will deliver enhanced transparency in environmental governance by providing more data on the sites we regulate. This will enable the Agency to identify and differentiate between non-compliance and potential criminality thus ensuring maximum use of resource.
- Enhanced partnership working with other law enforcement authorities, in particular the Police Service of Northern Ireland and Her Majesties Revenue. NIEA has developed Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) with both organisations which address both operational and information sharing arrangements.
- NIEA has joined the Organised Crime Task Force Strategy Group, chaired by the Department for Justice. This group brings together a number of law enforcement agencies including the NIEA, Police, NCA, HMRC to tackle organised crime in Northern Ireland.

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail (i) how many fines have been issued in relation to environmental crime; (ii) the average value of fines in each year; (iii) the average value of fines in Britain for comparable environmental crime, for each year since 2008.

(AQW 2266/17-22)

Mr Poots: The table below sets out the information requested. The Department do not hold any information in relation to fines issued for environmental crime in Britain. Such information would be in the domain of Environment Agency (England), the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency, and Natural Resources Wales.

Year	No. of fines issued	Average value of fines (£)
2008	37	£3,229.72
2009	28	£2,758.92
2010	47	£3,001.75
2011	69	£2,138.40
2012	72	£2,022.74
2013	77	£1,273.41
2014	60	£2,041.89
2015	72	£1,404.93
2016	36	£1,870.37
2017	30	£3,312.50
2018	22	£4,845.83
2019	10	£7,024.23

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how many incidence of notifiable disease among livestock was recorded, broken down by (i) disease; and (ii) local council area, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2763/17-22)

Mr Poots: The incidence of recorded notifiable disease in each of the last five years is provided in the tables below. Tables 1 and 2 provide the incidence for each disease by Divisional Veterinary Office (DVO) area, where available, rather than local council area as this is how the data is collated. Table 3 provides detail of those diseases where occurrence is held on a Northern Ireland basis only.

There have been no reported incidences in Northern Ireland for 52 of the 64 notifiable diseases in the last five years.

Table 1: Notifiable disease cases by disease and DVO

Notifiable Disease	No. of Cases 1/1/15 – 31/12/19	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Brucellosis	3		1 (2016)	1 (2016)							1 (2017)
Caprine Arthritis Encephalitis *	1			1 (2019)							
Paramyxovirus Infection	1									1 (2015)	

* OIE were notified but investigations are still ongoing

1 – Armagh, 2 – Ballymena, 3 – Coleraine, 4 – Dungannon, 5 – Enniskillen, 6 – Londonderry, 7 – Mallusk, 8 – Newry, 9 – Newtonards, 10 – Omagh.

Table 2: Bovine Tuberculosis incidence

DVO	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Total
No of cases 1/1/15 – 31/12/19	913	603	1202	1189	1127	226	504	1454	1080	1183	9481
2019*	174	122	211	190	218	29	128	304	209	172	1757
2018	191	147	286	264	262	53	96	302	247	241	2089
2017	214	158	239	292	246	39	120	365	245	290	2208
2016	189	88	223	249	201	30	73	238	206	242	1739
2015	145	88	243	194	200	75	87	245	173	238	1688

* Data for 2019 still provisional

1 – Armagh, 2 – Ballymena, 3 – Coleraine, 4 – Dungannon, 5 – Enniskillen, 6 – Londonderry, 7 – Mallusk, 8 – Newry, 9 – Newtonards, 10 – Omagh.

Table 3: Notifiable disease incidence held at NI level

Notifiable Disease	No of cases					
	1/1/15 – 31/12/19	2019	2018	2017	2016	2015
Infectious Laryngotracheitis	9		2		3	4
Duck Septicaemia	1		1			
Infectious Bovine Rhinotracheitis	34	6	4	12	7	5
Jaagsiekte Complex	116	18	21	29	27	21
Johne's Disease	496	239	164	48	32	13
Porcine reproductive and respiratory syndrome	14	5				9
Salmonellosis	571	29	138	86	139	179
Sheep Scab	2				1	1

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether his Department plans to have milk tanker meters calibrated and monitored by Trading Standards.

(AQW 2922/17-22)

Mr Poots: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether his Department plans to have milk tanker meters calibrated and monitored by Trading Standards

The Northern Ireland Trading Standards Service, which has responsibility for promoting and maintaining fair trading, is part of the Department for the Economy. I have no plans to request the Northern Ireland Trading Standards Service to either calibrate or monitor milk tanker meters.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline the plans for the proposed planting of two million trees.

(AQW 2944/17-22)

Mr Poots: I delivered a Ministerial Statement in the Assembly recently announcing a Programme of Afforestation to plant 18 million trees, creating 9,000 hectares of new woodland, by 2030.

I understand that the proposed planting of two million trees includes community-led initiatives and primarily involves the planting of native tree species. This initiative will make a valuable contribution to the Programme of Afforestation, as it recognises opportunities for planting native trees, particularly in smaller woodlands or where recreation or biodiversity is an important consideration.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the challenges in securing a fair funding level for direct payments to farmers.

(AQW 2979/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Northern Ireland Trading Standards Service, which has responsibility for promoting and maintaining fair trading, is part of the Department for the Economy. I have no plans to request the Northern Ireland Trading Standards Service to either calibrate or monitor milk tanker meters.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he will commit to the long-term utilisation of direct payments to farmers beyond 2021.

(AQW 2980/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Agriculture Bill will give us the ability to continue to make payments to farmers under CAP Pillar 1, continue to deliver schemes under Pillar 2, and to keep pace with appropriate changes elsewhere in the UK.

I am considering carefully what future payments can do to support sustainable farming, both productively and environmentally, so that we can move to something new which better addresses the needs of Northern Ireland agriculture.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment on whether current funding levels for direct payments to farmers will be maintained by the UK Government for a period beyond the transition period.

(AQW 2981/17-22)

Mr Poots: I recently confirmed that the arrangements for £293 million in Direct Payments for the 2020 scheme year are now in place.

In relation to future years, the Conservative Party manifesto stated that funding for farm support would be maintained at existing levels until the end of this Parliament. While the schemes themselves may change across the UK, I anticipate that funding levels will be maintained up until 2024.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether provisions contained within Schedule 6 of the Agriculture Bill 2019-21 present any particular challenges with meeting the state aid requirements as set out in (i) Article 10; and (ii) Annexes 5 and 6 of the Ireland / Northern Ireland Protocol.

(AQW 2982/17-22)

Mr Poots: The provisions within Schedule 6 of the Agriculture Bill give DAERA powers relating to intervention in agricultural markets and allow for financial assistance to agricultural producers in Northern Ireland whose incomes are being, or likely to be, adversely affected by disturbance in agricultural markets. The Bill also gives DAERA powers to continue or to modify the arrangements for Direct Payments to farmers and those currently made under the Rural Development Programme.

Schedule 6 of the Agriculture Bill does not present any particular challenges with meeting state aid requirements as set out in Article 10 and Annexes 5 and 6 of the Ireland/ Northern Ireland Protocol but the powers will need to be exercised, and payments made in a way, that meets those state aid requirements.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what assurances his Department has sought from Defra in relation to the availability of funding for direct payments to farmers in the post-transition period.

(AQW 2983/17-22)

Mr Poots: I have already raised the issue of future support arrangements with the Prime Minister and with former Defra Secretary of State Theresa Villiers.

I am seeking to ensure that our future share of the UK agricultural budget will reflect Northern Ireland's current combined CAP Pillar 1 and Pillar 2 share.

My department is liaising closely with the Department of Finance to ensure that future needs of the Department are clearly identified and that future funding is maximised.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail what (i) properties; and (ii) land are currently surplus to requirements within his Department.

(AQW 3038/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department has one piece of land which has been determined as surplus to the Department's requirements. This relates to 1.6 hectares at Longpoint Wood, Bellaghy, which is being disposed of in line with Land and Property Services Central Advisory Unit (CAU) Guidance. No other land or property has formally been deemed as surplus at this stage however the Department continues to review its estate to carefully consider estate assets that may be suitable for disposal.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail (i) how he will enforce Tree Preservation Orders by preventing any removal of older trees by developers; (ii) what actions he will take to ensure appropriate action is taken against developers who cut down trees against Tree Preservation Orders.

(AQW 3056/17-22)

Mr Poots: Tree Preservation Orders are made on a statutory basis to provide protection for selected trees under the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. Local Councils are the authority that make and enforce Tree Preservation Orders under this legislation, to protect selected trees, groups of trees or woodlands.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to AQW 767/17-22 and AQW 1004/17-22, whether the Forest Service has given permission for snares to be used on any land it owns or controls in County Antrim, in the last five years.

(AQW 3060/17-22)

Mr Poots: Forest Service has not received any requests, or given permission, for the use of snares on land owned or controlled by Forest Service in County Antrim in the past 5 years.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to AQW 2507/17-22, (i) what delivery options are being considered; and (ii) whether it is intended to bring these into operation from 1 April 2020.

(AQW 3083/17-22)

Mr Poots:

The options which my Department are currently considering include:

- (i) delivery by DAERA; delivery through the Aquaculture Representative Group; and delivery through an alternative supplier with an aquaculture remit.

- (ii) While it will be challenging to have this in place by 1 April 2020, my officials are confident that an interim arrangement for supporting the Aquaculture Sector will be in place from 1 April 2020, if required.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline (i) what measures have been implemented to date to protect and enhance salmon stock in the River Derg, Co.Tyrone; and (ii) what measures are planned to address this same issue.

(AQW 3117/17-22)

Mr Poots: Under the Foyle Fisheries Acts (1952), as amended, the Loughs Agency is responsible for conserving, protecting, developing, improving and managing the salmon and inland fisheries of the Foyle and Carlingford Areas, including the River Derg and its tributaries.

- (i) Loughs Agency Fishery Officers undertake patrols on the River Derg, particularly during the angling season, to ensure that anglers are licensed and that conservation measures, such as the use of carcass tags and the compliance with Regulations, including the preservation of undersized fish and protection of gravid fish are adhered to. Any breaches of Regulations identified are considered for enforcement action.

The Loughs Agency has also worked in partnership with angling clubs on the Derg system, and in particular the local Derg Valley Angling club. This has included training the angling Private River Watchers in enforcement measures and in the detection of water pollution related incidents.

The Agency continues to work in partnership with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency in relation to water pollution issues affecting the River. Proactive advice has been provided to the farming community where pollution may be impacting on fish stocks and regular patrols are carried out to identify pollution sources.

The Loughs Agency also carry out habitat improvements to protect and enhance salmon populations. Significant in-channel and riparian improvement projects have been developed and implemented across the Foyle and Carlingford Areas, such as: riparian fencing; native riparian tree planting; and soft and hard bank protection.

- (ii) A programme of patrols to protect salmon stocks in the River Derg is planned for this year. The Agency also plans to carry out capital improvement works in selected areas of the River Derg catchment.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail (i) invasive plant species in Northern Ireland; and (ii) the plans his Department has to remove them.

(AQW 3128/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- (i) Details of terrestrial, marine and aquatic invasive plant species recorded in Northern Ireland can be accessed under the Invasive Species tab at: <https://northernireland-species.nbnatlas.org/>
- (ii) DAERA is taking action to deal with the spread and impact of invasive alien species. The Invasive Alien Species Strategy for Northern Ireland details a range of interventions – targeted eradication, awareness programs, local action groups, and research and development.

The Department introduced new domestic legislation, The Invasive Alien Species (Enforcement and Permitting) Order (Northern Ireland) 2019, to fulfil its obligations under the European Union Regulation No. 1143/2014 on the prevention and management of the introduction and spread of invasive alien species.

Eight plant species of Union Concern are identified as being 'Widely Spread Species' (WSS) in Northern Ireland, and requires effective management measures be put in place for these species, so that their impact on biodiversity, related ecosystem services and, where applicable, human health or the economy are minimised:

Nuttall's waterweed (*Elodea nuttallii*), Chilean rhubarb (*Gunnera tinctoria*), Giant hogweed (*Heracleum mantegazzianum*), Himalayan balsam (*Impatiens glandulifera*), Curly waterweed (*Lagarosiphon major*), American skunk cabbage (*Lysichiton americanus*), Floating pennywort (*Hydrocotyle ranunculoides*) and Parrot's feather (*Myriophyllum aquaticum*).

The Department works with a range of stakeholders - community groups, non – government organisations, farmers and landowners - to carry out management and removal of invasive plant species from their land.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the future of farm payments, post-2020.

(AQW 3161/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Agriculture Bill will give us the ability post-2020, to continue to make payments to farmers under CAP Pillar 1, continue to deliver schemes under Pillar 2, and to keep pace with appropriate changes elsewhere in the UK.

I am considering carefully what future payments can do to support sustainable farming, both productively and environmentally, so that we can move to something new which better addresses the needs of Northern Ireland agriculture.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline (i) the purpose of the data capture exercise for east-west trade in which local councils have been asked to assist; and (ii) whether this exercise plays any part in preparing to establish an east-west regulatory and customs border and infrastructure.

(AQW 3292/17-22)

Mr Poots: A data capture exercise is being conducted which aims to measure G.B. to Northern Ireland agri-food trade. This is to inform me and my Departmental officials on existing trade and therefore assess opportunities as to how frictionless trade may best be supported. I have previously stated clearly that I have no intention of facilitating infrastructure at Northern Ireland ports. Consequently, this work is not preparatory to that.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what assessment has been carried out on the impact a regulatory and customs border in the Irish Sea would have on the agri-food industry.

(AQO 272/17-22)

Mr Poots: I recognise that many farmers and agri-food stakeholders are concerned about the impact that the Ireland / Northern Ireland Protocol could have on them.

The detailed arrangements for the implementation of the Protocol have still to be determined and will be subject to discussion between the EU and UKG through the Specialised and Joint Committee structures. This detail will very much depend on the precise nature of the future trading relationship between the UK and the EU.

The negotiation on the future trading relationship between the UK and the EU has just started. It will be some time yet before we have a complete picture of what arrangements may be required for the movement of live animals or goods across the Irish Sea.

However, to be clear, I want an outcome at the end of the transition period that removes the requirement for any additional regulatory or customs checks on goods or live animals moving between GB and NI.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline what efforts his Department is undertaking to help combat the spread of Ash Dieback.

(AQO 273/17-22)

Mr Poots: Chalara Ash Dieback has become prevalent across these islands since the first finding in a GB plant nursery and its subsequent spread to Northern Ireland. The disease is widespread, affecting ash throughout Europe.

Since the first findings here on recently planted ash in 2012, Ash Dieback has spread extensively on ash throughout the wider environment in Northern Ireland. Over the intervening period and up until 2016 the Department has undertaken a significant programme of removing infected trees in recently planted sites as a precautionary approach to slow down the spread of the disease to ash in the natural environment. Despite the efforts taken across this island we found that the situation in Northern Ireland was the same as that in GB with the disease spreading to infect native ash in the wider environment.

The Department are now focused on working with stakeholders to manage disease spread and to minimise Ash Dieback impacts in the wider environment.

Forest Service has published guidance and provides grant aid under a Forest Protection Scheme to support and encourage sustainable management of woodlands that may be affected by Ash Dieback now or in the future. Against the likelihood of more trees becoming infected, the guidance focuses on tree safety and operational planning guidance for those with infected ash trees to manage the health and safety risks from dead and dying trees.

Currently we are continuing to monitor the progression of the disease with a view to being able to identify any evidence of ash trees displaying resistance to infection. The Department is providing funding for a Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute research project to identify genetic markers in native ash trees that will be indicative of resistance to Ash Dieback. Similar work to identify resistance is ongoing elsewhere across the UK with a view that screening work on resistant ash trees in infected areas will, in the longer term support efforts to repopulate the wider environment across the UK with resilient, sustainable healthy trees including ash.

Whilst in Northern Ireland we are dealing with the progression of Chalara disease in the wider environment, we also continue to prohibit further importation of ash for planting from outside the EU that could harbour new strains of the disease. The Department does permit the entry of ash plants from Europe provided that these are notified to the Department and are accompanied by a plant passport. Since the introduction of the new Plant Health Regulation in December 2019, restrictions on the internal movement within NI of all ash wood are removed. This recognises that the main risk of further spread will come from infected ash trees in the wider environment rather than from the movement of infected wood.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline the effect a regulatory border in the Irish Sea could have on the movement of animals following the end of the transition period.

(AQO 274/17-22)

Mr Poots: I recognise that many farmers and agri-food stakeholders are concerned about the impact that the Ireland / Northern Ireland Protocol could have on them.

The detailed arrangements for the implementation of the Protocol have still to be determined and will be subject to discussion between the EU and UKG through the Specialised and Joint Committee structures. This detail will very much depend on the precise nature of the future trading relationship between the UK and the EU.

The negotiation on the future trading relationship between the UK and the EU has just started. It will be some time yet before we have a complete picture of what arrangements may be required for the movement of live animals or goods across the Irish Sea.

However, to be clear, I want an outcome at the end of the transition period that removes the requirement for any additional regulatory or customs checks on goods or live animals moving between GB and NI.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in relation to the proposed Points-Based System and Salary Thresholds for Immigration, for his assessment of the impact it may have on the supply of seasonal workers in the agri-food industry.

(AQO 275/17-22)

Mr Poots: The UK's Points Based System will come into effect on the 1st January 2021 to coincide with the end of the transition period and hence freedom of movement with the EU. This system will not feature a route for low skilled migrants to come to the UK to work.

Migrants must have an offer of employment in a role considered sufficiently skilled to be eligible to apply to enter the UK. This will make it difficult for the NI agri-food industry to source seasonal labour as the roles are primarily low skilled in terms of academic qualifications and there is a significant reliance on migrant labour.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, given the prevalence of social isolation and mental ill health in rural communities, how he will protect the budget for the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation Framework.

(AQO 276/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI) Programme resource allocation came from the Confidence and Supply agreement funding in each of the last two years which maintained the opening budget at £1.8m per annum. This was supported by an opening capital budget of £2.2m in each year.

The TRPSI programme supports a range of initiatives, working in partnership across the public sector and community sector, that tackle social isolation and projects such as: the Rural Support charity; Farm Family Health checks; Social Farming; and Social Prescribing, directly support and address mental health issues.

You will appreciate that my department is facing a range of financial pressures and challenges going forward but I am very keen to continue to support this good work and I have sought funding from the Department of Finance to allow this to be continued in 2020/21.

I am also working with Ministerial Colleagues on the Executive Working Group on Mental Well-Being and Resilience and through this I wish to ensure that the needs of rural communities are considered and that we work in partnership across government to effectively tackle social isolation and mental ill health.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the number of cases of Avian Influenza that have been detected in 2020.

(AQO 277/17-22)

Mr Poots: In 2020 there have been nine confirmed cases of non notifiable avian influenza type H6N1.

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs when people can apply to join the Environmental Farming Scheme.

(AQO 278/17-22)

Mr Poots: Following a review of uptake of the scheme so far, my Department has submitted an Addendum to the original Business Case for the Environmental Farming Scheme (EFS) to the Department of Finance.

Subject to the necessary approvals being in place, my Department plans to open a fourth tranche 4 of EFS, with Higher Level applications in Spring 2020 and Wider Level applications in Summer 2020.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline the rationale for extending the recent consultation on the application for a Marine Licence for Islandmagee Gas Storage Project.

(AQO 279/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Department received a letter alleging shortcomings with the public notice advertising the consultation on the updated application, Environmental Statement and Marine Environmental Conditions Update Report for the proposed Islandmagee Gas Storage project.

Following a review of the notice, the Department decided to re-advertise and extend the consultation using an amended notice.

DAERA has contacted all respondents informing them of the revised consultation closing date of 27 March 2020. Respondents have also been advised that while they do not have to make a further response, they can use this period to add any additional comments in support of their views.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he will introduce a land management strategy that rewards public goods, in line with new proposals from the Welsh Government.
(AQO 280/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am looking at what future payments can do to support sustainable farming and our cultural landscape. In doing this, I will be giving consideration to all types of support which could be available.

We need to have an agriculture industry that is environmentally sustainable in terms of impact on air and water quality, soil health, carbon footprint, and bio diversity. Like the Welsh Government, I am supportive of paying farmers to deliver public goods such as improving air and water quality, storing carbon etc, but this must be in tandem with increased productivity, improved resilience, an agriculture industry that is environmentally sustainable and an industry which operates within an integrated, efficient, sustainable, competitive and responsive supply chain. These are the four pillars of the future agricultural policy framework my Department engaged with stakeholders on in 2018.

I look forward to continued engagement with industry and stakeholders on this.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the establishment of an independent Environmental Protection Agency.
(AQO 281/17-22)

Mr Poots: Good environmental governance is about much more than the degree of independence of an agency.

I will consider the implications of the proposals in the New Decade, New Approach agreement for the establishment of an independent environment agency to form part of the possible outline of a future Programme for Government. It would be necessary to scope all of the potential impacts, which are likely to include significant legislative, financial and human resource issues, before making decisions.

In the meantime I am considering the establishment of an independent environmental oversight body for Northern Ireland. Subject to obtaining the relevant consent of the Assembly, I will be seeking to extend to Northern Ireland the provisions of the Environment Bill giving effect to an Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) and plan to issue a discussion document to gauge stakeholder views on this subject shortly.

Department for Communities

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Communities for an update on budget allocations for Neighbourhood Renewal Projects for the 2020/21 financial year.
(AQW 1505/17-22)

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): I am pleased to confirm that the programme budget for the Neighbourhood Renewal strategy will be maintained at current levels for the 2020/21 and 2021/22 financial years. I have written to Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership chairs and Areas at Risk representatives to inform them of this decision.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities (i) how much public funding is required to deliver the Casement Park project; and (ii) how much funding her Department has requested from the Department of Finance to deliver the Casement Park project.
(AQW 2059/17-22)

Ms Hargey: As you know, all parties agreed to “investing for the future” as part of the New Decade New Approach and as part of this priority, we agreed to advance plans to complete the Casement Park project.

In March 2011 the Executive allocated my Department a budget of £110 million, grant funding, to deliver the three projects within the Regional Stadia Programme. This included £62.5 million towards the redevelopment of Casement Park. UCGAA committed £15 million of Partnership funding bringing the total current, approved project budget for Casement to £77.5 million.

The current, project cost estimate is circa £110 million for Casement Park.

Cost Estimates may be subject to change and when all matters associated with the Planning Permission are concluded, project costs will need to be finalised. Then I will be in a position to consider approval of the final UCGAA Full Business Case (FBC).

When the FBC has been approved, I will, as appropriate, submit a request to increase the Casement Park Project budget to the Executive for approval.

Currently no request has been made to increase funding for the Casement Park Project.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Communities how her Department is adopting a trauma-informed approach when developing policy and legislation.

(AQW 2120/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Many of the public services provided by my Department require colleagues to recognise the signs and symptoms of trauma in people accessing support.

I am committed to protecting the most vulnerable in society, embedding a right-based approach and meeting objective need.

As outlined in New Decade, New Approach, the Department is committed to citizen and community engagement and a co-design, co-production approach to policy development.

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister for Communities to detail the total amount of funding allocated from her Department to (i) Gaelic Athletic Association; (ii) Irish Football Association; and (iii) Ulster Rugby, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2133/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The table below provides a summary of funding provided to the Governing Bodies through a range of programmes including capital allocations under the Regional Stadia Programme. Given the period covered by the question, these figures include funding from the former Departments of Culture, Arts and Leisure and Social Development and rely on historical records and accounting procedures.

The figures do not include funding provided by arms-length bodies of the Department.

	Gaelic Athletic Association	Irish Football Association	Ulster Rugby
2014/15	£2,506,157	£17,962,695	£3,382,353
2015/16	£1,645,990	£8,756,857	£169,712
2016/17	£3,351,094	£243,495	£447,694
2017/18	£1,243,261	£43,759	£38,512
2018/19	£465,223	£44,154	£39,697

Ms Mullan asked the Minister for Communities whether her Department plans to build new bungalows in Foyle; and whether she will review the House Sales Scheme to include bungalows with 2 bedrooms or less.

(AQW 2159/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Bungalows are only included in new social housing schemes in exceptional circumstances, generally in cases where an alternative design solution would not be appropriate to meet the client's needs, or where specific Planning restrictions are applicable. Whilst there are a significant number of new social housing units planned for the Foyle area the agreed housing mix for a majority of these are yet to be finalised. A number of these schemes may include bungalow provision.

By way of example, I can advise in the past three years (2017/18 – 2019/20), there have been nine new social housing bungalows completed. A further five new social housing bungalows are currently under construction. The details of which are set out below.

Social Housing Bungalows Completed 2017/18 – 2019/20 (9 units)

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Nr Bungalows	Onsite Year	Completed Year
Choice	Nelson Drive Phase 2	Derry	New Build	4	2015/16	2017/18
Choice	Nelson Drive Phase 3	Derry	New Build	2	2017/18	2019/20
Apex	Coolnafinney	Eglinton	New Build	1	2017/18	2019/20
Apex	Trench Road	Derry	New Build	2	2016/17	2019/20

Social Housing Bungalows Under Construction (5 units)

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Nr Bungalows	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Apex	Galliagh Phase 2	Derry	New Build	3	2017/18	2020/21
Choice	Bishop Street	Derry	New Build	2	2018/19	2020/21

Programmed schemes can be lost or slip to future programme years for a variety of reasons e.g. relating to delays in acquiring sites and/or failure to secure planning permission.

In terms of a review of the House Sales Scheme and in line with New Decade, New Approach I intend to bring forward legislation as soon as possible to facilitate reversal of the Office for National Statistics' classification of Housing Associations as Non-Financial Public Corporations.

In producing this draft legislation, my department conducted two public consultations, one of which was concerned with the future of the House Sales Scheme. Options were proposed and these included abolition on the grounds that this may be necessary in order to achieve reclassification.

I am currently considering draft legislation and will update members on the way forward as soon as possible.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister for Communities how she plans to engage with Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships in the design and implementation of an anti-poverty strategy.

(AQW 2160/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The experience and expertise of Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships will be instrumental in the development of an anti-poverty strategy. My officials have been running a programme of engagement workshops with Partnerships, and I am attending the next event on 18th March 2020. I look forward to hearing directly from the Partnerships and Areas at Risk representatives on the design and implementation of an anti-poverty strategy.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister for Communities for an update on funding for the Neighbourhood Renewal strategy for 2020/21.

(AQW 2161/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I am pleased to advise that the programme budget for the Neighbourhood Renewal strategy will be maintained at current levels for the 2020/21 and 2021/22 financial years. I have written to Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership chairs and Areas at Risk representatives to inform them of this decision.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Communities how she plans to bridge the gap that has developed in salaries for many community workers, including those funded under the Neighbourhood Renewal strategy.

(AQW 2168/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The rights of workers employed in the voluntary and community sector are an important issue for me. I am keen to examine how my Department's activities can support a fair deal for workers in the sector including those funded under the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy, and I have asked my officials to develop options for me to consider.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities what is the current size of the (i) Polish; (ii) Chinese; (iii) Slovakian; (iv) Portuguese; (v) other Eastern European; and (vi) Irish Gaelic communities whose first language is not English.

(AQW 2209/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Department for Communities does not hold the information required to answer the Member's question.

I would refer the Member to the 2011 Census, which provides detailed characteristics on ethnicity, country of birth and language.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to outline the anticipated demolition commencement date of (i) Monkscoole House; and (ii) Abbotscoole House; and what plans there are to build new social housing on the site.

(AQW 2217/17-22)

Ms Hargey: A consultant has been appointed to prepare and tender a demolition scheme for Monkscoole House. At present it is intended that it will be demolished in early 2021.

The Housing Executive intends to have a business case submitted for the demolition of Abbotscoole House to the Department by the end of 2020. The residents will be further consulted as part of the preparation of the business case. It is currently estimated that it will take around two years to vacate Abbotscoole House, which suggests an indicative timescale for demolition of 2023 at the earliest. However, it is acknowledged that there is considerable opposition by the residents to its demolition and therefore the anticipated timescale may, by necessity, be longer.

As set out in the Tower Blocks Action Plan, following the demolition of Abbotscoole House, it is the Housing Executive's intention to develop the combined cleared sites of the two blocks for new social housing. An initial feasibility study indicates a put back of approximately 53 new dwellings.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail the correspondence between the Housing Executive and her Department concerning Monkscoole House and Abbotscoole House.

(AQW 2218/17-22)

Ms Hargey: In May 2014 the then-DSD Minister wrote to the Housing Executive requesting that they develop a maintenance and investment strategy for Tower Blocks. This Strategy recommended that each tower block, including Monkscoole House

and Abbotscoole House, be subject to an individual options appraisal. The Tower Block Strategy was approved by the then-Minister in February 2016.

After extensive consultation in 2018 the Housing Executive prepared, as required, a Strategic Outline Case (SOC) document, based on its Tower Block Action Plan and submitted it to the Department for Communities in April 2019 for its consideration. The Department wrote to the Housing Executive in August 2019 confirming approval of the SOC.

The correspondence for Monkscoole House is as follows:

- In June 2019 the Housing Executive notified the Department that it intended to close Monkscoole House on health and safety grounds (a paper recommending its closure was subsequently approved by the Board of the Housing Executive at its meeting on 24th June 2019).
- On 4th December 2019 the Housing Executive submitted a business case to the Department recommending the demolition of Monkscoole House.
- On 9th December 2019 the Department wrote to the Housing Executive confirming receipt of the business case.
- On 10th January 2020 the Department wrote to the Housing Executive with its approval for the business case.

There has been no subsequent correspondence since the approval of the SOC regarding Abbotscoole House.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister for Communities (i) how many complaints have been made in respect of the viewing of pornography on library computers, in the last two years; (ii) what controls are in place to ensure illicit or pornographic material is not viewed on computers in libraries; and (iii) what measures she will take to ensure software is in place to prevent or monitor said material being brought into libraries via portable devices to be viewed on library computers.

(AQW 2260/17-22)

Ms Hargey:

- (i) Libraries NI has informed me that in the last two years it has received two official complaints in respect of the viewing of pornography on library computers. In addition, in a small number of cases, concerns were raised by library users relating to computer use and these were addressed by library staff, at the time, in the library. Both my Department and Libraries NI take such incidents, and the need to safeguard library users, very seriously.
- (ii) The provision of public access terminals (computers) and Wi-Fi is an important and well used service provided by Libraries NI. There are typically over 950,000 sessions delivered annually across the library network and Libraries NI strive to provide the service in a safe and effective way. Computer terminals in libraries are designed and intended for general public use. To use the computers in a library it is necessary to register as a library member.

Libraries NI has put in place a range of policies and procedures including application controls (e.g. web monitoring), physical controls (e.g. configuring computer suites to facilitate ease of monitoring - computer screens facing into rooms) and ensuring staff in libraries are vigilant for any signs of breaches of computer use. This is done to create an environment that is welcoming, safe and secure.

Despite these controls, incidents of computer misuse do occur from time to time. Libraries NI takes all incidents concerning misuse of computer systems, breaches of conditions of use and safeguarding very seriously. Where an incident does take place Libraries NI submits a safeguarding report to my Department as well as carrying out a full investigation including informing the PSNI if appropriate.

- (iii) Unfortunately information contained on portable devices, such as a USB pen, cannot be currently monitored and tracked in the same way that accessing websites can be tracked. However, Libraries NI is working with its IT specialists to ascertain what additional software measures and controls can be found to prevent, monitor or reduce the risk of inappropriate material of the nature referred to being viewed via portable devices brought into libraries.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister for Communities whether there are plans to redevelop the vacant Northern Ireland Housing Executive lands in Legahory, Craigavon.

(AQW 2262/17-22)

Ms Hargey: There are no plans at present to redevelop the vacant Housing Executive lands in Legahory, Craigavon. There is an unmet housing need of 5 units for the wider Central Craigavon local housing area and Housing Executive land at Drumellan has been identified to help meet this need.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister for Communities what youth services are funded by her Department in the Upper Bann area.

(AQW 2263/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department supports a range of youth activity in Upper Bann under the Neighbourhood Renewal and Areas at Risk programmes. The Housing Executive also provides support to a number of youth projects across Upper Bann.

These projects include individual tailored youth programmes which complement existing youth provision, focusing on disengaged youth and outreach work, health and well-being and making informed life choices. The projects are:

Neighbourhood Renewal Programme	19/20 Allocation
ACB&CBC Craigavon Building Sustainable Communities	£105,418.91
ACB&CBC Craigavon Sport in the Community	£81,687.71
Education Authority Youth Engagement PLUS Programme	£92,124.87
Areas At Risk	
ACB&CBC – Gilford AaR Project	£21,500.00

Under the Supporting People Programme there are currently two youth programmes funded in the Upper Bann area. These services are delivered by the Simon Community and Southern Health and Social Care Trust (SHSCT). Details of each service are contained in the table below.

Service	Units funded by SP	Unit Rate (Amount per unit per week) (£)	Maximum Annual Funding Agreement Value (£)
Simon Floating Supporting Service	30	42.66	66,548
SHSCT STAY Project	5	92.71	24,105

The Housing Executive does not fund youth services directly through its Community Safety and Cohesion work; however, it supports a number of community-based programmes, some of which have a focus on engaging with younger people. A summary of the programmes currently supported in the Upper Bann Area has been outlined in the table below.

Community Group	Project
Carnagat Community Association	Looking into the Future
Community Intercultural Programme	Oasis International Kids Programme
Corcain Redmanville Community Partnership	Arts & Crafts
Corcain Redmanville Community Partnership	Community Christmas Event
Corcain Redmanville Community Partnership	Community Halloween Programme
Drumbeg North and South Residents Association	Community Based Intergenerational Christmas Event
Bannside Community Group Portadown	Youth Engagement Programme
Edgarstown Residents Association	Community based detached youth work
The Y Zone	Youth Hut Safe Space
Edgarstown Residents Association	Intergenerational Christmas Event

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities for an update on social housing maintenance schemes in Fermanagh. (AQW 2274/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The table below, provided by the Housing Executive, highlights all maintenance schemes in Fermanagh that are currently ongoing, or planned for the upcoming financial year.

Appendix 1: Social Housing Maintenance Schemes in Fermanagh

	Scheme	Dwellings	Year
Bathroom Kitchen Rewire	Fermanagh BKR	77	20/21
	Hillview	50	20/21
	Total	127	
Bathrooms	Kilmacormick bathrooms Phase 2	66	20/21
	Total	66	
Double Glazing	South Region DG Mop up Phase 1	52	20/21
	Total	52	

	Scheme	Dwellings	Year
Ext Cyclic Maintenance	Irvinestown/Kesh/Ederney	241	on site
	Edenmore Heights	148	20/21
	Cavanaleck/Coleshill	139	20/21
	Cornagrade/Beleek, Fermanagh	152	20/21
	Enniskillen Town	184	20/21
	Carrowshee/Hudson heights	111	20/21
	Total	975	
Heating Installation	Irvinestown 15 Year replacement	82	on site
	Belcoo/Beleek/Derrygonnelly	76	on site
	Cavanleck / Chanter Hill, Enniskillen BR	80	20/21
	Total	269	
Revenue Kitchens	Fermanagh Revenue Kitchens	77	20/21
	Total	77	
Misc.	Fence Painting *	987	20/21
	Total	987	

* Fence painting numbers are not exclusive to Fermanagh but include properties in SW and Mid Ulster Areas.

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the Belfast Citywide Tribunal Service; and whether she will provide support to enable the continuation of this service in the 2020/21 financial year.
(AQW 2285/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department provides significant funding for the delivery of independent community based advice services, including appeals advice and representation, as follows:

- **£1.8m annually**, through the Community Support Programme. This is match funded by Councils who take responsibility for commissioning and distribution of funding in their local communities.
- **£1.5m annually**, through Fresh Start Agreement welfare mitigations funding. This supports a Freephone Helpline, additional face to face advice services and legal support.
- **£122,000 annually**, to the Law Centre NI, through Fresh Start Agreement welfare mitigations funding for advice and specialist appeal representation.

I am aware of the very valuable work being done on the ground by a wide range of advice organisations, including Belfast Citywide Tribunal Service, and I know much how the assistance with benefit appeals is improving people's financial and wider wellbeing.

In 2019/20, in recognition of increasing workloads being experienced by the advice sector, directly related to benefit appeals; additional funding of **£320,000** was made available from Fresh Start Agreement welfare mitigations funding. Belfast City Council's additional allocation was £66,000.

I am committed to protecting those most in need across our society. Access to community based, independent advice services, including help with making an appeal, is critical to meeting that commitment.

My Department is therefore working at pace to ensure that, in line with commitments set out in 'New Decade, New Approach', the extension of welfare mitigations, including continuation of additional funding for advice services (including appeals), takes place from 31st March.

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister for Communities whether she is aware of the challenges facing a range of arts organisations that are losing their studio space in Belfast city centre; and what plans she has to help them to find new studio hub space.
(AQW 2287/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I am aware there has been press coverage regarding a recent presentation to Belfast City Council (BCC) regarding the difficulties Arts Organisations are having in obtaining secure tenancies for studio space in Belfast City Centre. Funding for the Arts by my Department is primarily delivered through the Arts Council. Arts Council in conjunction with BCC, has regular dialogue with studio groups and individual artists through the Belfast Visual Arts Forum and are aware of the issues they face when seeking creative workspace.

Arts Council have funding programmes, which Arts organisations can avail of, covering a broad range of needs of the sector. There is, however, no specific funding programme to secure studio space. Arts Councils Annual Funding programme currently provides funding of £100,185 to four studios in Belfast. Arts organisations can also apply to their Small Grants programme for funding of venue hire for workshops, training, rehearsals and performance.

BCC are implementing a new cultural strategy from April 2020. As part of the implementation of this strategy, they will be considering how best they support the Visual Arts sector in the City. Arts Council remain open to dialogue with the sector and BCC to assess the potential to support artists through sustainable studio provision.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 346/17-22, why the Scott Review is not relevant to the current issues and circumstances.

(AQW 2327/17-22)

Ms Hargey: A “regular internal governance review” of the Charity Commission was announced by the then Minister in August 2016. The review focussed on the approach taken at that time by the Department and the Charity Commission to good governance and regulation. While this review was not finalised in the absence of Ministers, the Department’s and Commission’s approaches have since been updated, taking account of up to date sectoral knowledge and best practice as it emerged here and in other jurisdictions.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 346/17-22, what the new governance arrangements are for the Charity Commission; and how this has been taken forward.

(AQW 2328/17-22)

Ms Hargey: New Partnership Agreements are being introduced with Arm’s Length Bodies (ALBs) following the Department of Finance (DoF) led Departmental Sponsorship of Arm’s Length Bodies Lab - Insight Report February 2018. These will replace the current Management Statement and Financial Memoranda for each ALB. My Department and the Charity Commission are currently collaborating on the new agreement which it is hoped will be finalised and agreed by DoF over the coming months. The Partnership Agreement will explain the overall governance framework within which Charity Commission operates, including the structure through which necessary assurances are provided to stakeholders, and the roles and responsibilities of partners.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Communities to outline the costs associated with the Scott Review into the Charity Commission.

(AQW 2329/17-22)

Ms Hargey: An internal governance review of the Charity Commission was taken forward by Departmental officials in 2016 to provide assurance. The Review was undertaken by two existing civil servants, in addition to their standard duties, over a period of three months. A sectoral expert provided external consultancy support at a cost of £1,232.64.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Communities what measures her Department is taking to address problem gambling.

(AQW 2332/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I recognise that the current legislation on gambling is outdated; it has not kept pace with industry and technological changes and does not contain adequate protections for vulnerable people.

A consultation on the “Regulation of Gambling in NI” was launched on 16 December 2019 and closed on 21 February 2020. The purpose of the consultation is to seek views on the appropriateness of the current law and to identify areas of gambling activity which should be included in any future legislation. My officials will analyse the responses received and I hope to announce the way forward by the summer.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities how many Personal Independence Payment appeal tribunal hearings have been deferred due to problems with medical evidence since the beginning of 2019.

(AQW 2334/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The current issue regarding the production of medical evidence to the tribunal arose in April 2019. When an appeal is lodged with the Appeals Service, following due process, in accordance with the regulations and established practice, the appeal is listed before a tribunal panel.

It is a matter for the panel to adjudicate on the appeal; the panel may request medical evidence from the appellant to support their appeal. This is a judicial decision. The tribunal panel, between April 2019 and December 2019, has adjourned 3,376 hearing, as a result of requests for medical evidence.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities how many Personal Independence Payment decisions have been changed or overturned as part of the mandatory consideration process, since the introduction of Welfare Reform.

(AQW 2335/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The most recent Personal Independence Payment statistics were published on 26 February 2020 and covered the period up to 30 November 2019. Since the introduction of PIP on 20 June 2016 to that date, 55,870 mandatory reconsideration decisions had been made with 11,230 decisions changed.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities to outline the initiatives her Department is taking to support food banks. (AQW 2349/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Access to adequate food is vital in a rights-based society. My stated ambition is that Executive partners should work together to tackle poverty, on the basis of objective need, thereby eradicating the need for food banks in our society.

My Department has no funding relationship with food banks and Jobs & Benefits offices and Make the Call Wraparound support do not formally refer people to them. However, the Make the Call Wraparound Service supplies leaflets to food banks on request, and these are then included in food packs which are distributed by the food bank to their users. If a person subsequently contacts Make the Call, a full Needs Assessment is completed and advice on benefits, supports and services is provided.

As a response to exploring new ways of addressing food poverty, as part of the Welfare Reform Mitigations package, a Social Supermarket Pilot Programme has been running since October 2017. A Social Supermarket operates a membership system and for a small weekly fee, provides both food and wraparound services to include access to advice across a range of areas including financial capability, debt management, training, skills and volunteering opportunities, all of which aim to provide a holistic approach to helping people to become more financially secure.

Five pilots are currently being supported and I am currently considering how the Social Supermarket Programme should be developed beyond this financial year.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities whether her Department has plans to fund upgrades to play parks in the Omagh area. (AQW 2351/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My department has no plans to fund upgrades to play parks in the Omagh area.

While responsibility for the maintenance, upgrading and accessibility of play parks rests with the owners, my Department has partnered with a number of local councils and supported some projects to provide or renovate play parks, through its Neighbourhood Renewal programme.

Records indicate that there is no current application or correspondence relating to any such proposals in the Omagh area. A project to upgrade a playpark could apply for funding from one of my department's capital funding programmes where it would be formally appraised.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Communities for an update on social housing maintenance schemes in Upper Bann over the next three years. (AQW 2353/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The 3 tables below set out the Housing Executive's maintenance schemes for the Upper Bann constituency over the next three years.

It should be noted that:

- These schemes are subject to the availability of finance, the necessary scheme approvals being obtained and the appropriate Contractor capacity being available to carry out the works.
- Some of the schemes will include dwellings that are not in the Upper Bann constituency.

Table 1

Scheme	20/21
External Cyclical Maintenance	Maryville Estate, Banbridge
	Lawrencetown/ Loughbrickland
	Brownstown / Clounagh, Portadown
	Corcrain, Portadown ECM
Doors	Hospital Estate, Lurgan
Roofs	Banbridge
Windows	South Area 20/21 Windows
	Banbridge Timber Retrofit Double-Glazing

Scheme	20/21
Bathroom/ Kitchen/ Rewire	Mourneview/Grey/Larkfield
	Killicomaine, Portadown
	Dromore/ Annaclone/Gilford
	Craigavon Revenue Kitchens
	Garvaghy Park / Churchhill Gdns, Portadown
Capital Works	Wellington Street, Lurgan
External Wall Insulation	(ERDF) Brownstown Estate No Fines
	(ERDF) Redmanville Estate No Fines
	(ERDF) Meadowbrook No Fines

Table 2

Scheme	21/22
External Cyclical Maintenance	Redmanville, Portadown
	Brownstown, Portadown
	Hospital Estate, Lurgan
	Portadown Central
	Enniskeen / Rural
	Garvaghy / Rural Portadown
	Bleary Area/ Lurgan
Windows	South Area
Bathroom/ Kitchen/ Rewire	South Area Revenue Kitchens
	Highfield/ Kenlis, Banbridge
	Donacloney/Dollingstown/Waringstown
	Taghnevan/Gilpinstown/Kilwilkie Kitchens
	Seagoe Park
Bathroom	Westland/Drumilly/Drumcairn
	Banbridge/Gilford/Dromore
Heating Capital Works	Banbridge Town (2005)
	Lurgan Mop Up (2005)
	Brownstown Estate, Portadown
	Lurgan 15 Year Replacement
	Portadown Estates (05/06)
	Churchill Park / Gardens (06) Portadown
	Banbridge 05/06
	Castleview Gilford / Seapatrick
	Parkside Flats, Portadown

Table 3

Scheme	22/23
External Cyclical Maintenance	Parkmore
	Wakehurst/ Waringstown
	Brookfield / Edenderry, Banbridge
	Moorefield, Banbridge
Bathroom	Churchill Estate, Portadown
Heating	Tullylish / Laurencetown
	Portadown Estates (06/07)
	Lurgan (2007)
	Aghagallon / Waringstown / Derrytrasna
	Highfield, Banbridge / Park Hill, Dromore
	Portadown Estates (07/08)

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities (i) to detail any underspend in the Cost of Work Allowance budget, including the total amount; (ii) what happened to the unspent money; and (iii) what steps her Department has taken to avoid future underspends.

(AQW 2372/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department was allocated £37m for Cost of Work Allowance including administrative costs in 2019-20. Cost of Work Allowance was not progressed in 2019-20 and the full £37m of ring-fenced underspend was surrendered to Department of Finance. Underspends arising in ring-fenced budget allocations cannot be used by the Department for any other purpose.

The Department has not bid for funding for Cost of Work Allowance in 2020-21, therefore no future Cost of Work Allowance underspends will arise.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities what measures her Department intends to implement to ensure extended or new mitigation underspends are avoided and the mitigations are claimed by those who require them.

(AQW 2373/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Department for Communities review into the welfare mitigation schemes, published in March 2019, explained the reasons for the underspend in the allocated budget for the welfare mitigation schemes. This was largely attributable to the later than expected introduction of some welfare reforms and the Cost of Work Allowance scheme not being introduced.

People are not required to make a claim to receive any of the current mitigation schemes and officials remain confident that payments have been made to those who are eligible and who have been affected by the applicable welfare reforms.

Going forward it is anticipated that the availability of evidence on the delivery of the welfare mitigation schemes since 2016 will assist in forecasting future expenditure. My Department will also continue to closely monitor expenditure on all mitigation measures.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities what discussion she or her departmental officials have had with the Minister of Finance or his departmental officials to ring-fence any mitigation underspends to help address poverty.

(AQW 2374/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department's funding for Fresh Start Welfare Mitigation is ring-fenced. Underspends arising in ring-fenced budget allocations cannot be used by the Department for any other purpose and must be surrendered to Department of Finance.

Departmental officials continue to liaise with Department of Finance officials as we seek to secure funding for 2020-21 to continue to provide financial support for claimants who have been impacted by welfare reforms.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities how she intends to involve the Committee for Communities and stakeholders in further developing new or extended mitigations to welfare reform.

(AQW 2375/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I am fully committed to delivering the review of the welfare mitigation measures as set out in the New Decade, New Approach Deal. I have instructed officials to develop proposals for the format of the review and I will make an announcement on this in due course after consultation with Executive colleagues and the Committee for Communities.

Since becoming Minister for Communities one of my priorities has been to engage with key stakeholders, including the Human Rights Commission and representatives of the Cliff Edge Coalition, on the future of the welfare mitigations. This programme of engagement has been invaluable in helping to identify many of the possible elements of a new package of mitigation measures.

While details of the review of the welfare mitigation measures has not yet been finalised I am committed to continued engagement with a wide range of stakeholders with an interest in social security matters. I will, of course, continue to engage fully with the Committee for Communities as the review progresses.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities what discussions she or her departmental officials have had with the Minister for Finance, his departmental officials or HM Treasury regarding a resolution to the income tax liability in relation to the cost of work allowance.

(AQW 2376/17-22)

Ms Hargey: As set out in the Review of the Welfare Mitigation Schemes, published in March 2019, HMRC notified the Department for Communities that payments made under the proposed Cost of Work Allowance scheme would be treated as taxable income.

As the Cost of Work Allowance is not one of the existing welfare mitigation schemes it will not be extended after 31 March 2020. On this basis my officials have not held any discussions on the taxable status of the Cost of Work Allowance scheme with DoF or Treasury.

As part of the review of the future provision of welfare mitigation measures the introduction of a scheme to provide financial support for people in working poverty may be considered. If such a scheme is proposed my officials will engage with the Department of Finance and, as appropriate, HMRC to clarify the taxable status of any payments at the earliest opportunity.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Communities whether she will explore the possibility of increasing the availability of the Lost Lives book in local libraries.

(AQW 2388/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department has allocated Libraries NI additional in year funding of £3.472m to buy additional book stock. This brings Libraries NI's total spend on book stock in 2019/20 to £4.372m.

Libraries NI has informed me that it has 21 copies of the Lost Lives book in stock and is keen to purchase additional copies as the book is in high demand. However, the book is currently out of print so this has not been possible. Libraries NI checks this regularly with its suppliers and will continue to do so.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities how many people are in receipt of a Personal Independence Payment.

(AQW 2397/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The most recent Personal Independence Payment statistics were published on 26 February 2020 and covered the period up to 30 November 2019. At that date, 141,990 people were in receipt of Personal Independence Payment.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Communities what plans she has to develop legislation to enforce responsible gambling, including the timescale, with particular regard to restricting the use of fixed odds betting terminals.

(AQW 2440/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The current legislation on gambling is outdated; it has not kept pace with industry and technological changes and does not contain adequate protections for vulnerable people, such as social responsibility requirements for gambling operators.

A consultation on the "Regulation of Gambling in NI" was launched on 16 December 2019 and closed on 21 February 2020. The purpose of the consultation is to seek views on the appropriateness of the current law and to identify areas of gambling activity which should be included in any future legislation. The operation of gaming machines, including fixed odds betting terminals, was part of the consultation. My officials will analyse the responses received and I hope to announce the way forward by the summer.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Communities what discussions she has had with the Minister of Health concerning support for people suffering with gambling addiction.

(AQW 2441/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I have not discussed this issue with the Minister of Health but I would refer the Member for South Belfast to my answer to AQW 458/17-22

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister for Communities whether consultation will take place with local clubs about their needs in respect of a Sub-Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer; and will provision of modern training facilities be included as an important element of the revised programme.

(AQW 2443/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I am fully committed to delivering the Sub Regional Stadia Programme and ensuring that it meets the current and future needs of football.

Engagement has begun with key stakeholders. When this initial phase of engagement has completed, I will consider how further engagement should be taken forward including how we will seek the views of the wider football family including local clubs.

In terms of whether the provision of modern training facilities will be included in the Sub Regional Stadia Programme, decisions have not yet been made on financial allocations within the programme. However, the process for allocating funding must be fair, open and transparent and take an evidenced-based approach to the demonstration of need for investment.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities (i) what was the total staffing compliment of the former 26 local councils in their last full year of operation; and (ii) what is the total staffing compliment of the current 11 local councils.

(AQW 2447/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The total staffing complement is taken as meaning the average number of full-time equivalent (FTE) employees as disclosed in the annual accounts for councils.

- (i) The total average number of employees (FTE) for 26 councils in 2014-15 was 9,790.
- (ii) The total average number of employees (FTE) in 2018-19 was 10,136.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for Communities what funding is available for music, arts, food and cultural festivals from her Department and its arm's-length bodies; and to itemise the funding by festival that has been made available through these streams in the last five years.

(AQW 2466/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department makes available the Belfast City Centre Events Grant, which is used to promote footfall in Belfast City Centre. Details of itemised festivals are at Annex A.

My Department also provides funding to the 11 councils for the Community Festivals Fund. Councils provide match funding to this and administer the scheme on our behalf. Approximately 400-500 festivals are funded during each financial year; details of these can be found on the Government Funding Database <https://govfundingpublic.nics.gov.uk/>

The Arts Council has provided funding to festivals through the following programmes - Annual Funding Programme, Arts Development Fund, Arts & Older People, City of Culture Legacy, Equipment, Intercultural Arts Programme, Lottery Project Funding and the Small Grants Programme. The Small Grants Programme is the only programme currently open. Details of itemised festivals are at Annex B.

NI Screen provides funding to festivals as part of their film and exhibition funding. Details of itemised festivals are at Annex C.

Belfast City Centre Events Grant

Annex A

Event	Applicant	2015/16 £	2016/17 £	2017/18 £	2018/19 £	2019/20 £	Total £
Belfast Photo Festival	Belfast Photo Festival	7,716.00	2,000.00			5,252.50	14,968.50
Tradfest	Belfast Summer School of Traditional Music					6,985.00	6,985.00
Belfast International Arts Festival	Belfast International Arts Festival					15,000.00	15,000.00
Belfast Children's Art Festival	Young at Art	9,000.00				12,000.00	21,000.00
Culture Night	Cathedral Quarter Trust	10,000.00	9,000.00				19,000.00
Culture Day	Cathedral Quarter Trust					21,682.23	21,682.23
Outburst Arts Festival	Outburst Arts Festival	3,500.00	3,250.00			3,840.00	10,590.00
Winter Circus	Tumble Circus					7,506.00	7,506.00

Event	Applicant	2015/16 £	2016/17 £	2017/18 £	2018/19 £	2019/20 £	Total £
Black Box and Green Room Programme	Black Box and Green Room	6,400.00	5,800.00			5,700.00	17,900.00
Cinemagic	Cinemagic		3,000.00			3,000.00	6,000.00
Out to Lunch	Cathedral Quarter Arts	8,500.00	8,000.00			8,000.00	24,500.00
Sound of Belfast	OH Yeah Music Centre					5,000.00	5,000.00
Big Design Day Out	Blick Studios					1,888.00	1,888.00
Belfast Restaurant Week: Taste The City	Destination CQ BID Ltd					4,700.00	4,700.00
Walkway & River Halloween Spooktacular	Lower Ormeau Resident's Action Group					3,926.40	3,926.40
NI Science Festival	Science Festivals NI	7,500.00	7,500.00			8,566.00	23,566.00
Belfast Lumiere	Kaleidoscope					7,000.00	7,000.00
Moving on Music	Moving on Music Festival		8,307.00				8,307.00
Bryson LaganSports	Annual Programme of Events		7,280.00				7,280.00
Macmillan	Zipline		840.00				840.00
Festival of Fools	Festival of Fools 2016		8,653.00				8,653.00
Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival (CQAF)	CQAF in Custom House Square	10,000.00	9,000.00				19,000.00
Tiny Life	Dragon Boat Race		2,160.00				2,160.00
Macmillan	Dragonboat Race	2,110.00	2,110.00				4,220.00
Queen's University Belfast	University Boat Race	4,319.00	4,040.00				8,359.00
Friends of the Cancer Centre	Dragon Boat Race	2,160.00	2,160.00				4,320.00
Irish Custom Bike Club	Custom Bike Show	1,764.00	1,860.00				3,624.00
Community Multisport	Belfast Alive 2016		3,700.00				3,700.00
Belfast Pride	Pride Day	6,000.00	5,400.00				11,400.00
EastSide Arts Partnership	Woodstock Rhythm & Blues	3,300.00	2,500.00				5,800.00
Daddy Promotions	Ultimate Strongman		4,500.00				4,500.00
Folktown CIC	Moondance Festival		3,570.00				3,570.00
Community Arts Partnership	Hit the North 2016		2,000.00				2,000.00
Greenshoot Productions	The People of Gallagher Street		5,026.00				5,026.00
Belfast Healthy Cities	KidsSpace	1,500.00	1,500.00				3,000.00

Event	Applicant	2015/16 £	2016/17 £	2017/18 £	2018/19 £	2019/20 £	Total £
Belly Laughs	Belfast International Comedy Festival	4,000.00	4,000.00				8,000.00
Belfast Arts Festival	Belfast Arts Festival		6,750.00				6,750.00
Place	Architecture Festival 2016		2,040.00				2,040.00
Connor Diocese Col	St. Patricks Experience		1,500.00				1,500.00
Festival of fools	Festival of Fools	10,000.00					10,000.00
Belfast Community Circus School	30th Anniversary	6,500.00					6,500.00
Bryson Lagansports	Annual programme of events	8,000.00					8,000.00
Moving on Music	Brilliant corners & City Centre Event	9,000.00					9,000.00
Cancer Focus	Dragon Boat Race	2,160.00					2,160.00
Panarts	Nashville songwriters festival and events	8,000.00					8,000.00
Beat Carnival	Beat Carnival	6,000.00					6,000.00
Festival of Fools	Sunday Treats	9,000.00					9,000.00
Place	Open House Belfast	2,200.00					2,200.00
Belfast Ultimate Strongman	Belfast Ultimate Strongman Giant Weekend 2015	5,000.00					5,000.00
Community Arts Partnership	Community Arts Partnership	2,000.00					2,000.00
NI Hospice	Midnight Walk	2,577.00					2,577.00
Belfast Festival	Belfast Festival	7,500.00					7,500.00
ArtsEkta	Nine Nights	5,500.00					5,500.00
Ulster University	Festival of Art & Design	2,000.00					2,000.00
Comic Relief	Sport Relief - regional games	7,000.00					7,000.00
	Totals	£180,206.00	£127,446.00			£120,046.13	£427,698.13

Arts Council of NI Festival Funding

Annex B

Organisation Name	Programme	Project Title / Festival	Finance Year	Grant Amount
The Nerve Centre	Equipment	Music Festivals, Take Over & Innovation	2018-2019	12743.00
The Nerve Centre	Equipment	Music Festivals, Take Over, Outreach Album Creation & Studio Upgrade	2019-2020	9203.00
An Gaeláras	City of Culture - Legacy	Derry International Music Festival	2015-2016	27000.00
Artists Moving Image Northern Ireland CIC	Small Grants Programme	Artists' Moving Image Festival	2016-2017	6720.00

Organisation Name	Programme	Project Title / Festival	Finance Year	Grant Amount
Ballymoney Drama Festival	Small Grants Programme	Ballymoney Drama Festival	2015-2016	1450.00
Bangor International Choral Festival	Small Grants Programme	Bangor International Choral Festival 2016	2015-2016	2900.00
Bangor International Choral Festival	Small Grants Programme	Bangor International Choral Festival	2017-2018	2200.00
Belfast International Arts Festival	Annual Funding Programme	Belfast Festival 2015	2015-2016	189150.00
Belfast International Comedy Festival	Small Grants Programme	Belfast Comedy Festival 2016	2016-2017	4200.00
Belfast Photo Festival	Lottery - Project Funding	Belfast Photo Festival	2016-2017	30000.00
Belfast Photo Festival	Lottery - Project Funding	Belfast Photo Festival Youth Edition 2017/18	2017-2018	35553.00
Belfast Photo Festival	Lottery - Project Funding	Belfast Photo Festival 2018/19	2018-2019	30000.00
Big Telly Theatre Company	Arts and Older People	GlenFest	2016-2017	7500.00
Cahoots NI Ltd	Lottery - Project Funding	In July 2016 ON THE EDGE the World Festival of Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) will take place in Birmingham. TYA-NI is represented by 3 local companies, Cahoots NI, Replay Theatre and Young at Art, playing a central role.	2016-2017	19500.00
Cairncastle Ulster Scots Cultural Group	Small Grants Programme	Cairncastle Annual Ulster Scots Bluegrass & Folk Festival	2015-2016	7203.00
Cairncastle Ulster Scots Cultural Group	Small Grants Programme	Cairncastle Annual Ulster Scots Bluegrass & Folk Festival	2017-2018	5569.00
Cairncastle Ulster Scots Cultural Group	Small Grants Programme	Cairncastle Annual Ulster Scots Bluegrass & Folk Festival	2018-2019	4000.00
Cairncastle Ulster Scots Cultural Group	Small Grants Programme	Cairncastle Annual Ulster Scots Bluegrass & Folk Festival	2019-2020	4000.00
Camerata Ireland	Equipment	New Equipment for the Clondeboy Festival	2018-2019	4680.00
Celtronic Derry Ltd	Small Grants Programme	Celtronic 2016 - Ireland's leading electronic music festival	2016-2017	5000.00
Celtronic Derry Ltd	Small Grants Programme	Celtronic 2018 - Ireland's leading electronic music festival	2018-2019	2395.00
Charles Wood Festival of Music and Summer School	Small Grants Programme	The Charles Wood Festival of Music and Summer School	2015-2016	5000.00
Charles Wood Festival of Music and Summer School	Small Grants Programme	The Charles Wood Festival of Music and Summer School	2016-2017	7500.00
Charles Wood Festival of Music and Summer School	Small Grants Programme	The Charles Wood Festival of Music and Summer School	2017-2018	5000.00
Charles Wood Festival of Music and Summer School	Small Grants Programme	Charles Wood Festival of Music and Summer School Song Competition	2019-2020	4240.00
Charles Wood Festival of Music and Summer School	Small Grants Programme	Charles Wood Festival of Music and Summer School	2019-2020	5000.00

Organisation Name	Programme	Project Title / Festival	Finance Year	Grant Amount
City of Derry Guitar Festival	Small Grants Programme	City of Derry Guitar Festival 2015	2015-2016	6970.00
City of Derry Guitar Festival	Small Grants Programme	City of Derry Guitar Festival 2016	2016-2017	7000.00
City of Derry Guitar Festival	Small Grants Programme	City of Derry Guitar Festival 2017	2017-2018	7030.00
Walled City Music Trust	Lottery - Project Funding	City of Derry International Choral Festival	2016-2017	37000.00
City of Derry International Choir Festival	Lottery - Project Funding	2017 International Choir Festival	2017-2018	44000.00
City of Derry International Choir Festival	Lottery - Project Funding	International Choir Festival	2018-2019	30000.00
City of Derry International Choir Festival	Lottery - Project Funding	International Choir Festival	2019-2020	30000.00
Dance Resource Base (NI) Ltd	Arts Development Fund	Emergence: Contemporary Dance Mini-fest	2019-2020	11000.00
Dublin City Council	Lottery - Project Funding	The Dublin Book Festival	2015-2016	14100.00
Dublin UNESCO City of Literature (on behalf of Dublin Book Festival)	Lottery - Project Funding	Programming events for the Dublin Book Festival	2016-2017	14100.00
Dublin UNESCO City of Literature (on behalf of Dublin Book Festival)	Lottery - Project Funding	The Dublin Book Festival	2017-2018	15600.00
Dublin Book Festival	Small Grants Programme	Dublin Book Festival 2019 - selected events within the programme to feature Northern Irish authors	2019-2020	3110.00
Echo Echo Dance Theatre Company	City of Culture - Legacy	Echo Echo Festival of Dance and Movement	2015-2016	26950.00
Electric Circus Music Theatre	Small Grants Programme	Music, performance and improvisation festival	2019-2020	1600.00
Enniskillen ComicFest	Small Grants Programme	Enniskillen Comic Fest	2015-2016	5820.00
Enniskillen ComicFest	Small Grants Programme	Enniskillen ComicFest	2016-2017	5000.00
Enniskillen ComicFest	Small Grants Programme	Enniskillen ComicFest	2017-2018	4000.00
Enniskillen ComicFest	Small Grants Programme	Enniskillen ComicFest	2018-2019	2400.00
Enniskillen ComicFest	Small Grants Programme	Enniskillen ComicFest	2019-2020	2700.00
Fermanagh Arts Festival	Small Grants Programme	FLive 2018 Fermanagh Live Arts Festival	2018-2019	3180.00
Festival of Fools	Lottery - Project Funding	2018 Festival of Fools	2017-2018	47245.00
Festival of Fools	Equipment	Festival Capital Support Programme.	2018-2019	3046.00
Festival of Fools	Small Grants Programme	Festival of Fools	2019-2020	10000.00

Organisation Name	Programme	Project Title / Festival	Finance Year	Grant Amount
Friends of Columbanus	Small Grants Programme	Columbanus 1400 Festival	2015-2016	3272.00
Friends of Portaferry Presbyterian Church	Small Grants Programme	Gala Festival to Celebrate Opening of Portico	2015-2016	9480.00
Friends of Portaferry Presbyterian Church	Small Grants Programme	Festivards 2017	2017-2018	7400.00
Friends of Portaferry Presbyterian Church	Small Grants Programme	The Tallis Scholars in Festiv'Ards 2018	2018-2019	5000.00
Guildhall Press	Lottery - Project Funding	3 new fiction titles and Writers Festival	2015-2016	24650.00
Hollywood Harmony	Small Grants Programme	Hollywood Harmony Festival	2017-2018	500.00
Hollywood Music Festival	Small Grants Programme	Hollywood Music Festival	2015-2016	2000.00
Household Belfast C.I.C.	Small Grants Programme	The Arbor film screenings by Clio Barnard, a collaboration between Artangel, Household and Belfast Film Festival	2017-2018	4795.00
Imagine Belfast	Lottery - Project Funding	Belfast International Comedy Festival 2015/16	2015-2016	4160.00
Imagine Belfast	Small Grants Programme	Belfast Comedy Festival 2016	2016-2017	4200.00
Imagine Belfast	Small Grants Programme	Belfast Comedy Festival 2017	2017-2018	3750.00
Institute of Cultural Studies	Small Grants Programme	Rostrevor Choral Festival	2016-2017	5285.00
Irish Culture Bay Area	Arts Development Fund	Los Gatos Festival	2017-2018	5000.00
Irish Culture Bay Area	Arts Development Fund	Los Gatos Festival	2018-2019	7250.00
Karma Kalakendram	Small Grants Programme	Karma Fest- The Swathi Thirunnal Project	2017-2018	700.00
Keady Arts and Heritage Society	Small Grants Programme	Keady Flute Fest	2017-2018	7516.00
Kilbroney Community Association	Small Grants Programme	Rostrevor Literary Festival	2016-2017	2461.00
Kilbroney Community Association	Small Grants Programme	Rostrevor Literary Festival	2016-2017	2400.00
Kilbroney Community Association	Small Grants Programme	Rostrevor Literary Festival	2019-2020	2680.00
Larne Drama Festival	Small Grants Programme	Larne Drama Festival 2016	2015-2016	1250.00
Linen Hall Library	Lottery - Project Funding	The programme offered at the Library provides inclusive events and opportunities for participation by local communities - through engagement in festivals, events, performances, interactive classes and workshops.	2016-2017	25000.00

Organisation Name	Programme	Project Title / Festival	Finance Year	Grant Amount
Mid Ulster Festival of Amateur Drama	Small Grants Programme	Mid Ulster Festival of Amateur Drama 2018	2017-2018	2500.00
Mid Ulster Festival of Amateur Drama	Small Grants Programme	Mid-Ulster Festival of Amateur Drama 2019	2018-2019	2270.00
Mid-Ulster Festival of Amateur Drama Committee	Small Grants Programme	Mid-Ulster Festival of Amateur Drama 2020	2019-2020	1350.00
Newry Chamber Music CIC	Small Grants Programme	Midsummer Festival 2015	2015-2016	6338.00
Newry Drama Festival	Small Grants Programme	Newry Drama Festival 2016	2015-2016	1500.00
Newry Drama Festival	Small Grants Programme	Newry Drama Festival 2018	2017-2018	2000.00
Northern Ireland Mental Health Arts and Film Festival (NIMHAFF)	Small Grants Programme	NI Mental Health Arts Festival 2018 - Core artistic programme	2017-2018	5000.00
OBon on the Foyle Festival Group	Intercultural Arts Programme	O-Bon Japanese Cultural Outreach Programme & Festival	2016-2017	15000.00
Omagh Arts Committee	Small Grants Programme	The Omagh Literary Festival, Honouring Benedict Kiely	2018-2019	3718.00
Omagh Arts Committee	Small Grants Programme	Omagh Literary Festival, honouring Benedict Kiely	2019-2020	3718.00
Omagh Jazz and Big Band Festival	Small Grants Programme	Omagh Jazz and Big Band Festival 2016	2015-2016	2200.00
Open House Festival	Equipment	Open House Festival equipment	2018-2019	2640.00
Outburst Arts Festival	Lottery - Project Funding	10th Anniversary of Outburst Queer Arts Festival	2016-2017	40000.00
Outburst Arts Festival	Lottery - Project Funding	11th Outburst Queer Arts Festival	2017-2018	40000.00
Outburst Arts Festival	Lottery - Project Funding	Outburst Queer Arts Festival	2018-2019	35000.00
Outburst Arts Festival	Lottery - Project Funding	Outburst Queer Arts Festival	2019-2020	35000.00
Project St Patrick	Small Grants Programme	Fermanagh St Patrick's Day Festival 2016	2015-2016	5155.00
Roe Valley Folk Club and Festival	Small Grants Programme	Roe Valley Folk Club Workshops, Tutorials, Events and Festival	2016-2017	3170.00
Sole Purpose Productions	Arts Development Fund	21 Years Festival	2017-2018	2000.00
Stendhal Festival Ltd	Small Grants Programme	Family Programme - Stendhal Festival 2017	2017-2018	5770.00
Stendhal Festival Ltd	Small Grants Programme	ArtAbyss Children's Festival: sustaining rural arts provision for the future	2019-2020	4350.00
Storytellers of Ireland/Aos Sceal Eireann	Small Grants Programme	FEST Storytelling in Borderlands -- a gathering of storytellers from Europe to participate in Festival and Conference events in Co. Armagh.	2016-2017	8151.00
The Castlewella Soma Group	Small Grants Programme	The Soma Festival	2016-2017	5000.00

Organisation Name	Programme	Project Title / Festival	Finance Year	Grant Amount
The Castlewellan Soma Group	Small Grants Programme	The Soma Festival	2017-2018	5000.00
The Castlewellan Soma Group	Small Grants Programme	The Soma Festival	2018-2019	5000.00
The Charles Wood Summer School	Small Grants Programme	The Charles Wood Festival of Music and Summer School	2015-2016	5000.00
The Charles Wood Summer School	Small Grants Programme	The Charles Wood Festival of Music and Summer School	2016-2017	7500.00
The Shakespeare Schools Festival	Small Grants Programme	Shakespeare Schools Festival 2015 - Northern Ireland	2015-2016	4798.00
The Waterways Community	Small Grants Programme	Waterways Storymaking Festival 2019/20 Touring Exhibition and Printed Anthology	2019-2020	2250.00
Tommy Makem Festival of Traditional and Folk Song	Small Grants Programme	Tommy Makem Festival of Traditional and Folk Song	2015-2016	4650.00
Tommy Makem Festival of Traditional and Folk Song	Small Grants Programme	TOMMY MAKEM FESTIVAL OF TRADITIONAL AND FOLK SONG	2017-2018	4250.00
Walled City Music Trust	Small Grants Programme	The Sixteen -- 'Choral Pilgrimage' guest concert at City of Derry International Choral Festival 2016	2016-2017	7000.00
Walled City Music Trust	Small Grants Programme	Some Day, a new music and multi-media commission for Trio Festivale and Walled City Music Festival by composer Christopher Norby.	2019-2020	5000.00
Waterside Theatre Company Ltd	City of Culture - Legacy	Develop Children's Festivals and Outreach Programme	2015-2016	13600.00
Wilgar Community Forum Association	Small Grants Programme	Wilgar Rock and Blues Festival	2015-2016	3550.00
Wilgar Community Forum Association	Small Grants Programme	Wilgar Rock and Blues Festival	2016-2017	2950.00
Young at Art Ltd	Arts Development Fund	Belfast Children's Festival	2017-2018	5000.00

NI Screen Festival Funding**Annex C**

	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
Cinemagic	38,000	40,000	40,000	40,000	40,000
Foyle Film Festival	85,500	90,000	90,000	90,000	90,000
Belfast Film Festival	76,000	80,000	80,000	80,000	80,000
Additional					
BFF	-	40,000	20,470	-	-
FFF	-	35,500	23,414	-	
Doc Festivals				37,420	50,000
	199,500	285,500	253,884	247,420	260,000

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities what cash reserves each housing association currently holds.
(AQW 2475/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The cash reserves for each Registered Housing Association have been extracted from the 2018-19 certified accounts and are shown in the table below:

Registered Housing Association Cash Reserves

Grove Community Housing Association	£1,555,805
St Matthew's Housing Association	£1,764,353
Clanmil	£7,164,679
Connswater Homes	£2,984,373
Radius	£4,546,352
Covenanter Residential Association Ltd	£117,116
Apex Housing Association	£7,252,840
Craigowen Housing Association	£2,459,499
Ark Housing	£715,625
Abbeyfield & Wesley	£2,182,585
Alpha Housing	£4,049,783
Triangle Housing Association	£2,289,653
Rural Housing Association	£507,847
Newington Housing Association	£494,362
Choice	£14,993,000 ¹
Habinteg	£7,042,347
North Belfast Housing Association	£2,395,636
South Ulster Housing Association	£1,300,033
Co-ownership Housing	£31,723,828
Woodvale & Shankill Housing Association	£1,488,901 ²

- 1 Figures rounded to the nearest thousand in the financial statements
- 2 Figure obtained from audited financial statements as at 31 March 2017

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities whether she plans to provide mitigations for households that are affected by the Universal Credit two child limit.

(AQW 2504/17-22)

Ms Hargey: As Minister for Communities one of my priorities is to review the welfare mitigation measures committed to in the New Decade, New Approach deal. The purpose of this review is to identify and make recommendations on the provision of future welfare mitigations and I would expect that consideration will be given to the impact of the two child limit on social security benefits and tax credits.

I have instructed officials to develop proposals for the format of the review and I will make an announcement on this in due course after consultation with Executive colleagues and the Committee for Communities. Any proposals for further mitigations will be assessed in terms of affordability considered against my Department's equality and human rights responsibilities.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail the policy intent behind social housing multi-offers.

(AQW 2519/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Multiple offers can be used by social landlords to speed up the letting process for difficult-to-let properties and to minimise the time they remain vacant, thus making best use of available stock.

Social housing is allocated by direct lettings in line with the rules of the Housing Selection Scheme. This means that, as a general rule, when a home becomes available, it is normally offered to the highest pointed relevant applicant who is on the waiting list for that Common Landlord Area. Homes can sometimes be left empty for longer than needed when that applicant refuses the offer, and the property must be offered to the next highest-pointed relevant applicant in turn, until an offer is accepted.

Currently, social landlords can decide to let properties by multiple offers if a property is difficult to let. Difficult-to-let properties are those that are void for at least four weeks: this could be due to, for example, the property's condition, its size, its history or its location. Landlords can offer a property to a maximum of ten applicants at the same time. The property is then offered to the applicant with the most points who expresses an interest.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities how she will respond to social housing need in Rathcoole.
(AQW 2522/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Within the Rathcoole area, 28 social housing units have been completed to date in 2019/20, 24 units are currently under construction and a further 25 units are programmed to start in 2021/22. (Details attached)

In addition to these schemes already included in the published SHDP, Apex Housing has been nominated to take forward a scheme at the former Newtownabbey High School site to include 80 new social housing units. South Ulster Housing Association is also programmed to start a 67 unit social housing scheme in 2020/21 at Knockenagh Avenue, Rathfern. These schemes will help address social housing need in the wider Rathcoole area.

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.

New Decade, New Approach commits the NI Executive to "enhanced investment in new social home starts".

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Need Group	Units	Status	Start Year	Completion Year
Choice	Northern Trust Resettlement, Abbots Road, Newtownabbey	N'abbey	New Build	Mental Health	24	Completed	2015/16	2019/20
Connswater	33 Dunanney Avenue	N'abbey	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	1	Completed	2018/19	2019/20
Connswater	24 Braden Glen	N'abbey	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	1	Completed	2018/19	2019/20
Connswater	50 Braden Heights	N'abbey	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	1	Completed	2018/19	2019/20
Connswater	142 East Way	N'abbey	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	1	Completed	2019/20	2019/20
Apex	Rathmullan Drive	Rathcoole	New Build	Active Elderly	24	Under Construction	2017/18	2020/21

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Communities to outline the total cost incurred by the Local Government Commissioner for Standards to manage complaints made since 2015.

(AQW 2541/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Local Government Commissioner for Standards (the Commissioner) operates independently of my Department. My Department does not hold all the details of how much expenditure the Commissioner incurs.

However, the Commissioner publishes an Annual Report each year that contains funding and expenditure information, and this is available on the Commissioner's website at:

<https://nipso.org.uk/site/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/NILGCS-Annual-Report-2017-18.pdf>

The amounts of council funding that were notified to my Department by the Commissioner in each year since 2015 are set out below:

(£)

2015/2016	2016/2017	2017/2018	2018/2019
227,795	271,000	273,000	441,000

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Communities to outline the average cost to the Local Government Commissioner for Standards of investigating a complaint.

(AQW 2542/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I propose to answer AQWs 2542/17-22, 2543/17-22, 2544/17-22 and 2545/17-22 together.

The Local Government Act 2014, which makes provisions for the ethical standards framework for district councillors, gives the Local Government Commissioner for Standards (the Commissioner) authority to investigate and adjudicate on allegations that

councillors have breached the Local Government Code of Conduct for Councillors. All complaints regarding alleged breaches of the Code must be sent to the Commissioner's Office for consideration.

As the Commissioner operates independently, the Department does not hold information on the costs to investigate a complaint or the staffing of the Commissioner's Office. For the same reason the Department does not hold information on the time taken for investigations or the number of ethical standards complaints that have been received by the Commissioner's Office.

However, the Commissioner publishes a Report each year that contains information relevant to most of your questions, and this is available on the Commissioner's website.

<https://nipso.org.uk/site/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/NILGCS-Annual-Report-2017-18.pdf>

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Communities how many staff are employed in the office of the Local Government Commissioner for Standards.
(AQW 2543/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I propose to answer AQWs 2542/17-22, 2543/17-22, 2544/17-22 and 2545/17-22 together.

The Local Government Act 2014, which makes provisions for the ethical standards framework for district councillors, gives the Local Government Commissioner for Standards (the Commissioner) authority to investigate and adjudicate on allegations that councillors have breached the Local Government Code of Conduct for Councillors. All complaints regarding alleged breaches of the Code must be sent to the Commissioner's Office for consideration.

As the Commissioner operates independently, the Department does not hold information on the costs to investigate a complaint or the staffing of the Commissioner's Office. For the same reason the Department does not hold information on the time taken for investigations or the number of ethical standards complaints that have been received by the Commissioner's Office.

However, the Commissioner publishes a Report each year that contains information relevant to most of your questions, and this is available on the Commissioner's website.

<https://nipso.org.uk/site/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/NILGCS-Annual-Report-2017-18.pdf>

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Communities to outline the average time taken for an investigation by the Local Government Commissioner for Standards into a complaint.
(AQW 2544/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I propose to answer AQWs 2542/17-22, 2543/17-22, 2544/17-22 and 2545/17-22 together.

The Local Government Act 2014, which makes provisions for the ethical standards framework for district councillors, gives the Local Government Commissioner for Standards (the Commissioner) authority to investigate and adjudicate on allegations that councillors have breached the Local Government Code of Conduct for Councillors. All complaints regarding alleged breaches of the Code must be sent to the Commissioner's Office for consideration.

As the Commissioner operates independently, the Department does not hold information on the costs to investigate a complaint or the staffing of the Commissioner's Office. For the same reason the Department does not hold information on the time taken for investigations or the number of ethical standards complaints that have been received by the Commissioner's Office.

However, the Commissioner publishes a Report each year that contains information relevant to most of your questions, and this is available on the Commissioner's website.

<https://nipso.org.uk/site/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/NILGCS-Annual-Report-2017-18.pdf>

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of complaints investigated by the Local Government Commissioner for Standards in each year since 2015.
(AQW 2545/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I propose to answer AQWs 2542/17-22, 2543/17-22, 2544/17-22 and 2545/17-22 together.

The Local Government Act 2014, which makes provisions for the ethical standards framework for district councillors, gives the Local Government Commissioner for Standards (the Commissioner) authority to investigate and adjudicate on allegations that councillors have breached the Local Government Code of Conduct for Councillors. All complaints regarding alleged breaches of the Code must be sent to the Commissioner's Office for consideration.

As the Commissioner operates independently, the Department does not hold information on the costs to investigate a complaint or the staffing of the Commissioner's Office. For the same reason the Department does not hold information on the time taken for investigations or the number of ethical standards complaints that have been received by the Commissioner's Office.

However, the Commissioner publishes a Report each year that contains information relevant to most of your questions, and this is available on the Commissioner's website.

<https://nipso.org.uk/site/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/NILGCS-Annual-Report-2017-18.pdf>

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities to outline her plans to increase public housing to meet the growing need.
(AQW 2553/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I am currently considering the detailed plans for the 2020/21-2022/23 Social Housing Development Programme that have been submitted to me by the Housing Executive. Delivery of these plans will be significantly determined by future decisions on budget.

New Decade, New Approach, committed the Executive to “enhance investment in new social and affordable home starts”. In 19/20, £146m has been invested against a target of 1850 starts.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 1108/17-22, to detail the terms of reference of the Transportation Study for Newcastle.

(AQW 2588/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Newcastle Transportation Study covers the area at Gyratory, Donard St, Byransford Ave, Shimna Rd, Main Street and to investigate the increase use of Donard Street. Survey records already exist for the B180 Bryansford Road, Main street Newcastle and U60207 Donard Street and the roundabout at A2 Dundrum Road/Castlewellan Road/Dunwellan Park Access. The study involves:

- 1 Construction and validation of a weekday peak and Saturday peak new Base Model;
- 2 Modelling and testing of proposed design options (2 x options) for traffic forecast scenarios;
- 3 Preliminary design layouts of proposals; and
- 4 Reporting and presentation of study area and comparing the design options / network performance.

This additional survey will therefore provide a comprehensive and detailed transport assessment for the Town Centre.

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the impact of mental health issues on unemployment levels; and what action is being taken to provide evidence-based psychological support to people who experience mental health difficulties to successfully return to work.

(AQW 2589/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I am fully aware of the prevalence of poor mental health in our community and accept that this condition poses a barrier to work for a significant number of our people. Whilst my Department does not have a remit for providing psychological therapy, we are fully committed to supporting people with poor mental health to progress towards, move into and stay in work.

Through our employability programmes my Department provides a range of supports for people with poor mental health. Our Steps 2 Success programme offers mindfulness training, stress management and mood matters training among other interventions in partnership with Action Mental Health, Aware NI and Inspire Wellbeing. The Department also works in collaboration with the Department of Health to deliver the Condition Management Programme, (CMP). CMP is a voluntary programme facilitated by healthcare professionals including Occupational Therapists and Mental Health Nurses using evidence based principles of practice. The aim of the programme is to help participants manage their health to enable them to progress towards, move into and stay in work.

My Department has attached Work Psychologists to each our of Jobs and Benefits Offices to develop the capability and confidence of our Work Coaches to support our people with mental ill-health and other health related support needs.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities (i) for an update on the timescale to bring forward the sexual orientation strategy; (ii) whether she has any plans to bring forward legislation as part the strategy; and (iii) what financial resources she will allocate to the strategy.

(AQW 2618/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I am committed to developing a Sexual Orientation Strategy to address any barriers or inequalities related to Sexual Orientation and to fulfil the commitments in New Decade, New Approach and the Executive’s Programme for Government. My officials will soon commence work with representatives from the LGBT sector and other key stakeholders, including officials from other Departments, to develop a Strategy. As stated in New Decade, New Approach, the Executive is committed to publishing within three months of restoration a comprehensive timetable for the development and delivery of the Strategies necessary to achieve outcomes in a Programme for Government. A draft timetable for development and delivery of the Sexual Orientation Strategy will be put to the Executive in advance of the three-month deadline.

The principles and practice of citizen and community engagement, co-design and co-production will be a key part of the development and delivery of a Sexual Orientation Strategy. I am keen to ensure the people who will be most affected by the Strategy are able to make a meaningful contribution to this work. In taking account of the evidence gathered from this engagement, full consideration will be given to legislative reform, if it is identified as a priority.

Due to the cross-cutting nature of the Strategy, responsibility for any such legislation will be determined by Ministerial remits, not restricted to my own portfolio, and will require Executive support.

The costs associated with stakeholder engagement and development of the Strategy will be met from my Department's budget. Financial resources needed to implement the Strategy cannot be anticipated at this time, and will require financial commitments from other Ministers in relation to their remits.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 1565/17-22, whether her Department will be establishing a new scheme to assist local councils with dilapidated properties similar to the previous Dereliction Intervention Programme.

(AQW 2647/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Dereliction Intervention Programme was a Department of the Environment scheme launched in 2012 to address dilapidation and in pursuance of its policy objectives in relation to the environment. Responsibility for this function transferred to the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in 2016. I do not have any plans to replicate this scheme.

Protecting and enhancing our environment is an objective shared across Central & Local Government and my previous response detailed my Department's contribution.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities how many households, in each constituency, have been impacted by the Universal Credit two child limit in the last financial year; and how much worse off these families are as a consequence.

(AQW 2661/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The information requested regarding the number of households impacted by the Universal Credit two child limit and its financial consequences is not currently available.

As with other social security benefits, a single system, developed and managed by the Department for Work and Pensions, is used to collect and store Universal Credit data. My Department is working closely with the Department for Work and Pensions to improve the range of data available to us.

The latest official statistics for Universal Credit here were published on 26 February 2020 providing detail up to November 2019. That report along with previous reports, is available at www.communities-ni.gov.uk/articles/universal-credit-statistics

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities (i) for an update on the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme; (ii) when the last cohort of people will be welcomed under the scheme; and (iii) to outline any future plans for refugee settlement in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 2692/17-22)

Ms Hargey:

- (i) The first group of 51 refugees arrived in Belfast under Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (SVPRS) in December 2015. Since then, 25 groups have arrived approximately every 2 months. The most recent group arrived on 6 February 2020. A total of 1,815 Syrian refugees have been resettled here under the scheme to date.
- (ii) The last arrival under Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme was on 6 February 2020.
- (iii) On 17 June 2019 the British Government confirmed its ongoing commitment to refugee resettlement and announced plans for a new Resettlement Scheme which will see more refugees provided with a route to protection from April 2020. The new Resettlement Scheme will bring together the SVPRS and two other organised refugee resettlement programmes.

In August 2019 the Home Office wrote to all local authorities and the devolved administrations requesting ongoing support for refugee resettlement under the new scheme.

In the absence of Ministers, the Head of the Civil Service decided under the provisions of the Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions Act 2018 that we would continue to welcome refugees for a further year. The first group of refugees to arrive here under this arrangement will be welcomed in April 2020.

During this coming year, the SVPRS will be evaluated and the outcome will inform a decision by the Executive on whether we should continue to participate in the British programme beyond April 2021.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Communities to outline the financial contribution each Council has paid towards the Office of the Local Government Commissioner for Standards in each year since 2015.

(AQW 2708/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The financial contribution each council has paid towards the Office of the Local Government Commissioner for Standards, in each year since 2015, is set out below:

District Council	Financial Contribution			
	2015/2016 £	2016/2017 £	2017/2018 £	2018/2019 £
Antrim and Newtownabbey	18,420	22,176	22,401	36,131
Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	20,670	24,574	24,658	39,941
Belfast	42,998	51,601	51,646	83,268
Causeway Coast and Glens	17,589	20,995	21,129	34,236
Derry and Strabane	18,080	20,889	21,062	34,201
Fermanagh and Omagh	16,815	19,764	19,934	32,416
Lisburn and Castlereagh	19,369	23,244	23,552	37,876
Mid and East Antrim	18,003	20,818	20,999	33,786
Mid Ulster	16,928	20,443	20,666	33,421
Newry, Mourne and Down	19,506	23,290	23,482	37,901
Ards and North Down	19,419	23,205	23,471	37,823
Total	227,797	270,999	273,000	441,000

The final figure for the financial contribution for 2019/2020 is not available yet.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities whether there is a legal obligation for Post Office card account customers to switch to a mainstream account; and what will happen to these accounts once the contract ends in November 2021.
(AQW 2748/17-22)

Ms Hargey: There is no legal obligation for Post Office card account customers to switch to a mainstream account. The Post Office contract is coming to an end and ahead of contract end, customers who are able to switch to a mainstream account are being encouraged to do so. Those customers unable to manage a mainstream account will be offered an alternative payment exception service.

Following the end of the Post Office card account contract, people who have not switched to an alternative mainstream account will be migrated onto the new payment exception service and their Post Office card account will be closed.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities how many complaints her Department has received about Universal Credit in the last two year period.
(AQW 2783/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The Department has received a total of 76 complaints since the introduction of Universal Credit on 27 September 2017. This equates to 0.12% of the current Universal Credit caseload.

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister for Communities what consideration he has given to providing financial support to Belfast City Council to assist in the development of Belfast Zoo.
(AQW 2843/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Belfast Zoo is operated by and is the responsibility of Belfast City Council (BCC) and therefore I have not considered the provision of any financial support.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Communities how many new claims for Universal Credit have been made in (i) 2018; and (ii) 2019; and how many of these claimants made an application to the Contingency Fund.
(AQW 2864/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Between January 2018 and November 2019 there were a total of 81,180 eligible claims to Universal Credit. This may include repeat claims. Further information on these official statistics is available here

<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/articles/universal-credit-statistics>

The Universal Credit Contingency Fund is a unique service provided by my Department offering an up-front payment, not a loan, to those experiencing financial hardship. From November 2017 to January 2020 there were a total of 10,367 applications to the Fund, of which 8,100 were successful.

We have recently made changes to make it easier for people to avail of the Contingency Fund by removing the need to claim an advance payment before making an application. I am continuing to review the Fund and will make sure we consider our options to further promote it.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for Communities whether she is considering alternative or additional methods of identifying and tackling poverty.
(AQO 290/17-22)

Ms Hargey: In line with New Decade, New Approach, I will be publishing a timescale for the delivery of a new Anti-Poverty Strategy in the coming weeks. The principles and practice of citizen and community engagement, co-design and co-production will be a key part of the development and delivery of this strategy.

Together with stakeholders and colleagues from other departments, steps will be taken to ensure that the Strategy targets and measures the things that will make a real difference in identifying and tackling poverty. I am committed to the delivery of an anti-poverty strategy that targets objective need and ensures that no one is penalised for being poor.

Currently the main source of data used to measure poverty here is the Family Resources Survey (FRS). The FRS collects information on the incomes and circumstances of around 2,000 private households. My department publishes Poverty Statistics annually using the FRS data. These statistics estimate the number and percentage of people living in low income households.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Communities how she plans to reduce the waiting list for housing, particularly for people living in housing stress.
(AQO 292/17-22)

Ms Hargey: In line with New Decade New Approach, I intend to work with Executive colleagues to progress measures that aim to reduce the number of households in housing stress.

These measures will include:

- Enabling housing associations to continue building new social homes by bringing forward legislation to facilitate reversal of the Office for National Statistics' classification of registered Housing Associations as Non-Financial Public Corporations;
- Enhancing investment and agreeing a target for new social and affordable home starts. In fact, in 2019/20, £146 million has been allocated against a target to start building 1850 new social homes; and
- Tackling the maintenance backlog for Housing Executive properties.

In addition, housing will be an outcome for the Executive within the new Programme for Government, with a focus on ensuring every household has access to a good quality, affordable and sustainable home that is appropriate for its needs.

In support of this, I will bring forward as soon as possible my Housing Programme for the next two years.

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister for Communities for a timeframe for assessing the responses to the consultation on changes to gambling laws.
(AQO 293/17-22)

Ms Hargey: The current legislation in relation to gambling here dates back to 1985; I recognise that it is outdated and takes no account of the internet and other industry advances nor does it address the serious issue of problem gambling.

The Gambling Prevalence surveys carried out by my Department have demonstrated that there is a much higher rate of problem gambling here than in other jurisdictions.

My Department's consultation on the Regulation of Gambling closed on the 21 February. The purpose of the consultation was to seek views on the appropriateness of the current law and to identify areas of gambling activity which should be included in any future legislation.

My officials are analysing over 400 responses to the consultation and I expect to receive a report in a few weeks. Following engagement with the committee, I hope to be able to announce the way forward by the summer.

With regard to sponsorship by gambling companies of local sport, I recognise the great work sports clubs do, especially for young people and that many of them rely on advertising and sponsorship to raise funds. I am, however, also very concerned at the harm caused by problem gambling in our society.

I will want to consider the contents of the consultation report on this issue and take into account the health and economic impacts before coming to any conclusions on changes to the law.

Mr Lunn asked the Minister for Communities when she will bring forward legislation to reclassify housing associations.
(AQO 285/17-22)

Ms Hargey: In line with New Decade, New Approach I intend to bring forward legislation as soon as possible to facilitate reversal of the Office for National Statistics' classification of Housing Associations as Non-Financial Public Corporations. I am currently considering draft legislation.

This is a very urgent issue but finalisation of the draft legislation has only been possible since the return of the Executive. My officials and I are bringing this process to a close as quickly as possible so that I may seek agreement from the Executive to introduce the legislation into the Assembly.

My officials are also working with officials in the Department of Finance, in the meantime, to secure an extension from Treasury to the current derogation – due to end on 31 March, 2020. This derogation has so far deferred an effect of the decision by the Office for National Statistics – which otherwise would have required the borrowings of Registered Housing Associations to score against the Capital Budget of my Department.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities whether Post Office Card Account holders will be denied access to their accounts following the end of the contract in November 2021.

(AQO 289/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Payments of benefits and pension into mainstream accounts provides people with greater financial inclusion as these can provide access to services such as Direct Debit, ATMs and Chip & Pin. These services are not available through the Post Office card account.

The Post Office card account contract is due to end in November 2021, and following contract end, people will no longer be able to access or use their existing Post Office card accounts.

People are therefore encouraged to switch from their Post Office card account to a mainstream account. This is considered to be a safe and reliable method of payment, providing financial inclusion and giving people a greater choice about where and when they collect their money.

For those people unable to access or manage a mainstream account, my Department will offer a replacement payment exception service.

Support is available to help people choose a product that is right for their circumstances, which may be an alternative payment exception service.

A dedicated free telephone service has been set up within DWP which offers POca users the opportunity to ask questions and provides support in choosing an account that is right for their circumstances.

Contact details are provided in letters issued on to customers by DWP on behalf of the Department, and are also available on NI Direct.

Further support can be made available by contacting the Make the Call Service.

Department of Education

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Education what plans his Department has to enable schools to participate in commemorating the centenary of Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1062/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): The UK Government has made a commitment in the New Decade, New Approach Deal to work with the Executive to mark the centenary of Northern Ireland in 2021; and to make available funding for related projects. I intend to participate in discussions the Executive may have with the Secretary of State about the implementation of this commitment.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education whether there are any young people in Derry city excluded from school and at home without any education provision; and, if so, how many.

(AQW 3027/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority has advised that is aware of 6 pupils who have been expelled from school in Derry City who have no current educational provision. The EA's Education Welfare and Behaviour Support Services are presently supporting these pupils to secure suitable provision.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education what progress has been made to develop an enhanced approach to careers advice, curriculum, training and apprenticeships to enhance employability and support growth, as outlined in the New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 3048/17-22)

Mr Weir: These commitments within the New Decade New Approach Agreement fall within the responsibilities of my Department and that of the Minister for the Economy. Together we will be working with Executive colleagues ensure these commitments can be progressed.

In addition the Transition of Young People into Careers (14-19) Project is a collaborative Project jointly funded and led by my department and the Department for the Economy. The Project aims to implement a more strategic and joined up approach to 14-19 education and training provision. In developing a joint 14-19 strategy, the Transition of Young People into Careers (14-19) Project is considering a range of issues including careers, curriculum delivery, progression and pathways, post-16 and funding, which will help inform how we progress some of the New Decade/ New Approach commitments.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education to outline (i) how many children in the Upper Bann constituency were suspended or expelled from school, in each of the last five years, broken down by primary and post-primary school; and (ii) the reasons for these suspensions and expulsions.

(AQW 3065/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) I have arranged for a table containing the numbers of pupils suspended in the Upper Bann constituency for the most recent five years for which data are available, 2013/14 to 2017/18 to be placed in the Assembly Library.

It is not possible to disaggregate the number of pupils expelled by school type and constituency.

- (ii) I have arranged for a table containing the reasons for each suspension occasion in the Upper Bann constituency for the most recent five years for which data are available, 2013/14 to 2017/18, to be placed in the Assembly Library.

It is not possible to disaggregate the reasons for pupils' expulsions by school type and constituency.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 2199/17-22, to detail the spend on (i) school uniform grants; (ii) free school transport; and (ii) free school meals in each of the last three years.

(AQW 3075/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department's spend in these areas is as follows:

(i) school uniform grants:

Year	School Uniform Grants
2016/2017	£4,915,000
2017/2018	£5,230,000
2018/2019	£5,174,000

(ii) free school transport:

Year	Transport Costs
2016/2017	£76,920,081
2017/2018	£80,932,056
2018/2019	£86,102,581

(iii) free schools meals:

Year	Free School Meals
2016/2017	£44,929,898
2017/2018	£46,972,740
2018/2019	£49,863,337

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of reported events of racism in our school system, broken down by school, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 3076/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) has confirmed it does not hold a central register to record reported events of racism in schools.

The EA has only received one recent report of racist bullying in 2020.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to outline (i) the guidance concerning racism provided to schools; and (ii) what checks and balances are conducted to ensure schools investigate racism properly.

(AQW 3077/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) The Education Authority (EA) Intercultural Education Service provides general advice and guidance to schools to help them welcome children and young people of different races and ethnicities.
- (ii) The EA can provide anti-racist advice to schools when requested however the EA has no investigatory role or powers.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to confirm whether he will introduce an equivalent system to England's Operation Encompass in Northern Ireland, to promote information sharing between the PSNI and schools in relation to children who witness domestic abuse incidents.

(AQW 3098/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department is working collaboratively with the Safeguarding Board for NI, the Police Service for NI and the Departments of Health and Justice through the "Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse Strategy" to consider the introduction of a pilot scheme to notify schools of domestic abuse incidents, based on the principles of Operation Encompass'. However, at this stage no conclusions have been reached.

In terms of current initiatives to combat domestic abuse, the Department supports the Women's Aid Helping Hands programme which offers training to teachers to teach sensitive subjects, in this case domestic abuse, and respond appropriately to issues and concerns raised by pupils.

The Department has also published 'Safeguarding and Child Protection in Schools, a Guide for Schools' which includes, at section 8.2, advice regarding their responsibilities in this area.

The Guide can be accessed via the following link:

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/safeguarding-and-child-protection-in-schools-guide-pdf-for-website-%28september-2019%29.pdf>

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Education to outline the number of surplus places in Northern Ireland schools and the estimated annual cost of maintaining these surplus places.

(AQW 3119/17-22)

Mr Weir: In the 2018-19 academic year, which is the most recent year for which data are available there were 41,606 available places in Primary schools, 19,362 in Post Primary schools and 194 in Nursery schools and units. The methodology for calculating available places can be accessed through the Department's website at the link provided (Available Places documents).

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/node/37331>

In terms of calculating the cost of available places, under the extant Common Funding Scheme grant-aided schools do not receive funding for available places or spare capacity. They are funded based on actual pupil numbers and the characteristics of those pupils. There are certain fixed costs which will always be inescapable irrespective of school size and the number of available places a school may have.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Education to outline any measures his Department is taking to support schools who may wish to mark the centenary of Northern Ireland in 2021.

(AQW 3135/17-22)

Mr Weir: The UK Government has made a commitment in the New Decade, New Approach document to work with the Executive to mark the centenary of Northern Ireland in 2021; and to make available funding for related projects. I intend to participate in Executive discussions with the Secretary of State about the implementation of the UK Government's commitment to support and fund projects. The quantum and method of allocation of these funds have not yet been determined.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education (i) whether he will consider including emotional and physical wellbeing into the curriculum in primary schools; and (ii) in considering the move, will he take into consideration best practice from the Republic of Ireland who have already introduced such a measure.

(AQW 3143/17-22)

Mr Weir: Emotional and physical wellbeing are already an integral part of the Northern Ireland curriculum. At Key Stage 1, as a minimum, pupils have opportunities to learn about keeping themselves healthy and safe as well as developing a knowledge and understanding of self-esteem, self-confidence and their own feelings and emotions. At Key Stage 2 pupils are given the opportunity to further their knowledge in sustaining health and in developing effective strategies to manage their feelings and emotions and the feelings and emotions of others.

In physical education (PE) young people are provided with opportunities to develop their knowledge, understanding and skill in a range of activities. Young people should experience a sense of fun, enjoyment and achievement through progressively challenging and innovative activities and appreciate the benefits of physical activity and its relationship with good health.

I acknowledge the positive impact on mental health and emotional wellbeing that physical exercise can have and through investing in the Sports Programme, am ensuring that pupils are learning about mental health, resilience and emotional wellbeing.

There is no evidence that prescribing detailed lists of compulsory subject content produces better outcomes for young people. Schools have the flexibility to adapt their approach and use a variety of circular resources which best suit the needs of their pupils and to use customised approaches to ensure that children and young people are both safe and well informed about the range of issues that they face in a modern society.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the rationale behind asking schools to carry out a stocktake each year; (ii) how this is recorded in their annual budget; and (iii) whether he will review the effectiveness of the practice.
(AQW 3144/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) School stocktakes were introduced in 2017-18 with the key aim of enhancing financial management in schools.
- (ii) Recognising the value of stock held by schools ensures that only items which are used in the financial year are recorded as expenditure for that year. The value of any unused items at the stocktake date is deducted from the school's expenditure and then included in future periods when the items are actually used.
- (iii) The Education Authority is committed to continuous review and improved efficiency in financial processes, including the school stocktake process, and has made several improvements in the process since its inception. The effectiveness of this practice will continued to be reviewed.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education to detail the outcome of the home to school transport review, carried out in December 2018.

(AQW 3147/17-22)

Mr Weir: The review of the home to school transport policy was launched in December 2018 and as the review is still ongoing, no decisions have yet been taken with regard to any future policy changes.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education to detail the proportion of teachers currently job sharing in the Upper Bann constituency.

(AQW 3149/17-22)

Mr Weir: The number of teachers currently job sharing in Upper Bann is 33 out of a total of 1,229 teachers in the constituency.

Source: The information above was extracted from the teachers' payroll system.

Notes:

- 1 The figures supplied are for permanent teachers taken as at 6 March 2020 based on information supplied by employers.
- 2 The figures supplied do not include voluntary grammar schools. These schools run their own payrolls and the Department of Education does not have access to this data.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education how many teachers have taken early retirement and then subsequently taken up temporary teaching positions, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 3150/17-22)

Mr Weir: The number of teachers who have taken early retirement and then subsequently taken up temporary teaching positions in each of the last three complete financial years are set out in the table below:-

Financial Year	Number of teachers
2016-17	56
2017-18	60
2018-19	40

Source: Information extracted from the Teachers' pension & payroll systems.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of times children with special needs were unable to be brought to school due to the unavailability of regular school transport buses in the 2016-17 and 2018-19 academic years; and (ii) whether compensation was paid to parents to cover the alternative transport arrangements they had to make.

(AQW 3151/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority has advised that it does not hold the data requested. It has confirmed that while it is unusual for a travel arrangement not to operate for a sustained period, in such circumstances it will liaise with parents to explore alternative arrangements and if necessary provide financial assistance.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to outline the plans for additional teaching and non-teaching staff in light of a potential coronavirus outbreak.

(AQW 3160/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department of Education (DE) is not the employer of teachers, and is not responsible for the appointment of teachers. Teachers are employed by the Board of Governors (BoG) for each school setting, with the recruitment, selection and appointment of teachers carried out in conjunction with the relevant employing authority; such as the Education Authority (EA) in respect of controlled schools and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) in respect of maintained schools.

I have asked the EA and CCMS to outline their plans for additional teaching and non-teaching staff in light of a potential coronavirus outbreak.

EA continues to provide advice, based on PHA guidance, to all schools and an EA cross directorate business continuity planning group has been established and will all assist with coordination of services and communication to schools as the situation progresses.

Schools in Northern Ireland already rely on a contingent workforce to meet demands for short term emergency cover and all schools have access to the Northern Ireland Substitute Teacher Register (NISTR) to arrange temporary cover. There are 9,989 active teachers on this register who have all gone through the necessary pre-employment checks. The booking system is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

All schools have a knowledge of non-teaching staff within their local area that they regularly call upon to cover absences in the school. Procedures are in place to ensure the safeguarding of pupils in these circumstances and to ensure that these staff can be engaged at short notice and receive the appropriate payment.

At this stage CCMS is following PHA advice and keeping close contact with colleagues in DE and EA. The impact of an outbreak in a school will be challenging, however, CCMS is working with statutory agencies and following their guidance and advice. CCMS will continue to engage with DE and EA colleagues on a daily basis and will follow government guidance and advice.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 2258/17-22, how this timeframe is quality controlled.

(AQW 3271/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) aims to respond to all correspondence and enquiries within 10 working days. This timeframe is quality controlled through a Performance Improvement Report which is reviewed and approved by the Corporate Leadership Team at their quarterly planning and performance meetings. 'Processing of Correspondence (COR) cases' is the metric used by the EA in measuring its performance against the target of responding within 10 working days.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education whether the membership of the committee that conducted the Education Authority's internal report into Special Educational Needs had no conflict of interest.

(AQW 3277/17-22)

Mr Weir: I am informed that the team was selected by the Chief Executive of the Education Authority on the basis of their skills and experience in the key areas identified for examination by the Audit of Practice. I am also advised by the Chief Executive that no member of the team had a conflict of interest.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 2587/17-22, is there a timetable for the various stages of the ongoing consultation period.

(AQW 3284/17-22)

Mr Weir: The formative part of the statutory Development Proposal (DP) process is not subject to defined timeframes, involving as it does exploratory discussions and the consideration of options, however, once this activity is complete, as described in my previous answer, it may result in the publication of a DP.

At this point in the process greater definition can be provided, as publication triggers a two month period of consultation during which expressions of support or opposition may be submitted to the Department. All pertinent evidence will then be collated by my officials and I will receive advice to inform a decision.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the schools that are involved in the North Belfast Principals Group; (ii) the details of all funding awarded to this group; (iii) the criteria used to award funding; and (iv) what steps his Department is taking to ensure that schools based in areas of multiple deprivation are supported.

(AQW 3295/17-22)

Mr Weir: The North Belfast Principals Group consists of the following 22 schools.

- | | |
|------------------------------|--|
| ■ Ballysillan Primary School | ■ Cliftonville Integrated Primary School |
| ■ Bunscoil Bheann Mhadagain | ■ Currie Primary School |
| ■ Carr's Glen Primary School | ■ Hazelwood Integrated |
| ■ Cavehill Primary School | ■ Holy Cross Boys Primary |

- | | |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| ■ Holy Cross Girls' Primary | ■ Sacred Heart Primary School |
| ■ Holy Family Primary | ■ Seaview Primary School |
| ■ Ligoniel Primary School | ■ St Mary's Star of the Sea |
| ■ Lowwood Primary School | ■ St Patrick's Primary School |
| ■ Mercy Primary School | ■ St Vincent de Paul Primary School |
| ■ Our Lady Of Lourdes | ■ St. Therese Of Lisieux P.S. |
| ■ Our Lady's Girls' Primary Sch. | ■ Wheatfield Primary School |

Funding is awarded to these schools on an individual basis via the following:

- Common funding formula (CFF) budget share
- Targeting Social Need (TSN) funding
- Extended Schools Allocation

A total of £23.3 million has been made available to these schools as part of core school budgets in 2019/20 including £3.7 million in respect of Targeting Social Need to support pupils from socio-economically deprived backgrounds. A further £414,000 has been allocated through the Extended Schools (ES) programme this year which includes monies made available to support the operation of local ES Clusters.

In addition, and separately to this group is the North Belfast Primary Principals Support Programme (NBPPSP). It presently consists of all of the above listed schools with the exception of Holy Cross Boys' Primary School.

This group is a non-constituted body and the decision as to which schools to include regarding this intervention lies with the 21 school principals involved.

The NBPPSP received £250,000 in 2019/20 to cover a range of initiatives aimed at addressing educational underachievement linked to socio-economic disadvantage.

My Department has a wide range of policies and programmes in place to ensure that schools based in areas of multiple deprivation are supported. These include but are not limited to Targeting Social Need funding (circa £77 million p.a.), Sure Start (circa £25 million p.a.), Extended Schools programme (circa £9 million p.a.), Full Service Programmes in North and West Belfast (£770,000 p.a.), Sharing the Learning Programme (West Belfast) (£200,000 p.a.) and West Belfast Community Project (Shankill) (£80,000 p.a.).

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education how many Looked After Children under the age of 16 in Derry city are not in education and are not receiving education support.
(AQW 3306/17-22)

Mr Weir: Currently the Education Authority (EA) is aware that less than 5 children in Derry City Schools who are defined as Looked after Children are not in education and not receiving education support.

This information needs to be treated with caution as the EA is not always notified regarding children who are defined as Looked after Children.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Education to outline his Department's plans to facilitate the expansion and development of Dean Maguirc College, Carrickmore.
(AQW 3351/17-22)

Mr Weir: Any significant change to education provision such as an increase in a school's enrolment number requires the publication of a development proposal. As managing authority for schools in the Maintained sector, any significant change proposed at Dean Maguirc College would be a matter for the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools in the first instance.

The Education Authority's extended Annual Action Plan April 2019 to March 2020 (the Action Plan) sets out the work programme of the planning and managing authorities to address specific issues at a local level. As Dean Maguirc College, which is located in the Fermanagh and Omagh Local Government District, does not feature in the Action Plan, there are currently no plans for any significant changes at this school.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education for an update on the tendering process for the C2K contract for schools.
(AQW 3354/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority has ensured that the existing C2k Education Network service continues to deliver a high quality, sustainable ICT infrastructure, connectivity and resources to schools in support of school management, teacher professional development and the delivery of the Northern Ireland curriculum.

In order to maintain the stability and integrity of the existing C2k service, EA sought and secured approval from DE and DoF for the modification of the current contract using Public Contracts Regulations. This extension has ensured continuity of existing education technology services across the entire school estate initially through to 31st March 2021. This extension also identifies an additional period of time to accommodate a transition from the C2k Education Network to future ICT

services known as ETS (Education Technology Services). This migration is anticipated to be completed during the 2022/23 financial year.

In parallel with these extension arrangements, the Education Authority has established an ETS Programme team to take forward the specification and tendering of new ICT services for schools. The ETS Programme has progressed through its initiation and start-up phases and is currently pursuing approval of an outline business case to enable tendering to begin later in 2020. The ETS Programme not only seeks to deliver replacement services currently delivered by C2K but also avail of synergies, to deliver a more holistic education technology service to schools.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the reliability of the AQE Common Entrance Assessment (CEA) and PPTC Entrance Assessment (GL) tests as assessments of literacy, numeracy and ability.
(AQW 3363/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department does not regulate or administer the transfer tests used by selective post-primary schools. It does not endorse either test and makes no assessment about their robustness or reliability as assessments of literacy and numeracy skills. Language and Literacy and Mathematics and Numeracy are core Areas of Learning of the statutory curriculum in primary schools and across Key Stages 1 and 2, teachers enable pupils to develop knowledge, understanding and skills in topics such as reading and writing and in a range of mathematical processes including number and number notation, measures and handling data.

My Department issued guidance in 2016 setting out how primary schools may supply support materials, carry out preparations for tests during core teaching hours, coach in exam technique and familiarise pupils with the test environment. However, that guidance was not prescriptive and it is a matter for individual schools to judge how much core teaching time they devote to preparing pupils for the tests.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of core primary teaching hours are spent preparing pupils for AQE Common Entrance Assessment (CEA) and PPTC Entrance Assessment (GL) tests.
(AQW 3365/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department does not regulate or administer the transfer tests used by selective post-primary schools. It does not endorse either test and makes no assessment about their robustness or reliability as assessments of literacy and numeracy skills. Language and Literacy and Mathematics and Numeracy are core Areas of Learning of the statutory curriculum in primary schools and across Key Stages 1 and 2, teachers enable pupils to develop knowledge, understanding and skills in topics such as reading and writing and in a range of mathematical processes including number and number notation, measures and handling data.

My Department issued guidance in 2016 setting out how primary schools may supply support materials, carry out preparations for tests during core teaching hours, coach in exam technique and familiarise pupils with the test environment. However, that guidance was not prescriptive and it is a matter for individual schools to judge how much core teaching time they devote to preparing pupils for the tests.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Education for an update on progress since New Decade, New Approach to establish an expert group to examine the links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background, particularly due to the identified underachievement amongst working class Protestant boys.
(AQW 3379/17-22)

Mr Weir: I am currently considering options in respect of establishing the Expert Group to examine and propose an action plan to address links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background, including the long-standing issues facing working-class, Protestant boys.

Tackling educational underachievement is critical to improving the life chances of children and young people and it is important that we progress this work swiftly. Proposals regarding how the Expert Group is to be established and the timescales involved will come before the Executive as soon as possible.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) how many pupils in the South Down constituency are waiting longer than the 26 week timeframe for a special educational needs statement; and (ii) what steps the Education Authority is taking to address this situation.
(AQW 3400/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) This has been interpreted as the number of referrals to the Education Authority (EA) for a statutory assessment (a statutory assessment may result in a statement or a note in lieu of a statement).

As of 11 March 2020, the number of pupils in the South Down constituency waiting longer than 26 weeks for completion of the statutory assessment process was 38. Of these 38 pupils, 16 had valid exceptions.

In recognition that circumstances may arise where it is impractical for the EA to meet the time limit prescribed in statute, certain detailed exceptions (known as valid exceptions) apply.

- (ii) Following a recent audit of practice, the EA has been focusing on those statutory assessments falling outside the 26-week framework, but not to the detriment of those now entering the statutory assessment process.

The Authority has also provided additional resources to support front line staff to meet the level of demand.

The Authority is also actively considering how digitalisation of some current manual tasks could further streamline processes and enhance efficiency.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Education (i) to publish the GCSE examination results and A-level examination results for St Joseph's Boys School, Derry, for each of the last five years; and (ii) for comparison, the average examination results for Northern Ireland's non-selective post-primary schools over the same period.

(AQW 3403/17-22)

Mr Weir: Headline GCSE and A-level examination results from 2014/15 to 2017/18 for St Joseph's Boys' School (School ID: 223-0131), and average examination results for Northern Ireland's non-grammar post-primary schools, are accessible on the Examinations Achievements tab within the Statistical Information section on Schools+ (<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/services/schools-plus>). These figures include equivalent qualifications.

Information for 2018/19 will be accessible through Schools+ later this month.

For ease of access, data for the last five years are detailed below in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1: St Joseph's Boys' School (School ID: 223-0131) Examination Results - 2014/ 2015 to 2018/ 2019

Academic Year	2014/ 2015 %	2015/ 2016 %	2016/ 2017 %	2017/ 2018 %	2018/ 2019 %
Year 12 pupils achieving 5 or more GCSEs 1 at grades A*-C	50.3	52.5	49.6	70.8	86.7
Year 12 pupils achieving 5 or more GCSEs 1 at grades A*-C including GCSE English and GCSE maths	28.3	35.4	35.2	38.5	36.7
Year 12 pupils achieving 5 or more GCSEs 1 at grades A*-G	91.7	93.0	91.2	96.9	95.3
Pupils in the final year of an A-level course achieving 3 or more A-levels 1 at grades A*-C	31.5	57.4	33.3	30.0	37.5
Pupils in the final year of an A-level course achieving 2 or more A-levels 1 at grades A*-E	98.1	100.0	93.0	96.7	91.7

Source: Summary of Annual Examination Results

Note

- 1 GCSE and A-level examination results include equivalent qualifications.

Table 2: Non-grammar Examination Results - 2014/ 2015 to 2018/ 2019

Academic Year	2014/ 2015 %	2015/ 2016 %	2016/ 2017 %	2017/ 2018 %	2018/ 2019 %
Year 12 pupils achieving 5 or more GCSEs 1 at grades A*-C	72.0	72.7	74.4	77.3	79.7
Year 12 pupils achieving 5 or more GCSEs 1 at grades A*-C including GCSE English and GCSE maths	46.8	47.0	49.9	52.4	54.8
Year 12 pupils achieving 5 or more GCSEs 1 at grades A*-G	97.4	97.6	97.5	98.0	97.7
Pupils in the final year of an A-level course achieving 3 or more A-levels 1 at grades A*-C	47.8	51.5	55.0	57.2	58.8
Pupils in the final year of an A-level course achieving 2 or more A-levels 1 at grades A*-E	95.8	96.1	97.0	96.4	96.4

Source: Summary of Annual Examination Results

Note

- 1 GCSE and A-level examination results include equivalent qualifications.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education how many year 8 places does St Columbanus' College, Bangor, currently have; and how many will it have for the 2020-21 term.

(AQW 3406/17-22)

Mr Weir: The admissions numbers for the listed schools are depicted in the table below. The 'Approved Admissions Number' column denotes each school's usual admissions number. A school may at any time request a Temporary Variation to its admissions number to increase its intake, therefore the numbers for 2019/20 and 2020/21 are correct at this point in time but may be varied in response to future requests from schools.

School Name	Approved Admissions Number	Admissions Number 2019/2020	Admissions Number 2020/2021
St Columbanus' College	115	131	130
Sullivan Upper School	150	150	150
Glenlola Collegiate Grammar School	157	159	157
Bangor Grammar School	125	130	135
Bangor Academy	242	297	262

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education how many year 8 places does Sullivan Upper School currently have; and how many will it have for the 2020-21 term.

(AQW 3407/17-22)

Mr Weir: The admissions numbers for the listed schools are depicted in the table below. The 'Approved Admissions Number' column denotes each school's usual admissions number. A school may at any time request a Temporary Variation to its admissions number to increase its intake, therefore the numbers for 2019/20 and 2020/21 are correct at this point in time but may be varied in response to future requests from schools.

School Name	Approved Admissions Number	Admissions Number 2019/2020	Admissions Number 2020/2021
St Columbanus' College	115	131	130
Sullivan Upper School	150	150	150
Glenlola Collegiate Grammar School	157	159	157
Bangor Grammar School	125	130	135
Bangor Academy	242	297	262

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education how many year 8 places does Glenlola Collegiate Grammar School currently have; and how many will it have for the 2020-21 term.

(AQW 3408/17-22)

Mr Weir: The admissions numbers for the listed schools are depicted in the table below. The 'Approved Admissions Number' column denotes each school's usual admissions number. A school may at any time request a Temporary Variation to its admissions number to increase its intake, therefore the numbers for 2019/20 and 2020/21 are correct at this point in time but may be varied in response to future requests from schools.

School Name	Approved Admissions Number	Admissions Number 2019/2020	Admissions Number 2020/2021
St Columbanus' College	115	131	130
Sullivan Upper School	150	150	150
Glenlola Collegiate Grammar School	157	159	157
Bangor Grammar School	125	130	135
Bangor Academy	242	297	262

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education how many year 8 places does Bangor Grammar School currently have; and how many will it have for the 2020-21 term.

(AQW 3409/17-22)

Mr Weir: The admissions numbers for the listed schools are depicted in the table below. The 'Approved Admissions Number' column denotes each school's usual admissions number. A school may at any time request a Temporary Variation to its

admissions number to increase its intake, therefore the numbers for 2019/20 and 2020/21 are correct at this point in time but may be varied in response to future requests from schools.

School Name	Approved Admissions Number	Admissions Number 2019/2020	Admissions Number 2020/2021
St Columbanus' College	115	131	130
Sullivan Upper School	150	150	150
Glenlola Collegiate Grammar School	157	159	157
Bangor Grammar School	125	130	135
Bangor Academy	242	297	262

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education how many year 8 places does Bangor Academy currently have; and how many will it have for the 2020-21 term.

(AQW 3410/17-22)

Mr Weir: The admissions numbers for the listed schools are depicted in the table below. The 'Approved Admissions Number' column denotes each school's usual admissions number. A school may at any time request a Temporary Variation to its admissions number to increase its intake, therefore the numbers for 2019/20 and 2020/21 are correct at this point in time but may be varied in response to future requests from schools.

School Name	Approved Admissions Number	Admissions Number 2019/2020	Admissions Number 2020/2021
St Columbanus' College	115	131	130
Sullivan Upper School	150	150	150
Glenlola Collegiate Grammar School	157	159	157
Bangor Grammar School	125	130	135
Bangor Academy	242	297	262

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost of commissioning Peter Tymms to make recommendations on post-primary transfer tests.

(AQW 3447/17-22)

Mr Weir: The total cost to my Department of commissioning Professor Peter Tymms to make recommendations on post-primary transfer tests was £26,675.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education for an update on his Department's policy on GCE examination resits.

(AQW 3518/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department's policy regarding GCE re-sits is that there is one re-sit opportunity for AS and /or A2 courses in June of each year.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Education whether he will give a direction to schools to start teaching menstrual wellness as part of reproductive education.

(AQW 3551/17-22)

Mr Weir: The current curriculum already provides our schools with the flexibility across the Key Stages to educate young people about menstrual wellbeing. For example, at Key Stage 3 young people are provided with opportunities to explore self-awareness and their personal health and to develop an understanding about, and strategies to manage, the effects of change on their body and mind and to explore the implications of sexual maturation. To support teaching, the Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment has produced a range of guidance and resources around personal development including menstrual well-being. As in all areas of the curriculum, the teaching of these topics will be age appropriate.

It is important to note that, unlike other jurisdictions, the curriculum here is not made up of a mandatory list of subjects or subject content that every school must teach. Instead, subject to meeting minimum requirements in Areas of Learning across all Key Stages, it is designed to give schools flexibility to use a variety of approaches and curricular resources that reflect, and are responsive to, the needs of pupils.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister of Education for an update on the review of procurement in schools.

(AQO 319/17-22)

Mr Weir: As the managing authority for controlled schools and the funding authority for all grant funded schools, the Education Authority (EA) is responsible for ensuring that effective procurement practice is embedded across the education sector to provide best value for money. These schools are therefore required to comply with the EA's purchasing and contracting procedures for the procurement of any works, equipment, goods or services, using EA contracts where they exist.

All grant funded schools are also required to operate within the procurement legal framework and to adhere to Northern Ireland Public Procurement Policy and the relevant Northern Ireland Procurement Guidance Notes.

Controlled schools have the autonomy to procure any non-contracted items via the EA's i-Procurement system for goods or services not exceeding £5,000. For these procurements, two quotations are required to be provided by schools to demonstrate value-for-money has been achieved. Petty cash may also be used by schools to purchase low value or incidental items that cannot be procured through the i-Procurement system.

For contracted procurements the EA work to ensure best value for money by conducting competitive tender exercises (in compliance with legislation and the Northern Ireland Public Procurement Policy) and awarding to the bidder(s) that provide the best value for money with respect to both quality and cost (lowest cost alone does not necessarily represent best value for money). Controlled and maintained schools significantly benefit from operating within the EA procurement boundary in terms of economies of scale, having the administration of procurement handled by the EA and being assured that they are fully compliant with all procurement legislation.

These schools have access to over 700 competitively tendered compliant contracts. This provides schools with improved supplier risk management, provides increased buying power that supports maintenance of supply in difficult market conditions, supports more effective contract management that ensures supplier accountability and reduces the risk of supplier non-compliance with contractual and legal obligations for example, Health and Safety and Insurance requirements.

In 2018, the EA introduced new Procurement Governance structures and published its Procurement Strategy 2018-2021. A number of initiatives taken forward as part of the Strategy to progress the transformation of the EA's procurement service are nearing completion, including a review of Minor Works, Education Technology Services and the establishment of a Procurement Transformation Board, all of which include representation or oversight by the Department.

I am aware that this has been raised by schools and I am keen to examine this in greater detail.

Department of Finance

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance, whereas the published cost of special advisers salaries is £876,498, what is the gross cost, including employer National Insurance and pension contributions.
(AQW 2845/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): The annual salary costs of special advisers in the current Administration is £878,498 with additional employer National Insurance costs of £104,562.48. The annual salary cost of special advisers at the end of the previous Administration was £1,162,894 with additional employer National Insurance costs of £142,568.

Opting in or out of the government pension scheme is a personal matter for individual special advisers.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Finance whether the Northern Ireland Building Regulations Advisory Committee has met to review current building regulations and, in particular Article 43 B, which deals with nearly zero-energy requirements for new buildings by the 31 December 2020.
(AQW 3023/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Our statutory building regulations advisory committee, NIBRAC, has met to review proposed legislative amendments to the building regulations. Regulation 43B (nearly zero-energy requirements for new buildings) has been included in committee discussions.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Finance to detail how much each Executive Department spent on private sector security in each of the past five years.
(AQW 3099/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Although Construction & Procurement Delivery (CPD) arrange contracts for private sector security, each Executive Department may avail of those contracts and are therefore responsible for their own expenditure. On that basis I can only provide expenditure on private sector security that is specific to the Department of Finance. The expenditure incurred for the past five years is as follows:

	£
2015-16	850,770
2016-17	964,737
2017-18	1,017,226

	£
2018-19	1,130,385
2019-20 (10 months unaudited)	1,028,346

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Finance whether he intends to legislate to remove discrimination from public service schemes made under the Public Service Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 from April 2015, further to the McCloud Judgement.

(AQW 3155/17-22)

Mr Murphy: To fully remove discrimination from the devolved public service pension schemes whilst also ensuring that scheme members can keep benefits that they have earned to date, is expected to require changes to the Public Service Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Finance (i) for his assessment of the McCloud Judgement; (ii) how the McCloud Judgement impacts members of public service pension schemes in Northern Ireland; and (iii) to detail the estimated costs to his Department to address discrimination found in the McCloud Judgement.

(AQW 3156/17-22)

Mr Murphy: There is a clear need to address age discrimination in devolved public service pension schemes as a consequence of the McCloud ruling. This is supported by legal advice.

This is a complex issue, as some members of the devolved public service pension schemes will have been better off in the old schemes, and some better off in the new schemes. The solution must ensure members can keep their accrued rights, whilst also removing discrimination for the future.

The quantum of any costs associated with addressing age discrimination in the devolved public service pension schemes is not yet available. Any increased expenditure on public service pensions, as a result of decisions to be taken in relation to the McCloud ruling, would be expected to be paid out over future decades as current public sector workers retire and their pensions start to be paid.

Pensions in payment are paid through AME (Annually Managed Expenditure) while the level of contributions required from employers is set in actuarial valuations of the schemes. The next valuations will set employer contribution rates from 2023. A number of factors could affect the valuations between now and then and it is too early to say whether employer contribution rates will increase from 2023.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance for an estimate of the cost of undertaking the next census.

(AQW 3257/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The additional cost of the 2021 Census programme which runs from 2015 to 2025 is projected to be £35 million.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance when he will announce the date of a new census.

(AQW 3258/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Subject to legislative approval the next census will take place on 21st March 2021.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Finance whether he has any plans to increase transparency by putting Land and Property Service maps online with a function for the public to be able to view onscreen for free and to pay to print or download portfolios.

(AQW 3265/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Land Registry map and Folio searches are currently provided online through the LandWeb system. Under the LandWeb PFI contract, a fee must be paid to the system supplier for the provision of this information. Making maps and searches free online would require this fee to be cross-subsidised from the fees paid by customers for other Land Registry services.

The current LandWeb contract is due to expire in July 2021. Land & Property Services has started pre-procurement work to define the specification for a new digital solution to replace the LandWeb system. The new solution will be based on a 'digital first' approach with improved data quality and structure. This will enable a modern, more accessible and efficient service which is designed around the needs of the customers and users of the service. A full review of the process for carrying out searches and the charges that are levied will be undertaken as part of the procurement of the new system.

My department has started a programme to identify and map land and property assets held by government bodies. As the programme progresses, details of all land owned by departments and public bodies will become available through a free public web portal, thereby increasing the transparency around the ownership of public assets.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Finance whether he will provide specific financial assistance in the forthcoming budget to deal with a coronavirus outbreak.

(AQW 3384/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Executive has announced a substantial package of measures to help local business cope with the economic impact of the coronavirus outbreak.

This includes £100 million of support through the rating system and grants for small business and those in retail, hospitality and tourism.

Further funding from Treasury has now been made available and the Executive will do all in its power to ensure that appropriate financial assistance is given to support people and businesses.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Finance what advice his Department has provided to the Northern Ireland Civil Service on coronavirus.

(AQW 3397/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Department of Finance (DoF) has provided the following advice to the Northern Ireland Civil Service on COVID-19:

Specific guidance for managers and staff covering key matters for COVID-19 (coronavirus) including:

- How absence relating to COVID-19 (both symptomatic and confirmed) will be handled.
- What to do if a staff member has or thinks they have COVID-19 infection or has been exposed to the virus.
- What to do if a member of staff falls within a high risk category.
- What to do if a staff member experiences symptoms of COVID-19 whilst at work.
- What to do to try to ensure social distancing.
- How special leave considerations will apply for example in the case of caring responsibilities or a school closure.
- Frequently asked questions.
- How to record absences / special leave relating to COVID-19 on HRConnect.

The guidance provided is based on Public Health Agency (PHA) advice. Given that the situation is fluid and rapidly changing, guidance will be updated on a regular basis as circumstances regarding COVID-19 develops.

The guidance is readily available on the NICS intranet/Employee Services Portal (ESP) (most recent update 18th March 2020); an e mail was sent on the 5th March 2020, to all NICS members of staff who have access to Outlook, with a direct link to the ESP. Where a staff member does not have access to Outlook / the NICS intranet managers are required to bring this information to their attention.

NICS HR have advised our trade unions colleagues of the approach being taken by the NICS in the handling of COVID-19 absences.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Finance what assessment his Department has made of the impact of a coronavirus outbreak on the Northern Ireland Civil Service; and what plans his Department has in place to manage the impact.

(AQW 3405/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Department of Health is the lead department for the COVID-19 health response and the Executive Office (TEO) are supporting the co-ordination of the wider non-health preparedness. My department is providing input to TEO together with other NICS Departments. I can confirm that all business areas in my department have business continuity plans in place to provide for the continuation of priority services in the event of a reasonable worst case scenario outbreak across DoF staff.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Finance whether he will consider suspending business rates for a minimum of two months as an Executive response to COVID-19.

(AQW 3583/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As part of the Executive's response to COVID-19, I have announced an initial three months rates holiday.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Finance (i) what measures he will put in place to help small to medium-sized businesses impacted by coronavirus; (ii) what are the Barnett consequentials following the UK Treasury's plans to cancel business rates for small to medium-sized businesses; (iii) how much he anticipates a similar proposal to cancel business rates in Northern Ireland would cost the Executive; and (iv) how much additional monies he expects the Executive to initially receive under the Barnett consequentials for the Health Service to help with additional pressures in dealing with COVID-19.

(AQW 3650/17-22)

Mr Murphy: You will be aware that the Chancellor in his Budget on Wednesday 11 March 2020 announced a series of measures to provide support through the economic disruption caused by COVID-19.

We have subsequently been allocated £900m of funding in relation to Covid-19 measures, including for those that will be directed to the health service and businesses.

In respect of business rates specifically, I have now announced emergency measures to reduce the cost of rates on businesses at this unprecedented time. As part of this package, all businesses will pay zero rates for the next three months, effectively a reduction of 25% applied to the billable amount – this step will save businesses £100m. I am also deferring the issuing of rates bill from April until June to help businesses with short-term cash flow and am bringing proposals to Ministerial colleagues for a reduction in the regional business rate.

We have also announced two new grant schemes.

- COVID Small Business Grant - An immediate grant of £10,000 will be provided to all small businesses who are eligible for the Small Business Rate Relief Scheme. This matches the scheme announced in England.
- Hospitality, Tourism and Retail Sectors Grant Scheme - An immediate grant of £25,000 will be provided to companies in these sectors with a rateable value up to £51,000. This matches the amounts provided to these sectors by the scheme in England.

Together these two schemes will provide some £370m of assistance to some of our most vulnerable businesses.

We will be considering further measures in the coming days.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance whether he will introduce a business rate holiday for business affected by COVID-19.

(AQW 3704/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I have now announced emergency measures to reduce the cost of rates on businesses at this unprecedented time. As part of this package, all businesses will pay zero rates in April, May and June, effectively a reduction of 25% to the billable amount after all other reliefs have been applied. This will save businesses some £100m. I am also deferring the issuing of all rate bills from April until June to help businesses with short-term cash flow and I will deliver a reduction in the Regional Rate for businesses.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance what measures he plans to take in relation to non-domestic rates, in light of challenges being experienced by businesses due to COVID-19.

(AQW 3767/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I have now announced emergency measures to reduce the cost of rates on businesses at this unprecedented time. As part of this package, all businesses will pay zero rates in April, May and June, effectively a reduction of 25% applied to the billable amount after all other reliefs are applied. This will save businesses £100m. I am also deferring the issuing of all rate bills from April until June to help businesses with short-term cash flow and I will deliver a reduction in the Regional Rate for businesses.

Department of Health

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health what consideration he is giving to developing an oral health strategy, in line with the recommendation from the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee at Westminster.

(AQW 1113/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): The development of a new Oral Health Strategy would carry a significant resource cost and, in the context of the range of financial pressures facing Health and Social Care, it has not been possible in past years to identify funding for that. A dedicated Dental Public Health expert, or group thereof, which would come at a significant cost due to the complex and extended nature of both developing a new Oral Health Strategy and pre-requisite Oral Health Needs Assessment. The only dental professionals already within the Department or Board that have the appropriate additional knowledge, skills, and qualifications, do not have the workload capacity to even support on such matters. Business planning would also be necessary for the other professional and administrative support that would be required from within the Department and HSC organisations.

That said, my Chief Dental Officer's professional view is that, within that context, most of the 2007 Oral Health Strategy remains fit for purpose, given the current evidence-base and cost-effectiveness of available interventions, and available funding.

We are though making excellent progress in some key oral health outcomes. For example, recently emerging data for 5 year-old children provides evidence of further significant improvement in respect of the relevant Oral Health Strategy targets. One target was to improve the then 39% of 5 year-old children who were decay free, to a level of at least 50% within ten years. In 2013 the data indicated we had achieved a figure of 60%, and the emerging 2018/19 data indicates that around 70% of our 5 year-old children are decay free. There have also been very significant additional improvements in terms of the severity of dental disease in this age group of children. Another Oral Health Strategy target for 5 year-olds aimed to improve upon the relevant technical metric by a threshold of 24% and 2013 data highlighted a 44% improvement. The latest data appears to indicate that a further 18% improvement has been achieved, again in around half the original time period, since then. As

these younger children grow up, notable further improvements in the oral health outcomes of 12 and 15 year-old cohorts are consequently expected

These are notable successes within the extant strategic direction, especially given the many regional differences we face at a UK level that enable England to generally achieve better child oral health outcomes.

And the work continues. My Chief Dental Officer has established Oral Health Options Groups to allow for the consideration and development of further oral health policy options for the two most urgent groups at present, namely children and the elderly. In parallel with this, I will continue to pursue additional funding for this important area.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of contracted GPs who are employed specifically for the GP Out Of Hours service in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 2719/17-22)

Mr Swann: There are 18 GPs with contracted hours. There are 130 GPs who hold a Bank Contract, which means they can work as and when they choose. In a typical month, approximately 40 out of the 130 GPs will actively participate in the GP Out Of Hours service.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health to detail the waiting lists for counselling services in Belfast, broken down by district.

(AQW 2779/17-22)

Mr Swann: Please find information detailed below.

Table 1. Waiting times for talking therapies (psychological therapies) as at 31 January 2020

HSC Trust	0-13 Wks (0-91 days)	>13 wks (92+ days)	Total Waiting
Belfast	582	890	1,472

Source: Health and Social Care Board

Belfast Trust have advised that the breakdown of these figures by district is not held centrally.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health what is the current waiting time, in each Health and Social Care Trust, from request or referral for a home care package until the package is in place.

(AQW 2804/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department does not hold this information centrally and cannot provide within the timeframe.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Health what the current annual salary is for a full time pharmacist in (i) primary care; and (ii) secondary care.

(AQW 2849/17-22)

Mr Swann: Annual salaries for pharmacists working within GP Federations are as follows:

- General Practice Pharmacist: £34,330 - £36,410
- Lead General Practice Pharmacist: £44,733 - £46,814

Within secondary care, salaries for pharmacists fall under Agenda for Change Pay Bands and Pay Points for Health and Social Care (HSC) staff. A post qualifying pharmacist normally enters at Band 6. The current starting salary is £30,401 which reflects the recent refresh of Agenda for Change pay structures. Staff can progress through the Agenda for Change bands and further details on the associated salary levels is available from:

www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/AfC-draft-framework-agreement.pdf

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Health (i) when the professional allowance for community pharmacists was introduced; (ii) at what annual rate; and (iii) what is the current rate.

(AQW 2850/17-22)

Mr Swann: The professional allowance for community pharmacists was introduced in 1987 at an annual rate of £18,000 per community pharmacy. The current allowance is £20,900 per community pharmacy per annum.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health what progress has been made toward the development of a successor strategy and action plan to the Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs Phase 2, as outlined in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 2893/17-22)

Mr Swann: As reflected in "New Decade, New Approach", my Department has begun the development of a new substance misuse strategy. Building on the pre-consultation process that was undertaken in late 2019, a group has been brought together to co-produce the development of this new strategy and I plan to ensure it is designed with input from all key

stakeholders, including service users, to ensure that we improve services, and take innovative and effective action to reduce alcohol and drug related harm. A formal consultation will be brought forward in due course.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health what moves have been made to improve stroke and breast assessments, as indicated in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 2894/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department has completed public consultations on 'Reshaping Breast Assessment Services' and 'Reshaping Stroke Care' to inform the identification of improvements to both services. In total 4,630 written responses were received in relation to breast assessment services, with 19,510 responses received in relation to stroke services.

I intend to carefully consider the evidence available, the consultation analyses and the views of all those who responded before deciding on the way forward to deliver improvements in both services. I will, of course, update the House in due course.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health what moves have been made to improve emergency care and day case elective care, as indicated in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 2895/17-22)

Mr Swann: Prototype daycase elective care centres were established in December 2018 for the treatment of cataracts and varicose veins. My Department is working on the development of a regional model for daycase elective care centres, taking learning from the prototypes. I hope to be in a position to consult on these proposals shortly.

My Department is also currently undertaking a clinically led Review of Urgent and Emergency Care which aims to establish a sustainable regional care model for the future. I expect to receive the team's initial report in the coming months.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health what progress has been made to provide support funding to the Derry addiction centre, as outlined in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 2896/17-22)

Mr Swann: Under the heading "Addressing Northern Ireland's unique circumstances" within "New Decade, New Approach", the UK Government commits to making funding available for a number of areas, which could include additional funding to support the Derry/Londonderry addiction centre. Discussions are ongoing with the UK Government about the delivery of this funding but no specific progress has been made in respect of potential support for a Derry/Londonderry addiction centre.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health how much has been spent on domiciliary care packages by each Health and Social Care Trust in each of the last three financial years.

(AQW 2897/17-22)

Mr Swann: The total cost by each of the Health and Social Care Trusts in relation to domiciliary care packages both in house and independent sector is set out at Table 1.

Table 1.	2018/19 £m	2017/18 £m	2016/17 £m
BHSCT	43.1	40.8	41.5
NHSCT	56.9	49.9	49.9
SEHSCT	56.9	52.1	49.5
SHSCT	45.5	41.5	38.3
WHSCT	47.2	42.2	36.1

Note – In regard to NHSCT, the increase in 18/19 reflects the rebanding of in house home care workers including arrears.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of (i) elective orthopaedic procedures; and (ii) emergency orthopaedic procedures that have taken place at Craigavon Area Hospital in each month of the last three years.

(AQW 2898/17-22)

Mr Swann: The number of emergency and elective procedures carried out under the Trauma and Orthopaedic speciality in Craigavon Area Hospital over the past three years are detailed below.

Number of procedures carried out in Trauma and Orthopaedics Speciality at Craigavon Area Hospital by month 2016/17 - 2018/19

Year	Month	Month/ Year	Elective	Non-Elective	Total
2016/17	Apr	Apr 2016	109	135	244

Year	Month	Month/ Year	Elective	Non-Elective	Total
2016/17	May	May 2016	150	126	276
2016/17	Jun	Jun 2016	129	115	244
2016/17	Jul	Jul 2016	76	117	193
2016/17	Aug	Aug 2016	117	119	236
2016/17	Sep	Sep 2016	126	114	240
2016/17	Oct	Oct 2016	141	137	278
2016/17	Nov	Nov 2016	131	127	258
2016/17	Dec	Dec 2016	46	129	175
2016/17	Jan	Jan 2017	107	140	247
2016/17	Feb	Feb 2017	113	125	238
2016/17	Mar	Mar 2017	134	99	233
2017/18	Apr	Apr 2017	137	97	234
2017/18	May	May 2017	141	135	276
2017/18	Jun	Jun 2017	140	140	280
2017/18	Jul	Jul 2017	124	121	245
2017/18	Aug	Aug 2017	128	135	263
2017/18	Sep	Sep 2017	107	130	237
2017/18	Oct	Oct 2017	153	113	266
2017/18	Nov	Nov 2017	111	131	242
2017/18	Dec	Dec 2017	87	146	233
2017/18	Jan	Jan 2018	68	155	223
2017/18	Feb	Feb 2018	122	117	239
2017/18	Mar	Mar 2018	137	147	284
2018/19	Apr	Apr 2018	130	114	244
2018/19	May	May 2018	139	148	287
2018/19	Jun	Jun 2018	174	124	298
2018/19	Jul	Jul 2018	115	145	260
2018/19	Aug	Aug 2018	100	171	271
2018/19	Sep	Sep 2018	132	143	275
2018/19	Oct	Oct 2018	173	144	317
2018/19	Nov	Nov 2018	170	146	316
2018/19	Dec	Dec 2018	111	144	255
2018/19	Jan	Jan 2019	161	165	326
2018/19	Feb	Feb 2019	143	140	283
2018/19	Mar	Mar 2019	139	122	261

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health how much revenue each hospital site has generated from car parking charges, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 2899/17-22)

Mr Swann: The table provides the level of revenue generated from car parking charges in each hospital site in the last three years.

Trust	Hospital Site	Revenue Generated 2016/17 (£'m)	Revenue Generated 2017/18 (£'m)	Revenue Generated 2018/19 (£'m)
Belfast	Royal Victoria	-	0.70	1.74
	Belfast City	0.64	0.64	0.68
	Mater	0.1	0.1	0.10
	Non-identifiable*	0.42	0.50	0.70
Northern	Antrim	0.72	0.75	0.84
	Causeway	0.33	0.34	0.38
South Eastern	Ulster	1.47	1.58	1.68
	Ards	-	-	0.12
Southern	Craigavon	0.45	0.43	0.45
	Daisy Hill	0.16	0.15	0.17
Western	Altnagelvin	0.28	0.40	0.47
	South West Acute	0.10	0.17	0.17
	Omagh	-	0.02	0.03

*The levels of revenue stated relates to staff car parking across the Belfast hospital sites and are not separately identifiable.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health how much revenue has been generated from parking fines at hospital sites in each of the last three years.

(AQW 2900/17-22)

Mr Swann: The table below provides the level of revenue generated from car parking fines at each hospital site in the last three years.

Trust	Hospital Site	Revenue Generated (£'000) 2016/17	Revenue Generated (£'000) 2017/18	Revenue Generated (£'000) 2018/19
Western	Altnagelvin	25	26	28
	South West Acute	5	13	14
	Omagh	-	4	6

The Belfast, Northern, South Eastern and Southern Health and Social Care Trusts do not generate any revenue from parking fines as any revenue generated is retained by the licensed contractor.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health has he any plans to create a Chief Psychological Officer role, to expedite the transformation of the psychological workforce and to ensure equitable access to evidence-based psychological interventions across all areas of physical and mental health.

(AQW 2914/17-22)

Mr Swann: There are no current plans to create a Chief Psychological Officer role within the Department. However, my Department will continue to work closely with psychologists working in the HSC and with relevant representative bodies as we take forward important work such as reviewing the Psychological Therapies Strategy.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health why the psychology profession is not currently represented at a strategic level, similar to other professions, in the Public Health Agency; and why there is no appropriate professional advice informing the joint Public Health Agency and Health and Social Care Board commissioning plan in relation to accessing evidence-based psychological interventions across health and social care services.

(AQW 2915/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Public Health Agency does not currently employ a dedicated psychology position specifically in relation to mental health or psychological interventions.

The Health and Social Care Board and Public Health Agency regularly takes clinical advice from Trust professional leads and professional bodies as appropriate when commissioning services. This includes advice from psychologists and experts in psychological services.

The absence of an employed dedicated psychology position does not mean lack of psychological input or limitation to accessing evidence-based psychological interventions across health and social care services.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health (i) to outline the membership of the working group on mental well-being; (ii) how it is envisaged that this group will operate; and (iii) whether there will be opportunities for input from the psychology profession into its work.

(AQW 2917/17-22)

Mr Swann: Membership of the Executive Working Group on Mental Wellbeing, Resilience and Suicide Prevention is at a strategic level and includes the Northern Ireland Executive Committee and senior representatives from the Department of Health, other Departments and the Public Health Agency.

The following Terms of Reference were agreed at the 4th March meeting of the Group:

- To monitor and report on progress of relevant departmental actions.
- To determine additional actions in support of suicide prevention and mental wellbeing.
- To examine wider progress in relation to the implementation of the Protect Life 2 Strategy.
- To review existing cross-departmental co-ordination on suicide prevention.
- To consider cross-departmental actions to improve psychological resilience of hard to reach groups.
- To consider actions for reducing risk factors for suicide and for enhancing protective factors.
- To ensure inclusion of emotional wellbeing and resilience building within the new Mental Health Strategy.

It is expected that there will be regular presentations to this group and that may provide an opportunity for the psychological profession to contribute in future. There will also be opportunities to provide input through Protect Life 2 implementation groups.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Health what funding and support groups exist to assist people with combat stress and post-traumatic stress disorder.

(AQW 2925/17-22)

Mr Swann: Psychological Therapy and other Mental Health Services within each Health and Social Care Trust provide individual and group interventions for people with post-traumatic stress symptoms. These are funded from the health service budget and it would not be feasible to disaggregate costs.

A number of voluntary organisations provide services for people that have experienced combat stress or post-traumatic stress symptoms.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Health for an update on the timescale for the rollout of the three cycles of In Vitro Fertilisation provision, including how LGBTQ women will be able to access these services, as outlined in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 2940/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am pleased that the New Decade, New Approach agreement committed to providing three funded IVF cycles for eligible women.

While I have previously highlighted capacity constraint with the Regional Fertility Centre, I am establishing a Project Board to take this project forward and consider what is needed to enable implementation of the three cycles for eligible women. I will be able to provide further details, including an implementation date when the Project Board reports back to me.

The referral pathway for all eligible patients, regardless of their sexual orientation, is through their GP.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Health what steps he has taken to implement the recommendations of the Bengoa report since taking office; and when he will provide a full report on the progress of implementation.

(AQW 2961/17-22)

Mr Swann: Since taking office I have committed to supporting the Transformation agenda, with work ongoing across my Department and the wider HSC on a range of key Transformation projects, including the introduction of Multidisciplinary Teams in Primary Care, and the establishment of prototype Elective Care Centres. I am also currently considering the findings of recent public consultations on Stroke and Breast Assessment Services.

A Year 1, and a Year 2 Transformation progress report has been published. These reports can be found at:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/progressreportintroduction>. It is expected that a further progress report will be published later this year.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of calls to the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, in each of the last three years, that were deemed to be false alarm calls, broken down by station.

(AQW 2962/17-22)

Mr Swann: The table below shows the total number of calls, mobilised and non-mobilised, received by Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service (NIFRS) Regional Control Centre (RCC) for the financial years 2016/17, 2017/18 and 2018/19 that were deemed to be false alarm calls, broken down by Station.

Station	2016/17 Total False Alarm Calls	2017/18 Total False Alarm Calls	2018/19 Total False Alarm Calls
Knock	1,187	1,181	1,140
Central	1,814	1,773	1,659
Cadogan	1,499	1,475	1,438
Whitla	562	462	511
Westland	823	829	983
Springfield	1,332	1,108	1,247
Ballymena	424	539	591
Kilrea	47	67	96
Cushendall	57	38	62
Carnlough	19	48	29
Larne	321	300	365
Coleraine	369	408	425
Portstewart	63	69	102
Portrush	205	179	122
Ballymoney	174	140	134
Ballycastle	120	93	82
Glengormley	919	1,003	988
Antrim	680	579	647
Ballyclare	145	145	118
Carrickfergus	308	355	554
Whitehead	77	56	108
Lisburn	727	729	763
Crumlin	178	149	160
Portadown	499	499	618
Armagh	335	379	355
Banbridge	193	250	266
Lurgan	670	787	809
Keady	51	51	51
Dromore	65	65	93
Bangor	586	639	641
Comber	70	107	130
Donaghadee	125	117	88
Ballywalter	88	65	111
Holywood	124	169	145
Newtownards	477	582	627
Portaferry	31	51	57
Newry	533	710	918
Crossmaglen	34	46	41

Station	2016/17 Total False Alarm Calls	2017/18 Total False Alarm Calls	2018/19 Total False Alarm Calls
Rathfriland	63	93	109
Warrenpoint	92	102	109
N'townhamilton	32	66	36
Downpatrick	503	517	613
Kilkeel	161	181	293
Carryduff	176	210	282
Newcastle	249	253	535
Ballynahinch	101	103	183
Crescent Link	504	737	580
Northland	1,187	1,405	1,225
Strabane	249	355	309
Limavady	248	169	156
Dungiven	88	97	114
Omagh	241	296	321
Dromore	33	39	34
Castledearg	35	39	30
Fintona	19	41	24
Newtownstewart	48	69	68
Cookstown	223	224	263
Pomeroy	60	77	81
Maghera	97	106	142
Dungannon	436	461	433
Magherafelt	210	192	216
Enniskillen	350	294	299
Irvinestown	66	46	43
Belleek	21	39	31
Lisnaskea	82	88	88
Clogher	97	86	79
	21,602	22,627	23,970

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of calls to the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, in each of the last three years, broken down by station.

(AQW 2963/17-22)

Mr Swann: The table below shows the number of calls, mobilised and non-mobilised, received by Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service (NIFRS) Regional Control Centre (RCC) for financial years 2016/17, 2017/18 and 2018/19 broken down by Station.

Station Name	2016/17 Total Calls	2017/18 Total Calls	2018/19 Total Calls
Knock	1,697	1,797	1,642
Central	2,512	2,429	2,266
Cadogan	2,101	2,054	2,048
Whitla	922	757	827

Station Name	2016/17 Total Calls	2017/18 Total Calls	2018/19 Total Calls
Westland	1,206	1,198	1,391
Springfield	2,095	1,757	1,915
Ballymena	759	899	960
Kilrea	109	110	172
Cushendall	153	97	143
Carnlough	59	87	66
Larne	490	475	536
Coleraine	595	632	677
Portstewart	105	119	138
Portrush	320	280	206
Ballymoney	275	245	270
Ballycastle	215	186	151
Glengormley	1,260	1,353	1,409
Antrim	995	881	944
Ballyclare	260	228	211
Carrickfergus	554	523	815
Whitehead	121	96	160
Lisburn	1,070	1,067	1,107
Crumlin	282	243	277
Portadown	743	750	859
Armagh	528	564	546
Banbridge	338	393	432
Lurgan	1,143	1,343	1,355
Keady	89	104	114
Dromore	103	129	157
Bangor	906	986	966
Comber	162	174	198
Donaghadee	182	192	136
Ballywalter	148	120	174
Holywood	195	230	213
Newtownards	633	829	847
Portaferry	47	83	90
Newry	875	1,130	1,590
Crossmaglen	79	97	106
Rathfriland	128	191	239
Warrenpoint	164	164	214
Newtownhamilton	68	168	92
Downpatrick	844	910	991
Kilkeel	336	354	591
Carryduff	241	265	374

Station Name	2016/17 Total Calls	2017/18 Total Calls	2018/19 Total Calls
Newcastle	414	422	806
Ballynahinch	181	196	315
Crescent Link	819	1,125	964
Northland Road	1,909	2,211	1,928
Strabane	497	651	588
Limavady	379	284	297
Dungiven	152	176	199
Omagh	408	501	532
Dromore	69	91	75
Castledearg	71	90	82
Fintona	46	95	51
Newtownstewart	96	139	117
Cookstown	354	371	456
Pomeroy	109	121	164
Maghera	148	170	248
Dungannon	678	733	704
Magherafelt	297	291	356
Enniskillen	558	504	511
Irvinestown	117	109	100
Belleek	73	97	89
Lisnaskea	175	167	189
Clogher	202	183	162
Test Station*	1,555	1,046	957
Not specified/not NI	-	-	6
Total	35,414	36,462	38,511

* Test station figures are used to facilitate the testing of call handling procedures, call equipment and mobilisation equipment. These are internally generated calls.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health to detail the cost to each Health and Social Care Trust of parking enforcement services, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 2964/17-22)

Mr Swann: The table below provides the level of cost attributed to Health and Social Care Trusts for parking enforcement services in the last three years.

Trust	Parking Enforcement Services Costs (£'000) 2016/17	Parking Enforcement Services Costs (£'000) 2017/18	Parking Enforcement Services Costs (£'000) 2018/19
Western	39	58	57

No costs have been incurred by the Belfast, Northern, South Eastern and Southern Health and Social Care Trusts in relation to parking enforcement services. Any revenue generated is retained by the licensed contractor.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to detail the hourly rate paid to domiciliary care workers by each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 2984/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the annual salary of domiciliary care workers employed in each Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust at 31 December 2019, broken down by grade and using the 2018/19 Agenda for Change (AfC) pay scales (those in place at the time) is detailed in the table below:

Domiciliary Care Workers at 31 December 2019

HSC Trust	Grade	2018/19 AfC Pay Scale	Hourly Rate	Headcount
Belfast	Band 2	£16,943 - £18,309	£8.67 - £9.36	528
	Band 3	£17,406 - £20,246	£8.90 - £10.35	75
Northern	Band 3	£17,406 - £20,246	£8.90 - £10.35	956
South Eastern	Band 2	£16,943 - £18,309	£8.67 - £9.36	533
	Band 3	£17,406 - £20,246	£8.90 - £10.35	35
Southern	Band 2	£16,943 - £18,309	£8.67 - £9.36	83
	Band 3	£17,406 - £20,246	£8.90 - £10.35	1,062
Western	Band 2	£16,943 - £18,309	£8.67 - £9.36	475
	Band 3	£17,406 - £20,246	£8.90 - £10.35	13

Source: Health & Social Care (HSC) Trusts

Pay parity with England for all staff on Agenda for Change was restored in January 2020, with effect from 1 April 2019. The 2019/20 pay award is being implemented with a view to paying this in March 2020 salaries. Band 2 will be paid at £17,652 - £19,020 and Band 3 at £18,813 - £20,795. The 2020/21 pay award will then be implemented as soon as possible, maintaining parity with England. In 2020/21, Band 2 will be paid at £18,005 - £19,337 and Band 3 at £19,737 - £21,142.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health whether General Practitioner contracts include the requirement to work out of hours.

(AQW 2985/17-22)

Mr Swann: The General Medical Services (GMS) Contract came into effect on 1st April 2004. Under the Contract arrangements, responsibility for provision of Out of Hours Services passed initially to the Health and Social Service Boards with effect from 1st January 2005 and latterly to the Health and Social Care Board in 2009. Since the 2004 arrangements took effect, GPs are not contracted to provide Out of Hours Services.

It is important to note that, alongside those GPs who provide Out of Hours Services, a range of other health care professionals including nurses, advanced nurse practitioners, Marie Curie nurses and pharmacists play a key role in delivering out of hours services across Northern Ireland.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Health to outline the role of the Health and Social Care Board Business Services Organisation in the recruitment of staff, staff payroll and procurement for the Health Service.

(AQW 2990/17-22)

Mr Swann: The information requested is available online via the following link: <http://www.hscbusiness.hscni.net/pdf/BSO%20service%20catalogue%2019-20%2019.09.19.pdf>

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health what steps he will take to ensure pay parity between social workers in Northern Ireland and those elsewhere in the UK.

(AQW 2994/17-22)

Mr Swann: As outlined in my statement to the Assembly on 14 January, pay parity with England is restored for all health and social care staff on Agenda for Change terms and conditions with effect from 1st April 2019. This will include social workers.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health, in light of the UK Supreme Court judgement on the Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards, whether he has any plans to update these safeguards; and to outline any planned timescale.

(AQW 2995/17-22)

Mr Swann: The 2014 UK Supreme Court judgement in relation to deprivation of liberty (commonly referred to as the 'Cheshire West' case) provided an acid test for deprivation of liberty as being a person who lacks capacity, is under continuous control and supervision and is not free to leave. The Supreme Court also noted that all deprivations of liberty must be authorised.

In March 2019, my Department, along with the Department of Justice, took the decision to commence the Mental Capacity Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 in phases, most notably to introduce a new statutory process for deprivation of liberty in the first phase. This came into operation on 2 December 2019.

The new statutory Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards meet the standards required following the Supreme Court judgement on Cheshire West.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health how much was paid to agencies to fill social work vacancies during the financial year 2018-19.

(AQW 2996/17-22)

Mr Swann: The amount paid to agencies within the category social work during the financial year 2018-19 is detailed below;

HSC Expenditure on Agency Social Workers

Year	HSC Trust				
	Belfast	Northern	South Eastern	Southern	Western
2018/19	£3,467,033	£1,178,000	£1,664,049	£323,735	£3,581,657

Source: HSC Trust

* May include some expenditure on Band 5 agency staff working in social care.

Agency expenditure may not solely relate to filling vacancies, and may be used for other reasons, for example covering sickness absence.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health what provisions are being made to ensure that older people, and other people who may not have access to the internet, are fully informed about how to prevent the contraction or spread of COVID-19, including with regard to the distribution of potentially necessary provisions and protection to people who are being advised not to visit GPs.

(AQW 2997/17-22)

Mr Swann: The two key public health messages in relation to COVID-19 are about (1) the importance of good hand hygiene and how to wash hands effectively, and (2) the 'catch it, bin it, kill it' message about coughs and sneezes.

A national TV and press campaign is providing advice on good hand hygiene to help prevent further spread of viruses. In addition, Northern Ireland now has full access to the NHS 111 helpline service on Covid-19.

Coverage of the public health messages has been intensive and persistent across all media.

Public health information is being displayed prominently in healthcare settings, social care settings and many other public spaces.

Anyone who needs prescription-only medication should contact their GP surgery.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health to outline the changes made after the regional bureaucracy action plan, emerging from the 2012 Social Work strategy; and what evidence exists that this has reduced bureaucracy for social workers.

(AQW 2998/17-22)

Mr Swann: A number of initiatives have been progressed including: a new approach to carers' assessments; the introduction of an electronic version of the Northern Ireland Single Assessment tool; use of digital dictation and mobile devices. There is evidence of some of these reducing bureaucracy, but it has been difficult to quantify this in others. A range of opportunities have recently been identified with stakeholders to reduce bureaucracy and are currently being considered by my Department.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 1453/17-22, what assurances he can give that a perinatal mental health inpatient unit and community service is high on his Department's budgetary priorities.

(AQW 3033/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department is currently considering a business case for enhanced community perinatal mental health services for the region. The business case for a dedicated mother and baby unit is still being developed. Any investment in this area will have to be balanced against other service priorities and in the context of the Department's financial settlement.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 937/17-22, whether it is in line with the Department of Health's Guidance in Relation to the Health and Social Care Complaints Procedure - April 2019 - for the person complained against to investigate the complaint.

(AQW 3062/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Health & Social Care Complaints Procedure encourages front line staff to attempt to resolve informal complaints/concerns 'on the spot' where possible. If such direct resolution is not possible and the complaint is then taken forward as a formal complaint by the HSC organisation, the investigation of the complaint would be undertaken by a suitable person appointed by the HSC organisation with the appropriate skills, expertise and seniority and excluding persons involved in the substance of the complaint as the investigating officer.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to outline the policy areas he (i) is currently reviewing; and (ii) has instructed for a review to take place.

(AQW 3078/17-22)

Mr Swann: The information requested is provided in the tables below:

(i) The policy areas the Minister of Health is currently reviewing:

Review	Policy Area
Cancer Strategy 2020	Secondary Care
Mid-Term Review of Making Life Better, (Strategic Framework for Public Health)	Health Development
Social Prescribing Policy	Primary Care/ e-Health
The Childcare Partnerships and underpinning Early Years Development Fund	Family and Children's Policy
The Autism Strategy 2013 - 2020	Autism
Review of Restraint and Seclusion	Mental Health
The Review of the Gender Identity Service	Social Services Policy
Nursing Alerts Review	Workforce Policy
Off Contract Agency Review	Workforce Policy
Review of HSC Zero Tolerance Policy	Workforce Policy
Review of Senior Executive Pay	Workforce Policy
The Fundamental Review of Regulation (Review of The Health and Personal Social Services (Quality, Improvement and Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order 2003)	Safety, Quality and Standards
Review of the RQIA Fees and Frequency of Inspections	Safety, Quality and Standards
Reshaping Stroke Care	Regional Health Services Transformation
Regional Review of Neurology Services	Regional Health Services Transformation
Reshaping Breast Assessment Services	Regional Health Services Transformation
Modernising Pathology Services	Regional Health Services Transformation
Urgent and Emergency Care	Hospital Services Reform Directorate
Daycase Elective Care Centres	Hospital Services Reform Directorate
Landscape Review of Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC)	Social Services

(ii) The policy areas the Minister of Health has instructed for a review to take place:

Review	Policy Area
Agenda for Change Refresh	Workforce Policy

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 1964/17-22, to break these figures down per hospital.
(AQW 3079/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number of available overnight beds across all hospital facilities in HSC Trusts in Northern Ireland is collected on a quarterly basis. The year-on-year change in the average daily number of beds available for overnight stays for 2013/14 to 2018/19 (the latest full year of data available at present) have been provided for in the tables below.

The number of available beds is the number of beds on each ward opened overnight that were actually available for patients, measured at midnight. Beds reserved solely for day case admissions or regular day admissions are not included in these figures.

Table 1: Daily average number of available beds by hospital

Trust Provider	Hospital	Average Daily Available Beds				
		14/15	15/16	16/17	17/18	18/19
Belfast	Belfast City	445	425	419	406	378
	Musgrave Park	250	261	251	243	263
	Cancer Centre	69	68	67	65	62
	Knockbracken Healthcare Park	141	134	118	118	118
	Young Peoples Centre	25	31	31	31	31
	Royal Victoria	683	670	688	674	674
	Royal Maternity	123	114	110	106	110
	RBHSC	95	94	94	95	96
	Mater Infirmorum	233	237	229	245	245
	Muckamore Abbey	139	120	115	104	87
South Eastern	Ards	20	20	20	20	20
	Ulster	609	614	625	634	626
	Ulster MHU	24	24	24	24	24
	Lagan Valley	94	88	93	93	90
	Lagan Valley PNU	36	36	36	36	36
	Thompson House	35	36	36	36	36
	Downshire	79	71	71	72	72
	Downe	47	42	43	43	43
Northern	Robinson Memorial	21	21	21	21	21
	Dalriada	23	27	32	32	32
	Causeway Hospital	235	233	241	240	239
	Holywell	126	120	119	116	117
	Moyle	16	16	16	17	18
	Whiteabbey	44	44	43	44	44
	Mid Ulster	26	22	22	22	22
	Antrim	509	506	519	528	529
Southern	St Luke's	35	24	24	24	24
	South Tyrone	40	36	36	36	36
	Lurgan	51	51	51	52	53
	Craigavon Area	464	481	483	492	477
	Daisy Hill	207	212	215	216	217
	Craigavon Area PNU	90	94	94	94	94
Western	Altnagelvin Area	481	482	477	476	463
	Waterside (Ward 1-4)	66	64	63	65	65
	Gransha	62	47	36	30	30
	Lakeview	20	13	9	10	10
	Omagh/Tyrone County	44	34	37	51	30
	South West Acute	218	220	225	224	226
	Tyrone & Fermanagh	94	67	62	66	64

Table 2: Percentage change in number of available beds from previous year

Trust Provider	Hospital	% change from previous year				
		14/15	15/16	16/17	17/18	18/19
Belfast	Belfast City	-4.1%	-4.4%	-1.4%	-3.2%	-6.9%
	Musgrave Park	3.4%	4.6%	-4.1%	-2.9%	8.2%
	Cancer Centre	-0.1%	-1.1%	-1.7%	-3.4%	-5.1%
	Knockbracken Healthcare Park	-14.3%	-4.9%	-12.4%	0.3%	-0.4%
	Young Peoples Centre	-8.8%	21.9%	-0.5%	0.3%	0.0%
	Royal Victoria	5.1%	-1.9%	2.7%	-2.1%	0.0%
	Royal Maternity	0.8%	-7.5%	-3.6%	-3.1%	3.1%
	RBHSC	10.7%	-0.5%	0.1%	1.1%	0.3%
	Mater Infirmorum	-6.1%	1.6%	-3.3%	6.7%	0.0%
	Muckamore Abbey	-23.0%	-13.8%	-4.1%	-9.6%	-16.6%
South Eastern	Ards	0.0%	-0.4%	-0.2%	0.3%	0.0%
	Ulster	2.5%	0.9%	1.7%	1.5%	-1.4%
	Ulster MHU	0.0%	0.3%	-0.5%	0.3%	0.0%
	Lagan Valley	3.0%	-6.4%	5.6%	0.0%	-3.6%
	Lagan Valley PNU	0.0%	0.3%	-0.5%	0.3%	0.0%
	Thompson House	1.4%	1.7%	-0.5%	0.3%	0.0%
	Downshire	-6.9%	-10.1%	0.0%	1.1%	0.0%
	Downe	-4.4%	-10.0%	0.3%	2.3%	-1.3%
Northern	Robinson Memorial	-13.1%	0.3%	1.1%	-0.9%	-0.5%
	Dalriada	-26.2%	19.8%	17.9%	0.3%	0.0%
	Causeway Hospital	0.8%	-1.0%	3.5%	-0.4%	-0.5%
	Holywell	-26.7%	-5.3%	-0.7%	-2.5%	0.9%
	Moyle	-7.4%	0.7%	-0.3%	3.5%	5.7%
	Whiteabbey	0.3%	0.1%	-4.0%	3.6%	-0.3%
	Mid Ulster	-5.7%	-15.5%	0.2%	2.3%	1.0%
	Antrim	4.0%	-0.6%	2.5%	1.8%	0.2%
Southern	St Luke's	-30.5%	-30.3%	-0.5%	0.3%	0.0%
	South Tyrone	-11.5%	-8.9%	-1.1%	0.4%	-0.1%
	Lurgan	0.0%	0.2%	-0.5%	1.2%	2.9%
	Craigavon Area	-1.0%	3.5%	0.4%	2.0%	-3.1%
	Daisy Hill	0.8%	2.4%	1.2%	0.4%	0.3%
	Craigavon Area PNU	21.4%	5.0%	-0.6%	0.3%	0.0%
Western	Altnagelvin Area	0.8%	0.3%	-1.1%	-0.2%	-2.8%
	Waterside (Ward 1-4)	-0.5%	-3.1%	-1.5%	4.0%	0.3%
	Gransha	0.0%	-24.0%	-23.7%	-16.5%	0.0%
	Lakeview	-18.6%	-32.6%	-29.9%	8.4%	0.0%
	Omagh/Tyrone County	-0.8%	-21.3%	8.7%	36.6%	-40.2%
	South West Acute	1.4%	1.0%	2.4%	-0.5%	0.7%
	Tyrone & Fermanagh	0.3%	-28.7%	-8.3%	7.2%	-2.3%

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 1596/17-22, whether the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust stopped using Essure 18 months before the manufacturer didn't renew the CE mark; and to outline the rationale for this decision.

(AQW 3089/17-22)

Mr Swann: In July 2016 the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust made the decision to suspend/stop performing the procedure for female sterilisation utilising the Essure device. This was a clinical decision based on information that was available from Health Canada (amongst others) about long-term systemic side effects a significant number of patients had been suffering following the placement of the Essure devices.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health whether he will put a specialist consultant in place for Essure patients.

(AQW 3090/17-22)

Mr Swann: Essure patients experiencing complications are seen by consultant gynaecologists for assessment and if they require further surgery they are placed on an inpatient waiting list. There are currently no plans for a specialist consultant post for Essure patients in Northern Ireland.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Health why the Western Health and Social Care Trust hold no waiting lists for short-term breaks or respite for under 18 year olds in the Derry city area when a number of families have had their respite stopped over 6 months ago.

(AQW 3114/17-22)

Mr Swann: Londonderry's short break facility, Rosebud Cottage, has recently been relocated to Racecourse Road with an anticipated opening date of 30 April 2020. The Western Health and Social Care Trust is aware of the impact on families over recent months due to the unavailability of services. In lieu of the availability of short break facilities in Rosebud, families have been offered alternatives such as access to services in Avalon (a short break service in Omagh) or Self Directed Support. This again is based on on-going assessed need.

Once the service in Rosebud Cottage is operational, a waiting list will be re-established in order to assist managers to prioritise services for those most in need.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health what plans he has to communicate the health impacts of air pollution to the public.

(AQW 3139/17-22)

Mr Swann: The collective effect of actions by members of the public, local councils and government departments and agencies, can make a significant difference to reducing air pollution and the impact it has on population health. At a strategic policy level, the importance of air quality is reflected in the draft Programme for Government and the public health strategic framework 'Making Life Better'. My Department publishes information on air pollution and health on NI Direct and, in conjunction with DAERA, supports 'Air Aware', a free subscription service that delivers SMS alerts when air pollution levels are high. For those interested in the research and the science, the Department's web site has link to the Committee on the Medical Effects of Air Pollutants (COMEAP), which provides independent advice to government departments and agencies on how air pollution impacts on health.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health what steps he will take to improve Tier 2 and Tier 3 Child and Adolescent Mental Health services to ensure that patients are treated effectively by appropriately trained mental health professionals.

(AQW 3162/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department leads on a draft Inter-Departmental Action Plan in response to the Children's Commissioner's 'Still Waiting' report. The Action Plan outlines a range of actions to improve CAMHS. Both the draft Action Plan and a Progress Update Report are available on my Department's website.

Responding to the Commissioner's recommendations, and strengthening CAMHS, will require additional investment which will have to be considered against other priorities and in the context of my Department's budget settlement.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health how he intends to ensure, through appropriate commissioning and funding, that access to evidence-based psychological interventions are available to meet the mental health needs at each stage of a person's life.

(AQW 3167/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Mental Health Action Plan, which I intend to publish very soon, and the Mental Health Strategy, which will be co-produced and published in December, will address access to evidence-based psychological interventions.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health to detail his Department's spend on gender identity services in each of the last five years, broken down by (i) staffing; (ii) administration; (iii) marketing or advertising; and (iv) patient treatment.

(AQW 3178/17-22)

Mr Swann: The gender identity service is not recorded separately on the Belfast HSC Trust's system and is not separately costed. Therefore, it is not possible to provide the information requested without incurring disproportionate costs.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Health whether the Mental Capacity (NI) Act 2016 has been implemented in all Health and Social Care Trusts.

(AQW 3189/17-22)

Mr Swann: The first phase of the Mental Capacity Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 was commenced on 1 October and 2 December 2019 for the purposes of deprivation of liberty, research and money and valuables.

All Trusts have implemented these provisions and my officials have continued to work with Trusts to support the implementation.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how many care packages are currently in place in each Health and Social Care Trust.
(AQW 3194/17-22)

Mr Swann: The number of residential and nursing care packages in effect as at 31st December 2019, and the number of home care packages delivered 8th - 14th September 2019, by HSC Trust, are outlined below in Table 1 and Table 2, respectively.

Table 1. The number of residential and nursing care packages in effect as at 31 December 2019, by HSC Trust

HSC Trust	Residential care packages	Nursing care packages
Belfast	881	2,030
Northern	1,080	2,047
South Eastern	762	1,442
Southern	502	1,740
Western	495	1,309

Source: CC7 return

Table 2. The number of domiciliary care packages delivered 8th - 14th September 2019, by HSC Trust

HSC Trust	Domiciliary care packages
Belfast	4,905
Northern	5,882
South Eastern	5,467
Southern	5,049
Western	4,271

Source: CC7b domiciliary care survey

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health whether his Department is seeking to recruit nursing staff from abroad.
(AQW 3197/17-22)

Mr Swann: The current International Nursing Recruitment project commenced in January 2016 as one approach to address the escalating Registered Nurse (Adult) vacancies across the five Health and Social Care Trusts. The project aim is to recruit 622 nurses to the HSC by March 2020.

As at 13th February 2020, the HSC had 448 arrivals from EU and non-EU countries. Of these 402 remain in post. Recent numbers have been increasing, and current trends indicate that the target of 622 will be reached – and perhaps exceeded - within the coming months.

My officials are currently developing options for my consideration for future international recruitment exercises, which could complement the increase in pre-registration nursing and midwifery places outlined in New Decade, New Approach, as a further means of filling nursing vacancies. There is also a need to promote Health and Social Care as an employer of choice, and a number of actions are being progressed under the health and social care Workforce Strategy.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health whether he has any plans to stop Health and Social Care Trusts charging for car parking.
(AQW 3198/17-22)

Mr Swann: I refer the member to my response for written AQW 1590/17-22.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health (i) when the roll out of Mental Health Regional Trauma Network is due to start; (ii) what will be its first focus; and (iii) what specific provision will be made for veterans.

(AQW 3232/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Regional Trauma Network is in the process of being developed and I am hopeful that it will be launched in the coming months. The recent Health and Social Care Board public consultation on the Regional Trauma Network (<http://www.hscboard.hscni.net/get-involved/previous-consultations>) sets out the proposed initial focus for the service. Provision for veterans will be considered as part of the development of the Regional Trauma Network.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health how many children and young people in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust are registered with a Health Service dentist; and what this figure represents as a percentage of all children and young people.

(AQW 3235/17-22)

Mr Swann: The number of under 18s in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust who are registered with a Health Service dentist, and what this figure represents as a percentage of all children and young people in the Trust, are shown in the following table.

Number of under 18s in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust (HSCT) who are registered with a Health Service dentist; and the percentage of all under 18s this represents in the Trust.

Number of under 18s registered with a dentist in the Northern HSCT, December 2019 ¹	NISRA 2019 Population Projection for under 18s in the Northern HSCT ²	Registration Rate
81,408	108,838	74.8%

1 Latest official dental registration figures published are for December 2019.

Dental registrations are based on registrations paid in December 2019, with age calculated at 1st of the month.

Patient numbers are based on patient's residency, regardless of where the dentist location is.

2 NISRA mid-year population estimates have been used to calculate registration rate. (2019 NISRA Population Projections are based on 2016 estimates).

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health what commitment he can give that the funding to provide a True Cost of Care, based on financial models, will be reinstated to progress reform of Adult Social Care.

(AQW 3304/17-22)

Mr Swann: Work has already been undertaken to understand the costs of delivering home-based care and support cost, as well as the projected costs of delivering social care in line with the projected levels of demographic demand over the next 10 years.

Notwithstanding the importance of the reform of adult social care, and my commitment to this work as set out in the New Decade New Approach document, I will give consideration to this in the context of the resources available to my Department, along with all other planned and emerging Departmental priorities for funding our Health and Social Care system.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether his Department has any plans to involve paediatricians in raising awareness of the impact of air pollution on children and young people.

(AQW 3327/17-22)

Mr Swann: While the Department has no specific plans to formally involve paediatricians to carry out this role, the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, in its position statement on air quality in the UK, points to the responsibility of paediatricians to inform patients and their families of the health impacts of air pollution, and to support and encourage them to make positive changes to improve air quality and reduce their exposure to air pollution. It also advises that paediatricians should be aware of local and national initiatives to improve air quality and signpost families to relevant resources.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether his Department has assessed its carbon emissions; and whether a plan exists to reduce these emissions.

(AQW 3328/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department has not assessed its overall carbon emissions however we and the Health and Social Care Trusts have assessed our carbon emissions arising from energy use. The Northern Ireland Civil Service Energy Management Strategy, launched in May 2019, aims to lower net energy consumption by 30 per cent by 2030 across Government, from a 2016/17 baseline year. The Department will therefore continue to work with HSC Trusts to ensure that effective energy management processes are in place and energy efficiency projects are identified and implemented.

HSC organisations also continue to drive carbon emission reduction through increased energy efficiency of the existing estate; the use of electric and hybrid vehicles and encouraging greater use of public transport and cycling; the sustainable procurement of goods and services including food and effective waste management, including increased recycling and reduction of waste to landfill.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of pregnant women living with (i) type 1; (ii) type 2; and (iii) gestational diabetes in the last year.

(AQW 3380/17-22)

Mr Swann: The number of individuals admitted to hospital with a recorded diagnosis of Type-1, Type-2 and gestational diabetes mellitus in pregnancy in the last financial year 2018/19, are shown in the table below.

Number of Individuals Admitted to HSCT Hospitals in Northern Ireland where there was a recorded diagnosis of Diabetes mellitus in pregnancy, childbirth and puerperium, 2018/19

ICD-10 Diagnosis Code	ICD-10 Diagnosis Description	Number of Individuals
O24.0	Pre-existing type 1 diabetes mellitus in pregnancy	115
O24.1	Pre-existing type 2 diabetes mellitus in pregnancy	45
O24.2	Pre-existing malnutrition-related diabetes mellitus in pregnancy	*
O24.3	Pre-existing diabetes mellitus, unspecified, in pregnancy	*
O24.4	Diabetes mellitus arising in pregnancy	2,044
O24.9	Diabetes mellitus in pregnancy, unspecified	*
Total		2,213

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health how many women in the last year have developed type 2 diabetes following a diagnosis of gestational diabetes in pregnancy.

(AQW 3381/17-22)

Mr Swann: This information is not available.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health (i) what measures are being taken to ensure maintenance of safe staffing levels within the family and childcare section of social services; and how many staff posts in family and childcare services are currently unfilled.

(AQW 3382/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) Health and Social Care Trusts have put in place a range of measures to ensure safe staffing levels within family and child care. These include initiatives to improve staff support, and thereby staff retention, and to recruit social workers to family and childcare.

The Social Work Strategy has supported a number of initiatives across Health and Social Care Trusts to strengthen workplace supports for social workers, including within family and childcare.

A working group has been established to explore the regional recruitment of newly qualified social workers into the workforce as a means of reducing the use of agency workers and turnover of staff.

A social work workforce review is underway to determine the number of social workers needed to meet future needs which will inform recommendations about the number of student places required for the future. Any recommendations about safe staffing levels will be factored into the modelling for future need. It is anticipated the review will report by the end of the year.

- ii) The number of vacant posts in family and child care in each Health and Social Care Trust is recorded in the table below. Trusts have advised that some vacant posts are currently occupied by staff recruited through Recruitment Agencies.

Northern HSC Trust	15.5
South Eastern HSC Trust	40
Southern HSC Trust	32
Western HSC Trust	7
Belfast HSC Trust	66

Source: Health and Social Care Trusts. 'Family and Child care' may be categorised differently across Health and Social Care Trusts.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health why there is a disparity in salary between dental core trainees in Northern Ireland and those in the rest of the UK.

(AQW 3385/17-22)

Mr Swann: Further to my answer to AQW 1112/17-22, pay for medical and dental post-graduate trainees is a devolved matter.

The Department of Health (England) imposed a new contract for hospital trainees in England in 2016. The English contract reduced the number of pay points on the medical and dental trainee payscales, and in so doing revalued those points. Trainees in Northern Ireland have remained on the 2002 contract and corresponding pay framework. Any change to the NI medical contract would be a matter for negotiation between the Department and the BMA.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health what advice his Department has provided to employers to help contain the spread of coronavirus.

(AQW 3404/17-22)

Mr Swann: General information on how to help contain the spread of COVID-19 is available on the Public Health Agency's website.

Guidance for Employers and Businesses, developed by Public Health England, will be made available on my Department's internet site. This guidance assists employers and businesses in providing advice to staff on what to do if someone who is suspected or is confirmed to have coronavirus has been in a workplace setting, or has travelled from listed areas.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health for an update on Health and Social Care training on parental alienation; and whether this training has been offered to social workers.

(AQW 3462/17-22)

Mr Swann: Training for social workers on parental alienation is being actively sought by the HSC Trusts. I understand that the Trusts hope to introduce a regional training program in the next financial year.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health whether the cancer drug Panitumumab is available for prescription in Health and Social Care Trusts; and to outline the rationale for this decision.

(AQW 3516/17-22)

Mr Swann: Panitumumab is recommended by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) as an option for previously untreated RAS wild-type metastatic colorectal cancer in adults (TA439). Therefore it is available for suitable patients in Northern Ireland.

Medicines are commissioned for use in Northern Ireland where there is substantive evidence of clinical and cost effectiveness, as determined by NICE.

There are two other licensed indications for the use of panitumumab, neither are recommended by NICE and therefore not routinely commissioned for patients in Northern Ireland.

In circumstances where NICE has not recommended a particular drug, it can be requested by an individual patient's clinician via the Individual Funding Request process which provides a mechanism to consider requests from clinical consultants for treatments for individual patients that fall outside the range of services routinely commissioned.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health how many children are awaiting assessment for autism, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 3678/17-22)

Mr Swann: The number of children waiting for an autism assessment as at 31 December 2019, and broken down by Health and Social Care Trust is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The number of children waiting for an autism assessment by Health & Social Care Trust at 31 December 2019.

HSC Trust	Number of children awaiting an autism assessment
Belfast	1017
Northern	922
South Eastern	59
Southern	132
Western	866
Northern Ireland	2996

Sources: Health and Social Care Board Return.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister of Health to outline progress in reducing bureaucracy for social workers, as outlined in the 2012 Strategy for Social Work, entitled Improving and Safeguarding Social Wellbeing.

(AQO 364/17-22)

Mr Swann: A number of initiatives have been introduced, for example an alternative approach to carer's assessments has been developed which reduced paperwork and increased social work time in direct practice and is being rolled out across Trusts. A pilot involving the use of electronic devices to record information was positively evaluated. The introduction of an electronic version in 2017 of the Northern Ireland Single Assessment tool replaced the paper version. While there have been some improvements it has however, been difficult, to date, to quantify. A range of opportunities have recently been identified with stakeholders to reduce bureaucracy and are currently being considered by my Department.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Health whether he will provide funding to independent counselling services to help address mental health waiting lists.

(AQO 359/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Public Health Agency allocates approximately £1.4m per year to 15 organisations to carry out a range of counselling services, including crisis intervention, family support services, bereavement support, suicide prevention, self-harm and early intervention programmes. The Public Health Agency monitor these services closely and will react to pressures in the system as they materialise. Already this year service enhancements have been provided to organisations who have been oversubscribed.

In addition the Health and Social Care Trusts commission counselling through Mental Health Hubs which operate across Northern Ireland and improve access to earlier mental health support. This reduces the requirement for people with common mental health needs to use secondary care mental health services. Referrals to the Hubs are made by GP's – with counselling and other services are provided by the independent and community and voluntary sector. The Hubs not only create a single gateway for psychological and well-being services but also offer a real alternative to drug therapies.

Counselling is also available in some GP practices through a Local Enhanced Service, where GPs choose to offer this service.

I am currently considering the draft Mental Health Action Plan, with a view to publishing it very soon in line with the commitment made in New Decade, New Approach. This will include an action to further roll out and develop Mental Health Hubs – as way to strengthen counselling provision across Northern Ireland.

I have also committed to publishing a new, ten year Mental Health Strategy by the end of 2020. The Strategy will take a lifespan, person centred approach and will consider the role of the independent and community and voluntary sector in supporting people who suffer from mental ill health, including through counselling. The Strategy will be co-produced – and the community and voluntary sector will be part of this co-production.

However, it is important to note that any investment in mental health services and counselling will have to be balanced against other service priorities and be considered in the context of the Department's financial settlements.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health what support or guidance is being given to Community Care Assistants in dealing with vulnerable clients susceptible to COVID-19; and whether their employers must ensure protective materials is provided to their staff.

(AQW 3740/17-22)

Mr Swann: Guidance for Domiciliary Care Providers was published on the 17th March. This guidance includes what to do if the individual being cared for has symptoms of COVID-19 and the supply of PPE and other resources for the care provision.

Guidance will be subject to further update as necessary.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of abortions carried out in each Health and Social Care Trust in each of the last five years, broken down by the reason for abortion.

(AQW 3745/17-22)

Mr Swann: Figures for the number of terminations of pregnancy carried out in each Health and Social Care Trust for the last 5 years are outlined in table 1 below.

We are unable to provide a definitive analysis of the reasons for terminations of pregnancies as the systems available for reporting do not hold such information. All terminations detailed below were for indications that are legally acceptable and medically approved in Northern Ireland.

Table 1: Terminations of Pregnancy in HSC Hospitals in Northern Ireland by trust provider

Year	Belfast	Northern	South Eastern	Southern	Western	Northern Ireland
2014/15	12	*	*	*	*	16
2015/16	*	*	*	*	*	16
2016/17	7	*	*	*	*	13
2017/18	8	*	*	*	*	12

Year	Belfast	Northern	South Eastern	Southern	Western	Northern Ireland
2018/19	*	*	*	*	*	8

Source: HSC Trusts

Cell counts less than 4 have been replaced by '*' to help protect patient confidentiality.

Further information and definitions are available from the Northern Ireland Terminations of Pregnancy 2018/19 publication which can be accessed from the following link <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/hs-termination-of-pregnancy-stats-18-19.pdf>.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Health what advice and direction has been circulated to people who provide care services to elderly people in their homes to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

(AQW 3755/17-22)

Mr Swann: Guidance for Domiciliary Care Providers was published on the 17th March. This guidance is aimed at Trusts and providers of care who support people in their own homes, including supported living arrangements.

The guidance includes what to do if the individual being cared for has symptoms of COVID-19 and what to do if a care worker is concerned they have COVID -19.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health whether local clinicians, performing full vaginal mesh removal requiring groin dissection, are fully trained and hold the required accreditation and validation.

(AQO 357/17-22)

Mr Swann: There is no formal accreditation process for mesh removal from the groin in the UK and expertise here is currently being acquired through professional collaborations with other surgeons across the UK.

In this field of practice, consultant urogynaecologists, will generally have completed relevant Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecology accredited subspecialty training in urogynaecology. This includes training in complex pelvic floor surgery. At the Belfast mesh centre the two consultants in this field have completed this accreditation and other specialists are experts in pelvic floor dysfunction specifically relating to bladder and bowel and pelvic floor reconstruction.

These surgeons have extensive experience and highly specialised expertise in pelvic surgery including management of surgical complications.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health whether he plans to reintroduce prescription charges.

(AQO 358/17-22)

Mr Swann: Charges for prescriptions were abolished in Northern Ireland in April 2010 with the aim of removing the financial barrier to people requiring medicines, to improve health outcomes and to avoid unnecessary hospital admissions.

I have no current plans to re-introduce prescription charges. Any proposals for the re-introduction of prescription charges would require public consultation and approval by the Executive as it is a cross-cutting issue.

In the meantime, it is important that patients only order repeat prescriptions for medicines that they need to minimise any potential waste.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Health to outline how he will work with the Minister for Communities to ensure that recommended home adaptations for people with a disability are actioned without delay.

(AQO 360/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department of Health and Department of Communities work collaboratively on all housing adaptations issues and I understand the value of such adaptations in delivering on the strategic aim of ensuring people with disabilities can continue to live and be cared for at home.

The inter-departmental Review of Housing Adaptions Services 2016 is an example of joint working between the two departments. The review also included significant input from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in conjunction with appropriate health and social care and housing association organisations

The review considered ways in which government can work together in a better way and included the development of an Adaptions toolkit to agree standards and to improve the communication processes between health and housing in order to avoid unnecessary delays in adaptation provision.

It also examined issues such as current and likely future demands for housing adaptations.

In the absence of a functioning Executive strands of the reviews recommendations have been taken forward by the Joint Housing Adaptions Steering Group which has representation from my department and Department for Communities

Health Trusts through their Occupational Therapy Services are also working collaboratively with their housing partners to ensure people with a disability are being provided with their adaptations in as timely a way possible.

I will continue to receive updates from my officials as this work progresses and will be available to meet with the Minister for Communities as required.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Health whether his Department's Core Grant Funding to the community and voluntary sector will continue until 2022.

(AQO 361/17-22)

Mr Swann: I recognise the important role the voluntary and community sector plays in supporting the work of the health and social care system, and I can confirm that, subject to final budget allocations, my Department's Core Grant Scheme will continue to run.

The Department currently invests £3.615million per year in the scheme, to support 67 organisations operating across a range of policy areas including: family support; mental health services; physical and learning disability support; elderly care; sexual health services; and support for victims of domestic violence.

My officials have already invited those organisations in receipt of core funding to submit applications for funding in 2020/21.

I also want to take this opportunity to address the issue of the equity of the current arrangements. The opportunity to apply for Core Grant funding is currently limited to those organisations who have been availing of the scheme during the previous year. In order to provide a more equitable and transparent funding mechanism to support partnership working with the sector going forward, I am today announcing that from April 2021 the opportunity to apply for Core Grant funding will be open to any organisation which meets application criteria, including those currently in receipt of core grant.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister of Health how his Department is addressing hospital waiting lists.

(AQO 362/17-22)

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 they should for assessment, diagnosis or treatment and I fully understand the distress and anxiety that long waiting times cause, particularly when patients are suffering pain and discomfort.

Tackling the current unacceptable waiting lists is a priority for me. Whilst transformation and organising our services more effectively is key, in parallel significant investment is also required to address the backlog of those patients that have been waiting the longest.

The New Decade, New Approach document published in January 2020 includes reducing hospital waiting times and delivering the reforms on health and social care as key priorities for the Executive in Northern Ireland. Delivery of these priorities is however dependent on new investment to implement the actions which underpin transformation and reform to sustainably reduce hospital waiting times.

The scale at which I will be able to tackle the unacceptable waiting times will be greatly influenced by the outcome of the current budgetary discussions.

Ms C Kelly asked the Minister of Health how his Department is addressing the high rate of hospital admissions in children for tooth extraction.

(AQO 363/17-22)

Mr Swann: The extraction of teeth under general anaesthetic should be the last option for a child who needs to have a tooth removed. Dental decay levels in Northern Ireland have reduced significantly over the last 16 years and there has been a similar reduction in children requiring a general anaesthetic for dental extractions. However, further reductions are needed.

Children's registration figures with General Dental Practitioners are at their highest ever level in Northern Ireland. While decay levels have fallen overall, children who come from an area of deprivation have higher levels than the population average.

Preventative interventions by general dental practitioners are important, as is the work of the Community Dental Service in targeting the most vulnerable sections of the population. Early diagnosis and intervention can slow the progression of decay and reduce the probability of a child needing a general anaesthetic.

The Health and Social Care system alone cannot solve this problem; there needs to be continued collaboration with the Department of Education in relation to school meals, school snack policies, school-based tooth brushing programmes and dental health messages. The introduction of campaigns addressing high levels of sugar consumption will have a positive impact on dental health, as will the recent dental workforce review in looking at the increased role in prevention by all members of the dental team, not just dentists.

Finally, in recent weeks the Chief Dental Officer has established Oral Health Options Groups to allow for the consideration and development of further interventions for the two most urgent groups at present, namely children and the elderly. These groups will help identify important service improvements and I will then be able to consider any options developed alongside any financial implications that may arise.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health's State of Child Health 2020 Report, particularly the high levels of suicide among children.

(AQO 365/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department will consider the report's recommendations in line with existing policy priorities and ongoing work.

Promoting and improving the physical and mental health of children and young people is a priority not only for my Department but across the Executive as evidenced in the New Decade, New Approach agreement.

The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health's State of Child Health 2020 report draws out a number of key themes from its findings. My Department is already investing in a number of programmes and strategies which seek to address child health inequalities and improve the wellbeing of our children.

The Protect Life 2 Strategy for Preventing Suicide and Self Harm was published on 10 September 2019 and sets out a clear action plan for addressing suicide. The strategy makes specific reference to children, the fact that some of the risk factors are specific to them, and that children experiencing suicidal ideation/behaviour require specific intervention as do children bereaved by suicide.

A number of actions within the Protect Life 2 Strategy are targeted at younger age groups including: suicide prevention training for teachers, youth workers and sports coaches; emotional resilience building and responding to critical incidents in schools; the schools counselling service; and child focused bereavement services.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Health to outline the data is collected on gambling addiction across all Health and Social Care Trusts.

(AQO 366/17-22)

Mr Swann: Where problem gambling causes mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, appropriate help and support is provided in line with clinical need and in line current service provision for mental health. This includes support from general Community Addictions teams within each Trust area who provide general assistance for those who suffer from any form of addiction. Further support is also available in the community and voluntary sector.

Given this, data on gambling addiction is not generally collected by Health and Social Care Trusts. Some information on referral rates is, however, collected by the Southern Health and Social Care Trust.

The Department for Communities recently consulted on the regulation of gambling and asked for views on whether the gambling industry should help fund research, education and treatment of problem gamblers – and whether a statutory levy should be imposed.

Officials in my Department will work with officials in the Department for Communities to consider the outworkings of that consultation and what this may mean for how services are provided and funded – including what data should be collected going forward.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health whether local clinicians, performing full vaginal mesh removal requiring groin dissection, are fully trained and hold the required accreditation and validation.

(AQO 357/17-22)

Mr Swann: There is no formal accreditation process for mesh removal from the groin in the UK and expertise here is currently being acquired through professional collaborations with other surgeons across the UK.

In this field of practice, consultant urogynaecologists, will generally have completed relevant Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecology accredited subspecialty training in urogynaecology. This includes training in complex pelvic floor surgery. At the Belfast mesh centre the two consultants in this field have completed this accreditation and other specialists are experts in pelvic floor dysfunction specifically relating to bladder and bowel and pelvic floor reconstruction.

These surgeons have extensive experience and highly specialised expertise in pelvic surgery including management of surgical complications.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health whether he plans to reintroduce prescription charges.

(AQO 358/17-22)

Mr Swann: Charges for prescriptions were abolished in Northern Ireland in April 2010 with the aim of removing the financial barrier to people requiring medicines, to improve health outcomes and to avoid unnecessary hospital admissions.

I have no current plans to re-introduce prescription charges. Any proposals for the re-introduction of prescription charges would require public consultation and approval by the Executive as it is a cross-cutting issue.

In the meantime, it is important that patients only order repeat prescriptions for medicines that they need to minimise any potential waste.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Health to outline how he will work with the Minister for Communities to ensure that recommended home adaptations for people with a disability are actioned without delay.

(AQO 360/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department of Health and Department of Communities work collaboratively on all housing adaptations issues and I understand the value of such adaptations in delivering on the strategic aim of ensuring people with disabilities can continue to live and be cared for at home.

The inter-departmental Review of Housing Adaptions Services 2016 is an example of joint working between the two departments. The review also included significant input from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in conjunction with appropriate health and social care and housing association organisations

The review considered ways in which government can work together in a better way and included the development of an Adaptations toolkit to agree standards and to improve the communication processes between health and housing in order to avoid unnecessary delays in adaptation provision.

It also examined issues such as current and likely future demands for housing adaptations.

In the absence of a functioning Executive strands of the reviews recommendations have been taken forward by the Joint Housing Adaptions Steering Group which has representation from my department and Department for Communities

Health Trusts through their Occupational Therapy Services are also working collaboratively with their housing partners to ensure people with a disability are being provided with their adaptations in as timely a way possible.

I will continue to receive updates from my officials as this work progresses and will be available to meet with the Minister for Communities as required.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Health whether his Department's Core Grant Funding to the community and voluntary sector will continue until 2022.

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Officials in my Department will work with officials in the Department for Communities to consider the outworkings of that consultation and what this may mean for how services are provided and funded – including what data should be collected going forward.

Department for Infrastructure

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure what additional funding is being allocated to Eastern Division to improve maintenance to street lighting.

(AQW 639/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): I understand and share the concerns of the public affected by street light outages and am working with my Departmental officials to address this issue as quickly as possible.

I am pleased to inform the Member that I have recently allocated £1.2m to address the current outage backlog and future outages up to 31 March 2020. £300k of this funding has been allocated for outage repairs in Eastern Division.

My Department's internal and external contractors are actively progressing outage repairs in all Divisions.

I have been raising the need for additional investment with the Minister for Finance as part of the 2020/21 budget discussions, in order to better maintain our roads and deal with other growing pressures facing my Department.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the total number of street lights currently reported as not working; and (ii) when Roads Service will have the funds to fully address the faults.

(AQW 830/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I understand and share the concerns of the public affected by street light outages. There are 12,085 street lighting outages reported on the street lighting management system.

I am pleased to inform the Member that after representations to the finance Minister, I have just recently allocated £1.2m to repair the current Street Lighting outage backlog and to repair future outages up to the end of this financial year.

My Department's internal and external contractors have already commenced work on repairing these broken street lights across all Divisions.

I am also currently engaged in the 2020/21 budget discussions and I have raised this issue with the Finance Minister to ensure future year budgets are properly funded to maintain this essential service.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Infrastructure what budget is available for (i) maintenance; and (ii) resurfacing schemes for rural roads.

(AQW 958/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department does not hold budget information on a rural/urban roads basis and therefore, it is not possible to provide details of budget on maintenance or resurfacing schemes for rural roads.

Structural Maintenance includes the activities of resurfacing and reconstruction of carriageways and footways, surface dressing, patching, structural stability and structural drainage.

The total capital and resource budget available for structural maintenance in 2019/20 is £107million. Of that, almost £68 million has been allocated to resurfacing schemes.

I can advise that the Department committed some £10 million of its opening £75 million Capital budget in the current year for structural maintenance of the road network to a 'Road Recovery Fund' (RRF) which has targeted roads adversely impacted by recent under-funding and roads which had deteriorated over the previous winter periods. A significant proportion of this RRF has been targeted to the rural road network.

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many street lights are currently in disrepair in the (i) Causeway Coast and Glens; and (ii) Mid and East Antrim Borough Council areas.

(AQW 1392/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Unfortunately as a result of severe budget constraints my Department had to restrict the street lighting maintenance service across Northern Ireland. As a result, priority was given to hazardous and group outages and individual outages were taking longer than usual to be repaired.

I understand and share the concerns of the public affected by street light outages and I am pleased to inform the Member that I have recently allocated £1.2m to address the current outage backlog and future outages up to 31 March 2020.

There are currently approximately 2800 reported outages in Northern Division, which includes the Causeway Coast and Glens and Mid and East Antrim Borough Council areas.

I can advise that my Department's internal and external contractors are working to repair outages across the North.

I have been raising the need for additional investment with the Minister for Finance as part of the 2020/21 budget discussions, in order to provide a more sustainable and street lighting repair service, better maintain our roads and deal with other growing pressures facing my Department.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will bring provisions in respect of MOT exemptions for vehicles over forty years old, in line with Great Britain.

(AQW 1680/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am aware that this exemption was introduced in Great Britain in 2018 which has led to a disparity as to how Vehicles of Historic Interest (VHIs) are treated in GB and NI.

I am also aware that following lobbying from both elected representatives and members of the public that my Department ran a public consultation exercise in 2019 seeking views as to whether this exemption should be introduced here.

This is an issue that I wish to examine carefully, and I will consider the consultation responses before I decide how best to proceed.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she plans to align legislation for electric bicycles with that in the rest of the United Kingdom.

(AQW 2068/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I announced on the 4 February that I will bring forward as soon as possible the necessary legislation which will remove the requirement for EAPCs to be registered and licensed. This will align with the position in Britain and Ireland. I have since written to the Infrastructure Committee setting out my intentions. The Committee considered this issue at its meeting of Wednesday 4 March 2020 where they confirmed that they are supportive of my proposals.

This will remove the need to register, license and insure EAPCs before use on public roads and the rider will no longer be required to wear a motorcycle helmet or hold a valid or full driving licence. In the case of insurance EAPC owners/riders should consider the need for insurance that covers areas such as damage, theft, personal injury and liability when the proposed legislative changes come into force.

I believe getting more people to walk, cycle or use public transport for every day journeys will have huge benefits for all of us, cutting down on traffic congestion, and reducing air pollution as well as the added benefits to our health and wellbeing.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the Roads Recovery Fund.

(AQW 2476/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In the last two years my Department has allocated some £25m to a Roads Recovery Fund (RRF) to help direct funding to those roads in most need following years of underfunding and severe winters. A significant proportion of this RRF has been targeted to the rural road network for resurfacing and repairs.

The funding is targeting many short lengths of road in particularly poor condition, together with a number of longer resurfacing schemes. It is estimated that by the end of this financial year over 1,800 locations on the road network will be improved by the initiative.

Recognising the importance of investment in the roads network to improve connectivity and help communities and tackle regional imbalance, I have been raising the need for additional investment with the Finance Minister, in advance of the 2020/21 budget. The availability of future funding for road maintenance will be determined when there is more certainty around future budgets.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment on being able to enhance street lighting repairs as a result of the new budget currently being worked on by the Executive.

(AQW 2534/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The annual funding required to provide a full street lighting repair service is £3.2million. During 2019-20, due to severe budgets constraints, street lighting repairs were seriously curtailed until additional funding was secured from the Minister of Finance in February 2020, so that my Department could urgently start repairing street lights again.

I have engaged with the Finance Minister setting out my Department's funding needs for the next budget period ahead having inherited significant budget challenges. I will work collaboratively with the Finance Minister on the 2020/21 budget and I hope to secure the necessary funding to deliver essential services including street lighting repairs in order to keep citizens safe.

Mr Wells asked the Minister for Infrastructure what is the total cost to Translink incurred through the practice of engine idling by drivers of its (i) buses; and (ii) trains.

(AQW 2732/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Idling occurs when buses or trains are stationary and is part of the normal operation of Diesel Buses and Trains. Idling is kept to a minimum by the use of technology designed to reduce cost and vehicle emissions. However, Translink does not separate the cost of idling on its train or bus fleets from its running cost information and therefore, it is not able to provide specific information in relation to the cost of idling on trains and buses.

My Department is working closely with Translink to develop opportunities to introduce zero and ultra-low emission public transport vehicle solutions to assist in tackling the climate emergency.

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will consider adding all or part of (i) Glenshesk Road, Armoyle, at St. Olcan's Primary School; and (ii) Shelton Road, Loughgiel, at St. Patricks's Primary School, to the gritting schedule.

(AQW 2822/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department receives many requests each year for additions to the winter gritting schedules. For this reason the Department has a Winter Service policy that ensures all decisions are made using objective assessments. This process

ensures a consistent approach to winter maintenance is adopted across the entire road network, allowing my Department to grit approximately 28% of the public road network, which carries 80% of our traffic.

Under the current policy neither Shelton Road nor Glenshesk Road satisfy the requirements for primary gritting nor do the schools qualify for secondary gritting. However I can advise that my Department has provided salt boxes adjacent to both schools together with a number of grit piles along the length of these roads. These salt boxes and grit piles have been provided for use by the general public, on a self-help basis, to assist traffic movement during periods of wintery weather.

While I would like to be able to expand our gritting service to many other routes, it is simply not feasible to do this at present, due to the severe budget constraints and many other pressures faced by my Department. This is an issue I hope to address with Executive Colleagues.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 421/17-22, (i) to detail the current remaining budget for streetlight repair; and (ii) whether the budget is sufficient to repair current and future outages.
(AQW 2862/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I understand and share the concerns of the public affected by street light outages and am working with my Departmental officials to address this issue as quickly as possible.

I am pleased to inform the Member that, after representations to the Finance Minister, I have recently allocated £1.2m to address the current outage backlog and to repair future outages up to the end of this financial year.

My Department's internal and external contractors are actively progressing outage repairs across Northern Ireland.

I have been raising the need for additional investment with the Minister for Finance as part of the 2020/21 budget discussions, in order to better maintain our roads, street lighting network and deal with other growing pressures facing my Department.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she intends to amend the Roads (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2010 to provide an exemption to running clubs in respect of providing a traffic management plan for the closure of roads, in the same manner in which public processions and cycling events are exempt.
(AQW 2920/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Roads (Miscellaneous Provision) Act (Northern Ireland) 2010 provides a power, which allows a road to be closed for the holding of a special event. Prior to the Act being commenced, roads had been closed by police using general policing powers, which were never wholly appropriate for the function.

Public processions and cycling events are governed by different legislation, and unlike special events, traffic on the day is still largely controlled by the presence of police officers. Responsibility for traffic control at a special event now lies with the event organiser. While the legislation was welcomed by many, I am aware that it does present challenges for some events. I have therefore asked my officials to bring forward proposals for a review of this legislation which the public will be consulted on.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department will undertake the ongoing maintenance of the unadopted alleyway between Olympia Drive and the National Stadium.
(AQW 2934/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The alleyway between Olympia Drive and Windsor Park Stadium is not owned or maintained by the Department. Adoption of this alleyway has previously been raised and considered by my Department on a number of occasions. The primary purpose of this rear alleyway is to serve private property on Olympia Drive. Furthermore, as there are existing alternative adopted footways serving the area it would not be appropriate to adopt this alleyway into the public road network.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Infrastructure, with specific reference to ease of access to the North Stand for emergency services, whether her Department will undertake a safety assessment of the alleyway between Olympia Drive and the National Stadium.
(AQW 2935/17-22)

Ms Mallon: It is my understanding that the planning application for the recent redevelopment of the National Stadium, which was subsequently granted planning permission, was considered by the Safety Action Group and Safety Technical Group, which includes representation from all of the emergency services. This alleyway was not proposed as an access for emergency services as part of this planning application.

As part of my Department's consideration of this planning application, in its consultee role as statutory roads authority, my officials deemed that emergency services would have suitable access to the stadium from the public road network.

Given this, the narrowness of the alleyway and that it is gated, my Department has no current plans to undertake a safety assessment of the alleyway between Olympia Drive and the National Stadium.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of the Derry to Coleraine Phase 3 rail improvements in addressing regional imbalance.
(AQW 2942/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Enhancing connectivity to and from the North West is a priority for me. This is not an end in itself. It is about addressing regional imbalance and playing our part in unlocking the economic potential of the North West to transform lives and improve health and well-being. The Derry to Coleraine / Belfast rail line will be increasingly important to the realisation of that ambition. In that regard, I recognise the significant interest in the future delivery of Phase 3 upgrade of the Derry –Coleraine railway line. The completion of Phases 1 and 2 paved the way for the introduction of hourly services between Coleraine and Derry resulting in significant increases in passenger numbers on the line.

I am committed to addressing regional imbalance and better connecting communities across the North with a clear focus on public transport including rail. However, given the severe constraints to my Departments budget over recent years, I have inherited significant pressures across all areas. I am currently assessing those pressures reflecting on my priorities, the commitments in “New Decade: New Approach” and the budget made available for the period ahead before making a decision on progressing this project.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail how many claims against her Department have been made for damage caused to vehicles that have hit potholes, in the last three years.

(AQW 2943/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Details of the number of public liability compensation claims received, in each of the last full three financial years, where the alleged cause of the vehicle damage was a pothole are shown in table below:

Year	Vehicle Damage
2016/2017	1,025
2017/2018	3,093
2018/2019	2,454

Mr Wells asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 838/17-22, what is the cost to her Department associated with the lighting of park and ride sites when they are not being used by vehicles.

(AQW 2969/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As explained previously in my response to AQW 838/17-22, the provision of lighting in Park and Ride/Share sites consistent with the adjacent road lighting is important in enhancing the public perception of their safety and attractiveness.

The energy cost to provide lighting throughout the night in my Department’s Park and Share sites is currently estimated at £15,800. However my Department’s ongoing programme to change all of the lighting at Park and Ride/Share sites to energy efficient LED units, will significantly reduce these costs. The pace at which this ongoing programme of work is taken forward will depend on the necessary funding being available.

Figures are not available for Park and Ride sites which are managed by Translink.

Mr Wells asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 838/17-22, how much carbon is released into the atmosphere as a result of her Department’s decision to light all park and ride sites when they are not being used by vehicles.

(AQW 2970/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As explained previously in my response to AQW 838/17-22, the provision of lighting in Park and Ride/Share sites consistent with the adjacent road lighting is important in enhancing the public perception of their safety and attractiveness.

It is estimated that currently 33 Tonnes of CO2 are produced in providing lighting throughout the night in my Department’s Park and Share sites. However my Department’s ongoing programme to change all of the lighting at Park and Ride/Share sites to energy efficient LED units, will significantly reduce this figure. The pace at which this programme of work is taken forward will depend on the necessary funding being available.

Figures are not available for Park and Ride sites which are managed by Translink.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans her Department has to address the ongoing traffic concerns at Caw Roundabout, Londonderry.

(AQW 3018/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Caw Roundabout is a major junction, which carries around 50,000 vehicles each day. Around 5,000 of those vehicles use the roundabout during the peak hour. At present, the roundabout is considered to have sufficient capacity to accommodate the volume of traffic using it. However, my officials are aware of significant proposed private developments planned for this area that will, if they proceed, increase traffic volumes.

My officials are in discussions with developers to consider mitigation measures to facilitate the introduction of traffic signals at the roundabout and left turn slip lanes, similar to those previously provided at the Culmore junction on the city side of the Foyle Bridge.

I am committed to working to find solutions that deliver better results for our communities and improves lives across Northern Ireland. However, due to uncertainty about the timing of the private developments and ongoing budgetary constraints in my Department, it is not possible at present, to indicate if, or when, these improvements might be undertaken

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department has any plans to fund construction of Strathfoyle Greenway, Derry/Londonderry.
(AQW 3028/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As outlined in my answer to AQW 1170/17-22, I am keen to work with other Ministers and with all stakeholders to deliver on projects that have the potential to improve the lives of people and connect communities. However, before I take decisions in relation to funding, I will need to consider carefully the budget position after the 2020/21 budget is made known.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail what (i) properties; and (ii) land are currently surplus to requirements within her Department.
(AQW 3037/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The table below provides details of all DfI property and land currently declared surplus to requirements. This list is subject to regular change as new sites are declared surplus and sites are disposed of in line with the Government Disposal Procedures:

Surplus DfI Property and Land as at 10 March 2020

House number	Street	Town
16	Moneybrannon Road	Aghadowey
3	Tullynacree Road	Annacloy
	Rathbeg Road	Antrim
	Greenfield Steps	Ardglass
	Caledon Road	Armagh
	Linenhall Street	Armagh
49A	Railway Street	Armagh
38	Annaghilla Road	Auger
	Caledon Road	Aughnacloy
Adj To 5	Caledon Road	Aughnacloy
14A	Dungannon Road	Aughnacloy
10A	Dungannon Road	Aughnacloy
12A	Dungannon Road	Aughnacloy
2a	Mill Street	Aughnacloy
304	Frosses Road	Ballymena
1	Pennybridge Road	Ballymena
2	Shanksbridge Road	Ballymena
71	Springmount Road	Ballymena
17-21	Ballygowan Road	Banbridge
42	Hamilton Road/ Park Drive	Bangor
355 - 357	Albertbridge Road	Belfast
359 - end	Albertbridge Road	Belfast
Land At 21	Ballymaconaghy Road	Belfast
	Ballysillan Park & Crumlin Road [Land At Both Sides Of Junction]	Belfast
12	Barnetts Crescent	Belfast
13	Barnetts Crescent	Belfast
14	Barnetts Crescent	Belfast
15	Barnetts Crescent	Belfast

House number	Street	Town
29	Barnetts Road	Belfast
	Canmore Street/Cupar Way	Belfast
	Cherry Road/Creighton Road	Belfast
	Clifton Street	Belfast
	Depot Road	Belfast
	Donegall Quay & Ann Street	Belfast
Adj To No.6	Dunmurry Lane	Belfast
	Durham Court & Westlink	Belfast
1	Finvoy Street	Belfast
2	Finvoy Street	Belfast
6-8	Finvoy Street	Belfast
	Fortwilliam Interchange M2	Belfast
26 - 30	Grampian Avenue	Belfast
Adj 82-88	Kennedy Way	Belfast
30-32	Knock Road	Belfast
	Land Between Blacks Road & The Hawthorns	Belfast
	Linden Hill/Stewartstown Road	Belfast
	Lower Braniel Road (Land To The Rear Of Odd Nos. On Ravenswood Crescent)	Belfast
	Old Coach Lane/Upper Malone Road	Belfast
	Old Golf Course Road	Belfast
312-320	Ormeau Road	Belfast
14 & 16	Parkgate Avenue	Belfast
692A&B	Ravenhill Road	Belfast
2	Ravenscroft Avenue	Belfast
	Regent Street/Westlink/Clifton Street Junction	Belfast
	Rodney Parade	Belfast
27	Sandhill Gardens	Belfast
	Stewartstown Road (Michael Ferguson Roundabout To McKinsty Road)	Belfast
25-27	University Road	Belfast
141-147	Upper Dunmurry Lane	Belfast
27	Upper Newtownards Road	Belfast
29	Upper Newtownards Road	Belfast
62	Upper Newtownards Road	Belfast
	Westlink	Belfast
	Westlink Backpath	Belfast
295	Whitewell Road	Belfast
346 J	Boa Island Road	Belleek
346 I	Boa Island Road	Belleek
3A	Coolebrooke Park Road	Brookeborough
3C	Coolebrooke Park Road	Brookeborough

House number	Street	Town
	Trooperslane	Carrickfergus
6	Tullybroom Road	Clogher
2	Cashel Road	Coleraine
	Mountsandel Road	Coleraine
	Moneymore Road	Cookstown
	Mountview Drive	Cookstown
4B	Westland Road South	Cookstown
	Bus Loop At Rear Of Rushmere Shopping Centre, Lake Road	Craigavon
	Lakeview Road/Balteagh Road	Craigavon
	B30 Newry Road	Crossmaglen
	Tully Road	Crumlin
C431	Ummera Cross	Derrylin
	Gracefield Lodge	Dollingstown
	Rann Road	Downpatrick
	Pathway At Slieve Croob, Dree Hill	Dromara
	36 Fortfield	Dromore
	Magherabeg Road	Dromore
3	Canberra Park	Dundonald
39	Cherryhill Road	Dundonald
21	Comber Road	Dundonald
50	Beechwood Manor	Dundonald
35	Canberra Park	Dundonald
33	Canberra Park	Dundonald
31	Canberra Park	Dundonald
29	Canberra Park	Dundonald
27	Canberra Park	Dundonald
25	Canberra Park	Dundonald
23	Canberra Park	Dundonald
21	Canberra Park	Dundonald
49	Cherryhill Road	Dundonald
51	Cherryhill Road	Dundonald
43	Cherryhill Road	Dundonald
37	Cherryhill Road	Dundonald
43	Canberra Park	Dundonald
41	Canberra Park	Dundonald
39	Canberra Park	Dundonald
37	Canberra Park	Dundonald
1	Canberra Park	Dundonald
7	Canberra Park	Dundonald
45	Hanwood Park	Dundonald
19	Canberra Park	Dundonald

House number	Street	Town
41	Cherryhill Road	Dundonald
53	Cherryhill Road	Dundonald
45	Cherryhill Road	Dundonald
55	Cherryhill Road	Dundonald
5	Canberra Park	Dundonald
9	Canberra Park	Dundonald
11	Canberra Park	Dundonald
13	Canberra Park	Dundonald
17	Canberra Park	Dundonald
	Derrydry Lane	Dungannon
	Mullaghbane	Dungannon
	Tullyvar Road	Dungannon
	Goland Road	Dungannon
	Ballygawley Road	Dungannon
	Killyliss Road	Dungannon
	Derryhubbert Road	Dungannon
123	Eglish Road	Dungannon
	Ballygawley Road	Dungannon
187A	Tamnamore Road	Dungannon
	Edenvale Meadows	Dunmurry
	Upper Dunmurry Lane	Dunmurry
9	Groganstown Road	Dunmurry
	Tempo Road	Enniskillen
	Irvinestown Road	Enniskillen
Adj No.28	Mount Stewart Road	Fintona
3A	Clabby Road	Fivemiletown
	A26 Moira Road	Glenavy
	Upper Hightown Road	Glengormley
37	Shore Road	Greencastle
2	Shore Road	Greenisland
46	Upper Road	Greenisland
Site At 68-72	Shore Road	Greenisland
110	Shore Road	Greenisland
74	Shore Road	Greenisland
ADJ 126	Moira Road	Hillsborough
4	Kilkeel Road	Hilltown
11	Castlewellan Road	Hilltown
	Redburn Square	Hollywood
	Manse Road & Katesbridge Road	Katesbridge
111	Manoo Road	Kesh
38B	Lisnagrot Road	Kilrea

House number	Street	Town
	Broadway	Larne
Adj 59-63	The Cutts/Derriaghy Road	Lisburn
	A26 Glenavy Road	Lisburn
	Bentrim Road	Lisburn
9FA	Thornleigh Park	Lisburn
	Queens Road/Seymour Street	Lisburn
	Queens Road/New Street	Lisburn
Adj to 99	Hillhall Road	Lisburn
67	Thornleigh Park	Lisburn
25	Thornleigh Drive (Land To Rear)	Lisburn
	Governor's Road	Lisburn
5	Derriaghy Road	Lisburn
	Linenhall Street	Lisburn
	Linenhall Street	Lisburn
	Queens Road / New Street	Lisburn
	Foreglen Road (Adjacent To Muldonagh Pumping Station)	Londonderry
	Belt Road	Londonderry
	Linsford Drive	Londonderry
	Culmore Road	Londonderry
	Crescent Link	Londonderry
	Carrakeel Drive	Londonderry
1	Norburgh Park	Londonderry
	Boating Club Lane	Londonderry
	Glenshane Road	Londonderry
	Prehen Road	Londonderry
	Dublin Road	Loughbrickland
	Gilpinstown Road / Carrigart Manor	Lurgan
	A99 Millennium Way	Lurgan
	Millennium Way To Rear Of 67 Trasna Way	Lurgan
	Glenshane Road	Maghera
14A	Motalee Road	Magherafelt
	Tandragee Road	Markethill
	Bridge Road	Moirra
15	Bridge Road	Moirra
A29	Station Road	Moneymore
	Old Armagh Road (Near No. 86)	Moy
18	Church Hill	Newry
	Forkhill Road	Newry
	Catherine Street	Newry
150a	Belfast Road	Newry
	Sugarhouse Quay/Basin Walk	Newry

House number	Street	Town
	Sugarhouse Quay / Basin Walk	Newry
1	Buchanans Road	Newry
2	Millvale Road	Newry
8	Millvale Road	Newry
39	Camlough Road/Millvale Road	Newry
	Craigmore Way	Newry
151	Belfast Road	Newry
	Manse Road	Newtownabbey
	Scullions Road	Newtownabbey
57	John Street	Newtownards
	Jubilee Road	Newtownards
31C	Killyclogher Road	Omagh
	Campsie Rd Car Park	Omagh
Adj to 30	Clanabogan Road	Omagh
209	Greencastle Road	Omagh
52	St Julians Road	Omagh
38/40	Dublin Road	Omagh
	Meadow Lane	Portadown
	Derrylileagh Road	Portadown
	Castle Street	Portadown
	Junction Of Upper Church Lane & Killicomaine Road	Portadown
	Charlestown Road	Portadown
254	Tandragee Road	Portadown
52	Movilla Road	Portstewart
Roundabout	Castle Road	Randalstown
	Craigstown Road	Randalstown
107	Craigmore Road	Ringsend
Adj 125	Craigmore	Ringsend

Mr Lunn asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in relation to her statement on 27 February, whether she has had any discussions with the insurance industry regarding MOT certificates being treated as evidence of roadworthiness.
(AQW 3085/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Following the suspension of using scissor lifts in Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) test centres on 27 January 2020, the Association of British Insurers (ABI) wrote to me to confirm that a motor insurance policy requires that the vehicle is kept in roadworthy condition and it is the responsibility of the driver to make sure their vehicle is safe to drive and complies with all applicable laws. They advised that an insurer would not penalise a policyholder for something that is entirely out of their control, such as the suspension of MOT test facilities, and would approach any claims on a pragmatic case-by-case basis provided that the policyholder had booked a test.

I also met with Mr Alistair Ross of ABI on 10 March 2020 to discuss the motor insurance position as a result of the disruption to MOT services and welcomed his support in sharing with ABI members the information we provided on the disruption, particularly in relation to the issue of Temporary Exemption Certificates (TEC) for vehicles five years old and over, and the prioritisation of four-year-old vehicles, which had not previously had an MOT, taxis and car dealerships. We agreed to liaise further when the implementation plans for the 52 new lifts has been agreed.

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many existing traffic calming schemes have been (i) upgraded; and (ii) repaired, broken down by local council area, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 3176/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The initial review of all requests considers various factors including: the likely speed and volume of traffic; the most recent 3 year personal injury collision statistics; and environmental factors such as the presence of schools, playgrounds, hospitals, clinics, shops, public buildings and if the road is used as a through route.

- (i) Details of existing traffic calming schemes that have been upgraded, broken down by council area, in each of the last five years are shown in the table below:

Existing Traffic Calming Schemes - upgraded

Councils	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20*
Antrim and Newtownabbey	0	0	0	0	0
Ards and North Down	0	0	0	0	0
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon	0	0	0	0	0
Belfast	0	0	0	0	0
Causeway Coast and Glens	0	0	1	1	0
Derry City and Strabane	0	0	0	0	0
Fermanagh and Omagh	0	0	0	0	0
Lisburn and Castlereagh	0	0	0	0	0
Mid and East Antrim	0	1	0	1	1
Mid Ulster	0	1	0	0	0
Newry, Mourne and Down	1	0	0	0	0

* projected

- (ii) While repairs to traffic calming features are identified and programmed for repair in accordance with our established maintenance standards, my Department's road maintenance system does not identify these repairs separately and therefore the information requested in relation to repairs on traffic calming schemes is not available.

I would like to be able to do more in terms of improving the road network, but it is simply not feasible to this at present due to severe budget constraints and many other pressures faced by my Department. I have been raising the need for additional investment with the Finance Minister, in advance of the 2020/21 budget.

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many new traffic calming schemes or measures have been completed, broken down by local council area, in each of the past five years.

(AQW 3179/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Details of the number of new traffic calming schemes completed, broken down by council area, in each of the last five years are shown in the table below.

New Traffic Calming Schemes

Councils	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20*
Antrim and Newtownabbey	1	0	1	0	0
Ards and North Down	1	0	1	0	1
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon	3	0	2	2	1
Belfast	0	5	0	1	0
Causeway Coast and Glens	3	1	1	0	0
Derry City and Strabane	7	0	2	3	3
Fermanagh and Omagh	0	0	0	0	1
Lisburn and Castlereagh	7	1	1	1	0
Mid and East Antrim	1	1	0	1	0
Mid Ulster	2	3	2	1	1

Councils	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20*
Newry, Mourne and Down	4	0	3	1	0

* projected

My Department is committed to introducing measures that reduce the speed of traffic on our roads. We are currently trialling the effectiveness of 'signed only' 20mph limits, which could be used more widely in appropriate environments, such as residential areas with schools, than would be possible with the current approach of providing 20mph limits along with traffic calming features. I am expecting receipt of the findings of the trial in the next month or so, and I fully intend to see what potential there is, to build on the work already underway.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline her Department's plans for resurfacing John F Kennedy Park, Bessbrook.
(AQW 3190/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department currently has no plans to carry out resurfacing at John F Kennedy Park. As with all public roads, the condition of John F Kennedy Park will be monitored during periodic maintenance inspections and it may be included in future works programmes. In the meantime, defects recorded during the most recent inspection on 2 February 2020 have been noted and will be actioned for repair in line with my Department's current maintenance guidelines.

I have been raising the need for additional investment with the Minister for Finance in order to better maintain our roads and deal with other growing pressures facing my Department. I welcome the additional allocation made to my Department for roads repairs. This money will help to begin to address the backlog. The extent of resurfacing plans amongst other competing priorities and pressures within my Department, will be determined by the forthcoming budget.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline what infrastructure projects her Department will seek EU funding for.
(AQW 3200/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My department will seek EU funding for all projects for which it is possible to do so. The latest Treasury advice indicates that it is possible to continue to bid for new grant funding until the end of the transition period. Should any suitable calls for applications be published during this time, these will be utilised.

Looking beyond 2020 I have asked my officials to explore all future options for accessing alternative EU funding streams, including those relating to PEACE+ and Horizon Europe.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of the impact that waste water capacity issues are having in terms of preventing developments.
(AQW 3202/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Based on the NI Water PC21 Business Plan analysis, there are 116 areas served by wastewater systems experiencing capacity issues across the North that are potentially affecting development. I am concerned that this is having an impact on the environment and on planning decisions in respect of housing and business developments seeking connection to the sewerage network and therefore it is having a significant impact on people's lives.

I have raised this issue and the critical need for investment in our waste water and sustainable drainage infrastructure with Executive colleagues so we can build more homes and grow our economy.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether there are plans to introduce a rail stop at Hollywood Exchange.
(AQW 3204/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am committed to improving connectivity for the benefit of our economy and communities across Northern Ireland. In that regard, I am clear that our rail network, whilst relatively small, presents a unique opportunity to improve the sustainability of our transport operations. However given the severe and challenging budget constraints I have inherited, there are significant challenges across my Department.

I will be assessing the pressures across my Department reflecting my priorities, the commitments in the "New Decade: New Approach" and the budget made available for the period ahead. In line with this, my Department is developing proposals for a new Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan and a new Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan. These plans will inform priorities for future development of the main road and rail networks and will consider the addition of rail halts, such as Hollywood Exchange.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Infrastructure when funding will be made available to extend the Gransha Greenway out to Strathfoyle.
(AQW 3206/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As outlined in response to previous Assembly Questions about Derry City and Strabane District Council's proposed Strathfoyle Greenway project (AQW 3028/17-22 and AQW 1170/17-22), I am keen to work with other Ministers and

with all stakeholders to deliver on projects that have the potential to improve the lives of people and connect communities. However, before I take decisions in relation to funding, I will need to consider carefully the budget position after the 2020/21 budget is allocated.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department plans to make James Street, Portadown, a one-way system.
(AQW 3209/17-22)

Ms Mallon: James Street is a residential area made up of terrace housing and with on-street parking permitted on both sides. Although traffic progression can be an issue at times as the street is reduced to one lane, I am advised this is consistent with the congestion in the Edenderry area during peak times.

Whilst a one way system may ease congestion, it could have significant safety disadvantages due to increased traffic volumes and speed on what is a residential street. Therefore at present, there are no plans to introduce a one way system.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister for Infrastructure what engagement her Department has had with Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council regarding the upkeep and visual cleanliness of the M12 gateway to Craigavon.
(AQW 3211/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can confirm that my officials have been engaging with Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council in relation to gateway proposals on the M12. I understand a Council proposal to create a gateway feature on the roundabout is currently at a preliminary stage and my officials will liaise again with Council officials when their proposal is sufficiently developed.

The M12 continues to be subject to monitoring during periodic inspections, and any routine work including removal of litter is carried out in parallel with other maintenance activities on this stretch of the motorway.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans her Department has for improving safety on the Brankinstown Road, Aghalee.
(AQW 3213/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can confirm that my officials are aware of a collision on the Brankinstown Road in 2019 and another collision in recent weeks.

I can advise that my officials will be reviewing all information once it is made available by the PSNI, after it has completed its investigation into the collision. This, along with consideration of general collision data for the location, will inform the overall assessment of safety on this road and whether further engineering measures may be necessary.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will consider plans to establish a rail halt to serve Ballymartin Park and Ride, Templepatrick.
(AQW 3221/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am committed to improving connectivity for the benefit of our economy and communities across Northern Ireland. In that regard, I am clear that our rail network, whilst relatively small, presents a unique opportunity to improve the sustainability of our transport operations. However given the severe budget constraints I have inherited, there are significant challenges across my Department.

I will be assessing the pressures across my Department reflecting my priorities, the commitments in the "New Decade: New Approach" and the budget made available for the period ahead. In line with this, my Department is developing proposals for a new Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan and a new Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan. These plans will inform priorities for future development of the main road and rail networks and will consider the addition of rail halts, such as Ballymartin Park and Ride.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she has any short-term or long-term plans for Donegall Square to be pedestrianised.
(AQW 3222/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Over the coming weeks, and working with the Department for Communities and Belfast City Council, I want to carefully consider how my Department can contribute to a more joined-up approach across planning, transport and regeneration in developing Belfast city centre – including Donegall Square – as an attractive, accessible, safe and vibrant space.

Not just for Belfast but for Northern Ireland as a whole, I have a clear vision to increase sustainable travel options that connect communities, reduce greenhouse gas emissions and deliver benefits for people. I also recognise that bold change is needed to deliver that vision so that we can prioritise space for those who walk and cycle as well as for those who use public transport.

In particular, I will be considering the interesting ideas coming out of the Belfast City Centre Connectivity Study and its 2035 vision of a city centre transformed with a rebalanced street network, providing quality space promoting walking and cycling and ensuring access to high quality, reliable, public transport.

I also plan to continue to engage with civic and other stakeholders in shaping a draft shared vision for central Belfast and with Executive colleagues to help realize that vision.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on flood remedial works planned to take place during the calendar year of 2020 in the Finaghy area of South Belfast.

(AQW 3224/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have been advised by NI Water that following flooding incidents in this area, it is undertaking a localised appraisal study of the drainage systems in the Orchardville and Ardmore areas of Finaghy Road North. Once complete, the results of this study will be used to identify any possible works that may be taken forward. Progression to detailed design and delivery of any medium-term solution will be subject to the availability of funding and is not currently planned within the 2020 calendar year.

My Department is also currently preparing a pre-feasibility report for various options to mitigate the flood risk in the Ashton Park area. It is anticipated that this report will be completed by May 2020 and if a financially viable scheme is identified, my officials will take forward a more detailed feasibility report and economic appraisal.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Infrastructure how local Government will ensure that local councillors will be part of the decisions made on how developers' contributions are made and spent under section 76 duties.

(AQW 3242/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In January 2017 the Department issued Development Management Practice Note 21 on the use of Section 76 Planning Agreements to assist those involved in this aspect of the planning process.

Planning Agreements are considered as part of the planning application process and therefore would, in the case of council planning authorities, normally be considered by local councillors on the planning committee as part of the determination of the subject application.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the proposed park and ride at William Street, Newtownards.

(AQW 3272/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The provision of a potential Park and Ride facility in Newtownards is currently under consideration and a number of sites have been appraised, including the former Ards Leisure Centre site on Hardford Link / William Street in Newtownards, which I understand is now surplus to requirements following the construction of a new Leisure Centre. My Department has already expressed an early interest in acquiring this land.

However, I have inherited severe and challenging budget constraints. I am committed to working to find solutions that deliver better for our communities and improve lives across Northern Ireland, to address regional imbalance and facilitate sustainable transport solutions. I am currently assessing the pressures across my Department reflecting on my priorities and the commitments in New Decade: New Approach. It is, therefore, too early to give commitments on specific schemes until more clarity is received on the budget allocation available to me in the years ahead.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) how many defibrillators have been installed in departmental premises since January 2015; and (ii) the locations of the defibrillators.

(AQW 3273/17-22)

Ms Mallon:

- (i) Three defibrillators have been installed in Department for Infrastructure premises since January 2015.
- (ii) Two of the defibrillators are located in my headquarters building, Clarence Court in Adelaide Street, Belfast. The third defibrillator is located in Castle Buildings in the Stormont Estate, Belfast.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for Infrastructure what policy her Department has in place for providing defibrillators in departmental premises.

(AQW 3274/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Northern Ireland Civil Service does not have a central policy on the provision of defibrillators.

However I have two defibrillators located in my Department's headquarters in Adelaide Street, Belfast and one in Roads Eastern Division at Castle Buildings, in the Stormont Estate.

All three of these devices are registered with The Circuit, the national defibrillator network, and are connected to the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service. This enables callers to the Emergency services to be directed to the closest defibrillator including those sited in my Department's premises.

Mr Lunn asked the Minister for Infrastructure how much has been spent on the A5 dual carriageway project, including legal fees, up to March 2020.

(AQW 3285/17-22)

Ms Mallon: At the end of January 2020 £81.1 million has been expended on the A5 dual carriageway project. It is anticipated that this total will rise to £81.5m by the end of March 2020.

Mr Lunn asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether (i) the A5 inquiry will consider (a) different routes; or (b) a rail upgrade as an alternative to the proposed dual carriageway route between Newbuildings and Ballygawley; (ii) its exclusive focus will be on the environmental impact of the proposed route.

(AQW 3286/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As a result of the quashing of the decision to proceed with the A5 Western Transport Corridor (A5WTC) scheme in November 2018, my Department has been working to enable a fresh decision to be made. This included the publication of an addendum to the existing Environmental Statement in March 2019 and a subsequent public consultation process. Following this the Department concluded that a further Public Inquiry was needed and agreed to the Inquiry considering strategic matters beyond those directly relating to the Environmental Statement Addendum.

The Public Inquiry for the A5WTC project took place in the Strule Arts Centre, Omagh in two stages. Stage 1, between 18 and 21 February 2020, considered 'environmental matters', while Stage 2 considered 'non-environmental' matters over a 3 day period from 11 March 2020. During the second day of the Stage 2 hearings alternatives, including a new railway and alternative off-line routes and alignments, were considered by the Inquiry.

Mr Lunn asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether the alignment of the A5 between Newbuildings and Ballygawley is the settled policy of her Department.

(AQW 3287/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department's current position on the proposed alignment for the A5 between New Buildings and Ballygawley is as set out in the Statutory Orders that were published in November 2017 and subsequently quashed in November 2018, following a legal challenge.

My Department is currently carrying out the necessary work to enable a fresh decision on the A5 Western Transport Corridor scheme to be taken and a Public Inquiry into the scheme concluded on 13 March 2020. I await the Inspector's report before deciding how best to proceed.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on residents' parking schemes in (i) the Carrickhill; (ii) Great Georges Street; and (iii) Newington areas of North Belfast.

(AQW 3298/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The first residents' parking scheme in Rugby Road / College Park Avenue, Belfast, came into operation during April 2018. A review of the scheme, which will reflect the needs, experiences and feedback of residents, is currently underway. I will want to make sure that any lessons learnt from this scheme inform wider policy on implementing residents' parking schemes to the benefit of communities.

At this stage, I am not in a position to advise on a timescale for completing the review, but I can confirm that any findings will be made publically available. I will consider any new schemes in light of these findings.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister for Infrastructure how are the costs of concessionary fares approximated.

(AQW 3308/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The costs of reimbursing concessionary travel are determined by the amount claimed by those transport operators who participate in the Concessionary Fares Scheme. These claims are based on actual concessionary ticket sales and are comprehensively and independently audited annually. An independent annual audit has been completed each year since the introduction of free travel for senior citizens in 2001. It is also subject to scrutiny each year by NIAO and forms part of their audit of my Department's accounts.

My Department forecasts concessionary travel costs based on a review of actual expenditure on a claim by claim basis by operator in the previous complete financial year. The cost of each claim is then recalculated by multiplying the cost by a percentage factor, usually 3%. The factor is intended to cover inflated costs that may be due to fares increases; increased passenger usage and the increase in the numbers of people who are eligible for concessionary travel.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Infrastructure what length of sight lines would normally need to be satisfied for a private roadway joining a rural road that is subject to the national speed limit.

(AQW 3316/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The specific length of sight lines required for any new private roadway joining a rural road that is subject to the national speed limit of 60 mph will be dependent on the estimated actual speed of vehicles using the public road in the vicinity of the entrance, the use of the access, and the traffic volumes on the public road. A single dwelling accessing a rural road

where vehicles are estimated to be travelling at the national speed limit of 60mph will typically be 2.4 metres x 215 metres. The full range of sight line requirements for new accesses is given in Tables A and B of the guidance document Development Control Advice Note 15 which can be accessed using the link below

https://www.planningni.gov.uk/index/policy/planning_statements_and_supplementary_planning_guidance/dcans/dcan_15_-_vehicular_access_standards-5.pdf

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) how many homes have availed of the Home Flood Protection Grant Scheme; and (ii) how much funding is available for this scheme.

(AQW 3320/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department has received 218 applications to the Homeowner Flood Protection Grant Scheme so far, of which 136 have been approved under the scheme eligibility criteria. Of those approved, 92 homeowners have opted to progress with works and installations are now complete at 80 homes. In addition, a further 16 homeowners applications are being considered or progressed by my Department. The initial overall budget for the scheme was approximately £960,000 and the grant element of the scheme, if an application is approved, will cover 90%, up to a maximum of £10,000, of the total survey and estimated installation costs.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline her plans to increase safety measures at railways crossings and bridges.

(AQW 3325/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Translink continually seeks to increase safety at crossings and bridges. Its staff participate in UK wide initiatives such as the Bridge Strike Prevention Group, which aim to improve safety for members of the public at the road and rail interface. Locally, Translink works in collaboration with my Department to jointly manage the safety risk at railway crossings and bridges. Measures implemented include the installation and annual maintenance of warning signs, provision of low bridge information to the haulage industry, signage of alternative routes and the installation of additional bridge protection beams. Translink also regularly inspects bridges both in the immediate aftermath of a reported bridge strike and during annual inspection cycles to monitor asset condition.

In relation to suicide prevention on the rail network, I believe a more innovative and collaborative approach is required and I can assure you that I will continue to work closely with Executive colleagues, local communities, experts, stakeholders and staff to ensure that my Department contributes fully to actions that can be taken to reduce the number of suicide attempts associated with our transport network and bridges in particular. I look forward to building on this engagement through the Minister for Health's new Executive Working Group on Mental Well-being, Resilience and Suicide Prevention.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the resurfacing scheme for Strabane bypass.

(AQW 3353/17-22)

Ms Mallon: All preparation work on this scheme has been completed and the carriageway is ready to receive the final surface layer, which unfortunately has had to be postponed on a number of occasions due to the extremely poor weather in February. Favourable weather conditions are required when applying the final surfacing course to ensure its longevity and this work is currently planned for the weekend of 21st and 22nd March 2020.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 2144/17-22, following (i) the Ofgem and government joint statement on the position in England and Wales entitled Upgrading our Energy System 2017, that stated that defining electricity storage as a subset of generation in the electricity Act 1989 will confirm the Government's current position that storage facilities should be treated as a form of electricity generating station for planning purposes; and (ii) the statement issued in December 2017 by the Chief Planner in England, that stated that local Planning Authorities should, as applicable, take the Government's position into account when considering proposed or existing development involving the construction, extension or operation of electricity storage facilities (such as battery storage systems), why her Department has not updated its approach.

(AQW 3392/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I understand that the Department for the Economy and the Utility Regulator will be examining the need to consider energy storage as generating facilities in discussions around implementation of the Clean Energy Package. My officials are engaging with DfE officials on this and to ensure that any planning implications of this work are properly considered.

In the interim any application for planning permission will be considered by the relevant planning authority on a case-by-case basis, considering the type and scale of development proposed against the requirements of extant planning policy and legislation.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the average; (ii) the shortest; and (iii) the longest time taken by her Department to determine a planning application within its remit, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 3402/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Details of the time taken to determine planning applications within my Department are set out in the attached tables.

Time taken to determine¹ Departmental planning applications, 2015/16 to Q2 2019/20

	Shortest time (weeks)	Average time (weeks)²	Longest time (weeks)
2015/16	2.6	137.2	382.4
2016/17	11.0	125.9	560.2
2017/18	16.8	64.6	403.8
2018/19	86.2	260.9	556.8
2019/20 (up to end of Q2) ³	16.2	56.4	177.4

Notes

- 1 The time taken to determine (or process) an application is calculated from the date on which an application is deemed valid to the date on which the decision is issued or the application is withdrawn. The only exception is for called in applications, i.e. those initially made to councils where the Minister/Department directs that these should fall to the Department for determination. For called in applications, the time taken to determine (or process) an application is calculated from the date on which the application is called in by the Department to the date on which the decision is issued or the application is withdrawn.
- 2 The median is used for the average processing time as any extreme values have the potential to inflate the mean, leading to a result that may not be considered as "typical".
- 3 Figures are provided up to the end of Q2 2019/20 (i.e. end of September 2019) in line with the most recently published Official Statistics. Quarterly estimates for 2019/20 are provisional and will be subject to revision ahead of finalised annual figures, to be published in June / July 2020.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Infrastructure when funding will be made available to advance the extension of the Waterside Greenway in Londonderry to the village of Strathfoyle.
(AQW 3513/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As outlined in response to previous Assembly Questions about Derry City and Strabane District Council's proposed Strathfoyle Greenway project (AQW 1170/17-22, AQW 3028/17-22 and AQW 3206/17-22), I am keen to work with other Ministers and with all stakeholders to deliver on projects that have the potential to improve the lives of people and connect communities. However, before I take decisions in relation to funding, I will need to consider carefully the budget position after the 2020/21 Budget is allocated to my Department.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in relation to COVID-19, whether she plans to assist the logistics industry by (i) the temporary relaxation of drivers' hours rules; and (ii) the lifting of night-time delivery restrictions.[R]
(AQW 3558/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I will quickly consider any requests for temporary relaxation of drivers' hours in urgent cases where the emergency exemption does not apply. An emergency exemption can already be used, in limited circumstances, to prevent, amongst other things, danger to life or health. It can be used by operators if the Coronavirus outbreak leads to a chronic shortage of drivers, and there is an immediate need on health grounds to deliver essential supplies. This does not require prior authorisation from my Department.

In addition, a temporary relaxation of the enforcement of the rules can be considered in urgent cases where the emergency exemption would not apply. My Department's prior agreement is required before any relaxation can take effect. Operators who are seeking a relaxation are required to provide a "Statement of Case", justifying the relaxation request and I would ask that they contact my Department if they need to do so. I am determined that my Department will do all that it can to support communities and help alleviate, where we may, any short term consequences of the coronavirus.

In relation to the lifting of the night-time delivery restrictions, I have written to all local councils making it clear that they should temporarily withhold any planning enforcement action which could result in unnecessarily restricting deliveries of food and other essential supplies, in order to support the response to Covid-19.

Ms Dillon asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline how her Department will address the disparity in the condition of rural roads and the trunk road network.
(AQO 341/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I would like to deliver better for our communities and to do more maintenance on rural roads. I have, however, inherited severe and challenging budget constraints that continue to make it difficult to offer the level of repair and resurfacing that our roads need, and that the public deserves.

The independent report on Structural Maintenance established an annual requirement of £143m, at today's prices, to maintain the structural integrity of the entire road network in the north. The average annual shortfall over the last five years has been £55m.

As a result of budget constraints, my Department has had to manage priorities adopting a sub-optimal budget strategy. The current strategy aims to keep the trunk road network at defined levels of condition, in view of its strategic importance and the traffic volumes it carries. We then target as much of the remaining budget as possible, to all other roads. It has been recognised over recent years that this has resulted in a long-term deterioration of the non-trunk network and officials have undertaken to review current practice in this area.

I have been raising the need for additional investment with the Finance Minister, in order to allow better maintenance of our roads and to deal with other growing pressures facing my Department. I welcome the additional allocation following representation recently made by my Department, towards winter service, urgent street lights and roads repairs. This money will help to address the backlog. Future service levels will depend upon future budget availability. I will continue to work with the Finance Minister and other Executive colleagues to find a way forward that delivers at the very least these basic services that our society and our economy desperately requires.

In relation to your specific requests, ahead of any further budget allocations, my officials will continue to inspect and repair any actionable defects, in line with current maintenance guidelines.

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will deliver a capital grants scheme for greenways.
(AQO 348/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Since taking up post as Minister for Infrastructure, several Members have asked me about the development of greenways and funding for greenway schemes, in particular, you have asked me about my plans to progress the Strategic Plan for Greenways.

In the Adjournment Debate about the Comber Greenway in this Assembly on Tuesday 3rd March, I underlined the many benefits associated with developing greenways: environmental, social and economic, in addition to the huge benefits they bring to physical and mental health and wellbeing. I also explained that I wanted to consider carefully how the development of greenways generally can deliver projects that have the potential to improve people's lives and connect communities. That work to consider options is currently underway.

I know that most Councils have already undertaken work – some of it funded by my Department – to develop feasibility studies and designs for greenway schemes that they want to deliver in their local areas. I am very willing to work collaboratively with Councils to provide them with whatever help I can to deliver their projects. Once the Budget process provides clarity on the resources available to me, I will be able to firm up my objectives for greenways and active travel more generally.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given that she has indicated that she has no plans to increase parking facilities at Dundonald Park and Ride, what action will she take to mitigate problems caused by commuter parking in the area.
(AQO 352/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am aware that the demand for parking in Dundonald has increased in recent years as a result of both commuter traffic and the development within the Ulster Hospital site.

Unfortunately there is no adjacent land available to extend the Dundonald Park & Ride, but we are currently looking at additional sites in Newtownards and Comber. These sites would provide an attractive alternative for commuters who currently travel to Dundonald to make use of the Glider services.

However, it is not possible at this stage to confirm precise timescales, or even if these projects will be possible, until more clarity is received on the Budget allocation available to me in the years ahead.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for Infrastructure when she plans to proceed with the project to extend the Belfast stormwater tunnel.
(AQO 346/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am advised by NI Water that it has requested funding to extend the Belfast Stormwater Tunnel as part of its Business Plan submission for the PC21 Price Control period. This was submitted to the Northern Ireland Utility Regulator in January 2020.

NI Water's PC 21 Business Plan sets out the company's total funding requirement for the 6 year period from April 2021 to March 2027. This includes the funding for all of NI Water's elements of the Belfast Strategic Drainage Infrastructure Plan which is currently being developed through my Department's Living With Water Programme.

The Utility Regulator's Draft Determination on NI Water's Business Plan will be published for consultation on 1 July 2020. If funded, it is anticipated that construction of the tunnel could commence in 2023. Subject to the necessary approvals and funding this is a major infrastructure project that I would like to see delivered at the earliest opportunity. For that to happen, the Executive will need to provide additional funding to my Department for water and wastewater infrastructure.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in light of the Court of Appeal's Ruling on 27 February 2020 regarding the Heathrow Airport expansion, for her assessment of any Regionally Significant Developments that are not consistent with our obligations under the Paris Agreement.
(AQO 351/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The England and Wales Court of Appeal's decision to quash the decision to approve the third runway at Heathrow has been of great interest to many of us given the climate emergency we face.

As I understand it the Court's decision revolved around a particular legal point. In England, when the Government creates policy statements, section 5 of the Planning Act 2008 requires it to "include an explanation of how the policy set out in the statement takes account of Government policy relating to the mitigation of, and adaptation to, climate change" which did not happen in this case.

In terms of how the judgement may affect Northern Ireland I can advise that the Planning Act (NI) 2011 does not contain a provision equivalent to section 5(8) of the Planning Act 2008.

My officials however are liaising with the UK Government to understand any wider implications of the Court of Appeal's Ruling on 27 February 2020.

Ms C Kelly asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will consider constructing two phases of the A5 simultaneously, in order to rapidly progress this project.

(AQO 345/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The current phasing for the A5 project is: Phase 1A from New Buildings to north of Strabane; Phase 1B south of Omagh to Ballygawley; Phase 2 from Strabane North to Omagh South and Phase 3 from Ballygawley to the border at Aughnacloy.

The previous Executive agreed an indicative funding package for the A5 up to 2020/21, as a Flagship Project and the Fresh Start Agreement affirmed the Irish Government's commitment of £75 million to allow the construction of the Phase 1A, from New Buildings to north of Strabane.

In New Decade: New Approach the UK Government committed to infrastructure funding for investment in capital projects such as the A5 and the Irish Government re-affirmed its £75 million commitment to Phase 1A. I very much welcome these commitments and I want to see this project progress.

Whilst I had been hopeful that Phase 1A could commence in early 2021, this is now likely to be spring 2021, subject to the satisfactory conclusion of all statutory procedures, as the Inspector has indicated that his findings, following the Public Inquiry, will not be presented to the Department until the end of September 2020. The progression of each phase will depend on the availability of future funding, in Budgets and subsequent Spending Rounds.

I have stated clearly that I am committed to tackling regional imbalance, connecting communities, promoting economic growth, improving road safety and delivering radical change. As such, I look forward to working with the Finance Minister and to further engagement with Executive colleagues and the Irish Government to secure the necessary funding to take this project forward as rapidly as possible.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the steps her Department is taking to reduce the number of fatalities on our roads.

(AQO 349/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister for Infrastructure, I am responsible for promoting and improving road safety, a responsibility I take very seriously. Regrettably, so far this year 13 people have lost their lives in road traffic collisions, compared to 8 at the same time last year and 2018.

It is worth noting, that more than nine out of ten road traffic collisions on our roads are because of human error. The Department and our road safety partners can educate, engineer and enforce, but each of us as individuals has to take personal responsibility for our attitudes and behaviours as road users. There are three key elements to help improve road safety. These are Engineering, Enforcement and Education and my Department has a key role these.

My Department will continue to undertake comprehensive inspection and maintenance activities and will continue to monitor collisions and be proactive in our identification of engineering works to further improve road safety. I have recently announced that I intend to increase the fine and penalty points for using a handheld mobile phone while driving. This is a first step, and I will consider what else can be done. I will also be looking at the issue of drink driving and have sought a meeting with the Chief Constable to discuss road traffic issues.

Many road user groups are particularly vulnerable on our roads – notably, the young and the elderly, pedestrians, cyclists and motorcyclists; and the 17-24-year old age group. I also intend to bring forward proposals later this year to introduce Graduated Driver Licensing (GDL). This will establish a revised training, testing and post-testing regime for new driver (and riders) to reduce the over representation of mainly young drivers in fatal and serious injuries.

My Department through its road safety campaigns focuses on problem areas, such as drink driving, speeding, and careless and inattention; and on groups, which are, over-represented in the casualty figures. These campaigns challenge road user behaviours and encourage all those using the roads to take personal responsibility for their own safety and the safety of others. Actions undertaken to achieve a reduction in the number of people killed and serious injury on our roads are carried out within the context of the NI Road Safety Strategy 2020.

I want to take the time, and work with partners to ensure my decision on the way we proceed following the expiry of the current Strategy, is as well informed as possible. Reducing death and serious injuries is an important aspect of improving wellbeing for all. I expect to be in a position to make a decision on the current Road Safety Strategy's successor later in the year.

I remain committed to continuing to work towards reducing deaths and serious injuries on our roads.

I recognise the continuing challenges of preventing road deaths and serious injuries and as such, it is key that my Department, in collaboration with partners continue to address the issues using all practicable methods.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of the suitability of vehicle test centre equipment for the testing of Vehicles of Historical Interest.

(AQO 344/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver and Vehicle Agency conducts mandatory vehicle tests on vehicles registered after 1960, and voluntary vehicle tests on vehicles registered before this date. Therefore vehicles that may be categorised as Vehicles of Historical Interest are already being tested using the equipment in vehicle test centres.

The vehicle testing process, and the use of vehicle testing equipment, is dependent on the vehicle's age and construction. In GB an MOT test exemption for Vehicles of Historical Interest, which are more than 40 years old, was introduced in May 2018.

A public consultation exercise was launched here last June seeking views on whether we should introduce the same exemption. My officials are preparing an analysis of responses received, which will help inform my decision how best to progress this policy.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether the entirety of the B47 Glenelly Road, Cranagh to The Six Towns will be included on the winter gritting schedule.

(AQO 347/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In accordance with the current Winter Service policy inherited from previous Ministers, my Department generally salts roads that carry more than 1,500 vehicles per day. The B47 between Cranagh and Draperstown currently carries around 600 vehicles per day, which is less than half of the established threshold.

Under our current policy small settlements of more than 100 dwellings in rural areas, are also connected to the Primary Grittled Network, by means of a gritted route. The B47 between Plumbridge and Cranagh is on the gritting schedule to provide such a gritted route to the village of Cranagh, during periods of icy conditions and winter weather.

The application of this policy ensures that 28% of the total road network, which carries around 80% of traffic, is salted, at an annual cost of approximately £6 million. My Department also deploys grit piles and salt bins on unsalted roads and undertakes secondary gritting of such roads after the primary salted network has been gritted or cleared of snow.

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 this at this time due to the severe budget constraints faced by my Department.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline her Department's role in working with the Education Authority in relation to pedestrian safety outside schools.

(AQO 350/17-22)

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 the targeted provision of infrastructure at and near schools can go a long way to making our roads and communities safer.

My Department does not however deal with the Education Authority when providing such infrastructure as it deals directly with the school. To promote and instil good road user behaviours in children, my Department has developed and provides free of charge, a range of road safety teaching resources to schools. These resources are designed to be used by teachers to highlight and embed good road safety behaviours, including pedestrian safety.

My Department has worked with the Education Authority to ensure teachers have access to these resources through its C2K system, the teachers ICT network. My officials have access to C2K and frequently update or upload new resources. My Department has also worked with the Education Authority to produce a road safety lesson on the Green Cross Code, which was broadcast to schools on the Education Authority's TV broadcast system.

Department of Justice

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Justice to provide a comparison of the prison population numbers for each of Northern Ireland's prisons, in each of the past five years, and to breakdown these figures by (i) age of prisoner; (ii) nature of offence; and (iii) length of sentence.

(AQW 2855/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): Information on the average daily Northern Ireland prison population is available in the format requested from 2015/16.

The average daily Northern Ireland prison population presented by (i) age of prisoner; (ii) nature of offence; and (iii) sentence length, within each establishment is presented below for the period 2015/16 to 2018/19.

Table 1: Average Daily Northern Ireland Prison Population by Prisoner Type, Gender and Establishment¹

		2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Remand	Maghaberry	339	319	310	353
	Magilligan	0	0	2	5
	Hydebank Wood College Males	36	36	37	51
	Hydebank Wood College Females	18	18	19	26
	Total	393	374	368	436
Immediate Custody	Maghaberry	584	541	538	480
	Magilligan	506	452	427	442
	Hydebank Wood College Males	66	57	56	46
	Hydebank Wood College Females	35	35	38	38
	Total	1,192	1,085	1,060	1,006
Fine Default	Maghaberry	5	6	6	5
	Magilligan	0	0	0	0
	Hydebank Wood College Males	0	0	0	0
	Hydebank Wood College Females	1	0	1	0
	Total	6	7	7	6
Non-Criminal	Maghaberry	2	2	2	1
	Magilligan	0	0	0	0
	Hydebank Wood College Males	0	2	2	0
	Hydebank Wood College Females	0	0	0	0
	Total	2	5	4	1
Males		1,539	1,418	1,382	1,384
Females ²		53	54	57	65
Establishment	Maghaberry	931	869	857	839
	Magilligan	506	453	430	447
	Hydebank Wood College Males	102	96	95	98
	Hydebank Wood College Females	53	54	57	65
	Total	1,592	1,472	1,439	1,448

Source: PRISM

- 1 Components may not sum to totals due to rounding
- 2 Females may include Transgender persons

Table 2: Average Daily Northern Ireland Prison Population under Sentence of Immediate Custody by Establishment and Current Age¹

		2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Maghaberry	18-20 years	1	1	0	0
	21-29 years	341	324	311	296
	30-39 years	295	290	304	294
	40-49 years	169	147	139	145
	50-59 years	94	80	73	72
	60+ years	30	25	29	33
	Total	930	868	857	839
Magilligan	21-29 years	177	149	137	143
	30-39 years	145	130	137	149
	40-49 years	86	83	65	75
	50-59 years	57	51	46	41
	60+ years	41	43	45	39
	Total	506	454	430	447
Hydebank Wood College Males	18-20 years	74	71	70	73
	21-29 years	29	25	25	24
	Total	102	96	95	98
Hydebank Wood College Females ²	18-20 years	2	3	3	4
	21-29 years	18	17	18	15
	30-39 years	13	14	12	20
	40-49 years	10	10	15	14
	50-59 years	7	8	8	9
	60+ years	2	2	2	2
	Total	53	54	57	65
All	18-20 years	77	75	74	77
	21-29 years	565	515	491	478
	30-39 years	453	433	453	463
	40-49 years	266	240	219	235
	50-59 years	158	139	127	121
	60+ years	74	70	76	74
	Total	1,592	1,472	1,439	1,448

Source: PRISM

1 Components may not sum to totals due to rounding

2 Females may include Transgender persons

Table 3a: Average Daily Northern Ireland Prison Population under Sentence of Immediate Custody Sentence Length¹ in HMP Maghaberry

	2015/16			2016/17			2017/18			2018/19		
	Total Length	Custody Length	Licence Length	Total Length	Custody Length	Licence Length	Total Length	Custody Length	Licence Length	Total Length	Custody Length	Licence Length
Life ²	152	152	152	134	134	134	120	120	120	116	116	116
>10 years - < Life	50	23	0	36	16	<1	40	20	0	39	18	0

	2015/16			2016/17			2017/18			2018/19		
	Total Length	Custody Length	Licence Length	Total Length	Custody Length	Licence Length	Total Length	Custody Length	Licence Length	Total Length	Custody Length	Licence Length
>5 years - <=10 years	107	61	9	76	42	9	67	41	11	64	38	12
>4 years - <=5 years	26	28	25	21	24	21	29	23	21	24	19	19
>3 years - <=4 years	27	39	31	40	32	24	37	30	19	28	27	18
>2 years - <=3 years	56	60	65	48	44	44	58	43	46	32	37	46
>1 year - <=2 years	66	91	69	72	93	77	65	90	88	61	72	57
>6 months - <=1 year	48	72	22	52	84	37	57	96	37	46	78	35
>3 months - <=6 months	36	42	3	42	52	8	47	57	8	48	54	3
<=3 months	16	17	208	19	19	188	18	18	188	20	21	173
Missing Lengths	1	1	1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1	<1
Total	584	584	584	541	541	541	538	538	538	480	480	480

Table 3c: Average Daily Northern Ireland Prison Population under Sentence of Immediate Custody Sentence Length1 in Hydebank Wood College - Males

	2015/16			2016/17			2017/18			2018/19		
	Total Length	Custody Length	Licence Length	Total Length	Custody Length	Licence Length	Total Length	Custody Length	Licence Length	Total Length	Custody Length	Licence Length
Life2	0	0	0	0	0	0	<1	<1	<1	1	1	1
>10 years - < Life	3	0	0	2	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0
>5 years - <=10 years	14	5	1	10	5	1	11	3	0	9	1	<1
>4 years - <=5 years	4	2	1	4	3	1	2	3	2	1	3	3
>3 years - <=4 years	6	7	6	3	1	1	3	<1	<1	3	2	2
>2 years - <=3 years	12	6	10	9	7	10	11	8	11	5	5	6
>1 year - <=2 years	7	19	19	11	17	14	11	16	14	9	16	9
>6 months - <=1 year	12	17	5	9	15	7	9	16	7	8	9	2
>3 months - <=6 months	6	8	1	6	6		6	7	1	5	7	1
<=3 months	2	2	24	2	2	23	2	2	22	2	2	22
Missing Lengths	0	0	0	0	0	0	<1	<1	<1	0	0	0
Total	66	66	66	57	57	57	56	56	56	46	46	46

Table 3d: Average Daily Northern Ireland Prison Population under Sentence of Immediate Custody Sentence Length1 in Hydebank Wood College - Females

	2015/16			2016/17			2017/18			2018/19		
	Total Length	Custody Length	Licence Length	Total Length	Custody Length	Licence Length	Total Length	Custody Length	Licence Length	Total Length	Custody Length	Licence Length
Life2	6	6	6	6	6	6	7	7	7	7	7	7
>10 years - < Life	<1	<1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	0
>5 years - <=10 years	5	3	0	2	1	0	3	0	0	4	0	0
>4 years - <=5 years	2	1	0	3	1	<1	2	1	1	1	1	1
>3 years - <=4 years	4	3	2	2	1	1	4	3	2	2	3	3
>2 years - <=3 years	3	2	3	2	1	3	2	2	2	1	2	2
>1 year - <=2 years	2	5	6	3	6	4	4	6	5	9	3	3
>6 months - <=1 year	5	7	2	10	11	3	6	9	4	7	5	5
>3 months - <=6 months	5	6	<1	4	6	2	6	7	<1	4	<1	<1
<=3 months	1	1	15	1	1	15	2	3	17	2	17	17
Total	35	35	35	35	35	35	38	38	38	38	38	38

Table 3e: Average Daily Northern Ireland Prison Population under Sentence of Immediate Custody Sentence Length1 in All Establishments

	2015/16			2016/17			2017/18			2018/19		
	Total Length	Custody Length	Licence Length	Total Length	Custody Length	Licence Length	Total Length	Custody Length	Licence Length	Total Length	Custody Length	Licence Length
Life2	162	162	162	160	160	160	156	156	156	158	158	158
>10 years - < Life	118	68	0	109	60	<1	105	58	0	102	0	0
>5 years - <=10 years	245	122	21	193	111	21	162	102	22	171	27	27
>4 years - <=5 years	78	53	42	63	53	39	67	46	38	64	36	36
>3 years - <=4 years	105	97	77	88	76	59	91	63	45	77	55	55
>2 years - <=3 years	141	138	162	119	109	123	135	104	123	97	127	127
>1 year - <=2 years	142	263	217	149	226	183	140	218	204	144	160	160
>6 months - <=1 year	105	174	64	112	173	75	105	194	84	94	85	85
>3 months - <=6 months	71	88	9	67	91	19	72	92	16	73	12	12
<=3 months	25	25	438	25	26	405	25	26	371	27	347	347
Missing Lengths	1	1	1	<1	<1	<1	1	1	1	<1	<1	<1
Total	1192	1192	1192	1085	1085	1085	1060	1060	1060	1006	1006	1006

Source: PRSIM

- 1 Components may not sum to totals due to rounding
- 2 Life includes those detained at the Secretary of State's Pleasure
- 3 Females may include Transgender persons

Table 4: Average Daily Northern Ireland Prison Population under Sentence of Immediate Custody by Establishment and Principal Offence^{1,2}

		2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	
Maghaberry	Violence Against the Person	246	235	225	192	
	Sexual	30	16	26	33	
	Other Misc Sexual	1	1	4	1	
	Robbery	51	41	43	30	
	Theft	24	22	24	23	
	Burglary	32	33	29	26	
	Criminal Damage	20	21	18	20	
	Drugs	29	35	35	34	
	Possession of Weapons	10	11	9	9	
	Public Order	19	95	95	85	
	Motoring	10	13	15	7	
	Fraud	3	2	2	1	
	Other Offences	109	14	15	17	
	Missing	1	<1	0	0	
	Total		584	541	538	480
Magilligan	Violence Against the Person	127	119	109	115	
	Sexual	95	92	77	68	
	Other Misc Sexual	5	3	1	<1	
	Robbery	59	43	46	49	
	Theft	24	9	10	13	
	Burglary	26	25	29	27	
	Criminal Damage	17	13	15	20	
	Drugs	55	57	55	46	
	Possession of Weapons	4	4	4	4	
	Public Order	17	69	58	74	
	Motoring	11	4	9	6	
	Fraud	4	2	4	4	
	Other Offences	61	12	10	16	
	Total		506	452	427	442
	Hydebank Wood College Males	Violence Against the Person	24	16	20	15
Sexual		5	3	2	1	
Robbery		8	6	5	7	
Theft		5	4	2	4	
Burglary		9	5	5	4	
Criminal Damage		6	5	4	3	
Drugs		<1	<1	1	1	
Possession of Weapons		1	<1	<1	1	

		2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
	Public Order	2	13	14	9
	Motoring	1	2	<1	1
	Other Offences	7	2	1	1
	Missing	<1	0	0	0
	Total	66	57	56	46
Hydebank Wood College Females ³	Violence Against the Person	18	16	14	16
	Sexual	0		2	2
	Robbery	2	1	3	1
	Theft	2	5	6	6
	Burglary	<1	1	<1	<1
	Criminal Damage	4	3	2	1
	Drugs	3	2	3	2
	Possession of Weapons	<1	<1	6	8
	Public Order	2	3	<1	<1
	Motoring	<1	<1	1	2
	Fraud	0	1	2	38
	Other Offences	3	2	38	0
	Missing	0	0	<1	0
	Total	35	35	38	0
All	Violence Against the Person	416	386	368	338
	Sexual	130	112	106	104
	Other Misc Sexual	6	4	5	1
	Robbery	119	91	97	88
	Theft	55	40	42	45
	Burglary	68	64	64	57
	Criminal Damage	47	42	38	45
	Drugs	87	95	94	84
	Possession of Weapons	15	15	13	14
	Public Order	40	180	173	176
	Motoring	21	20	25	14
	Fraud	7	6	7	5
	Other Offences	179	30	27	35
	Missing	1	<1	<1	0
	Total	1192	1085	1060	1006

Source: PRISM

- 1 Principal offence relates to the most serious offence for which an individual was convicted
- 2 Components may not sum to totals due to rounding
- 3 Females may include Transgender persons

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice what mechanism is in place to allow grievances to be made by Prison Service staff and to be managed effectively.

(AQW 2888/17-22)

Mrs Long: Prison staff are civil servants and are therefore subject to the NICS Grievance Policy (Staff Handbook Para 6.04 refers). If an issue arises an attempt will be made to resolve through informal contact at a local level in the first instance. If that is not possible, Prison Staff can then raise the issue through the formal NI Civil Service Grievance Policy.

Line Managers and/or the local HR department will refer staff to the grievance policy to ensure the member of staff fully understands the different roles in the process.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice what work, if any, the UK Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner has engaged in with regard to Northern Ireland since 2017; and whether the Department is aware of any future plans on the part of the Commissioner on the impact of modern slavery in this jurisdiction.

(AQW 3010/17-22)

Mrs Long: There has been very positive engagement with the UK Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner (IASC) in relation to Northern Ireland since 2017. This has included direct engagement with me and my Department, as well as with civil society, contracted support providers, local government, the judiciary and the Department of Health.

Dame Sara and I had a constructive meeting during her second visit to Northern Ireland on 18 and 19 February. My officials facilitated the IASC and her team to engage with partners which has helped to highlight best practice in raising public awareness; informed development of policy and strategy; and reinforced cross-border and cross-jurisdictional co-operation.

The IASC's Advisory Panel, which provides guidance, challenge and support to her office includes representation from Northern Ireland. This helps ensure the interests of this jurisdiction are considered by IASC at a strategic level.

I am committed to further engagement on an ongoing basis with the IASC, as we work together to take forward our strategic priorities to combat modern slavery and human trafficking in Northern Ireland and to support victims in their recovery.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice to outline the (i) shortest recorded; (ii) longest recorded; (iii) average time it takes for an individual who enters the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) in Northern Ireland to obtain a reasonable grounds decision or a conclusive grounds decision.

(AQW 3011/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Single Competent Authority (SCA) in the Home Office is responsible for the publication of NRM statistics. Information on the time taken to reach decisions does not currently form part of the published statistics.

The Home Office has advised that it is gathering views and opinions on how the publication of future NRM statistics could be improved and adapted to best meet user needs. Interested parties can register their interest in this consultation by emailing: NRMStatistics@homeoffice.gov.uk.

NRM statistics are produced in line with the Code of Practice for Statistics and are published online at the following link: – <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/national-referral-mechanism-statistics>.

Previous publications can be accessed on the National Crime Agency website: – <https://nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/who-we-are/publications?search=&category%5B%5D=3&limit=15&tag=&tag=>.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice whether her Department believes any legislative change is required on the 45-day recovery period for victims of human trafficking in response to the case of *The Queen on the Application of NN and LP v Secretary of State for the Home Department* decided in June 2019.

(AQW 3012/17-22)

Mrs Long: I am satisfied that no further legislative change is required in response to the case of *The Queen on the Application of NN and LP v Secretary of State for the Home Department*. This case related specifically to 'move-on' support provided by the Home Office to victims of modern slavery and human trafficking in England and Wales.

Support for potential victims of modern slavery in Northern Ireland is provided on a statutory basis, under section 18 of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 ["the NI HT Act"]. Whilst 45 days is the minimum period that potential victims are entitled to under section 18, many potential victims receive much longer periods of support, subject to the amount of time taken by the NRM Single Competent Authority to reach a conclusive determination. DoJ support under section 18 continues to be made available throughout this period until a determination is reached. Section 18(9) of the NI HT Act also provides for the Department to ensure that assistance and support can continue to be provided to a person for such further period as the Department thinks necessary.

In the current annual Modern Slavery Strategy, my Department has undertaken to explore the potential for support available to adult potential victims of modern slavery under the DoJ support contract to be provided for an extended recovery and reflection period, subject to available resources. My Department will also consider the Home Office's Recovery Needs Assessment which was introduced in England and Wales in response to the case of *NN and LP* but which is at an early stage and is being kept under review.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice whether an appeal mechanism should be introduced in the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) process against a (i) preliminary; (ii) final decision indicating an individual is not a victim of human trafficking.

(AQW 3013/17-22)

Mrs Long: NRM decision-making is undertaken by the Single Competent Authority (SCA) in the Home Office. A reconsideration process is in place where a decision can be challenged if there are concerns a decision is not in line with published guidance or if there is new evidence that would impact on the decision. This reconsideration process was recently broadened to allow victims and their legal representatives to make reconsideration requests directly to the SCA and there is no time limit on when reconsiderations can be brought on new evidence grounds.

In addition, where an individual considered that the SCA had made a decision incorrectly, it would be also open to them to challenge that decision through the courts, by way of Judicial Review.

My response to AQW 888/17-22 also advised of the establishment of Multi-Agency Assurance Panels (MAAPs), in early 2019, to improve the quality of decisions and stakeholder confidence in the decision-making process. MAAPs were introduced to quality assure all negative conclusive grounds decisions made by the SCA before the individuals concerned are notified. Whilst the panels are not decision-making bodies and they do not have the ability to overturn decisions, they are in place to review the cases and provide the SCA with their review, which will either state that the panel agrees with the reasons for the negative decision or whether further consideration of the case by the SCA is suggested.

MAAPs consist of independent experts across the UK drawn from NGOs, local authorities and police. In summer 2019, additional recruitment of further panel members took place, to increase the pool of available members, in particular the representation from local authorities, and training of these new panel members took place in late 2019. Quarterly meetings of panel chairs, the SCA and the Home Office Modern Slavery Unit have been taking place to discuss and feedback on MAAPs, share lessons learned and best practice, highlight any issues, trends and themes that may have arisen during the process and ensure an ongoing consistent approach across MAAPs.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice to detail what (i) properties; and (ii) land are currently surplus to requirements within her Department.

(AQW 3039/17-22)

Mrs Long:

- (i) The following properties (buildings) have been declared surplus:
- NI Regional War Room, 48 Mount Eden Park, BELFAST
 - Bangor Courthouse, 18-20 Quay Street, Bangor, BT20 5ED
 - Larne Courthouse, Victoria Road, Larne, BT40 1RN
- (ii) There is currently no land surplus to requirement within the Department.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of the use of CCTV as a way to reduce crime in town centres.

(AQW 3040/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Department has made no assessment of the use of CCTV as a way to reduce crime in town centres.

The Department of Justice does however fund Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs), in partnership with the Northern Ireland Policing Board. PCSPs are statutory stand-alone bodies responsible for addressing local community safety concerns, which may include the management of CCTV as a deterrent to crime and antisocial behaviour, and to assist police in detecting crime. As such, CCTV can be a valuable tool that makes a contribution to community safety where it is deployed.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Justice to detail how much funding her Department will provide to the establishment of a new RUC George Cross museum and a timeline for work undertaken in this area.

(AQW 3101/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Police Service of Northern Ireland took over responsibility for the project to deliver a policing museum from the RUC George Cross Foundation in November 2016. HM Treasury committed £5.5m funding for the project, and a further £383k has been committed by my Department.

The timeframe is an operational matter for the Chief Constable.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice whether victims of human trafficking are entitled to access legal aid for the purposes of seeking a compensation claim against their trafficker; and, if so, how many individual victims over the last 5 years have applied for legal aid for this purpose.

(AQW 3108/17-22)

Mrs Long: Yes. Provided that a person is financially eligible for legal aid, and their claim has sufficient merit, they can be granted legal aid for this purpose.

Regrettably, data on legal aid applications is not sufficiently detailed to identify claims brought by victims of trafficking against their traffickers.

It is possible to identify requests for advice and assistance that relate to human trafficking. Numbers of such requests in the last five years are given below.

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
No. of requests	12	20	9	5	38

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice whether (i) there is any evidence of modern slavery being recorded in car washes in Northern Ireland; (ii) if so, what action is taken against it; (iii) and what advice does her Department provide to individuals concerned about the possibility of modern slavery at a car wash.

(AQW 3110/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) has advised that its Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Unit (MSHTU) conducts regular safeguarding visits to car wash businesses across Northern Ireland. The MSHTU has led over 50 operations at hand car washes in Northern Ireland and has interviewed over 250 workers. The vast majority of these workers stated that they were not working under duress, with many indicating that they were content with pay and conditions. As a result of this operational activity, six potential victims of trafficking were referred to the National Referral Mechanism between February 2016 and August 2018.

PSNI has advised that its entire approach to modern slavery is victim-centred, with its focus to identify, locate and recover any potential victims of modern slavery and to offer the potential victims police help and support in line with current legislation.

Modern slavery is often described as being 'hidden in plain sight'. The Department of Justice and PSNI jointly advise members of the public of the importance of being aware of the indicators that someone may be a victim of modern slavery and to report their concerns to police.

Some of the signs and indicators of potential exploitation in car washes include:

- workers not being appropriately dressed or provided with protective equipment;
- electricity being bypassed at a car wash from a public electrical post;
- workers living on-site at the car wash;
- someone working who appears to be under the strict control of others;
- someone who cannot produce their passport or personal documents;
- workers living in houses of multiple occupancy, that is, 15-20 people living in a three bedroom house.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) all organisations in the Foyle constituency that have received funding through the Assets Recovery Community Scheme from 2018; and (ii) the total funding awarded to each project.

(AQW 3120/17-22)

Mrs Long: Five organisations located in the Foyle constituency have received funding through the Asset Recovery Community Scheme (ARCS) since 2018. An open call for applications was launched in August 2018 and funding was allocated across three financial year periods, up to 31 March 2021.

The five organisations that were allocated funding are:

- The Top Ten Women's Drama Group's "Outside In" project was funding of allocated £20,828 over a three year period (2018/19 to 2020/21);
- The Off the Streets Community Youth Initiative's "City Centre Street Work Provision" project was allocated funding of £57,627 over a three year period (2018/19 to 2020/21);
- The North West Play Resource Centre's "Listen to Us" film-making project was allocated funding of £66,770 over a three year period (2018/19 to 2020/21);
- The Leafair Community Association's "Safer Communities" project was allocated funding of £20,000 over a two year period (2018/19 to 2019/20); and
- Hillcrest Trust's "Law and Order Programme" was allocated funding of £2,666 over a two year period (2018/19 to 2019/20).

In addition there are a number of projects that were allocated funding under the current Scheme that operate on a Northern Ireland-wide basis that are helping to prevent crime and reduce the fear of crime and that are having a positive impact on the lives of people across many constituency areas.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Justice what steps her Department is taking to address violent crime, including knife crime.

(AQW 3134/17-22)

Mrs Long: I consider violence against the person in all its forms unacceptable and I am conscious of the impact crime of this nature has on victims and our community as whole.

In tackling this particular area, my Department remains committed to carrying forward a significant and wide ranging body of work, in collaboration with criminal justice partners, and continues to monitor developments of our neighbouring jurisdictions. Recognising the varied and complex factors that underpin violent crime, this work includes the establishment of a number of key strategies, prevention measures and targeted delivery programmes.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Justice (i) to give her assessment of the McCloud Judgement; (ii) how the McCloud Judgement impacts members of Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), (iii) to detail estimated costs to her Department to address discrimination found in the McCloud Judgement for members of the PSNI.

(AQW 3153/17-22)

Mrs Long: The impact of the McCloud judgment on all public service pension schemes is under active consideration. The employment tribunal cases relating to the Police Service of Northern Ireland have been stayed pending the final remedy of the McCloud judgment and, therefore, it is not appropriate for me to comment.

Department for the Economy

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy (i) whether she has any plans to introduce an age, goods and facilities and services bill as mentioned in New Decade, New Approach; and (ii) what measures she is considering to ensure that young people are not disadvantaged in remuneration, when employed in the same role as older colleagues.

(AQW 1613/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): We will consider the development of an Age, Goods and Facilities and Services Bill in due course. At present responsibility for setting the National Minimum wage is within the remit of the UK Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister for the Economy what discussions Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council have had with Invest NI regarding the Denny's site, Portadown.

(AQW 2103/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Invest NI's Regional Manager meets monthly with Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council's Director, Place Directorate (Economic Development and Regeneration) to discuss economic development matters which has included general discussion on the Council's plans for the regeneration of the Denny's site Portadown.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 704/17-22, what has been expended in respect of training in apprenticeships in Northern Ireland since the Apprenticeship Levy was introduced in the United Kingdom.

(AQW 2291/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department's gross expenditure in respect of apprenticeship training in Northern Ireland from the introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy in April 2017 to January 2020 was £66,270,000.

The Apprenticeship levy is collected directly by Her Majesty's Revenue & Customs (HMRC) through the Pay As You Earn (PAYE) system and although not responsible for collection my Department estimated in 2018 that Northern Ireland employers contribute between £46 - £50 million per year to the Levy. Between £28 - £30 million of this figure is estimated to be paid by Northern Ireland public sector employers and between £18 - £21 million is estimated to be paid by Northern Ireland private sector.

It should however be noted that in Northern Ireland there is no direct link between Levy contribution and eligibility for support. My Department provides funding to support the cost of apprenticeship training for private sector employers regardless of whether they pay levy contributions. The Apprenticeship Programmes are demand led by employers, and I encourage all employers to avail of these Programmes to drive forward business growth.

I will continue to consider the issues raised by NI employers during the consultation on the impact of the levy in NI, including widening access, increasing participation, and how to improve transparency for employers on the level of funding support they are currently availing of through participation in our apprenticeship programmes. I have also met a number of businesses and I am aware of the concerns they have expressed.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for the Economy to list all investment in North Belfast since 2016, including funding provided to the community and voluntary sector.

(AQW 2302/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

European Fund Management

Total funding offered to projects covering North Belfast under the NI ESF Programme (2014-2020) totals £190.967m, split across two distinct funding calls.

It should be noted that many of these projects operate in other constituencies throughout Northern Ireland and as such not all of this funding relates solely to North Belfast.

A list of organisations funded under the first tranche can be viewed at European Social Fund - 2014-2020 Projects Awarded Call 1 (<https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/european-social-fund-2014-2020-projects-awarded-call-1>). It should be noted that the total cost of £67.935m indicated is split across the 3 year period 1 April 2015 – 31 March 2018.

A list of organisations funded under the second tranche can be viewed at European Social Fund - 2014-2020 Projects Awarded Call 2 (<https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/66-european-social-fund-call-2-projects-by-constituency-and-council-area>). It should be noted that the total cost of £123.032m indicated is split across the 4 year period 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2022.

Total eligible project costs across the NI ESF 2014-20 programme are supported by an EU contribution of 50%, automatically matched by 15% national resources, with the remaining 35% match funding provided largely by DfE and DfC.

Further Education

Northern Regional College and Belfast Metropolitan College both provide further education in the North Belfast area through the Newtownabbey campus and Girdwood Community Hub respectively. My Department also provides funding for delivery costs, further education grants, home to college transport, free school meals and clothing allowance and for capital works and building maintenance.

As funding is provided to each college to address need across all their campuses I cannot provide a detailed breakdown of allocations per campus or specifically for students and campuses in the North Belfast area.

Apprenticeships, Careers and Vocational Education

The Department's Apprenticeship funding is not allocated on a geographical basis. The Apprenticeship programmes are demand-led linked to the number of Apprentices that a business employs, with funding paid directly to Further Education Colleges, universities and contracted non-statutory training providers operating across Northern Ireland.

The following organisations delivering Apprenticeship programmes are located in North Belfast:

- Loughview Training Services
- Northern Regional College (Newtownabbey Campus)
- Workforce Training Services

As is the case with Apprenticeship funding, the Department's Training for Success (TfS) Programme funding is not allocated on a geographical basis. The TfS Programme is demand-led, with funding paid directly to Further Education Colleges and contracted non-statutory training providers operating across Northern Ireland.

The following organisations delivering the TfS Programme are located in North Belfast:

- Loughview Training Services
- Northern Regional College (Newtownabbey Campus)
- Workforce Training Services

It should be noted that the services provided by the Department's Apprenticeship and TfS delivery partners are not geographically limited to North Belfast, and participants residing outside North Belfast may also attend provision in this area. Equally, other organisations located outside North Belfast may provide services to participants living in North Belfast. The Department does not publish individual supplier level Apprenticeship and TfS funding data as it is considered "commercial in confidence".

In addition to the provision outlined above, the following North Belfast based community organisations have been awarded funding as lead partners under the SEUPB managed cross-border Peace4Youth programme:

- Ashton Community Trust: €3,406,837.15 (Funding period: 1/8/17-31/12/21)
- Springboard Opportunities Trust: €5,074,283.26 (Funding period: 1/8/17-31/12/21)

The following organisations based in North Belfast will receive funding as a partner in another Peace4Youth project up to the end of December 2021:

- TIDES Training
- Northern Ireland Alternatives
- Start360

The Department is the NI Accountable Department and is responsible for funding the Peace4Youth programme in Northern Ireland

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy has any civil servant in the Energy Division of her Department declared an interest in respect of a company engaged by the Department to audit non-domestic RHI boilers.

(AQW 2366/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: No civil servant in Energy Group has declared an interest in respect of a company engaged by the Department to audit non-domestic RHI boilers.

The Head of Energy Group, who is seconded into the Department, declared a potential conflict of interest in respect to a contractor on the Framework Agreement relating to the inspections of non-domestic RHI boilers. This individual was not involved in the procurement or selection of the contractors onto the Framework and has had no role in any decision-making in, or management of the contract.

This information has already been released in response to a FOI request, received in November 2019.

Mr Storey asked the Minister for the Economy to outline any discussions she has had with representatives of Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council in respect of funding for Air Waves Portrush; and to detail what actions her Department will take to support the future of the event moving forward.

(AQW 2513/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I have had no discussions with Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council regarding Air Waves Portrush. The event is not only funded by the Council, it is also dependent upon significant manpower and technical expertise from council officials to allow the event to take place.

Officials in Tourism NI understand that the decision taken by the Council not to proceed with the Air Waves Event was taken on value for money grounds as the event delivered limited additional economic benefit within the Borough.

In the past Tourism NI has provided funding for the event as per the table below. The Council is the primary funder.

Funding Year	Value
2019/20	£12,000
2018/19	£20,000
2017/18	£19,000
2016/17	£25,000
2015/16	£25,000
Total:	£101,000

Ms Ennis asked the Minister for the Economy to outline what engagement Invest NI have had with mining and mineral exploration firms (i) internationally; and (ii) nationally, in the last 24 months.

(AQW 2796/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Invest NI has had the following engagement with mining and mineral exploitation firms in the last 24 months:

(i) Internationally

Invest NI, through its ongoing liaison with Geological Surveys Northern Ireland, continue to promote Northern Ireland's expertise in material handling, global mining and geoscience value supply chains. This occurs at events such as the annual Prospectors & Developers Association of Canada (PDAC) convention in Toronto which takes place in March each year.

As part of this, Invest NI met with a mining company headquartered in Canada, and with a subsidiary in Northern Ireland, at the PDAC in Toronto in March 2018.

Invest NI also supports Northern Ireland manufacturers of crushing and screening equipment which can be used by companies involved in mining activity to process minerals and materials. The agency actively promotes these companies at international events attended by mining companies. These include Bauma - Germany, Conexpo – Latin America, The Mining Show – Dubai and ConExpo – Las Vegas.

(ii) Nationally

Invest NI has had a number of engagements with key stakeholders and trade associations such as the Mineral Product Association (NI) and Geological Surveys Northern Ireland in order to assist their company members and the wider business base remain competitive. These engagements have been around energy savings and utilisation of water as a natural resource and are ongoing.

The agency has also been approached by two companies involved in gold mining for advice on the companies' business plans. I cannot comment further as these plans are commercially sensitive.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for the Economy to outline (i) why there have been no Invest NI investors visits in South Down in 2018/19; (ii) why Belfast got 278 such visits; (iii) who makes the decision where these visits take place; and (iv) what accountability there is for a regionally balanced approach to such visits.

(AQW 2837/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Invest NI promotes the whole of Northern Ireland as an attractive and viable location for inward investment opportunities to new investors, and to existing investors considering expansion.

I appreciate that the lack of visits to some areas across Northern Ireland is disappointing but the reality is that the investor makes the decision as to where they visit and locate based on their specific business needs and having considered all the options available to them. Whilst Invest NI promotes all areas, steering an investor to locate in any one area that does not meet their requirements would be both counterproductive and damaging to Northern Ireland's investment reputation.

It is important to note that the majority of inward visits begin with a meeting at Invest NI's HQ in Belfast as most investors arrive in Belfast via plane or train. A company often has only a short number of hours in Northern Ireland and, in most cases, the agency will invite key stakeholders, such as representatives from councils and colleges, to meet with the company in Belfast. While the company might be considering a location outside Belfast, the visit itself is logged under 'Belfast visits'. For this reason, the number of visits to Belfast might seem disproportionately high. What is more relevant is that in the last 5 years over 40% of investors have chosen to locate outside Belfast.

Finally, it is important to remember that Inward investment is only one element of Invest NI's support in any area. Over the past 5 years, in the Newry, Mourne and Down District Council area, Invest NI has made 1,640 offers of support to businesses. These offers aim to support 2,350 jobs and bring total planned investment commitments of over £260m to the area. For example, in recent times, Invest NI has supported local companies to grow in the area such as the 237 jobs being created by STATSports in Newry and the 125 jobs being created by Finnebrogue in Downpatrick.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy what consultation has taken place with the (i) co-operative; and (ii) credit union sectors during her Department's review of mutual society legislation.
(AQW 2870/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (1) It has been a long standing commitment of my Department to reform the mutuals legislative framework. To do this well we must involve the sector and over the years my Department has built strong working relationships with representatives of the mutuals sector and has consulted with them at every step of legislative change.

In 2014 officials began consulting on what culminated in the Credit Unions and Co-operatives and Community Benefit Societies (Northern Ireland) Act 2016. In 2018, two further provisions were commenced when the registration of societies was transferred to the Financial Conduct Authority and throughout the process the sector was kept fully informed of progress.

My officials met with sectoral representatives at the start of March as part of the final stage of the reform plan. They will shortly be issuing a 'Call for Evidence' to the sector so that a root and branch review of the mutual framework can be completed. This call for evidence will give the sector an opportunity to have a say on how they would like the legislation to look. This will then inform an official consultation which should take place in the Autumn.

- (2) My Department does not hold this information. The Financial Conduct Authority is the registering authority for co-operatives (as well as community benefit societies and credit unions). They maintain a public register of co-operatives and can advise of the number operating at any given time.

The register can be found at <https://mutuals.fca.org.uk/> or they can be called on 0800 111 678. The address is 12 Endeavour Square, London, E20 1JN.

- (3) The Credit Unions and Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 stipulated that a review of the operation of corporate membership of credit unions, specifically as it relates to unincorporated associations, be carried out.

Departmental officials have completed the review and the report is being finalised. All credit unions in NI, along with their trade associations, were consulted.

The Act stipulates that the report be laid before the Assembly and officials will ensure this happens in the coming weeks.

My officials can brief the Committee on the review if appropriate.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy whether Invest NI will commit financial resources to support the growth and creation of employee-owned enterprises.
(AQW 2871/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Invest NI works with individuals, companies and organisations which show the ambition and commitment to grow by being more innovative, more entrepreneurial and more internationally focused. The ownership model is not a determining factor on whether the agency is able to support a business/entrepreneur.

More information on the criteria for receiving support from Invest NI can be found at the following link <https://www.investni.com/about-us/how-we-support-business>. Where a business does not meet these thresholds, Invest NI will work in partnership with partners such as local councils and Enterprise NI to both signpost and make introductions for appropriate support.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister for the Economy to outline (i) why Invest NI hosted no potential investors in South Down in each of the last three years; (ii) her assessment of this; and (iii) what she will do to address this imbalance compared to all other constituencies.

(AQW 2874/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Invest NI promotes the whole of Northern Ireland as an attractive and viable location for inward investment opportunities to new investors, and to existing investors considering expansion.

I appreciate that the lack of visits to South Down is disappointing but the reality is that the investor will make the decision as to where they visit and locate based on their specific business needs and having considered the options available to them. Indeed steering an investor to locate in an area that does not meet their requirements would be both counterproductive and ultimately damage Northern Ireland's investment reputation.

It is important to note that the majority of inward visits begin with a meeting at Invest NI's HQ in Belfast as most investors arrive in Belfast via plane or train. A company often has only a short number of hours in Northern Ireland and, in most cases, the agency will invite key stakeholders, such as representatives from councils and colleges, to meet with the company often in Belfast. While the company might be considering a location outside Belfast, the visit itself is logged under 'Belfast visits'. For this reason, the number of visits against Belfast is disproportionately high. What is more relevant is that in the last 5 years over 40% of investors have chosen to locate outside Belfast.

Finally, it is important to remember that Inward investment is only one element of Invest NI's support in any area. Over the past 5 years, in the Newry, Mourne and Down District Council area, Invest NI has made 1,640 offers of support to businesses. These offers aim to support 2,350 jobs and bring total planned investment commitments of over £260m to the area. For example, in recent times, Invest NI has supported local companies to grow in the area such as the 237 jobs being created by STATSports in Newry and the 125 jobs being created by Finnebrogue in Downpatrick.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) what Invest NI have done to help attract investment into the South Down constituency in the last 5 years; (ii) what impact Invest NI have had on the development of economic opportunities in South Down in the last 5 years; and (iii) what plans Invest NI have to develop economic opportunities in South Down in 2020/21.

(AQW 2936/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

(i) & (ii) Invest NI has worked closely with local economic stakeholders to plan, develop and implement strategies to increase prosperity within South Down. This work has included active engagement with Newry Mourne and Down District Council (NM&D) on the development of both its Economic Strategy and Community Plan.

Over the past 5 years Invest NI has made 958 offers of support to local and externally owned businesses in South Down which will bring total planned investment of £131m in to the local economy. For example, Invest NI has supported the 237 jobs being created by STATSports in Newry and the 125 jobs being created by Finnebrogue in Downpatrick.

The agency's support is also helping businesses in the area develop in external markets and invest in innovation to remain competitive.

Invest NI has part funded a number of business start-up and development projects in partnership with Councils and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). For example, £1m of Invest NI and ERDF support was provided towards 4 Business Start and Growth programmes to help grow the economy in the Newry Mourne and Down District Council (NM&D) area.

(iii) Invest NI will continue to provide advice, guidance and financial assistance to those new and established businesses seeking its support. Close links and collaborations will also be maintained with key economic development stakeholder partners in order to foster increased levels of entrepreneurship and economic prosperity within the area.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for the Economy what properties or land are currently surplus to requirements within her Department.

(AQW 2945/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: While my core Department does not hold any property or lands that are currently surplus the following Arm's Length Bodies have identified a number as follows:

Further Education Estate:

Table A attached outlines the land and property assets that are current surplus to the requirement of the Further Education Estate.

There are a number of additional assets across the Further Education ((FE) Estate which will become surplus to requirements over the next few years following my Department's major capital investment to provide six new, state of the art campuses.

The FE Capital Projects Team regularly review, in consultation with the relevant College and the Department's Financial Management Branch, the surplus assets and proposed disposal timelines to ensure a structured and consistent approach is maintained.

Invest NI:

In line with Department of Finance guidelines Invest NI regularly reviews its assets to ensure it retains a sustainable estate meeting its identified future property needs.

In the current financial year the agency has declared two properties to be surplus to its requirements, namely an industrial estate of some 75 acres in Antrim as well as a 1.6 acre site at Hightown Industrial Estate in Mallusk.

The organisation is currently progressing the sale of a property at Lissue Road Industrial Estate and has completed the sale of a 1.44 acre site at Hightown. These properties had been declared to be surplus in previous years.

Table A. – Further Education Estate

College	Asset	Current Status	Estimated Disposal Date
Belfast Metropolitan College	Riddell Centre Belfast	Work is ongoing to resolve legal title issues	2021-22
Northern Regional College	Land adjacent to Newtownabbey Campus	The plot is land locked and preventing simple disposal	TBC
	Portrush Campus (former Catering College)	Awaiting formal transfer to DE who are part owners	2021-22
North West Regional College	Maydown, Londonderry (former Government training Centre)	Identified for disposal	2021-22
Southern Regional College	Banbridge Skills and Education Centre	Identified for disposal	2021-22
	Corry Square, Newry	Identified for disposal	2021-22
	Station Road, Armagh	Identified for disposal	2021-22
	Lisnally Caretakers House, Armagh	Identified for disposal	2021-22

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for the Economy to outline how many agency jobs Invest NI has assisted since 2014. (AQW 2971/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Invest NI assists businesses to create jobs by providing support via Selective Financial Assistance (SFA). In certain circumstances, Invest NI will allow a business to recruit a proportion of its workforce via employment agencies. Since 2014, approximately 1,700 agency jobs were assisted under SFA, representing less than 7% of the total jobs assisted.

As with all jobs assisted under the SFA scheme, agency jobs must be maintained for at least five years in the case of large companies and three years in the case of Small and Medium sized Enterprises.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for the Economy to outline how many jobs Invest NI has assisted which pay below the real living wage since 2014. (AQW 2973/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Between 1st April 2014 and 31st March 2019 Invest NI assisted 27,978 new jobs with recorded salary data. 24,028 of these jobs, 86%, will pay a salary above the real living wage, with 3,950, 14%, planning to pay a salary below the real living wage.

It is important to note that such jobs play a vital role in the NI economy to ensure that suitable opportunities are available at all levels, for example, the unemployed and the economically inactive to transition in to the world of work.

Mr Frew asked the Minister for the Economy what date did the System Operator for Northern Ireland (SONI) respond in full to the Utility Regulator's formal request for information under the SONI transmission license. (AQW 3005/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As per the response already provided to Priority AQW 3008/17-22 which noted:

SONI responded to the information request on 27 February 2020 and provided a response to each question asked. The Utility Regulator will be seeking further clarification on a number of points.

Mr Frew asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 2597/17-22, has the System Operator for Northern Ireland (SONI) responded to the Utility Regulator's formal request for information under the SONI transmission license by the deadline date that was extended to 5:00pm on 26 February 2020; and, if not, what further action is being taken by the Utility Regulator and Department for the Economy to protect consumers. (AQW 3007/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: SONI responded to the information request on 27 February 2020 and provided a response to each question asked. The UR will be seeking further clarification on a number of points.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister for the Economy to outline the number of jobs created with the support of Invest NI in each of the last 5 years, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 3019/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Invest NI moved to Outcome Based Reporting (OBA) in 2017, in line with the draft Programme for Government. As a result of this change the agency now measures the impact of its support based on key performance indicators (KPIs) gathered from a cohort of businesses which it works most intensely with. The agency now tracks the number of additional jobs these companies create each calendar year.

The table below shows the number of additional jobs created in 2017 and 2018 by businesses supported by Invest NI.

Additional Jobs created by companies by Parliamentary Constituency (2017 and 2018)

PCA	2017	2018
Belfast East	884	543
Belfast North	632	681
Belfast South	2,470	1,680
Belfast West	136	85
East Antrim	64	163
East Londonderry	230	280
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	838	747
Foyle	444	334
Lagan Valley	890	387
Mid Ulster	1,100	1,139
Newry & Armagh	778	674
North Antrim	428	279
North Down	102	65
South Antrim	251	450
South Down	472	181
Strangford	222	120
Upper Bann	1,114	971
West Tyrone	257	259
Total	11,309	9,033

Notes:

- 1 'Additional Jobs' are based on all jobs created by businesses supported by Invest NI during the period under review.
- 2 Totals may not add due to rounding.

Prior to this change in reporting, Invest NI measured jobs created each financial year based on employment related financial support. This information for 2014-15 to 2016-17 is contained in the table below.

Jobs Created through direct financial support by Parliamentary Constituency (2014-15 to 2016-17)

PCA	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17
Belfast East	1,069	684	431
Belfast North	425	363	211
Belfast South	1,004	1,752	1,408
Belfast West	371	133	63
East Antrim	198	403	151
East Londonderry	255	123	75

PCA	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	521	369	382
Foyle	663	398	221
Lagan Valley	439	224	263
Mid Ulster	663	357	370
Newry & Armagh	640	156	425
North Antrim	259	130	133
North Down	155	71	50
South Antrim	815	318	403
South Down	357	165	194
Strangford	164	63	105
Upper Bann	1,077	779	550
West Tyrone	304	241	470
Not Determined	29		
Total	9,409	6,730	5,904

Note: 'Jobs created' is based on those jobs for which Invest NI customers received a direct offer of employment related support.

These two tables are not directly comparable as different reporting methods, and time periods, have been applied.

It should be noted that over the past 5 years, three quarters of offers of support and two thirds of investment commitments secured by Invest NI were through businesses located outside Belfast. In addition, two thirds of the additional jobs created with the support of Invest NI were in businesses located outside Belfast.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy to outline what progress has been made to deliver on commitments made to expand Ulster University Magee Campus, as outlined in the New Decade, New Approach.
(AQW 3047/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Policy in respect of the proposed Graduate Entry Medical School at the Magee Campus of Ulster University belongs to the Department of Health (DoH). They have the expertise and knowledge in this area to decide in the best interest of Northern Ireland. My Department awaits any strategic imperative from DoH which may necessitate a capital development which could require DfE involvement. Ulster University has submitted a business case to the Department of Health and the UK Government has committed a ring-fenced allocation of £60 million of Capital Grant and Resource DEL towards that proposal. The Minister for Health has asked to meet and I am happy to do so.

As regards broader expansion at Magee, following a request by the Department for the Economy Permanent Secretary for an update on the university's proposals for Magee the University confirmed in correspondence to my Department in September 2019, that it remained committed to securing expansion of its Magee campus, and at the same time confirmed that the business case required updating prior to any consideration by the Department or Executive.

I recognise that considerable work needs to be done prior to any proposal being submitted for Executive consideration, however I am also committed to working with the University around the consideration of any expansion proposals that it develops.

Mr Wells asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 2559/17-22, what proportion of the total amount owed to creditors by the Presbyterian Mutual Society is made up of loan repayments due to his Department.
(AQW 3057/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As per the most recent published Presbyterian Mutual Society Accounts as at 31 March 2019 and as outlined in AQW 2559/17-22, total creditors due in one year totalled £100,033,480. Of this amount £97,750,000 related to loan repayments due to the Department. A breakdown of the total creditors balance can be found on note 14 of the accounts which are published on the Presbyterian Mutual Society website.

Mr Frew asked the Minister for the Economy whether Northern Ireland will be included in the next round of the Contracts for Difference (CfD) scheme, which opens in 2021; and, if not, what are the reasons for exclusion.
(AQW 3094/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Contracts for Difference (CfD) scheme has not been implemented in Northern Ireland for a number of reasons. In particular, joining the scheme, which was introduced in GB in 2014, would have placed a guaranteed additional

cost burden on Northern Ireland consumers, on top of existing support that consumers already pay for the Renewables Obligations.

This is against the background that CfD contracts are allocated through competitive UK-wide auctions and there would be no guarantee that projects in Northern Ireland would be successful. The previous exclusion of onshore wind, which makes up approximately 85% of local renewable electricity generation, increased this likelihood.

As things stand, Northern Ireland will therefore not be able to participate in Round 4 in 2021. However, I am pleased to note that primary legislation was put in place at the outset for Northern Ireland to join at a later date if conditions were right.

I am aware that the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is currently consulting on changes to the CfD scheme structure, including the inclusion of onshore wind (in excess of 5MW capacity) in the eligible technologies for Pot 1 (established technologies). This potential move would offer significantly greater opportunities for Northern Ireland.

My Department will be actively considering options on potential routes to market for renewable electricity projects, including CfDs, as it acts on the input gathered through the Energy Strategy Call for Evidence.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) what programmes Invest NI operates to support and sustain family-owned businesses, including when they are at risk of closure because of lack of family succession; and (ii) whether these programmes include supporting the conversion of the businesses into employee ownership or co-operatives.
(AQW 3121/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Family owned businesses/SMEs form a significant proportion of Invest NI's existing client base, and while the organisation does not currently run a standalone programme for these businesses the vast majority of interventions offered by the organisation are available to them, subject to normal application criteria.

These interventions are designed to support companies to grow and become sustainable, and focus on areas including (but not limited to) growing exports and external sales; investing in research and development and innovation; investing in skills/ upskilling of staff and providing access to finance to support business growth.

The agency's Leader Programme and Leadership Team Programmes provide business mentoring, leadership coaching; peer networking and assistance in developing a business growth plan which can help a family business consider succession planning, or options such as converting to employee ownerships or a co-operative.

The Non-Executive Director Programme, provides support to engage an experienced Non Executive Director which can be of particular benefit to those businesses who have not previously had an appropriate Board in place, or require specialist input.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of the green economy locally, in comparison to the British sector, the Irish sector and the European sector.
(AQW 3182/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Northern Ireland Executive does not have a single agreed definition for the green economy therefore it is not possible to provide a 'like for like' assessment of the local green economy in comparison to other economies.

The green economy is widely regarded as being low carbon, resource efficient and socially inclusive and covers a wide range of areas including the circular economy, renewable energies and energy efficiency.

The 'Low Carbon and Renewable Energy Economy survey', which is conducted by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and co-funded by my Department, does not capture the entirety of the green economy but it provides a starting point for an assessment in comparison to the UK.

The latest published results from this survey relate to 2018 and show that private sector businesses active in the low carbon and renewable energy sector in the UK had 224,800 full-time equivalents and a turnover of £46.7bn.

Northern Ireland has a turnover of £1.1bn with 5,400 full-time equivalents employed in this sector which equates to a 2.3% share of UK turnover and 2.4% of UK full-time equivalents. This is roughly equivalent to NI's share of total UK Gross Domestic Product (GDP) which is 2.3%.

My Department is unaware of any directly comparable Irish or European low carbon and renewable energy economy sources.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has considered introducing renewable subsidies or support schemes, in the absence of Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation (NIRO) and other supports, to improve the route to market for large scale renewable energy projects.
(AQW 3184/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The future for renewable energy of all capacities, including any potential future targets and the need for new support schemes, will be considered as part of the development of a new Energy Strategy.

A Call for Evidence to inform the development of a new Energy Strategy was published on 17 December 2019 and runs to 20 March 2020.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy to outline (i) the total energy consumption in the economy in 2019 (or the latest year for which data is available), broken down by sector; and (ii) to detail projected energy demands across the economy in 2030, 2040 and 2050 (or the latest year for which projections are available), also broken down by sector, and expressed in tabular form.

(AQW 3185/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) The table below provides data for Northern Ireland Energy Consumption in Gigawatt Hours (GWh) for 2017 (the latest available year) by sector.

Published by BEIS (see note 1)	GWh
Coal (see note 2)	
Industrial/Commercial	1,286
Domestic	458
Total	1,744
Manufactured fuels (see note 3)	
Industrial/Commercial	25
Domestic	292
Total	317
Petroleum Products (see note 4)	
Industrial/Commercial	6,207
Domestic	7,335
Road transport	13,561
Rail	146
Public Sector	66
Agriculture	1,803
Total	29,118
Bio-energy & wastes	2,106
Published by Utility Regulator	
Electricity	
Industrial/Commercial	4,949
Domestic	2,859
Total	7,808
Gas (see note 5)	
Medium & Large Industrial/Commercial (see note 6)	3,299
Domestic and Small Industrial/Commercial (see note 7)	2,649
Total	5,948

Sources: BEIS Final Energy Consumption Tables and Utility Regulator Annual Transparency Report

Notes to table:

- (1) The datasets exclude some sectors and fuels. It was recognised that it would not be meaningful to allocate energy consumption locally or regionally for some energy uses, in particular aviation (air transport) and shipping (national navigation).

Includes coal consumed in all the following sectors:

- (2) Heat Generation, Energy Industry use, Industry, Public administration, Commercial, Agriculture and Miscellaneous. Excludes coal used for electricity generation (or other transformation purposes).
- (3) Includes only manufactured solid fuels and not derived gases.

Includes petroleum products (e.g. petrol, diesel, home heating oil etc.) consumed in all the following sectors:

- (4) Heat Generation, Energy Industry use, Industry, Public administration, Commercial, Agriculture and Miscellaneous.
 - (5) Excludes gas used for electricity generation (or other transformation purposes).
 - (6) The Medium and Large Industrial/Commercial sector relates to any customers with annual gas consumption that is greater than or equal to 73,200 kWh per annum.
 - (7) The Domestic and Small Industrial/Commercial sector relates to any gas customers using less than 73,200 kWh per annum. The consumption information for domestic credit and small Industrial/Commercial are combined as this information is not available separately.
- (ii) My Department does not produce forecast energy demand data.

In relation to electricity generation, the System Operator for Northern Ireland and EirGrid publish annually updated forecasts of electricity demand within their All Island Generation Capacity Statement. The most recent publication covering the period 2019-2028 can be found at: <http://www.soni.ltd.uk/media/documents/EirGrid-Group-All-Island-Generation-Capacity-Statement-2019-2028.pdf>.

The Northern Ireland Gas Transmission System Operators publish annually updated forecasts of gas demand within their Northern Ireland Gas Capacity Statement. The most recent publication covering the period 2019/20-2028/29 can be found at:

<http://gmo-ni.com/assets/documents/Transparency/NI-Gas-Capacity-Statement/Northern-Ireland-Gas-Capacity-Statement-2019-20-to-2028-29.pdf>.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy how much her Department has provided to employers for apprenticeships as a result of the apprenticeship levy; and how much Northern Ireland employers have contributed towards apprenticeships through their payment of the apprenticeship levy.
(AQW 3191/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department for the Economy's gross expenditure in respect of apprenticeship training in Northern Ireland from the introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy in April 2017 to January 2020 was £66,270,000.

The levy is collected directly by Her Majesty's Revenue & Customs (HMRC) through the Pay As You Earn (PAYE) system and although not responsible for collection my Department estimated in 2018 that Northern Ireland employers contribute between £46 - £50 million per year to the Levy. Between £28 - £30 million is estimated to come from the public sector with between £18 - £21 million coming from the private sector. Gross apprenticeships expenditure by my Department was £23,056,000 in 2018/19, this is forecast to rise to £26,451,000 during 2019/20. Increasing transparency in the system is a key objective of mine and I have tasked officials with improving our ability to report accurately on the contribution being made by employers here, and the value of Apprenticeship training.

It should however be noted that in Northern Ireland there is no direct link between Levy contribution and eligibility for support. My Department provides funding to support the cost of apprenticeship training for private sector employers regardless of whether they pay levy contributions. The Apprenticeship Programmes are demand led by employers, and I encourage all employers to avail of these Programmes to drive forward business growth.

My Department continues to consider the issues raised by NI employers during the consultation on the impact of the levy in NI, including widening access, increasing participation, and how to improve transparency for employers on the level of funding support they are currently availing of through participation in our apprenticeship programmes. I have also met a number of businesses and I am aware of the concerns they have expressed.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for the Economy how she will ensure that an outcomes based approach in the new Programme for Government will ensure that her Department and InvestNI will have better outcomes for areas of deprivation.
(AQW 3240/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: By adopting an outcomes based approach, the Executive is able to develop policies, actions and interventions which aim to improve outcomes for people, centred on a collaborative and partnership based approach and informed by sound evidence base.

My Department leads on delivering the three economic-focused outcomes; outcome one: 'We prosper through a strong, competitive, regionally balanced economy'; five – 'We are an innovative, creative society, where people can fulfil their potential'; and six – 'We have more people working in better jobs'; as well as contributing to a number of other outcomes.

The Outcomes based approach is fully embedded within my Department. The strategic objectives set out in the Business Plan, alongside the work of our Arm's Length Bodies and key delivery partners, will collectively progress the PfG outcomes.

At a strategic level, the suite of strategies and policies my Department is developing, will align with the overall outcomes approach. Actions and activities set out within these will be cognisant of ensuring people are better off as a result.

With specific reference to ensuring better outcomes for areas of deprivation, I recognise that there is considerable variation between the statistically most and least deprived areas of deprivation, as measured by NISRA's Multiple Deprivations Measure, and it although is difficult to limit this completely, it remains a key challenges for the whole Executive. However I

remain committed, through the work of my Department, and Invest NI, to improve economic conditions across the whole of Northern Ireland, for the benefit of everyone.

I will be developing a new Economic Strategy to set out the Executive's economic priorities and support the Programme for Government. This Strategy, alongside other supporting strategies including the Social Strategy, will seek to continue to improve our employment rate and make a marked change to wage levels and wider economic conditions for the benefit of everyone in Northern Ireland.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) the total funding raised for the Northern Ireland Sustainable Energy Programme (NISEP) schemes in each year since the schemes began, broken down by (a) source of funding; (b) year; and (ii) how this funding has been used, expressed in tabular form.

(AQW 3245/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Northern Ireland Sustainable Energy Programme (NISEP) is an energy efficiency scheme managed by the Northern Ireland Utility Regulator. It is funded by all electricity consumers through a flat rate per kilowatt hour charge added to the Northern Ireland Electricity Public Service Obligation (PSO).

Table 1 below details expenditure on energy efficiency measures funded through the scheme since 2010/11.

Table 1: Total Expenditure (Figures are subject to rounding)

	10/11	11/12	12/13	13/14	14/15	15/16	16/17	Total
£m	£6.2m	£7.9m	£7.8m	£7.9m	£7.1m	£8.1m	£9.2m	£54.3m

The majority of funding, 80%, is prioritised for energy efficiency measures in the homes of vulnerable people. The remainder of funding is used to support measures in non-priority domestic properties, and commercial and business premises.

Table 2 below summarises the measures installed over this period.

Table 2: Measures installed

Year	10/11	11/12	12/13	13/14	14/15	15/16	16/17	Total
Heating systems/boiler replacement (PDS)	1,389	1,704	2,246	1,656	1,764	1,846	1,698	12,303
Heating systems/boiler replacement (NPDS)		17						17
Heating systems/boiler replacement (NPCBM)	50	48						98
Insulation (PDS)	10,037	7,328	6,530	5,806	5,417	6,571	6,912	48,601
Insulation (NPDS)	446	1,815	715	1,031	1,489	913	1,476	7,885
Low Energy Lighting(PDS)	22,928	23,643	23,908	19,396	23,708	17,391	13,015	143,989
Energy Efficient Lighting (NPCBM)	9,524	17,747	17,951	20,565	15,673	30,644	33,346	145,450
Other Measures (PDS)	3,211	2,357	27,480	5,904	96,866	3,099	2,541	141,458
Other Measures (NDPS)	0	615	328	475	0	4	8	1,430
Other Measures (NPCM)	109	72	71	216	82	60	197	807
Total Measures Installed	47,694	55,346	79,229	55,049	144,999	60,528	59,193	502,038

Key:

PDS – Priority Domestic Schemes

NPDS – Non Priority Domestic Schemes

NPCBM – Non Priority Commercial and Business Measures

Note: 'Insulation' includes cavity wall, solid wall and loft insulation measures.

'Other Measures' includes: Hot Water Cylinder Jackets, energy monitors, radiator panels, heating controls, solar PV, variable speed compressors, variable speed drives, time switches etc.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the number of workplace accidents that occurred in each constituency during the period 2014-2019.

(AQW 3246/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: HSENI do not hold information on workplace accidents by constituency. While we record a postcode of where all incidents occur, there are other factors such as work activity type which is more critical. Incidents are recorded against the location of the activity rather than the headquarters of the employing business.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the number of staff located in the Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland (HSENI) office in Omagh, compared to its office in Belfast.
(AQW 3247/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: HSENI has seven members of staff in the office in Omagh and ninety five members of staff in the office in Belfast.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy to detail all active renewable energy projects and sites, broken down by (i) type; (ii) power output in gross terms; (iii) power output as a share of total renewable power; and (iv) power output as a share of overall power generated.

(AQW 3249/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The vast majority of renewable electricity generating stations are accredited to the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation (NIRO). Ofgem, as administrator of the scheme, has confirmed that at the end of the 2018/19 year, 23,682 generating stations had accredited to the NIRO. In terms of technology, 22,196 of the accredited stations are solar photovoltaic (PV) installations; 1,272 are onshore wind; 118 are fuelled i.e. biomass or biogas; 86 are hydro and 8 are landfill gas.

NISRA published the latest figures on electricity consumption in NI for the year ending December 2019, on 5 March 2020. This states that some 7,713 Gigawatt hours (GWh) of electricity was consumed in NI of which 3,368 GWh i.e. 43.7% was generated from renewable sources. A breakdown of the contribution from each technology in terms of electricity consumption (GWh), percentage share of the total renewables contribution and percentage share of total electricity consumed is set out in the table below.

Technology	Electricity consumed (GWh)	% of total renewables	% of total electricity consumed
Onshore Wind	2846.0	84.5	36.9
Biogas	188.6	5.6	2.5
Biomass	131.3	3.9	1.7
Solar PV	117.9	3.5	1.5
Landfill Gas	60.6	1.8	0.8
Other e.g. hydro	23.6	0.7	0.3
Total	3368.0	100	43.7

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for the Economy how many industrial tribunal cases have proceeded to final hearing with written decision since 2010, broken down per calendar year.

(AQW 3282/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: There have been 3486 cases since 2010. Please see breakdown below.

Calendar Year	Number of decisions issued
2010	508
2011	502
2012	581
2013	455
2014	304
2015	298
2016	193
2017	204
2018	212
2019	229

Mr Frew asked the Minister for the Economy (i) whether she has had sight of the Cornwall Insight's tariff review; (ii) when it will be published; and (iii) whether her Department requested or suggested any changes, amendments, omissions or additions to the review.

(AQW 3294/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) I have received a copy of the Cornwall Insight Tariff Review Report.
- (ii) My officials are in the process of reviewing the findings and preparing documents for the Executive for review. The outcome of this piece of work will be considered by the Executive and will be made publicly available in due course.
- (iii) When Cornwall Insight shared draft versions of the report with the Department, officials considered the content and provided feedback on points of factual accuracy and clarity. The Department has not requested alterations to the conclusions of the report.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy to provide (i) a detailed breakdown on the potential of tidal energy, including locations where this potential is most abundant and details of any quantifiable measurement of this energy potential; and (ii) whether she will give her assessment of the future role of tidal energy in the transition to a net zero carbon society.

(AQW 3299/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) The Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) for my Department's Offshore Renewable Energy Strategic Action Plan (ORESAP) identified two sites of commercial value in Northern Ireland for tidal development. Tidal Zone 1 (North Coast) and Tidal Zone 2 (Rathlin Island and Torr Head). Potential generating capacity for these sites was identified as 100MW and 200MW respectively.
- (ii) A diverse energy mix will be important going forward both in terms of decarbonisation and security of supply. All electricity generation technologies will therefore be considered as my Department develops the new Northern Ireland Energy Strategy. The Call for Evidence, which is currently open for comment, includes a specific question on offshore energy development and the feedback will be carefully considered before any conclusions are drawn.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the number of local businesses that trade with Great Britain.

(AQW 3301/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The latest estimates of the number of businesses purchasing from and selling to Great Britain are available from the Broad Economy Sales and Exports Statistics 2017 and are presented in the tables below.

Number of purchasers of goods and services by business size, 2017

Business Size			
Category	No. of employees	Total no. of businesses in BESES population	GB purchasers
Micro	0-9	44,071	10,538
Small	10-49	8,558	3,649
Medium	50-249	1,299	729
Large	250+	319	218
	Total	54,247	15,134

Notes:

* Numbers may not sum due to rounding

** Businesses can buy and sell to the same partner.

Number of sellers goods and services by business size, 2017

Business Size			
Category	No. of employees	Total no. of businesses in BESES population	GB sellers
Micro	0-9	44,071	5,363
Small	10-49	8,558	1,827
Medium	50-249	1,299	445
Large	250+	319	169

Business Size			
Category	No. of employees	Total no. of businesses in BESES population	GB sellers
	Total	54,247	7,804

Notes:

- * Numbers may not sum due to rounding
- ** Businesses can buy and sell to the same partner.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) how many members of staff are assigned to her Department's Brexit unit; (ii) what priorities she has set the Brexit unit; and (iii) what issues the Brexit unit are currently looking at. **(AQW 3302/17-22)**

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) There are currently 118 members of staff assigned to my Department's Brexit unit, with 20 current vacancies.
- (ii) I want to see a future where we have a thriving economy that benefits everyone in our society. Where we not only maintain our place in the UK internal market, but also grow our exports to the EU and to countries around the world.
- (iii) The Group's work is centred around five strategic work strands:
 - 1) Negotiations on the implementation the Northern Ireland / Ireland Protocol, and operationalising these arrangements.
 - 2) Negotiations on the Future Economic Partnership covering the totality of UK-EU economic activity.
 - 3) Development of the UK's Independent Trade Policy with third countries.
 - 4) Supporting business to prepare, adjust and transition to the post-Brexit economic conditions.
 - 5) The readiness of the Department for January 2021.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for the Economy what affect the collapse of Flybe will have on the Northern Ireland economy. **(AQW 3312/17-22)**

Mrs Dodds: Flybe operated 14 routes from Belfast City Airport, had 190 employees in NI and carried 1.6m passengers to and from NI in 2019.

I am delighted that the Chief Executive Officer of Belfast City Airport has been able to reach agreement with Loganair who will take up two of the routes, and Eastern Airways who will take up another of the routes, all starting in the next two weeks. I am encouraged to note that the Airport have stated that they have had interest in all of their route network and are confident of announcing backfill in the near future. We will continue to work closely with Belfast City Airport in the forthcoming days and weeks, as maintaining air connectivity to mainland GB is vital to Northern Ireland.

Staff from the Redundancy Payments Service in the Department for the Economy, along with colleagues from the Department for Communities, have already attended clinics with the former Flybe employees and will continue to engage with them in the coming days and weeks to ensure that they receive guidance, support and payments to which they are entitled.

The Department's Careers Service is also attending the redundancy clinics to provide professional and impartial careers information, advice and guidance tailored to the individual needs of the Flybe employees. The Service will also keep in contact with those who request ongoing support.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for the Economy what action her Department is taking to help attract other airlines to take over routes formally operated by Flybe. **(AQW 3313/17-22)**

Mrs Dodds: Civil aviation in the UK is a reserved matter for the UK Department of Transport, and they are working with industry to identify opportunities to re-establish key routes, and engaging with Airlines UK and airlines directly to emphasise and accelerate this. Alongside this, I, and my Department, will continue to work closely with the Belfast City Airport in the forthcoming days and weeks, as maintaining air connectivity to GB is vital to Northern Ireland.

Belfast City Airport have stated that negotiations with a number of carriers to take up air routes formerly operated by Flybe are underway, and I am delighted that the Chief Executive Officer of the Airport has already been able to reach agreement with Loganair who will take up two of the routes, and Eastern Airways who will take up another of the routes, all starting in the next two weeks.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) Invest NI's land holdings in the Upper Bann constituency; (ii) what discussions Invest NI have had in the last 12 months about maximising this land; and (iii) how long they have been in ownership of this land.

(AQW 3358/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Invest NI holds approximately 334 acres of land in the Upper Bann constituency in support of its business development role. A breakdown of these landholdings, including availability and year in which land was initially acquired where records are available, is as set out in the following table.

Invest NI Estates/Industrial Area	Town	Landholding (acres) as at 31st Dec 2019	Land Availability (acres) as at 31st Dec 2019	Year of Acquisition
Mandeville Industrial Estate	Craigavon	99	95	1996*
Charlestown Road Industrial Estate	Portadown	60.16	12.87	Information not held
Craigavon Food Park	Portadown	43.36	1.75	1978
Halfpenny Valley Industrial Estate	Lurgan	60.37	28.17	Information not held
Silverwood	Lurgan	44.12	0	1966
Portadown Road	Lurgan	0.06	0	1966
Shaerf	Lurgan	1.79	0	Information not held
Scarva Road Industrial Estate	Banbridge	25.13	0	1978
Total		333.99	137.79	

* Year in which land was transferred from Department of the Environment to Department for Economic Development

Invest NI works closely with businesses to support their growth plans and, where companies have an identified requirement for new land, the agency can provide support to meet this need.

In the last 12 months the organisation has met with seven businesses that have expressed an interest in acquiring land within its business parks in the Upper Bann constituency and will continue a process of engagement as the companies continue to develop their plans.

In the same 12 month period two companies have entered into an agreement to acquire approximately 5.5 acres of land within Invest NI's Craigavon Food Park for the purpose of developing new purpose built facilities.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for the Economy to detail assistance being provided to George Best Belfast City Airport as a result of the collapse of Flybe.

(AQW 3487/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Civil aviation in the UK is a reserved matter for the UK Department of Transport, and they are working with industry to identify opportunities to re-establish key routes, and engaging with Airlines UK and airlines directly to emphasise and accelerate this. Alongside this, I, and my Department, will continue to work closely with the Belfast City Airport in the forthcoming days and weeks, as maintaining air connectivity to GB is vital to Northern Ireland.

Belfast City Airport have recently stated that negotiations with a number of carriers to take up air routes formerly operated by Flybe are underway, and I am delighted that the Chief Executive Officer of the airport has already been able to reach agreement with Loganair who will take up two of the routes, and Eastern Airways who will take up another of the routes, all starting in the next two weeks.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Saturday 28 March 2020

Written Answers

The Executive Office

Mr Beattie asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given the Armed Forces Covenant was instigated UK-wide in 2011, to outline what elements of the Armed Forces Covenant are not being delivered in Northern Ireland.
(AQW 1472/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): The Executive Office does not hold this information.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) what is the annual cost of the Strategic Investment Board; and (ii) when last was it assessed as to value for money.
(AQW 2444/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: The Annual Review and Financial Statements of the Strategic Investment Board Limited for the financial years up to 2018/19 are available in the Assembly Library, and detail expenditure for those years. The documents are also published online at: <https://sibni.org/what-we-do/available-information/what-we-spend/>

In line with guidance set out in the Department of Finance document 'Public Bodies: A Guide for NI Departments', a review of the Strategic Investment Board was carried out in 2017 by Business Consultancy Services, reporting in 2018.

Mr Givan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what criteria is applied when members of the Equality Commission are appointed.
(AQW 2478/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: The criteria to appoint members of the Equality Commission are determined by the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and are for the consideration of the Secretary of State. The appointment process is overseen by the Northern Ireland Office.

Mr Givan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many cases that the Equality Commission have taken have been heard in court, in the last five years.
(AQW 2479/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland is a Non Departmental Public Body and as such this is a matter for it to answer. We have therefore asked the Chief Executive of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland to respond to you directly on this matter.

Mr Givan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline (i) the salary; and (ii) relevant allowances paid to (a) the Chief Commissioner; (b) the Deputy Commissioner; and (c) Commissioners, in the Equality Commission.
(AQW 2481/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: The salaries and relevant allowances paid to the Chief Commissioner, Deputy Commissioner and Commissioners are reported each year in the Equality Commission's Annual Report. The most recent version can be found on their website:

<https://www.equalityni.org/ECNI/media/ECNI/Publications/Corporate/Annual%20Reports/AnnualReport2018-19.pdf?ext=.pdf>

Mr Givan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what assessment has been carried out regarding the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe Resolution 2318 (2020).
(AQW 2707/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: Resolution 2318 (2020) on the matter of the protection of freedom of religion or belief in the workplace was debated by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on 29 January 2020. The Resolution and its impact are currently being considered.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they will deposit in the Assembly Library, or otherwise publish, a copy of the Guidance to Ministers on the Exercise of their Functions document as referred to in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 2923/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: The Guidance will be published shortly on the Executive Office website.

Mr Carroll asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what progress has been made by her Department to bring forward an age goods, facilities and services bill to help ensure that no one is discriminated against because of their age.

(AQW 2959/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: Appendix 1 to the "New Decade, New Approach" document supports the possible outline of a Programme for Government including the bringing forward of an Age, Goods and Facilities and Services Bill. This will be subject to the Executive agreeing a final Programme for Government.

Mr Muir asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the provision of the Minority Ethnic Development Fund for 2020/21.

(AQW 3188/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: The Minority Ethnic Development Fund (MEDF) continues to be a key element of our policy for racial equality and good race relations in our society. It is intended to be aligned with and support our Racial Equality Strategy 2015 - 2025 and provides support for voluntary and community organisations working with minority ethnic people and groups.

The application process to the 20/21 Minority Ethnic Development Fund has commenced and closes on 2nd April 2020. It is intended that applicants will be told the outcome of that process before the end of April 2020.

In parallel, a review of the MEDF is underway and the findings will inform the operation of the fund beyond 20/21.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the tackling paramilitaries team in the Executive Office will provide support to those communities trying to improve the quality of lives of residents who have experienced unwanted bonfires within their communities.

(AQW 3243/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: The Communities in Transition Project aims to support transition in eight areas of focus by creating communities where citizens can feel safe and confident. Project delivery will aim to improve the quality of people's lives through a range of activities designed to help the community to address wide ranging issues such as community safety awareness, community capacity, health and wellbeing, culture, area regeneration, community safety awareness, restorative practices and targeted support for young people.

A team of local co-ordinators will be working with local communities to support effective delivery of projects, coordinate activities, and make links between projects and programmes that will meet the outcomes of the tackling paramilitarism programme.

Ms Armstrong asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline (i) the criteria that will be used to review and assess arm's-length bodies; (ii) whether that criteria will be a standard approach taken by each department; and (iii) whether all subsequent reports will be required to be produced using a standardised format.

(AQW 3266/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: The "New Decade, New Approach" document contains a number of commitments aimed at rationalising public services and making them more effective, including through a review of arm's-length bodies. This will require discussion at Executive level and we will update Members in due course.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they will lobby for the proclamation of an additional public holiday to mark the centenary of Northern Ireland.

(AQW 3393/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: We have not established a joint position on this matter.

Ms Rogan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what discussions they have had with Executive colleagues on developing a strategy for ending sectarianism.

(AQO 231/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: The Executive is committed to ending sectarianism. Through strategies and programmes such as the Together: Building a United Community Strategy, Racial Equality Strategy and Tackling Paramilitarism and Organised Crime, we have developed a range of actions to tackle sectarianism, prejudice and hate.

We are committed to having a society in which everyone can live, learn, work and socialise together, free from prejudice, hate and intolerance.

New Decade, New Approach, reaffirms the commitment of parties to end sectarianism. It commits to having a strategic focus within the Programme for Government on ending sectarianism and putting in place supporting strategies and actions.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline what he is doing to protect Tullynagardy Wood, Newtownards.

(AQW 3055/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I am advised that Tullynagardy Wood, Newtownards, is subject to a Tree Preservation Order made under the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. Local Councils are the authority that make and enforce Tree Preservation Orders under this legislation, to protect selected trees, groups of trees or woodlands.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to AQW 769/17-22, whether his Department's advice on applications for peat extraction to planning authorities includes information on the importance of this habitat for carbon sequestration.

(AQW 3058/17-22)

Mr Poots: The advice provided by the Department in relation to planning applications for peat extraction is cognisant of extant Planning Policy. This means that the Department provides advice in relation to the protection of boglands valuable to nature conservation interests, and with the protection of landscape quality in Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

The responsibility for the development of Planning Policy resides with Local Planning Authorities and the Department for Infrastructure.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he intends to release the scientific information he received which led to the recent policy change on the impact of ammonia on (i) Special Protection Areas; and (ii) Special Areas of Conservation.

(AQW 3059/17-22)

Mr Poots: To date the Department has not made any change to rules regarding ammonia emissions or to its advice to planning authorities on assessing the impacts of emissions from agricultural development on Special Areas of Protection, Special Areas of Conservation and other designated sites. However, in light of recent case law and emerging evidence, my officials are currently undertaking a review of the operational protocol for such advice. All scientific information and reports used to inform the ongoing review is publically available, likewise any research commissioned by the Department will be publically available on completion.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to AQW 769/17-22, regarding the importance of peatlands as a carbon pool, whether he will instruct his staff to recommend to planning authorities that all future applications to extract peat should be refused.

(AQW 3061/17-22)

Mr Poots: Planning officers frequently need to obtain specialist advice to enable them to consider the potential impacts of a development proposal. The Department provides such specialist advice.

It is the responsibility of planning authorities and their officials to make recommendations and decisions regarding the subsequent granting or refusal of an application. When decision-taking, these planning authorities must consider expert advice received, and balance and integrate a variety of complex environmental, social, economic and other matters that are in the long term public interest. This is fundamental to the achievement of sustainable development.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, with regards to provisions within the Agriculture Bill, what consideration has been given to the potential impacts of regulatory divergence between GB and the EU.

(AQW 3070/17-22)

Mr Poots: As agricultural policy is a devolved matter, I am very aware of the potential impacts should there be regulatory divergence between GB and the EU. This is not an issue unique to the UKG Agriculture Bill and its provisions.

I am determined to ensure, in line with the JMC (EN) principles, that the UK's internal market functions effectively and that Northern Ireland's ability to have continued and unfettered access to the GB market is maintained.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether the proposed provisions within the Agriculture Bill which are (i) UK wide; (ii) specific to here, have been tested for compliance with the Ireland/Northern Ireland protocol.

(AQW 3071/17-22)

Mr Poots: The impact of the Protocol is still being assessed and further clarification on many of the details is needed.

The detailed arrangements will be subject to discussion between the EU and UKG through the Specialised and Joint Committee structures outlined in Article 165 of the Agreement. This detail will very much depend on the precise nature of the future trading relationship between the UK and the EU.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment on whether the potential challenges to the agriculture sector from the Ireland/Northern Ireland protocol makes a local agriculture bill more likely.
(AQW 3072/17-22)

Mr Poots: The detailed arrangements for implementation of the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol have still to be determined and will be subject to discussion between the EU and UKG.

My priority is to introduce new policies and systems to ensure that we have a sustainable agricultural industry and that all farmers are supported on an equitable basis. It is this objective which will make a Northern Ireland Agriculture Bill more likely.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, if he brings forward an agriculture bill, whether he will introduce a 'sunset clause' to the existing bill.
(AQW 3073/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am focussed on ensuring agricultural policies are in place that will be good for farmers and provide the basis for an environmentally sustainable future. This is likely to require primary legislation in the Northern Ireland Assembly, which I will introduce at the appropriate time, subject to the Executive's agreement.

In the meantime, I have no plans to introduce a 'sunset clause' with respect to the Northern Ireland provisions in the UKG Agriculture Bill, which is making its passage through Parliament currently. Introducing such a clause could leave me with no legal authority to make agricultural support payments moving forward.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in relation to the approaches taken in Scotland and Wales, whether he will bring forward an agriculture bill within the current mandate of the Assembly.
(AQW 3074/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am focussed on ensuring agricultural policies are in place that will be good for farmers and provide the basis for an environmentally sustainable future. This is likely to require primary legislation in the Northern Ireland Assembly, which I will introduce at the appropriate time, subject to the Executive's agreement.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline (i) what measures have been implemented to date to protect and enhance salmon stock in the Mournebeg River, Co. Tyrone; and (ii) what measures are planned to address this same issue.
(AQW 3116/17-22)

Mr Poots: Under the Foyle Fisheries Acts (1952), as amended, the Loughs Agency is responsible for conserving, protecting, developing, improving and managing the salmon and inland fisheries of the Foyle and Carlingford Areas, including the Mournebeg River, a sub-tributary of the River Derg.

- (i) Loughs Agency Fishery Officers undertake patrols on the Mournebeg River, particularly during the angling season, to ensure that anglers are licensed and that conservation measures, such as the use of carcass tags and the compliance with Regulations, including the preservation of undersized fish and protection of gravid fish are adhered to. Any breaches of Regulations identified are considered for enforcement action.

The Loughs Agency has also worked in partnership with angling clubs on the Derg system, and in particular the local Derg Valley Angling club. This has included training the angling Private River Watchers in enforcement measures and in the detection of water pollution related incidents.

The Agency continues to work in partnership with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency in relation to water pollution issues affecting the River. Proactive advice has been provided to the farming community where pollution may be impacting on fish stocks and regular patrols are carried out to identify pollution sources.

The Loughs Agency also carry out habitat improvements to protect and enhance salmon populations. Significant in-channel and riparian improvement projects have been developed and implemented across the Foyle and Carlingford Areas, such as: riparian fencing; native riparian tree planting; and soft and hard bank protection.

- (ii) A programme of patrols to protect salmon stocks in the Mournebeg River is planned for this year. The Agency also plans to carry out capital improvement works in selected areas of the Derg catchment.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what measures have been put in place to (i) preserve; and (ii) prevent the erosion of river banking on the upper reaches of the River Derg, Co Tyrone.
(AQW 3118/17-22)

Mr Poots: The River Derg is designated as part of the River Foyle and Tributaries Special Area of Conservation and is thus afforded special protection for its river habitats and salmon. Whilst erosion and deposition processes reflect a naturally functioning river, the conservation objectives for the site do indicate the need to consider river bank stability e.g. maintenance of marginal woodland and creation of marginal buffers to prevent bank damage through animal grazing. The Environmental Farming Scheme has options, applicable to this river, for the creation of buffers along the river bank including planting of native trees and fencing. In addition, part of the INTERREG Va Source to Tap project, includes the River Derg Agricultural Land Incentive Scheme which has bank stabilisation options to reduce erosion risks.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what his Department is doing to (i) protect; and (ii) increase the numbers of red squirrels in (a) Northern Ireland; and (b) North Down.

(AQW 3124/17-22)

Mr Poots: Two of my Department's Executive Agencies; Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and Forest Service sit on the Northern Ireland Squirrel Forum, a collective of government, environmental non-governmental agencies, landowners and red squirrel group volunteers. This group has developed standard operating procedures that ensure the control of grey squirrels, to preserve red squirrels, is safe, legal and humane. While grey control is carried out ad hoc across Northern Ireland by the hunting community, strategic control around red squirrel hotspots has been carried out by the 13 red squirrel groups to protect their local red squirrels. Much of this work being carried out on DAERA's estate. In addition, red squirrel groups have carried out supplementary feeding of red squirrels to boost survival rates over the winter months.

My Department has played an active supporting role in Belfast Zoo's red squirrel breeding programme which has led to the enhancement of red squirrel populations at several sites in Counties Down and Antrim.

Two volunteer groups working in North Down and the Ards Peninsula continue to encourage the survival of red squirrels in North Down, through grey squirrel control and supplementary feeding of red squirrels. My Department has been directly involved with this work.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what his Department is doing to (i) protect; and (ii) increase the numbers of pine martens in (a) Northern Ireland; and (b) North Down.

(AQW 3125/17-22)

Mr Poots: Records of pine marten indicate an expansion of the animal's range and numbers over the last 10 years across Northern Ireland. While the greatest risk to pine martens in Northern Ireland is probably from road traffic accidents as the young animals spread out to new areas, it is not considered that the pine marten requires any assistance in aiding its spread. The pine marten is listed as a Schedule 5 animal under the terms of the Wildlife (NI) Order 1985 extending legal protection to the animals and their place of rest.

Last year my Department produced Northern Ireland specific guidance documents aimed at helping home owners and landowners to live with pine martens in their vicinity:- <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/pine-marten-martes-martes>.

Pine martens are present in North Down, but there is no accurate estimate of numbers due to their secretive nature.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail plans his Department has to reintroduce (i) animals; and (ii) birds that have become extinct in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 3126/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department currently has no plans to reintroduce any animals or birds that have become extinct in Northern Ireland.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline plans his Department has to reintroduce beavers to rivers.

(AQW 3127/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department has no plans to introduce beavers to rivers. There is currently no evidence that they ever occurred in Northern Ireland.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline any plans within the Forests for our Future programme to plant trees in North Down.

(AQW 3132/17-22)

Mr Poots: I made a statement in the Assembly recently announcing a new Programme of Afforestation: Forest for our Future programme, which will plant 18 million trees by 2030 throughout Northern Ireland to contribute to the UK's net zero carbon target.

I have written to Ministerial colleagues and Council Chief Executives, including Ards and North Down Borough Council Chief Executive, requesting their support for an Afforestation Forum which will develop plans for woodland creation on suitable public land under their control.

The Afforestation Programme, as outlined in my statement, will need also to further encourage rural landowners and other businesses to plant more woodland. Support for this through forestry grant schemes is currently under review, including the development of a specific small woodland grant scheme designed to help landowners to integrate woodlands into their farm or other businesses.

These measures will apply to the planting of new woodlands in North Down as elsewhere in Northern Ireland.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail plans for the replacement of trees at (i) Cairn Wood; and (ii) the wider Craigtlet area, following felling in 2014.

(AQW 3133/17-22)

Mr Poots: The trees were felled at Cairn Wood and the wider Ballysallagh Forest, in the Craigtlet area, by the Department in response to the presence of tree disease and to meet its statutory obligations for plant health.

Plans are in place to re-establish trees on the harvested areas and to create woodlands of primarily native tree species that integrate and enhance the surrounding landscape and biodiversity. Native broadleaved trees will be naturally regenerated in the areas around the water bodies to further support the natural biodiversity of these areas. Some small conifer woodlands will be planted in the wider forest area to add to the overall diversity and in particular to support the habitat favoured by the resident red squirrel population.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline (i) why there is an ongoing data capture exercise being carried out by his Department through local councils in respect of trade into Northern Ireland; and (ii) whether it is in preparation for providing border checks and infrastructure at ports.

(AQW 3169/17-22)

Mr Poots: A data capture exercise is being conducted which aims to measure G.B. to Northern Ireland agri-food trade. This is to inform me and my Departmental officials on existing trade. I have previously stated clearly that I have no intention of facilitating infrastructure at Northern Ireland ports. Consequently, this work is not preparatory to that.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail by what percentage greenhouse gas emissions must be reduced here by 2030 versus 1990 levels to (i) contribute to the fifth carbon budget; and (ii) to contribute to reaching net zero carbon by 2030.

(AQW 3183/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- (i) Following a request from my department the Committee on Climate Change (CCC) published its "Reducing Emissions in Northern Ireland" report". The report sets out the CCC's recommendations on possible actions or policies that NI can take to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions. The report recommends a reduction in GHG emissions of at least 35% by 2030 as NI's contribution to the fifth carbon budget.
- (ii) I have recently wrote to the CCC asking them to determine Northern Ireland's equitable contribution to the UK's Net Zero Target by 2050. On receipt of their response I will consider their recommendations before bringing forward a cross departmental pathway on climate change to the Executive for their agreement.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of spreading digestate from anaerobic digesters and the impact this has on the levels of nitrates and phosphorous in the environment.

(AQW 3250/17-22)

Mr Poots: Anaerobic digestate is a biofertiliser which provides crops and grass with readily available nutrients, and can be used as a substitute for chemical fertilisers.

The application of anaerobic digestate to land is regulated through the Nutrients Action Programme (NAP) 2019 – 2022 Regulations. The NAP applies to all farms in Northern Ireland and aims to protect water from pollution caused by nutrients from the spreading of animal manures, chemical fertilisers and other nutrient-containing materials onto land.

In the NAP for 2019 - 2022, new measures have been introduced specifically for anaerobic digestate. These include the mandatory use of Low Emission Slurry Spreading Equipment (LESSE) from 1 February 2020 for the spreading of anaerobic digestate and compulsory storage requirements on anaerobic digestate fibre. From 1 January 2020 all farms importing anaerobic digestate must soil test, prepare a fertilisation plan and have a nutrient content analysis of the digestate.

The purpose of these controls is to ensure digestate is applied to meet crop requirements and minimise the risks of losses to the environment through nutrient run-off to waterways or ammonia emissions to air.

If manure or slurry is mixed with other waste feedstocks, then the resultant anaerobic digestate will be waste and subject to waste regulatory controls, unless it complies with the Anaerobic Digestate Quality Protocol in addition to the NAP. A waste exemption is required and applicants must provide a nutrient management plan which documents applications to specific land banks according to crop requirement.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether his Department has worked collaboratively with the Department for Infrastructure to update the Bateman Formula.

(AQW 3251/17-22)

Mr Poots: It is now widely recognised that the existing policy on coastal protection in Northern Ireland, the Bateman formula dating from 1967, is no longer fit for purpose. Consequently, previous Ministers my Department and the Department for Infrastructure set up the Coastal Forum, a body comprising Government and Council Officials, and the National Trust. The Forum has initiated a working group to undertake a work programme geared towards improving our coastal change evidence base and devising policy and strategy recommendations. To date, the focus been on addressing the evidence gaps and this will inform the development of policy options for updating the Bateman Formula.

In addition to collaboration between Departments, the Coastal Forum and its associated working group has provided an opportunity for collaboration with local councils and organisations such as the National Trust, Ulster University, the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute, and Geological Survey of Northern Ireland. This collective expertise and desire to collaborate on the challenging issue of coastal erosion risk management is becoming very constructive.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what action he will take to include voluntary and conservation groups in the proposed Forests for our Future programme.

(AQW 3252/17-22)

Mr Poots: My recent statement in the Assembly announced a new Programme of Afforestation: Forest for our Future programme, which will plant 18 million trees creating 9,000 hectares of new woodland by 2030 to contribute to the UK's net zero carbon target.

There will be opportunities for voluntary and conservation groups to take part in planting on public land identified through a cross Governmental and local Council Afforestation Forum which will develop plans for woodland creation on suitable public land under their control.

The Afforestation Programme, as outlined in my statement, will need also to further encourage voluntary and conservation groups to plant new woodland on land which they own. Support for this through the forestry grant schemes is currently under review, including the development of a specific small woodland grant scheme designed to help these groups to integrate woodlands into their holdings.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what actions are being considered to protect and restore carbon sinks, such as native bogland and wetland.

(AQW 3253/17-22)

Mr Poots: We have a range of carbon-rich habitats in Northern Ireland which will play a key role in meeting our climate change commitments. These include wetland areas, such as blanket bog, lowland raised bog, fens and salt marshes, as well as native woodlands and semi-grasslands. We also need to consider our blue carbon, such as kelp and sea grasses. Putting in place the necessary protection and management ensures that these areas continue to act as carbon sinks, rather than become carbon sources.

My Department has been working to restore these habitats through a number of conservation programmes. The Environmental Farming Scheme supports farmers to manage these priority habitats to enhance biodiversity, carbon storage and flood alleviation potential. Conservation Management Plans are being developed for our Special Areas of Conservation which contain many of these carbon-rich habitats. Wetland habitats are being actively restored as part of the INTERREG Va programme. My Department's afforestation strategy will make provision for the planting of native woodland which can help to restore our wooded areas.

Furthermore, officials are gathering evidence to inform future actions and potential policy interventions to safeguard and enhance natural carbon sinks in land and sea.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what action has been taken to hire the additional veterinarians required to implement the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol.

(AQW 3254/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department is not currently undertaking any recruitment competitions for additional veterinarians, however veterinarians were recruited in 2019 as part of normal business. There remains a list of successful candidates from these recruitment campaigns and any further recruitment will be initiated if needed.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline (i) what assistance; and (ii) what funding his Department can give to local councils to help to reintroduce red squirrels.

(AQW 3259/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- (i) My Department has played an active supporting role in red squirrel re-introductions through the Northern Ireland Squirrel Forum, and in Belfast Zoo's red squirrel breeding programme, which has led to the enhancement of red squirrel populations at several sites in Counties Down and Antrim, including a council-owned country park.
- (ii) Funding for strategic biodiversity and conservation initiatives is administered by DAERA through the Environment and Challenge Funds, although it should be noted that the Environment Fund allocation has already been made. Councils should actively engage in grey squirrel management if they wish to consider future red squirrel enhancements within their local authority area.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether compensation is payable to farmers whose flock have been affected by avian influenza.

(AQW 3275/17-22)

Mr Poots: Avian Influenza strains can be distinguished as being either notifiable or non-notifiable. A notifiable disease is any disease that is required by law to be reported (ie "notified") to government authorities.

In cases where a notifiable strain of avian influenza is confirmed, the Department is required to depopulate and dispose of affected poultry to prevent further disease spread. Compensation is payable in these circumstances.

The Department has no legal powers to compel culling, and no compensation is payable in non-notifiable cases of avian influenza.

As per my response to AQW 3276, there have been no confirmed cases of notifiable strains of avian influenza in Northern Ireland in recent times.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail (i) how many farms have been affected by avian influenza since 01 December 2019; and (ii) the total number of birds that have been affected by avian influenza since 01 December 2019.

(AQW 3276/17-22)

Mr Poots: Since 01 December 2019, 12 farms and approximately 646,000 birds have been affected by a non-notifiable strain of avian influenza. There have been no confirmed cases of notifiable strains of avian influenza in Northern Ireland in recent times.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) whether his Department has implemented any of the findings of the Task & Finish Group established following the Mills Review; and (ii) if so, to detail (a) what the reforms were; (b) when each was implemented; and (c) for his assessment on the success or otherwise of these changes.

(AQW 3311/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department has implemented the majority of the findings of the Task and Finish Group established following the Mills Review. Appendix A details the reforms implemented.

The changes made improved operating practices within my Department and strengthened the legislative requirements around waste licensing exemptions, duty of care, and the assessment of a fit and proper person. This has had a positive impact in terms of the regulation of the waste sector and the prevention of waste crime.

Appendix A

Recommendation	Key Actions	Date
<p>The Department will consult on the proposed amendments to the 2003 Regulations and introduce them by the end of 2014.</p>	<p>The Department consulted on amendments to the fit and proper person requirements contained within the Waste Management Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003 in 2014.</p> <p>Subsequently the Department introduced the Waste Management Licensing (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 to tighten the requirements around the technical competence required to hold a waste management licence.</p> <p>The Department made further amendments through the Waste Management Licensing (Amendment No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 to expand the list of prescribed offences to be taken into account when determining whether someone is a fit and proper person to hold a waste management licence.</p>	<p>The amending Regulations came into force in 2015.</p>

Recommendation	Key Actions	Date
NIEA to review its policies and procedures for determining the technical competence of waste facility operators and carriers.	<p>Following a review of policies and procedures around the determination of technical competence of those persons applying for a waste management licence, the Department consulted on amendments to the fit and proper person requirements (including the technical competence requirements) contained within the Waste Management Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003 in 2014.</p> <p>Subsequently the Department introduced the Waste Management Licensing (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 to tighten the requirements around the technical competence required to hold a waste management licence. These Regulations introduced a the requirement for existing operators to obtain up-to-date certification within two years of 17 August 2015; introduced a requirement for operators to renew their certification every two years; reduced the maximum amount of time allowed to acquire technical certification from two years to 12 months; and updated the list of Operator Competence Certificates, which takes account of new waste technologies.</p> <p>The Department also published updated guidance on technical competence for waste operators.</p>	The amending Regulations came into force in August 2015 and the updated guidance was also published that month.
NIEA to consider options available to it to refuse or revoke authorisations in the event of conviction for prescribed offences.	<p>NIEA published a statement on its policy on specified offences (in the context of applying of or holding a waste authorisation) in May 2016.</p> <p>The Department also made amendments through the Waste Management Licensing (Amendment No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 to expand the list of prescribed offences to be taken into account when determining whether someone is a fit and proper person to hold a waste management licence.</p>	<p>The amending Regulations came into force in December 2015.</p> <p>The policy statement was published in May 2016.</p>
The Department will bring forward legislative proposals to strengthen the financial provision element of the FPP test, to protect the public purse and to ensure operators adhere to the polluter pays principle.	<p>The policy on Financial Provision for Waste Management Activities in Northern Ireland was reviewed and a revised policy and guidance was published in June 2016.</p> <p>The Waste Management Licensing (Amendment No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 expanded the list of prescribed offences to be taken into account when determining whether someone is a fit and proper person to hold a waste management licence so that relevant financial offences were also considered.</p>	<p>The amending Regulations came into force in December 2015.</p> <p>The revised policy on financial provision was published in June 2016.</p>
The Department to add FPP financial risk to the DOE Risk Register.	Illegal waste was added to the DOE Risk Register.	April 2014
All operators will be required to provide robust financial assurance before obtaining a Waste Management Authorisation.	The policy on Financial Provision for Waste Management Activities in Northern Ireland was reviewed and a revised policy and guidance was published.	June 2016
NIEA to meet with DOJ to explore how sentencing for waste offences could be increased to better reflect the seriousness of the crime.	The Criminal Justice Act 1988 (Review of Sentencing) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 took effect on 1st April 2016 allowing for the referral of sentencing of offences under Article 4 of the Waste & Contaminated Land (NI) Order 1997 to the Appeal Courts. The decision to seek referral to the Appeal Court is a matter for the Public Prosecution Service in consultation with the NIEA.	April 2016

Recommendation	Key Actions	Date
NIEA to use Fixed Penalty Notices for more minor infringements.	The power to issue Fixed Penalty Notices (FPN's) for minor waste offences has been available to the Department since March 2013 and these powers are regularly used. Specific guidance and procedures were issued to relevant staff in 2016 (revised 2020) regarding the application of FPN's.	March 2013
Publish the Duty of Care Code of Practice by September 2014.	The Duty of Care code of practice was published and is available on the DAERA website	July 2014
NIEA to review its regulatory procedures in relation to the monitoring and enforcement of the Duty of Care obligations.	These procedures were reviewed/revised and new procedures distributed to relevant staff.	2016
NIEA to prepare an assessment on the use of Articles 5B and 5C.	Engagement took place with the Public Prosecution Service on the use of Articles 5B and 5C. Guidance on the application of Articles 5B and 5C was issued to NIEA Enforcement Branch staff in July 2015 and both Articles are routinely considered in relation to waste offending.	July 2015
NIEA to introduce more comprehensive and tighter waste management licensing application procedures.	NIEA reviewed and updated its waste management licence application procedure and introduced a revised waste management licence application checklist which documents a multi-stage, multi-grade application assessment process.	Latest version of application procedure dated 07/06/2017. Current version of application checklist dated February 2020.
NIEA will continue to use Article 8(4) where appropriate to protect the environment, public health and local amenities.	NIEA has continued to apply the provisions of Article 8(4). The Fit and Proper Person assessment has become more robust following the amendments to regulations on prescribed offences and technical competence as well as a revision of the Financial Provision policy and guidance.	N/A
NIEA to review current Article 12 policies and procedures.	Article 12 relates to the suspension and revocation of waste management licences. Revised guidance on compliance procedures was issued to staff with relevant training completed.	2016
NIEA to review current Article 12 policies and procedures with respect to Article 16 to ensure prompt enforcement action is taken where required to protect the environment and human health.	Procedures on site inspections of regulated sites and the issuing of warning letters and notices under Articles 12 and 16 were revised and agreed.	January 2016
NIEA to prosecute under Article 18 where appropriate.	Article 18 relates to the offences of making false or misleading statements or false entries. This has been brought into the enforcement procedure, and process map.	N/A
The Department will bring forward legislative proposals to strengthen the regulation of the waste carrier registration system.	The Waste Management Licensing (Amendment No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 expanded the list of prescribed offences to be taken into account when determining whether an application for the registration as a waste carrier is to be accepted.	The amending Regulations came into force in December 2015.
NIEA to continue to review the waste carrier registration processes to ensure they are fit for purpose.	Revised procedures were put in place and used.	October 2015

Recommendation	Key Actions	Date
The Department will fully assess the financial, environmental and health risks associated with non-commencement of Part III of the 1997 Order.	NIEA established a project and has completed this assessment. The project Steering Group included representation from councils (Environmental Health Depts), the Department of Health and a Departmental economist.	March 2019
The Department will complete the first phase of the review of exemptions and update the 2003 Regulations by March 2016.	The Department consulted on proposed amendments to some of the requirements around exemptions from waste management licences in the Waste Management Licensing Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003 in June 2015. Subsequent amendments were made to Schedule 2 of the Waste Management Licensing Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003 through the Waste Management Licensing (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016, including the removal of some of the exemptions.	The amending Regulations came into force in September 2016.
The Department to publish a basic statement on the use of the Environmental Liability Regulations.	<p>The Department's website contains information on the Environmental Liability Directive and the Environmental Liability (Prevention and Remediation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009. Guidance on the application of the Environmental Liability (Prevention and Remediation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 was published in 2009 and was recently reviewed and updated.</p> <p>A Protocol on the recovery of costs under the Environmental Liability (Prevention and Remediation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 has also been published on the Department's website which includes information on the application of the polluter pays principle under these Regulations.</p>	<p>Updated guidance published in February 2020.</p> <p>Cost Protocol published in November 2019.</p>

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) how many staff car parking spaces his Department and its agencies have in Belfast city centre; and (ii) whether he is taking any action to reduce this number. (AQW 3336/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department has a total of 157 car parking spaces in Belfast City Centre for use by staff. These spaces are provided in line with business need for essential car users, on call staff and for the provision of accessible parking spaces. I have asked my officials to keep the number of parking spaces available to staff under review.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the (i) economic; and (ii) environmental impact for local farmers of government proposals to remove the Agriculture Property Relief. (AQW 3350/17-22)

Mr Poots: While I am aware of speculation surrounding the future of Agricultural Property Relief as regards Inheritance Tax, I am not aware of any government proposals to remove this relief.

I would be concerned if there were changes to the current application of Agricultural Property Relief as it does allow land to be passed from generation to generation without disrupting farming businesses and agricultural activity.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) for his assessment of the impact on farming and food production of proposals contained in the Westminster budget to reduce fuel duty on red diesel; and (ii) to outline his Department's engagement with the Chancellor of the Exchequer regarding proposals to reduce fuel duty on red diesel. (AQW 3352/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- i.) In the recent budget it was announced that entitlement to use red diesel will be removed from April 2022, except for Agriculture and a number of other sectors. Fuel duty on red diesel also remains unchanged and given this there will be no direct impact on farming and food production. The fishing sector will remain entitled to the Marine Voyages Relief so will not have to pay more for their fuel.
- ii.) Prior to the budget there was media speculation that an end to the freeze on fuel duties would be signalled. As a first stage it was suggested that the red diesel subsidy for users of agricultural and construction vehicles would be scrapped. My officials estimated that this would create an additional cost to Northern Ireland farmers of around £50 million. Consequently, I wrote to the Chancellor outlining my concerns about introducing these fuel duty changes at

this time given the financial pressures that the industry is already facing. I am pleased to hear that there has been no change in duty rates for diesel used by agricultural vehicles.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) for an update on current animal boarding legislation; and (ii) whether he has plans to change legislation to allow animals from different households to mix.
(AQW 3396/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department licenses animal boarding under the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 and the Animal Boarding Establishments Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1974.

I am aware of the demands from the public for a wider range of regulated animal boarding facilities and, in particular, increasing expectations around the socialisation of dogs. I am exploring how to reform the regulation of animal boarding establishments whilst maintaining high welfare standards and protecting the well-being of pets.

As a first step, I have asked my Chief Veterinary Officer to liaise with key stakeholders and veterinary experts to set up an independent working group which will examine evidence on the socialisation of dogs and make recommendations on a way forward. The Group is to report to the Department by May 2020.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he plans to look at using wearable technology to assess individuals' exposure to air pollution.
(AQW 3417/17-22)

Mr Poots: Air pollution can have a serious effect on people's health and has negative impacts on our environment.

My department has no current plans to look at using wearable technology to assess individuals' exposure to air pollution. However, my Department has been working on developing a draft Clean Air Strategy discussion document involving close collaboration with other Departments. Once complete, I will consider the options for issuing the draft Clean Air Strategy discussion for public consultation later in the year. This consultation will invite views on a range of matters and will be an opportunity to put ideas and suggestions to the Department. I welcome full engagement in this process.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) whether he has planned a role for community and volunteer groups in his afforestation strategy; and (ii) if so, to provide details of this envisaged role.
(AQW 3500/17-22)

Mr Poots: I made a statement in the Assembly recently announcing a new Programme of Afforestation which will plant 18 million trees creating 9,000 hectares of new woodland by 2030 to contribute to the UK's net zero carbon target. There will be opportunities for community and voluntary groups to take part in planting on public land identified through a cross Governmental and local Council Afforestation Forum which will develop plans for woodland creation on suitable public land under their control.

The Afforestation Programme, as outlined in my statement, will need also to further encourage community and voluntary groups to plant new woodland on land which they own. Support for this through the forestry grant schemes is currently under review, including the development of a specific small woodland grant scheme designed to help landowners to integrate woodlands into their holdings.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how much his Department has spent on producing materials in Irish, in each of the last five years.
(AQW 3509/17-22)

Mr Poots: The information which is currently available shows that the Department has spent a total of £6,520.92 on translation costs between the financial years beginning on 01 April 2014 and ending on 31 Mar 2019.

Below details the breakdown to the following financial years –

- 2014 – 2015 – £2,189.40
- 2015 – 2016 – Nil
- 2016 – 2017 – £1,715.52
- 2017 – 2018 – £2,616.00
- 2018 – 2019 – Nil

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to AQW 2529/17-22, for his assessment of how a ban on the sale of (i) household coal; and (ii) wet wood, would affect air quality.
(AQW 3552/17-22)

Mr Poots: There are no current plans to introduce a ban on the sale of household coal and wet wood in Northern Ireland. As such, an assessment of the impact of banning the sale of household coal or wet wood on air quality has not been carried out.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to AQW 2882/17-22, for his assessment on whether the lawful requirements of the seven enforcement notices that have legally taken effect in respect of Mobuoy illegal dump compromise his Department's emerging remediation strategy.

(AQW 3626/17-22)

Mr Poots: Final Remediation Strategy for the Mobuoy Road waste site has not yet been agreed, however, my officials are working closely with officials from DfI Planning, Roads and NI Water through an Integrated Strategy to ensure an aligned government approach.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to AQW 2882/17-22, whether his Department (i) was consulted with; and (ii) agreed the remedies stipulated in the seven planning enforcement notices for the Mobuoy illegal dump before they were served.

(AQW 3627/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Enforcement Branch within the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) was engaged with Department for Infrastructure (DfI) Planning in the early stages of the planning enforcement process and NIEA provided evidence on the presence of controlled wastes in support of the enforcement notices.

The planning enforcement notices were separate instruments and have been running in parallel with the NIEA criminal case. While NIEA did not stipulate the remedies in the planning enforcement notices, DfI Planning has kept NIEA informed on their progress and NIEA is currently working together with DfI Planning, Roads and NI Water to ensure delivery of an integrated remediation strategy that achieves the best environmental outcomes.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he plans to introduce mandatory CCTV recording in abattoirs to monitor animal welfare.

(AQO 397/17-22)

Mr Poots: I currently have no plans to make the installation of CCTV recording in abattoirs mandatory as the systems currently in place provide assurance that welfare standards are being met. At present over 99% of animals and birds processed in Northern Ireland are slaughtered under CCTV coverage.

Official Veterinarians from my Department maintain a permanent presence in approved Northern Ireland slaughterhouses during the hours of slaughter. They are responsible for monitoring animal welfare at slaughter and verifying that operators fulfil their obligations under both meat hygiene and animal welfare legislation.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in light of the 2019 Partnership for Action Against Wildlife Crime Northern Ireland report, whether his Department has any plans to address raptor persecution.

(AQO 398/17-22)

Mr Poots: Several DAERA business units are actively involved in the Partnership for Action Against Wildlife Crime Northern Ireland (PAW NI). The forum is co-chaired by NIEA and PSNI. It takes the lead in highlighting issues associated with wildlife crime across Northern Ireland, using its large potential audience to communicate the anti-wildlife crime message.

The Raptor Persecution report highlights the impacts of illegal activity on birds of prey – such activities include shooting, poisoning and nest disturbance or destruction. It is likely that the extent of this is under-recorded as there is a low probability of carcasses being found.

The PSNI are the lead enforcement body. DAERA staff have joined the PSNI on operations aimed at disrupting wildlife criminals, and are examining new approaches to educate the public and to make it easier to secure evidence for certain offences. They also work closely with the Northern Ireland Raptor Study Group, through NIEA-administered Environment Fund monies, to monitor bird of prey populations, and the nests of the most vulnerable species.

Ms Dillon asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the alignment between the Animal and Public Health Information System and the United Kingdom Livestock Information System.

(AQO 399/17-22)

Mr Poots: APHIS has been supporting livestock traceability and animal and public health in Northern Ireland since 1998, while the Livestock Information System (LIS) is a completely new system that is being developed for a similar purpose in Great Britain, as one of a number of initiatives in England, Scotland and Wales, to replace and enhance the British Cattle Movements Service's Cattle Tracing System (CTS) and improve traceability for all species. The first phase of the LIS, cattle movements, is anticipated to go fully live sometime in 2021.

In the meantime, APHIS continues to interface with the CTS, as it has done for many years, to display a joined up whole-life view of the movements and keepers of cattle from birth, as they move from Great Britain into Northern Ireland, and vice versa. It is anticipated that APHIS will continue to interface with the new LIS as and when it goes live, as will its intended successor, NIFAIS, in due course, via a "UK view" facility that will ensure the same joined up traceability, health assurance and disease control is available to farmers, the Department and the agri-food industry here in Northern Ireland, and all across the UK, into the future.

Dr Aiken asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether his Department will support attempts to subsidise waste for the projected Hightown Incinerator.

(AQO 400/17-22)

Mr Poots: A decision on the planning application to develop a waste to energy plant to treat Refuse Derived Fuel generated in an associated Mechanical Biological Treatment plant at Hightown rests with the Department of Infrastructure. Consequently conjecture about any future support my department may provide is entirely hypothetical at this stage. However, if the planning application is successful, any requests received by my Department for grant support or other financial mechanisms associated with the proposed residual waste treatment facility, would be considered in line with departmental priorities and the strategic and long-term needs for waste management and the circular economy in Northern Ireland.

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline how his Department is improving air quality in urban areas.

(AQO 401/17-22)

Mr Poots: Air quality in Northern Ireland has improved in respect of some air pollutants, for example, airborne lead and sulphur dioxide.

Recognising that more can be done, my Department supports District Councils with funding for air quality monitoring and the development of action plans to address local air quality issues across Northern Ireland.

My Department approves clean-burning appliances and low-smoke fuels for use in Smoke Control Areas, to reduce pollution from domestic chimneys.

Since 2016, my Department has been developing a draft Clean Air Strategy. This has involved close collaboration with other Departments and officials continue to work together to finalise the draft discussion document on the Clean Air Strategy. Once the draft discussion document is complete, I will consider the options for issuing the draft Clean Air Strategy for public consultation later in the year.

Behavioural change is also at the forefront of my Departments work. DAERA supports Sustrans, an active travel charity, which works to change attitudes and promote active travel such as walking and cycling. My Department also ran a MyNI environmental education campaign on social media in late 2019 to encourage positive behavioural change.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline the action his Department is taking to protect, and codify, the Voisinage Agreement on fishing.

(AQO 402/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Voisinage Agreement is a longstanding agreement between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland that provides for reciprocal fisheries access within 0 to 6 nautical miles of each other's coasts. I know that retention of this reciprocal access is especially valued by inshore fishermen operating in east Down and Londonderry and by those engaged in blue mussel aquaculture. The Fisheries Bill that is currently making its passage through Westminster will provide us with the means to provide reciprocal access to vessels from the Republic of Ireland, upon EU exit, if similar reciprocal access continues to be afforded to vessels from Northern Ireland. In 2019 Ireland amended its Sea Fisheries and Maritime Jurisdiction Act 2006 to make access by NI vessels under the Voisinage Agreement legal in Irish law. Longer term, I would also like to formalise the Agreement, which was simply based on an exchange of letters between officials in 1965. This would provide clarity for both Administrations about the types of vessels and fisheries that come under this special access arrangement, and the rules that should be complied with when operating in each other's inshore areas.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what discussions his Department has had with stakeholders likely to be impacted by the introduction of the Deposit Return Scheme in the Environment Bill.

(AQO 403/17-22)

Mr Poots: There has been ongoing discussions with stakeholders in relation to DRS for some considerable time. DAERA, alongside the UK Government and Welsh Assembly Government published a 12 week consultation on proposals for the introduction of a Deposit Return Scheme in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in February last year. Scotland is further ahead in its introduction of DRS with its regulations to introduce the scheme being laid this week.

Since the conclusion of this consultation, engagement with stakeholders including retailers, manufacturers, district councils, waste management companies has been ongoing and will continue through planned workshops and stakeholder events. The specific details of a DRS are currently being developed using evidence gathered and through ongoing engagement with stakeholders. This will then be subject to further consultation later this year.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan.

(AQO 405/17-22)

Mr Poots: DAERA's Northern Ireland Environment Agency leads in supporting the development and delivery of the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan 2015-2020 in Northern Ireland through working in partnership with many organisations and conservation bodies.

The Plan contains 81 actions, including published plans for Farmland, Councils, Communities, Gardens, Transport Corridors, Golf Courses and recently published actions for Group Water Scheme Sites. A review of the current plan is to be published by the All Ireland Pollinator Plan Steering Group.

I am pleased that DAERA is involved with this comprehensive plan to safeguard our vital pollinator species. It encompasses a wide range of measures and has been warmly received and has certainly helped to raise the profile of pollinators and the ecosystems services they provide to society. This has been done through the successful engagement of a wide range of partners in Northern Ireland including organisations such as local councils, NI Water, Translink, Ulster in Bloom, Keep NI Beautiful, the Best Kept Awards, the Ulster Bee Keepers Association, the National Trust, the Ulster Farmers' Union, Butterfly Conservation and Buglife. All these organisations have helped promote more sustainable land management for pollinators.

My Department has played its own part through its responsibility for policy and legislation on managed honey bees which play an essential role in crop production, through managing its own estate to be more pollinator friendly including wildflower planting at the Department's headquarters at Ballykelly, and by providing grant-aid through the Environment Fund for organisations promoting the conservation of pollinators and providing incentives to farmers through the Environmental Farming Scheme to provide and restore pollinator friendly habitats.

The UK Pollinator Monitoring Scheme was due to be launched in Northern Ireland next month, with Flower-Insect Timed Counts being promoted as a citizen science programme, with further more structured surveys to gather robust information on the status of pollinators in Northern Ireland to help enhance our data on pollinators and inform further policies and actions. This will be impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline any discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to advocate a soft Brexit to protect the local farming sector.
(AQO 408/17-22)

Mr Poots: I recognise that many farmers and agri-food stakeholders are concerned about the impact that the Exit from the EU could have on them.

I have met George Eustice MP, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs at the recent Inter-Ministerial Group meeting and have discussed a number of issues by telephone with him since taking up my role.

The detailed arrangements for the implementation of the Protocol have also still to be determined and will be subject to discussion between the EU and UKG through the Specialised and Joint Committee structures. This detail will very much depend on the precise nature of the future trading relationship between the UK and the EU.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the effectiveness of the High Hedges Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 in addressing problem hedges.
(AQO 409/17-22)

Mr Poots: The High Hedges Act is intended to provide a mechanism by which a complainant can resolve a high hedge problem if they are unable to resolve the problem with their neighbour before approaching their local council.

In 2016, an exercise conducted with Councils on the functioning of the Act revealed that between 2012 and 2016 of the 2,130 initial enquiries to councils, 122 (5.7%) progressed to complaints and of these 76 (3.5%) became formal complaints. Based on these findings, it was concluded there was no evidence to show that a review of the High Hedges legislation was needed at that time.

I can advise that the number of formal complaints submitted each year remains low.

My Department will continue to work with Councils to encourage the sharing of best practices and consistent application of the Act.

Department for Communities

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for Communities how affordable rent is defined within her Department's definition of affordable housing.
(AQO 411/17-22)

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): Building more social housing remains a priority for my Department with the majority of the capital budget being invested in this area. However while this is crucial, making additional types of affordable and intermediate housing available to help a broader range of households will also have a key role in reducing housing stress. The definition of 'Affordable Housing' sits within the Strategic Planning Policy Statement. 'Affordable Rent' is not currently defined within this document.

The Strategic Planning Policy Statement defines affordable housing as social rented and intermediate (or shared ownership) housing. The Statement allows for a broadening of that definition.

This was the context for my Department's consultation on proposals to revise the current definition of 'Affordable Housing'. This proposes broadening the range of affordable intermediate housing offerings. One of these suggested offerings is affordable rent products.

Research has begun into developing affordable rent products which sit between the social rented and private rented sectors.

This work is at an early stage with initial research commissioned on the viability of affordable intermediate rental products here.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Communities how many Personal Independence Payment appeals have been lodged in each of the last five years.

(AQO 412/17-22)

Ms Hargey: During the last five years there have been 25,326 appeals lodged in relation to Personal Independence Payments (PIP) claims. The number of PIP appeals lodged in each year is set out in the table below.

	Personal Independence Payment Appeals received
2015/16	0
2016/17	4,874
2017/18	7,329
2018/19	8,752
April 2019 - December 2019	4,371
Total	25,326

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Communities to what extent new social housing development is being curtailed by the sewerage infrastructure limitations recently highlighted by NI Water.

(AQO 414/17-22)

Ms Hargey: NI Water has publicly stated that major investment is required to address water/sewerage infrastructure. This is an issue that affects all aspects of development. We were aware that the water infrastructure capacity issues would potentially impact on housing development more generally and the social housing new build programme in particular.

The potential implications for the development of social housing schemes because of the current issues affecting the water/sewerage infrastructure is a concern for me, particularly given the increasing levels of housing stress;

The developing housing associations have raised their concerns with regard to the potential impact with the Housing Executive and my Departmental officials;

I understand that presently there are around nine schemes, totalling more than a thousand units, programmed over a number of years, at risk. I have asked the Housing Executive to carry out a detailed analysis of the areas of housing need that may be impacted by the water infrastructure issues;

I have committed to discussing the issues regarding the new build programme with Minister Mallon, who is also concerned about this issue. We will work together to understand the full extent of the issues and explore potential solutions to what is a growing problem.

My officials have and will continue to engage with the Department for Infrastructure and Housing Executive colleagues to establish what action can be taken to minimise the risks.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities whether Post Office card account holders will be able to access their accounts after November 2021.

(AQO 416/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Payments of benefit and pension into a mainstream account is considered to be a safe and reliable method of payment, providing greater financial inclusion and giving people a greater choice about where and when they collect their money. The Post Office card account contract is coming to an end in November 2021 and following contract end, people who have not already switched to an alternative mainstream account will be migrated onto the new payment exception service and their Post Office card account will be closed.

Ahead of contract end, account users are being given advance written notice encouraging them to switch to a mainstream account, so that those who are able to make that change have time to do so. For those unable to access or manage a mainstream account my Department will offer a replacement payment exception service.

Support is available to help people choose a product that is right for their circumstances, which may include a payment exception service.

Mr Lynch asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the release of publicly owned land for social housing development.

(AQO 418/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department is working to increase the release of public sector land for housing. The Department's Public Land for Housing Project seeks to identify unused or under-utilised public sector land that has the potential to be reused for housing. This has, to date, identified six additional public sector sites which will be used for housing. These have the potential to deliver at least one hundred and forty five social housing units.

Work is ongoing to identify and release further sites to meet the Programme for Government target to release ten sites for housing by March 2021.

One of the key barriers to social housing supply is land availability. Social house building has long used NIHE owned land and land released by other Departments through the 'D1' process. However most public sector land is currently being used, or has a use planned for it. Public Sector organisations are not permitted to bank land.

The Department continues to work in conjunction with the NIHE to find further sites for housing.

The NIHE's annual publication of the Commissioning Prospectus details the local housing requirements. It directs Housing Associations site-search activity to help address under-provision, in specific locations.

I will consider if further steps could be taken to release more land for social homes in areas of objective housing need.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister for Communities whether the extension of welfare mitigations will be introduced before 31 March 2020.

(AQO 419/17-22)

Ms Hargey: In The New Decade, New Approach Deal that accompanied the return of the Assembly there is a commitment that the Executive will extend the existing welfare mitigation measures beyond 31 March 2020 when they are due to expire.

These schemes provide essential financial support and I am fully committed to their continuation beyond the current end date of 31 March 2020. If we fail to deliver on this commitment an estimated 38,000 people will be affected by the bedroom tax. This is simply unacceptable.

I fully understand the frustration of many members that this important legislation has not yet been brought to the House for consideration. I can assure you that this is a priority for me personally and for my officials. They have been taking all necessary steps to ensure that the necessary legislation to extend the existing welfare mitigation schemes will be in place by 31 March 2020.

A Bill to allow for the extension of mitigation payments for the bedroom tax has been drafted and shared with Executive colleagues. I am pleased that they have agreed to accelerated passage for the Bill. My officials have also drafted subordinate legislation to extend the other welfare mitigation schemes beyond 31 March 2020.

I will reiterate that this issue is a priority for me and I am committed to bringing the draft legislation to the Assembly for consideration at the earliest opportunity. However, the reality is that it is now unlikely that the legislation will come into operation before 1 April 2020.

It is critical that no-one receiving welfare mitigation payments loses out. The political parties have provided an assurance in New Decade, New Approach that the existing welfare mitigation schemes will continue and this simply must be delivered. I can therefore confirm that if the legislation to extend the welfare mitigation schemes is not approved by 31 March 2020 then payments will be made under the sole authority of the Budget Act. I am grateful for my colleague the Minister of Finance for confirming this in his opening statement on the Budget Bill on 25 February 2020.

What this means for individuals is that no one will experience a break in their mitigation payment following 31 March 2020. My Department will continue to make payments to eligible people until such times as the necessary legislation to extend the schemes has been passed.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Communities whether regulation 25 of the Universal Credit, Personal Independence Payment, Job Seeker's Allowance and Employment Support Allowance (Claims and Payments) Regulations (NI) 2016 is being applied by her Department.

(AQO 421/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Regulation 25 of the Universal Credit, Personal Independence Payment, Jobseeker's Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance (Claims and Payment) Regulations (NI) 2016 allows the Department to backdate a claim for Universal Credit for up to one month in a limited number of circumstances. This is to protect the most vulnerable who may be delayed in claiming through no fault of their own.

Once an application is made and it is accepted that the provisions of this Regulation apply, backdating is always granted. Accordingly, my Department is fully aware of this provision, already applies it and will continue to do so as appropriate.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Communities what steps her Department is taking to ensure that the risk of COVID-19 is minimised in the context of ongoing sporting events.

(AQO 422/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Sporting events are part of the fabric of our society and play a major role in how we interact with each other. I want to recognise the role that sport and sporting events play in bringing communities together by providing opportunities for social and cultural interaction.

It is therefore regrettable that, in light of the serious concerns about COVID-19 and how it spreads, sporting events have now been cancelled across the island of Ireland.

Decisions taken by the various Sports Governing Bodies to temporarily suspend competitions, training and collective activities across their sports were not taken lightly and will impact sport at every level from grassroots and club level through to those competing on the international stage.

At times like this it is important that we all work together to protect life and those who are most vulnerable in society and that means continuing to take the right decisions in terms of public health regardless of how that impacts sport and sporting events.

My officials have been and will continue to engage with the Chief Medical Officer and officials from the Department of Health, with Government officials from other jurisdictions, officials from Sports Governing Bodies and representative groups including the NI Sports Forum, the Sports Grounds Safety Authority and SportNI to ensure that whatever decisions are necessary are appropriate, measured and effective. I can confirm that my officials and SportNI met with representatives from a range of Sports Governing Bodies as recently as 16 March.

A key action to date has been the dissemination of timely and up to date public health advice, through Sport NI and the NI Sports Forum, to local sporting bodies and organisations to inform decisions about holding games and sporting events. That will continue and I would assure the member that I am monitoring the situation and the impact COVID-19 is having on sport at every level.

I would finish by commending the community spirit that is being shown by clubs and their members who are providing support to older people and the most vulnerable.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Communities what steps her Department is taking to encourage more residential development in Belfast city centre.

(AQO 423/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department's and Belfast City Council's shared City Centre Regeneration and Investment Strategy recognises that a significant residential population is highly important for the successful functioning of a city centre.

In August 2018, the Council commissioned a multi-disciplinary team of consultants to undertake a Strategic Sites Assessment which reviewed the Council's fifteen publicly operated city centre car parks and adjoining Council assets, as well as adjacent land owned by my Department to identify opportunities on priority sites for comprehensive development, including residential development, involving wider land assembly or joint development opportunities. The priority sites are grouped into four clusters: Inner North West Northern Cluster, Inner North West Southern Cluster, Clarendon Cluster and Ormeau.

The Inner North West northern cluster contains three sites: Kent Street, Library Street, both owned by my Department, and Little Donegall Street, owned by Belfast City Council which have the potential to deliver a residential-led mixed use development. This cluster of sites represents a significant opportunity for DfC and Council to maximise the use of their assets and officers are currently exploring the potential for a housing-led mixed use regeneration scheme at this location. Such a scheme would provide a mix of private, social and affordable housing.

My Department is considering how the public sector and other lands can be brought forward in a strategic way to deliver on a range of housing tenures across the city and unlock barriers to city centre living to increase the city centre population. This work will also be key to bridging the divide between the centre and its adjoining communities.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister for Communities what assurances she can give that any proposed changes to liquor licensing will take account of the impact on tourism.

(AQO 424/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Members will be aware that my Department consulted on the general principles of liquor licensing laws late last year. The consultation also sought views on what should be changed to make the system a more modern and flexible one.

In the region of 1,500 responses were received to that consultation with representation from a number of trade and tourism bodies.

I am currently developing my policy proposals and hope to bring them to the Committee, followed by the Executive, in the coming months.

As part of the policy development process any policy which has not yet been subject to one, will undergo the relevant impact screening. This will of course include a Regulatory Impact Assessment which will consider the potential economic impact.

Those screening documents and any subsequent impact assessments carried out will be made available once I have finalised my policies.

Furthermore, at Committee Stage of the Bill, stakeholders will be given the opportunity to present their views on my policies, and what impact they will have, to the Committee.

Department of Education

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Education to outline the process for schools to provide counselling services.
(AQW 1130/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): The Independent Counselling Service for Schools (ICSS) is accessible to all post primary aged pupils attending grant-aided post primary schools and special schools.

At any time pupils may need additional emotional support, beyond the normal pastoral care offered by teachers. They are able to self-refer or may be referred by school staff or a parent.

The ICSS is responsive to pupils' needs, independent from and yet appropriately supportive of schools' established pastoral care provision. Delivering an effective counselling service requires a collaborative and co-operative partnership. In the case of the ICSS, the key parties to this partnership are the School's Senior Management Team, the counselling provider, the primary point of contact within the school staff (Key Contact for Counselling) and the counsellor.

ICSS is not available for primary school pupils. Schools can however independently select their own counselling provider, arrange for counselling and use their existing delegated budget to absorb any associated costs. They can also use funding from other sources, such as, the Extended Schools Initiative, the Big Lottery or Neighbourhood Renewal to purchase counselling support.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education whether he intends to reintroduce the tri-lingual approach to corporate branded departmental material.
(AQW 2224/17-22)

Mr Weir: I have no plans to reintroduce the tri-lingual approach to corporate branded departmental material.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education how many children across Northern Ireland are currently educated at home.
(AQW 3260/17-22)

Mr Weir: As of 29 February 2020, there were 444 children and young people known to the Education Authority (EA) as being electively home educated. Please note that this figure is not the total number of home educated children in Northern Ireland, rather it is only those that the EA has been informed about through the de-registration process or because the EA has been asked for advice or support.

The actual number may be higher as parents are only required to notify the EA if their child has previously attended school or has a statement of special educational needs.

Parents may choose what they consider to be the most appropriate educational setting for their child and that can include being home schooled.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Education to detail how many Education Welfare Officers there are working with (i) Irish-medium primary schools; and (ii) the post-primary Irish-medium school, in Belfast
(AQW 3296/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) The Education Authority (EA) has six Education Welfare Staff as link Education Welfare Officers to primary Irish-medium schools in Belfast.
- (ii) The EA has one Education Welfare Service Officer as link Education Welfare Officer to post-primary Irish-medium school in Belfast.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) how many young people in Derry city are waiting on an Education Other Than at School (EOTAS) place; and (ii) how many travel to Strabane EOTAS.
(AQW 3305/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority has reported that:

- (i) Less than five pupils are awaiting EOTAS placements.
- (ii) Less than five pupils travel to Strabane EOTAS from Derry City.

In order to protect the identity of children, where this number is less than five the exact number is not specified. In situations where there are challenging circumstances that relate to young people it is sometimes deemed beneficial to locate the young person in another geographical location.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the quality of education provision provided to young people who access Education Other Than at School (EOTAS) and to outline why there is no formal links with their previous school.
(AQW 3307/17-22)

Mr Weir: The assessment of the quality of education provision provided to young people who access Education Otherwise Than at School is formally completed through inspections carried out by the Education and Training Inspectorate who publish all their reports on <https://www.etini.gov.uk/>.

Internal processes are in place within EA to ensure that provision is planned, of a high standard and continuously reviewed.

Formal links with schools are encouraged and supported through a Partnership approach where a pupil remains enrolled at a mainstream school. For expelled pupils, there is no formal link with a school.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education (i) how many staff car parking spaces his Department and its agencies have in Belfast city centre; and (ii) whether he is taking any action to reduce this number.
(AQW 3340/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department of Education does not have any car parking spaces for staff located in the Belfast City Centre.

The Department's Arm's Length Bodies that are located in Belfast city centre have a total of 319 car park spaces allocated to staff.

At present I am not taking any action to reduce this number.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education to detail the annual fees payable, voluntary or otherwise, for attendance at each post-primary school in Northern Ireland.
(AQW 3364/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Reform (NI) Order 1989 Article 128 (1) and (2) enshrines the right to a free education for pupils registered in grant-aided schools, with certain specific exceptions in relation to grammar schools.

Further information on the fees and charges that can and cannot be levied by boards of governors in respect of registered pupils at grant-aided schools and requests for voluntary contributions, is detailed in Chapter 19 of the Department's Governor Guide, which can be accessed via the link below:

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/guide-governor-roles-and-responsibilities>

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Education what plans his Department has to utilise the C2K network to deliver remote learning in the case of a significant coronavirus outbreak.
(AQW 3399/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority is monitoring the situation in relation to COVID 19 very closely with the aim of mitigating day-to-day impact on schools and ensuring continuity of education delivery as much as possible.

In the event that school closures become necessary as part of a wider containment or delay phase, substantial capacity and provision exists via the EA Education Network service to facilitate teaching and learning outside of the classroom environment through digital and online platforms. Significant aspects of the current Education Network technologies operate online, whereby learners can access personal work areas, collaborate with their peers and teaching staff, and utilise curriculum resources based on an anytime, anywhere philosophy.

Besides the continuity of teaching and learning, schools also have a rich portfolio of communication tools at their disposal, to ensure the dissemination of critical notifications and alerts to parents, staff and other education related bodies should school closure be necessary.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of the number of teachers that will need to be trained for the education sector in (i) 2020-21; and (ii) for 2021-23.
(AQW 3427/17-22)

Mr Weir: Following consultation with the Department for the Economy (DfE), I have decided to retain intakes to Initial Teacher Education (ITE) courses at the current level for the 2020/21 academic year, as set out below.

Setting the level of ITE intakes for 2021/22 and 2022/23 will be taken following consideration of a number of factors, including DfE's budget allocation for these years, statistical information provided from my Department's Teacher Demand Model and wider policy considerations.

2020/21 Approved Intakes

Phase	Primary				Post Primary			Totals
	BEd	PGCE	PGCE IME	PGCE Early Years	BEd	PGCE	PGCE IME	
Stranmillis	95	-	-	15	50	-	-	160
St Mary's	94*	-	20	-	50	-	-	164
QUB	-	-	-	-	-	134	4	138
UU	-	33	-	-	-	80	4	117
Total by route	189	33	20	15	100	214	8	579
Totals by phase	257				322			579

* St Mary's University College BEd primary intake figure includes 18 Irish-medium places which will give an overall primary Irish-medium intake of 38.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to outline the Education Authority's plan for the former Lisnaskea High School site and to detail how the Education Authority initially acquired the site.

(AQW 3441/17-22)

Mr Weir: The former Lisnaskea High School closed on (date) and the buildings on the site are currently being demolished. Part of the site has been identified for the proposed relocation of Bunscoil an Traonaigh. No future educational need has been identified for the remainder of the site, therefore the EA will formally dispose of this asset in line with Land and Property Services' Central Advisory Unit's publication entitled "Disposal of Surplus Public Sector Property in Northern Ireland". Through this process, the land will initially be offered to other Departments and public sector bodies.

The EA inherited this site from the former Western Education and Library Board, who had been the long term owner of the site while it was occupied by Lisnaskea High School.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) what assessment his Department has made of the impact of a coronavirus outbreak on teaching staff; and (ii) what plans his Department has in place to manage an outbreak of the coronavirus in schools.

(AQW 3442/17-22)

Mr Weir: The impact of an outbreak in a school on teaching staff will be challenging.

Teachers' health and wellbeing is a matter of the utmost importance. The responsibility for the health and wellbeing of teachers rests with their employers, their Board of Governors, in conjunction with the employing authority where relevant, as the Department of Education (DE) does not employ teachers.

The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools and Education Authority (EA), who are the main employers, are following Public Health Agency (PHA) advice and keeping close contact with colleagues in DE and with each other. They will continue to engage with the PHA, DE colleagues and each other on a daily basis and follow government guidance and advice.

DE has put in place arrangements for working closely with all its education partners on emergency planning issues associated with the Coronavirus outbreak, including the EA on service delivery issues and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment on examinations issues. This will ensure that appropriate contingency plans are in place and that schools are regularly updated with appropriate advice as the situation evolves.

DE convened a COVID-19 Education Planning Group on 13 March which will co-ordinate efforts across the education sector. This group will continue to meet on a regular basis to consider and respond to issues arising. Specific guidance for educational settings also issued on 16 March and this will continue to be updated as the situation evolves.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education to detail the costs to grammar schools of administering post-primary transfer tests and from what budget this cost is met.

(AQW 3448/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department has no role in the operation or administration of the transfer tests used by selective post-primary schools nor does it provide specific funding to schools to administer these tests.

In 2016, my Department issued guidance using powers available to it under Article 16B of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997. This provided that primary schools could supply support materials, carry out preparations for tests during core teaching hours, coach in exam technique and familiarise pupils with the test environment.

It is a matter for individual schools to decide whether and how to use the available guidance in line with the wishes of parents and the needs of pupils.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education how many primary one places does Kilcooley Primary School currently have; and how many will it have for the 2020-21 academic year.

(AQW 3495/17-22)

Mr Weir: The information you have requested is provided in the table below. A school may at any time request a Temporary Variation to its admissions number to increase its intake. None of the four schools have, to date, received a Temporary Variation in either year.

School number	School name	2019/20 Admissions Number	2020/21 Admissions Number
401-6002	Kilcooley PS	29	29
405-1680	Bangor Central PS	88	88
401-6111	Towerview PS	58	58
401-1645	Crawfordsburn PS	30	30

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education how many primary one places does Bangor Central Primary School currently have; and how many will it have for the 2020-21 academic year.

(AQW 3496/17-22)

Mr Weir: The information you have requested is provided in the table below. A school may at any time request a Temporary Variation to its admissions number to increase its intake. None of the four schools have, to date, received a Temporary Variation in either year.

School number	School name	2019/20 Admissions Number	2020/21 Admissions Number
401-6002	Kilcooley PS	29	29
405-1680	Bangor Central PS	88	88
401-6111	Towerview PS	58	58
401-1645	Crawfordsburn PS	30	30

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education how many primary one places does Towerview Primary School currently have; and how many will it have for the 2020-21 academic year.

(AQW 3497/17-22)

Mr Weir: The information you have requested is provided in the table below. A school may at any time request a Temporary Variation to its admissions number to increase its intake. None of the four schools have, to date, received a Temporary Variation in either year.

School number	School name	2019/20 Admissions Number	2020/21 Admissions Number
401-6002	Kilcooley PS	29	29
405-1680	Bangor Central PS	88	88
401-6111	Towerview PS	58	58
401-1645	Crawfordsburn PS	30	30

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education how many primary one places does Crawfordsburn Primary School currently have; and how many will it have for the 2020-21 academic year.

(AQW 3498/17-22)

Mr Weir: The information you have requested is provided in the table below. A school may at any time request a Temporary Variation to its admissions number to increase its intake. None of the four schools have, to date, received a Temporary Variation in either year.

School number	School name	2019/20 Admissions Number	2020/21 Admissions Number
401-6002	Kilcooley PS	29	29
405-1680	Bangor Central PS	88	88

School number	School name	2019/20 Admissions Number	2020/21 Admissions Number
401-6111	Towerview PS	58	58
401-1645	Crawfordsburn PS	30	30

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 2406/17-22, (i) whether he agrees there is an element of discrimination against the controlled sector in that the capita per child is lower in both primary and post-primary than in any of the other sectors; and (ii) what proposals his Department has to address this, so that all schools are treated on a fair and adequate basis.

(AQW 3502/17-22)

Mr Weir: My response to AQW 2406/17-22 detailed the per pupil funding allocated to schools through the Common Funding Formula (CFF) for 2019-20. This was calculated using the total CFF allocation divided by the Full Time Equivalent pupil numbers for schools in the sectors requested.

The CFF is the Department's mechanism for allocating budgets to schools funded through Local Management of Schools arrangements. A school's CFF allocation will be determined by a combination of its overall enrolment, the differentiated needs of its pupils and the school's characteristics. Therefore, schools with higher numbers of newcomer pupils or pupils with free school meal entitlement will attract additional funding regardless of sector. Similarly, smaller schools receive small schools support funding which increases the per capita funding of these schools, irrespective of sector.

Schools budgets, calculated through the CFF, are reflective of the individual circumstances of each school, and all schools are treated in a fair and adequate basis, regardless of sector.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 2735/17-22; (i) whether he will make available the subsequent pages of the Minister's response to the original Dickson Plan scheme dated 5 February 1965 in a format that is readable; (ii) whether he can confirm that this agreement to the Dickson Plan has not been updated officially since the former Minister agreed it in his decision dated 15 February 1967; and (iii) whether he will undertake to begin a process that ensures the Dickson Plan (a) survives; and (b) is brought up to date.

(AQW 3511/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) There are no subsequent pages available to the former Ministry of Education decision dated 15 February 1967.
- (ii) The EA is the managing authority for Controlled sector provision including those schools in the Dickson Plan. If the EA decides it wishes to make a significant change in any reform of the Dickson Plan system, there is a statutory process which must be followed and this involves the publication of a Development Proposal, having taken account of the wider area context.
- (iii) I have previously made my views known on the Dickson Plan system and reiterate my support and assurance of its continuation.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Education what extra budget provision is being made for soap, anti-bacterial and other cleansing materials in schools.

(AQW 3524/17-22)

Mr Weir: I appreciate that this unprecedented situation is an extremely challenging time for schools and all our partners in the education sector. In conjunction with the Education Authority, my Departmental Officials are currently assessing the impact on schools budgets and what additional resources can be made available to assist schools at this time.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Education what plans his Department has to increase the enrolment numbers in Parkhall Integrated College.

(AQW 3549/17-22)

Mr Weir: The planning of education provision for Controlled schools is a matter for the Education Authority rather than the Department.

The Education Authority's extended Annual Action Plan April 2019-March 2021 (the Action Plan) sets out the work programme of the planning and managing authorities to address specific issues at a local level. There is no proposed activity in the Action Plan relating to Parkhall Integrated College.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education what plans his Department has to sell or demolish the old Cotton Primary School.
(AQW 3563/17-22)

Mr Weir: The former Cotton Primary School site is currently being retained by the Education Authority for potential future educational use.

Should this change, the EA will dispose of this asset in line with Land and Property Services' Central Advisory Unit's publication entitled "Disposal of Surplus Public Sector Property in Northern Ireland". This process includes a public sector trawl to ascertain if there is any public sector body that has a requirement for the site. If no interest is expressed, the EA would then move to dispose of the site on the open market.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to detail the schools where suspected coronavirus has been reported.
(AQW 3586/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department does not intend to monitor schools where coronavirus has been detected. It is monitoring the current situation in terms of schools which requested an exceptional closure week commencing 16 March 2020 and will continue to gather information on which schools are open to key workers week commencing 23 March 2020.

On 18 March the First Minister and deputy First Minister announced a radical package of measures that the Executive is taking to deal with the unprecedented challenges facing our society as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak. This included confirmation that schools will close to pupils at the end of the school day on Friday 20 March.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education whether any existing shared and integrated education funding can be allocated to progress integrated education nursery provision.
(AQW 3590/17-22)

Mr Weir: Fresh Start funding has been made available to my Department specifically to increase the provision of shared and integrated education. 23 integrated schools will benefit from major capital investment projects through this funding. Additionally, executive funding is being used to progress a number of major capital investment projects at some integrated schools not included in the Fresh Start Programme.

Generally where a school currently includes nursery provision the nursery provision will be included in the major capital project. Since the announcement of the Fresh Start Programme in March 2016, capital funding has been identified for nursery schools on the following projects:

- | | |
|-------------------|-----------------|
| ■ Millennium IPS | ■ Forge IPS |
| ■ Mill Strand IPS | ■ Portadown IPS |
| ■ Phoenix IPS | ■ Omagh IPS |
| ■ Braidside IPS | ■ Corran IPS |

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education why a COVID-19 education working group has not been established in Northern Ireland.
(AQW 3663/17-22)

Mr Weir: I have ensured my Department has arrangements in place to work closely with all its education partners on a range of very complex issues arising from the Coronavirus outbreak, including the Education Authority on service delivery issues and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment on examinations issues.

My Department convened a COVID-19 Education Planning Group on 13 March to co-ordinate efforts across the education sector. This group will meet on a regular basis to consider and respond to issues arising.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education what provisions are in place to facilitate online learning in the event of school closures.
(AQW 3664/17-22)

Mr Weir: With the announcement of school closures from Monday 23rd March by the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, the Education Authority can confirm that substantial capacity and provision exists via the EA Education Network service to facilitate teaching and learning outside of the classroom environment through digital and online platforms.

The use of online tools to help improve teaching and learning experiences has seen a significant increase, not only within the classroom but also extending beyond the classroom so that learners can access personal work areas, collaborate with their peers and teaching staff, and utilise curriculum resources based on an anytime, anywhere philosophy.

The MySchool portal acts as a focal point for online Education Network services and this is available to all learners and teachers through an Internet enabled device from home via www.c2kschools.net.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education many primary one places does Bloomfield Primary School currently have; and how many will it have for the 2020-21 academic year.
(AQW 3700/17-22)

Mr Weir: The information you have requested is provided in the table below. A school may at any time request a Temporary Variation to its admissions number to increase its intake. The school has, to date, not received a Temporary Variation in either year.

School number	School name	2019/20 Admissions Number	2020/21 Admissions Number
401-3023	Bloomfield Primary School	58	58

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Education, given the current health concerns, whether consideration will be given to updating groups that have applied for pathway funding sooner, so they can prepare for the impact of receiving or not receiving grants.

(AQW 3742/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department has appointed a Pathway Fund administrator (Early Years – the Organisation for Young Children (EYO)) for 2020/21. The Department is working closely with EYO during the current circumstances and contingency arrangements are in place in light of the COVID-19 pandemic so that, where possible, the Fund assessment and allocation process will progress as planned.

Budgets beyond the current financial year are undetermined, therefore no decisions have been taken in relation to future years. DE will notify EYO as soon as possible after the Pathway budget is confirmed. EYO currently anticipates that all applicants will be advised of the outcome of their application during the first week of April 2020, including indicative notification of award where applicable.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education how many primary one places does Ballymagee Primary School currently have; and how many will it have for the 2020-21 academic year.

(AQW 3776/17-22)

Mr Weir: The information you have requested is provided in the table below. A school may at any time request a Temporary Variation to its admissions number to increase its intake. Neither of the schools have, to date, received a Temporary Variation in either year.

School number	School name	2019/20 Admissions Number	2020/21 Admissions Number
401-6192	Kilmaine PS	90	90
401-6430	Ballymagee PS	60	60

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education, with current Government guidelines directing people to self-isolate when in contact with someone with a suspected case of COVID-19, why are schools with suspected cases not being granted closure for 14 days to protect pupils and staff.

(AQW 3812/17-22)

Mr Weir: On 18 March the First Minister and deputy First Minister announced a radical package of measures that the Executive is taking to deal with the unprecedented challenges facing our society as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak. This included confirmation that schools will close to pupils at the end of the school day on Friday 20 March.

The welfare, health and safety of pupils and staff is paramount. The Department will continue to follow the expert medical and scientific advice from the Chief Medical Officer, Public Health Agency and the UK Government and Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE).

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Education whether the exemptions on school attendance for key workers apply to families with one key worker parent, and which specific parts of the retail sector are included.

(AQW 3871/17-22)

Mr Weir: School attendance exemptions for key worker families apply where one or both parents are key workers.

A list setting out the broad categories of key workers is contained in Frequently Asked Questions provided to schools and pre-school education settings on 24 March and placed on the Departmental website:

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/faqs-schools-opening-children-key-workers-24-march-2020>

On 24 March the Executive published a list of essential businesses that are permitted to remain open. The list provides clarity on what retail services may remain open and which should close immediately.

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-essential-businesses-and-services>

Department of Finance

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance, whereas the Code of Appointment for Special Advisers asserts that the legal framework governing employment applies to the appointment of Special Advisers, including anti-discrimination laws, how is such demonstrated and transparent in circumstances where the Ministerial selection of the Special Adviser is outside the ambit of the Code.

(AQW 3290/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): The selection of a special adviser is a matter personal to the Minister. It would be for each Minister to confirm that the appointment complied with the necessary requirements. I have already done this for the DoF Special Adviser.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Finance for his assessment of the service provided via the NI Direct website, reporting system and call centre.

(AQW 3324/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The NI Direct website and call centre provide the citizen with a central point for key government information and services. Processes are in place to measure the effectiveness of these services, for example, performance against contractual Key Performance Indicators. Customer Satisfaction Surveys and regular quality checks are undertaken on Call Centre services. The average annual customer satisfaction rate is 97.5% and complaints are less than 0.01% of the overall number of calls answered (circa 2.2 million calls per annum).

In 2019, the nidirect website attracted almost 50.7 million page views and over 20.7 million users. User testing is conducted regularly with citizens to find out how informative, comprehensive and easy to use they find the nidirect website. Results suggest how that people are aware of the nidirect website, view it as a trustworthy source of unbiased information, like the clear layout and the level of information available. The website has not received any complaints.

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister of Finance how much (i) bingo; (ii) gambling; (iii) Lottery; and (iv) machine games duty has been paid by companies in the last five years.

(AQW 3346/17-22)

Mr Murphy: This is an Excepted Matter for HMRC who are responsible for collecting gambling duties and who hold the information in this regard.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Finance what measures his Department has planned to recognise the centenary of Northern Ireland.

(AQW 3415/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The British Government made a commitment in the New Decade, New Approach document to work with the Executive to mark the centenary in 2021 in a spirit of mutual respect, inclusiveness and reconciliation in line with the principles for remembering; and to make available funding for related projects.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance whether he plans to establish special funding streams for research on SARS-CoV-2/COVID-19.

(AQW 3418/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Executive will consider the appropriate response to COVID-19 which will be informed by views from individual Ministers on areas within their responsibility. The Health Minister will consider the need for special funding streams for research and development on SARS-CoV-2/COVID-19, taking account of work taking place at a UK-wide level.

We are working closely with the Westminster Government on this issue. The Executive will receive a share of any additional funding for support in devolved areas through the Barnett Formula. In addition, as set out in the Statement of Funding Policy, we can also access the Reserve where we are unable to manage any disproportionate costs from our own resources.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Finance to detail the number of complaints brought by staff that have been upheld in the last five years.

(AQW 3471/17-22)

Mr Murphy: In the answer, I have provided information on those formal complaints received by NICS staff under the NICS HR Handbook Employee Relations arrangements for Grievance, Dignity at Work, Uniform Appeals, which allow for complaints to be upheld or not.

The number of complaints 'upheld' in these categories in the last five years is set out in the Table 1, attached at Annex A.

ANNEX A

Table 1: NICS Staff Complaints 'upheld' in last five years

Departments	Grievance	Dignity at work	Uniform appeal
DAERA	2	2	9
DFC	18	2	41
DFE	-	1	4
DFI	5	3	4
DOF	3	1	12
DOJ	0	3	6
PPS	0	0	1
Total	28	12	77

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Finance how many temporary posts exist in each branch of his Department; and how long each post has been operational.

(AQW 3472/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The table below provides details of the number of temporary/fixed term staff and recruitment agency workers in the Department of Finance and how long they have been in post. The information is provided for each Deputy Secretary Group at 2 March 2020.

Deputy Secretary Group	Temp/Fixed Term Staff				Recruitment Agency Workers			Total Rec Agency	Overall Total
	< 6 mths	6-12 mths	12mths+	Total Temp / Fixed Term	< 6 mths	6-12 mths	12mths+		
Communication and Engagement Division				0	1			1	1
Corporate Services Group			1	1			3	3	4
Central Procurement Directorate	1	5	1	7		2	5	7	14
Departmental Solicitors Office				0	4	11	9	24	24
Enterprise Shared Services	3	8		11	2	14	4	20	31
Group Internal Audit and Fraud Investigation Services				0			2	2	2
Land and Property Services		4		4	50	55	44	149	153
NICS Human Resources				0	4	12	4	20	20
Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency	1	5		6	6	9	19	34	40
Public Spending Directorate				0		1		1	1
Strategic Policy and Reform Directorate				0	1	1	6	8	8
Total	5	22	2	29	68	105	96	269	298

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Finance to detail the number of complaints by departmental staff that were (i) reviewed and dismissed prior to investigation; and (ii) investigated and then dismissed, in the last five years.

(AQW 3474/17-22)

Mr Murphy: In the answer, I have provided information on those formal complaints received by NICS staff under the NICS HR Handbook Employee Relations arrangements for Grievance, Dignity at Work, and Uniform Appeals, where complaints can be investigated and/or dismissed.

The information is set out in Table 1 and Table 2 at Annex A.

ANNEX A

Table 1: Complaints reviewed and dismissed prior to investigation

Departments	Grievance	Dignity at work	Uniform appeal
DAERA	7	0	0
DE	1	0	0
DFC	39	0	3
DFE	6	0	1
DFI	18	0	0
DOF	13	0	0
DOH	0	0	1
DOJ	19	0	0
PPS	5	0	0
TEO	0	0	0

Table 2: Complaints investigated and then dismissed

Departments	Grievance	Dignity at work	Uniform appeal
DAERA	31	4	27
DE	3	0	14
DFC	92	12	249
DFE	8	4	23
DFI	41	8	35
DOF	16	5	39
DOH	1	0	0
DOJ	0	7	13
PPS	1	1	5
TEO	2	0	2

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Finance to outline the criteria that determines if a property is uninhabitable for the purposes of rates.

(AQW 3525/17-22)

Mr Murphy: A domestic property is uninhabitable for the purposes of rates when it ceases to be a hereditament, at which point it will be removed from the Valuation List and no rates are payable. A hereditament is defined in the legislation as a property that is liable to a rate.

If the property could be made capable of occupation by undertaking a reasonable amount of repair works, the property remains in the Valuation List and liable for rates. If a property is truly derelict and incapable of being repaired for its intended purpose, LPS will remove it from the Valuation List. This is referred to as the hereditament test. It is a physical test rather than an economic test and neither the cost of the repairs nor the ability of the owner or occupier to fund the repairs can be taken into account.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance to detail (i) how many staff are employed within his Department's information service; (ii) of these, how many are classed as press officers; and (iii) the annual cost of this service.

(AQW 3537/17-22)

Mr Murphy: There are four staff in the department's press office, three of which are press officers. The annual cost of this service is £160,644 (excludes employee pension and national insurance contributions).

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Finance how much funding has been spent on consultants in the last five years, broken down by contract; and for the date on which each contract was awarded.

(AQW 3540/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The following amounts have been spent on consultants over the past five years:

Year	Amount £'000
2015-16	632
2016-17	181
2017-18	706
2018-19	837
2019-20*	394

* Please note 2019-20 figures are provisional

I am unable to currently provide these figures broken down by project level as projects and related consultancy spend can span a number of years. However, my finance team is developing systems that will enable such information to be more easily extracted going forward. In addition, in order to provide greater transparency, consultancy costs will be published on a regular basis on the Open Data NI portal.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Finance how many staff are employed in his Department's press office.

(AQW 3541/17-22)

Mr Murphy: There are four staff in the department's press office, three of whom are press officers.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Finance to detail (i) the number of human resources and personnel court cases the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) has defended in each of the last five years, broken down by cases (a) won; and (b) lost by the NICS; and (ii) the costs and damages paid out.

(AQW 3542/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The number of human resources and personnel court cases the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) has defended in each of the last five years, broken down by cases (a) won; and (b) lost by the NICS; and (ii) the costs and damages paid out is attached in Annex A.

These detail the numbers of court cases the Northern Ireland Civil Service defended in each of the last five years, i.e. those which proceeded to a full hearing and then broken down as requested, to specify those in which the case was decided in favour of the applicant, those dismissed by the court and the costs involved in each.

ANNEX A

Table 1: Court cases defended by NICS, numbers won/lost and costs.

Year	Number of court cases defended by NICS	Number won	Number lost	Costs and damages paid out
2015	1	0	1	£15,264
2016	3	3	0	£1,782
2017	4	3	1	£47,471
2018	2	0	2	£118,974
2019	7	6	1	£29,405
2020	1 *	1	0	£5,430

* To date

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Finance, further to his Department's decision to close the Civil Service EO1 list with effect from 18 April 2020, whether this means no further names will be added to the list from that date, or whether the list will cease to exist from that date.

(AQW 3546/17-22)

Mr Murphy: No decision has been made whether to close or extend the EO1 list. My officials are considering a range of options to fill current and future vacancies in the NICS at this grade and will consult with Trade Union Side on this matter.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Finance to outline the rationale behind the decision to close the Civil Service EO1 reserve list on 18 April 2020 whilst vacancies are due to be created by the ongoing Staff Officer Assessment Centres which are running up to the end of April 2020.

(AQW 3547/17-22)

Mr Murphy: No decision has been made whether to close or extend the EO1 list. My officials are considering a range of options to fill current and future vacancies in the NICS at this grade and will consult with Trade Union Side on this matter.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Finance whether he will ensure that the funding for Changing Places, announced in the Budget, will be drawn down and used appropriately to implement the scheme speedily.

(AQW 3576/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Executive did not receive any additional Barnett Consequentials for 2020-21 in relation to Changing Places funding as part of the Chancellor's Budget on Wednesday 11 March 2020

While Barnett consequentials may be received later in 2020-21 these will be unhypothecated and it will be for the Executive to allocate in line with local needs and priorities. It will be for the Communities Minister to take forward any policy in this area.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Finance where the additional £210 million for Northern Ireland, announced in the UK Budget, will be spent.

(AQW 3584/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The £210 million of additional funding will form part of the funding for the Executive's deliberations on the Budget which will be announced on 30 March 2020.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Finance whether small businesses will receive rates relief in Northern Ireland following the Chancellor's Budget.

(AQW 3587/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I have announced emergency measures to reduce the cost of rates on all businesses at this unprecedented time. All businesses will pay zero rates in April, May and June, effectively a reduction of 25% applied to the billable amount, after all other reliefs are applied. This will save businesses £100m. I am also deferring the issuing of all rate bills from April until June to help businesses with short-term cash flow and I will deliver a reduction in the Regional Rate for businesses. Further, I will review the position on reliefs as part of the Budget.

Mr Allen asked the Minister of Finance whether he will ring-fence any Barnett consequentials emanating from the £30 million Changing Places toilet fund announced in the Chancellor's budget for a dedicated Northern Ireland Changing Places toilet fund.

(AQW 3608/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Executive did not receive any additional Barnett consequentials in relation to Changing Places funding as part of the Chancellor's Budget on Wednesday 11 March 2020.

While Barnett consequentials may be received later in 2020-21, these will be unhypothecated and it will be for the Executive to allocate in line with local needs and priorities. It will be for the Communities Minister to take forward any policy in this area.

Mr Allen asked the Minister of Finance, in light of Her Majesty's Government announcing £5.2 billion for flood defences in England together with £200 million funding to trial innovations to improve flood resilience, whether he is expecting Barnett consequential finances to assist the citizens of Northern Ireland similarly with improved flood defences and the trialing of innovations to improve flood resilience in similarly impacted areas.

(AQW 3609/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As part of the Chancellor's Budget 2020-21, the Executive received £6.5 million of Barnett Consequentials in relation to Flood defences funding in England.

These funds are unhypothecated, meaning they do not have to be used for the purposes for which they were issued. Barnett consequentials will form part of the overall funding available will be allocated by the Executive in line with local needs and priorities.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance whether he has any plans to abandon the pilot for hot desking in Goodwood House, given recent concerns about COVID-19.

(AQW 3644/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I have no plans to abandon agile working in Goodwood House. This environment allows staff the flexibility to work in different locations, including remotely and at home, which at the current time is being taken up by significant numbers of people.

This trial is not about hot-desking, rather it seeks to facilitate and support agile and smarter working practices. This requires appropriate technology and equipment to allow people to work in different spaces, depending on the task being carried out, and not be restricted to a desk in a traditional office environment. Connectivity enhancements allow staff to keep in touch with their teams and to make voice and video calls using their laptops. Video and tele-conferencing facilities are also available for meetings.

We are also considering how we can set up agile drop-in areas which would provide opportunities for staff to work closer to home. This has the potential to reduce the amount of travelling required and contribute to our fight to reduce carbon emissions.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance what help his Department can give to small businesses affected by the COVID-19 outbreak.

(AQW 3701/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My response to AQW 3704/17-22 already refers to the support measures which I have announced for all businesses.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister of Finance what plans he has to support businesses that will suffer negative financial effects from the COVID-19 outbreak through either a downturn in their trade or by total closure of their business.

(AQW 3706/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I announced emergency measures to reduce the cost of rates on businesses at this unprecedented time. As part of this package, all businesses will pay zero rates in April, May and June, effectively a reduction of 25% applied to the billable amount after all other reliefs are applied. This will save businesses £100m. I am also deferring the issuing of all rate bills from April until June to help businesses with short-term cash flow, and I will deliver a reduction in the Regional Rate for businesses as part of the Budget.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Finance, in light of the Coronavirus outbreak, what contact he has had with the Treasury or the Bank of England to consider future options to reduce mortgage payments for homeowners or loans to businesses.

(AQW 3739/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I pressed the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Stephen Barclay, to investigate the broad range of support available to people and households impacted by COVID-19 during a conference call with the Finance Ministers from Scotland and Wales on 18th March.

The 3 month mortgage holiday for households in financial difficulty that was agreed between the Treasury and lenders is to be welcomed in that regard. Our local banks are actively promoting this. But clearly more action is needed to help those worst affected.

My officials have also been engaging with the Bank of England, and directly with the financial industry here to discuss how they will work with people through this crisis, and in particular, the flexibility that needs to be shown to hard pressed families here.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance for a breakdown of the community background of staff employed by the North South Ministerial Council.

(AQW 3744/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Community background information is held on the 9 members of the Northern Ireland Civil Service working in the North South Ministerial Council. Information on the community background of individual members of staff is protected by the Fair Employment and Treatment (NI) Order 1998. In order to comply with the Order and to protect the confidentiality of this information it is our policy not to release community background data where the number of staff in any category (ie Protestant, Roman Catholic or Not Determined) is less than 10. It is therefore not possible to provide the information requested.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister of Finance to detail the Executive Budget from 2010 to 2020, broken down by Resource DEL, ring-fenced Resource DEL, Capital DEL and Financial Transactions Capital, broken down by year and displayed in tabular form.

(AQW 3757/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The table below details the Treasury control totals on which the Executive's Budgets, as published, from 2010 to 2020 were based.

£million

Financial Year	Resource DEL		Capital DEL	
	Non Ring-fenced	Ring Fenced	Capital	FT Capital
2019-20	10,771.1	587.2	1,660.3	244.9
2018-19	10,279.9	574.0	1,222.1	182.2
2017-18	10,085.8	558.1	1,117.9	114.4
2016-17	9,777.0	549.9	1,009.6	113.6
2015-16	9,674.1	550.4	1,020.3	129.0
2014-15	9,629.6	355.9	741.0	62.8
2013-14	9,570.3	356.7	733.8	46.8
2012-13	9,489.0	369.9	847.1	11.8
2011-12	9,485.7	351.0	903.4	-
2010-11	8,309.2	314.7	1,142.6	-

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance, in light of downturn experienced as a result of COVID-19, whether planned Reval 2020 non-domestic rates revaluation process can be suspended for sectors facing significant rises.

(AQW 3765/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The new non domestic Valuation List will come into force on 1 April.

It is not possible, within the terms of the legislation, to suspend changes in Net Annual Value for some, but not all, of the entries in the List at a general revaluation.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance whether he intends to offer (i) payment holidays; and (ii) ability to defer payments for non-domestic ratepayers until the economy recovers after COVID-19.

(AQW 3766/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I refer the Member to AQW 3767/17-22.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Finance, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, whether his Department will provide (i) 100% rates relief for businesses for a year; (ii) a new rates calendar from June to March; (iii) time to pay measures for all rates bills; and (iv) loans for small businesses.

(AQW 3804/17-22)

Mr Murphy:

- (i) I have announced emergency measures to reduce the cost of rates on businesses at this unprecedented time. As part of this package, all businesses will pay zero rates in April, May and June, effectively a reduction of 25% to the billable amount after all other reliefs have been applied. This will save businesses some £100m. As part of the Budget I will also deliver a reduction in the Regional Rate for businesses.
- (ii) I am deferring the issuing of all rate bills from April until June to help businesses with short-term cash flow.
- (iii) Furthermore Land & Property Services will discuss and agree extended payment arrangements with ratepayers where needed, to spread payments over a longer period of time. (iv) Loans for small businesses are not the responsibility of this Department.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Finance whether time to pay schemes will be announced for VAT, PAYE and corporation tax.

(AQW 3805/17-22)

Mr Murphy: This is a matter for HMRC which has an existing time-to-pay service in place, and where the Chancellor announced that this would be scaled up in response to COVID-19.

While this is welcome, clearly it is vital that HMRC are flexible in allowing businesses and the self-employed to defer tax payments during this crisis. I will continue to press Treasury Ministers to ensure that adequate support is provided for those that need it.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Finance whether hand sanitisers will be made available within Civil Service buildings; and what measures are being taken to protect Civil Service staff and service users during the COVID-19 outbreak.

(AQW 3809/17-22)

Mr Murphy: DoF does not have premises responsibility for all Civil Service buildings. That responsibility falls to the Department with the most staff located in that building. Within those premises for which my Department does have premises responsibility, there are supplies of hand sanitisers and soap and we are working with suppliers to increase the current supply. I understand that is also the case in other NICS buildings. As per my response to AQW 3405, my Department is providing input to The Executive Office on wider non-health preparedness for COVID-19. That input includes guidance to NICS staff and broadly follows, and points to, the advice given by the Public Health Agency, for example to demonstrate social distancing and maintain the highest possible personal hygiene, including washing hands thoroughly and frequently (with soap and water).

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Finance, in light of the coronavirus outbreak and in the interests of staff welfare, what health and disability audit has been undertaken of staff in the Civil Service in order that people with particular health vulnerabilities may work from home.

(AQW 3813/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Guidance covering COVID-19 (coronavirus), including Frequently Asked Questions, has been issued to all staff and managers. This is being updated on a regular basis.

This guidance strongly advises staff classified as vulnerable people by the Public Health Authority (PHA) website to follow the social distancing measures which include working from home, where possible. For staff in this category who are unable to work from home, paid leave arrangements apply.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Finance, in light of the successful challenge by firefighters to Government reform of public sector pensions, for an update to the situation in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 3833/17-22)

Mr Murphy: There is a clear need to address age discrimination in devolved public service pension schemes as a consequence of the McCloud ruling. This is supported by legal advice.

The solution will need to remove the discrimination identified in the reformed public service schemes from April 2015 and ensure equal treatment for the future, whilst also ensuring that members keep their accrued rights. This is a complex issue. Given that some members will be better off in the old schemes, and some better off in the new schemes, it is not as simple as putting everyone back in the old schemes. The way this is implemented could need to vary across schemes to some extent, because of existing differences in scheme design.

Proposals to accomplish this are currently being considered at the Collective Consultation Working Group, which is co-ordinated by the Department of Finance and which is the recognised forum for employer/employee consultation on public service pension policy.

A joint statement agreed between employer and employee representatives is available on the Department of Finance website at: <https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/publications/statement-mccloud-judgement>.

Further updates will issue as and when there are more developments to report.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance, in light of the current crisis, what steps he has taken to identify non-priority resource spend across Departments so as to maximise spending on health and the economy.

(AQW 3847/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Chief Secretary to the Treasury has assured me that funding will not be a constraint in providing comparable levels of COVID-19 support irrespective of where people and businesses are based.

There is ongoing close co-operation between all four administrations at Ministerial and official level.

To date we have received £904 million from Treasury to allocate to local measures to mitigate the effects of the Covid-19.

The Executive will take measures to reallocate funding to priority areas as required.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance to provide details of the process that will be followed in deciding whether civil servants will be disciplined in light of the findings of the RHI Inquiry.

(AQW 3848/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The exceptional nature and circumstances of the RHI Inquiry are such that any potential disciplinary matters relating to NI civil servants will be managed through an adapted process in line with NICS policies. This is to ensure that matters are dealt with in a timely way, ensuring the highest possible standards of fairness and consistency.

An external independent panel will consider the RHI Inquiry Report to identify any individuals who have reached the threshold of breaching 6.01 Standards of Conduct and 6.03 Discipline Policy as set out in the NICS HR Handbook.

The independent panel will consider all individuals at all grades in the NICS.

Formal disciplinary charges will be considered in relation to any NI civil servant who has been identified as having potentially undertaken an act/acts of misconduct and having breached relevant NICS policies.

The independent panel will submit a report to a NICS panel in respect of staff up to and including Grade 3. The independent external panel will separately submit its conclusions to the Cabinet Secretary for those at Grade 2 and above.

The NICS panel will comprise three NICS Permanent Secretaries who have not been involved in the RHI Inquiry or the RHI Scheme. The NICS panel will decide whether or not there should be any further action, undertake any disciplinary hearing and take decisions on appropriate disciplinary outcome.

Any appeals will be heard by a panel of two NICS Permanent Secretaries who are unconnected with RHI and who are not part of the NICS panel.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Finance whether any areas of current 2020-21 allocations can be reprioritised urgently to deal with either the COVID-19 crisis or its economic effects.

(AQW 3853/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Chief Secretary to the Treasury has assured me that funding will not be a constraint in providing comparable levels of COVID-19 support irrespective of where people and businesses are based.

There is ongoing close co-operation between all four administrations at Ministerial and official level.

To date we have received £904 million from Treasury to allocate to local measures to mitigate the effects of the Covid-19.

The Executive will take measures to reallocate funding to priority areas as required.

Department of Health

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health (i) what was the cost of the XStrahl 150 unit at Altnagelvin Hospital; (ii) for how long the machine has gone unused; (iii) the rationale as to why it has not been used; and (iv) how many Western Health and Social Care Trust patients have been sent elsewhere to receive treatment as the machine was not in use.

(AQW 2580/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): In answer to your question:

- i) The x-ray machine purchase cost was £167,255, including operator applications training.
- ii) The machine was installed in 2017 and has not yet been used to treat patients.
- iii) The machine was purchased and installed as part of a wider capital investment programme to fully equip the North West Cancer Centre with the best available technology in the most cost effective way. In line with the service implementation plan it was always intended that the superficial x-ray machine would only be commissioned after the other major equipment was available to treat patients. A consultant oncologist has been appointed and it is expected that the first patient will be treated in May 2020.
- iv) Western Health and Social Care patients continue to receive appropriate treatment for their skin cancer as surgery and topical treatments are provided locally. Where necessary patients have been referred for radiotherapy to Belfast or Galway. Since 2016, sixteen patients have been referred from the Western Health and Social Care Trust to Belfast for treatment.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health what services his Department is sharing on an All-Island basis to ensure that patients with medical conditions have access to their nearest service.

(AQW 2680/17-22)

Mr Swann: The following health services are currently provided on an all-island basis:

- i The Paediatric Congenital Cardiac services in Our Lady's Children's Hospital Crumlin;
- ii. The Milk Bank in the South West Acute Hospital (SWAH);
- iii. Hyperbaric Chamber provided on Craigavon Hospital site;
- iv. Sentinel Lymph Node Biopsy for Melanoma provided by Black Rock Clinic, Dublin; and
- v Provision of specialist blood components in a time sensitive emergency or catastrophic incident from the Irish Blood Transfusion Service (IBTS).

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health why databases from national societies are not used to compare surgical procedure outcomes; and whether he is considering any change to the legislation around data transfer in Northern Ireland so that Health and Social Care Trusts can participate fully in valuable UK datasets, enabling the comparison of important outcome data such as morbidity and mortality.

(AQW 2753/17-22)

Mr Swann: The current legislative and information governance environment in Northern Ireland does not preclude healthcare organisations from sharing non-identifiable information for secondary uses. Therefore I am not considering any change to the legislation around data transfer in Northern Ireland at this time. However the Department and HSC organisations are working to engage with the service to seek to remove perceived barriers to information sharing and clarify any potential confusion about how the current legal and legislative framework should be applied.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health whether there are any geographical areas where there are difficulties in recruiting staff to provide home care packages.

(AQW 2806/17-22)

Mr Swann: All Health and Social Care Trusts are finding the recruitment of domiciliary care staff challenging. This can be more acute in rural areas and along the boundaries between Trusts.

In addition to current Trust recruitment initiatives, my Department is currently looking at those recommendations from the Power to People Report which will impact on future domiciliary care provision.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health what progress has been made toward the publication of a mental health action plan, as outlined in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 2892/17-22)

Mr Swann: My intention is to publish the Mental Health Action Plan as soon as possible. Timing will need to take account of the current pressures facing the system.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health how he intends to advance a prevention and early intervention strategy for mental health and ensure, through appropriate commissioning and funding, that access to evidence-based psychological approaches are available to meet mental health needs at all stages of a person's life.

(AQW 2916/17-22)

Mr Swann: I have committed to developing a new, ten year Mental Health Strategy, which I will publish by the end of 2020. The Strategy will take a lifespan approach and will consider prevention and early intervention, as well as the future configuration of specialist mental health services, including psychological therapies. The Strategy will be co-produced and psychologists will be included in the co-production.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Health when he will decide on, and implement, a preferred option from the review of the application of Continuing Health Care in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 2991/17-22)

Mr Swann: A public consultation on continuing healthcare was launched on 19 June 2017 and ran for a period of 13 weeks. A total of 43 consultation responses were received and analysed. I am considering the consultation responses and will announce next steps in due course.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister of Health what additional support his Department is providing to the Western Health and Social Care Trust to address the challenges it has in the recruitment and retention of staff.

(AQW 3015/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department is working in partnership with all Trusts, including the Western Trust, to promote the HSC as a great place to work and as an employer of choice, through careers events and the development of the HSC jobs website (www.jobs.hscni.net), to make it easier to navigate and be more attractive for users, while using it as a platform to promote career choices within the Trust, and fill "hard- to- fill" posts.

The International Medical Recruitment Programme within the Western Trust was established in 2015 and has to date successfully appointed 127 doctors to the Trust. 36 of these doctors have been appointed since March 2019. Doctors have been appointed across a range of specialties, including areas which have been notoriously difficult to fill. This includes Emergency Medicine, Radiology, Oncology, Gastroenterology, Neurology and Ophthalmology.

There is also regional investment by the Department to facilitate the recruitment of international nurses. This project was first set up in 2016 and the HSC are committed to recruiting 622 nurses by March 2020, although this may be delayed by some months. The Western Trust have so far welcomed 64 new nurses and have 41 live offers undergoing pre-employment checks.

In terms of retaining staff, the Department is overseeing implementation of the health and social care Workforce Strategy, which includes a number of actions to improve staff health and wellbeing. All HSC employers, including the Western HSC Trust, are involved in this work.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health (i) what is the average waiting time for Essure patients; (ii) what are the arrangements for Essure patients to travel to Great Britain or the Republic of Ireland; and (iii) whether the current arrangements are likely to change.

(AQW 3091/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) Patients who require surgery as a consequence of having had an Essure coil fitted would normally have surgery in any of the Trusts in Northern Ireland, within the gynaecology specialty. We are unable to identify specific cases where such remedial surgery has taken place. However, the average (median) completed waiting time for elective surgery within the Gynaecology specialty as a whole for Northern Ireland in 2018/19 was 8.3 weeks.
- (ii) There are no separate contractual arrangements for Essure patients to travel to Great Britain or the Republic of Ireland and no requests have been submitted in the past three years relating to Essure. The EU Directive application route for patients ordinarily resident in Northern Ireland and legally entitled to Health and Social Care services may be considered. Reimbursements are granted for eligible treatment costs only (i.e. not travel / accommodation). Patients are advised to contact the HSCB in advance of travelling to discuss whether prior authorisation is required and levels of reimbursement.

Further information on the application process can be found on the HSCB website at:

<http://www.hscboard.hscni.net/travelfortreatment/the-directive-201124eu-on-cross-border-healthcare/>

- (iii) There are no plans in place to change the current arrangements.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health what efforts he is making to mitigate the incentive of doctors and other healthcare workers to work less hours due to issues with pension contributions.

(AQW 3113/17-22)

Mr Swann: I fully recognise the many difficulties that HMRC taxation rules on pensions are causing, in particular, the Annual Allowance when combined with changes to the tapering mechanism. The Minister of Finance and I jointly wrote to the Chancellor of the Exchequer on 28 February to urge action on this issue.

On 11 March the Chancellor announced in the Budget that, following an urgent review by HMRC, there will be changes to the tapered Allowance thresholds, increasing both thresholds by £90,000. Raising the tapered annual allowance thresholds means that no one with net income before tax below £200,000 will be caught by the tapered annual allowance.

However, to ensure that the very highest earners pay their fair share of pension tax, the minimum level to which the Annual Allowance can be tapered down is reduced from £10,000 to £4,000, affecting only those with total income (including pension accrual) above £300,000.

I believe that the increase to the Annual Allowance thresholds will allow doctors and other healthcare workers to spend as much time as possible treating patients and address the workforce pressures caused by some doctors reducing HSC workloads for fear of higher tax bills.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Health to detail the range of short break overnight respite services for under 18 years, over and above family based short breaks; and how many allocated slots are available in each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 3115/17-22)

Mr Swann: The number of respite beds available per Health and Social Care Trust for children are as follows:

	Beds
Northern Health and Social Care Trust	10
South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust	13
Western Health and Social Care Trust	17
Southern Health and Social Care Trust	12
Belfast Health and Social Care Trust	10*

* Belfast Trust has access to an additional 4 beds in a facility managed by the South Eastern Trust.

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of GPs on Out of Hours duty at (i) Altnagelvin Hospital; (ii) Omagh Hospital and Primary Care Complex; (iii) Strabane Health Centre; (iv) Limavady Health Centre; and (v) the South West Hospital, between the hours of (a) 6pm to 12am; and (b) 12am to 8am, over the last four weeks.

(AQW 3131/17-22)

Mr Swann: The number of GPs on Out of Hours duty at (i) Altnagelvin Hospital; (ii) Omagh Hospital and Primary Care Complex; (iii) Strabane Health Centre; (iv) Limavady Health Centre; and (v) the South West Hospital, between the hours of (a) 6pm to midnight; and (b) midnight to 8.30am, over the last four weeks, are shown in the table overleaf.

The number of GPs working in each out of hour base requested, between the hours of (i) 6pm to midnight; and (ii) midnight to 8:30am, over the last 4 weeks¹

Week	Base							
	Altnagelvin Area Hospital		Omagh Hospital and Primary Care Complex		South West Acute Hospital		Limavady Health Centre ²	Strabane Health Centre ²
	6pm to midnight	midnight to 8.30am	6pm to midnight	midnight to 8.30am	6pm to midnight	midnight to 8.30am	6pm to midnight	6pm to midnight
10th - 16th February	21	7	5	4	4	7	5	4
17th - 23rd February	10	5	6	4	8	7	5	1
24th February - 1st March	18	5	10	6	8	7	5	2
2nd - 8th March	18	6	9	6	8	7	5	4

Source: Health and Social Care Board

- 1 Western Urgent Care will have GPs or ANPs who could work a shift that covers all or part of these time periods. Given that they have worked at some point during the time period, they have been included in the data. The data does not include GP Trainees, because depending upon their grade, they may see patients alongside their Supervisor or independently.
- 2 Limavady and Strabane Health Centres only provide Out of hours services between 6pm and midnight. All other bases provide services between 6pm and 8.30 am.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health how many Ambulance Service staff are on zero hours contracts. (AQW 3138/17-22)

Mr Swann: NIAS does not employ any staff on zero hour contracts.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health whether he has considered establishing the role of clinical associate psychologists, using a graduate workforce, similar to developments in England where developments are being evaluated in pilot sites projects. (AQW 3163/17-22)

Mr Swann: The assessment, development and integration of new roles is an important element of the HSC Workforce Strategy. I anticipate that the potential contribution of clinical associate psychologists will be addressed as the mental health workforce requirements for the future are reviewed.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health for an update on the taskforce following British Association of Social Workers NI's Insult and Injury Report. (AQW 3165/17-22)

Mr Swann: The publication of a research report carried out by BASW (NI), 'Insult and Injury: Exploring the impacts of intimidation, threats and violence against social workers' highlighted the issue of threats, violence and intimidation towards HSC social work and social care staff.

My Department established a taskforce to develop a professional governance framework setting out good practice examples of employer support for social work and social care staff affected by work related violence. The draft framework aims to bring together existing good practice in this area in order that staff feel supported, safe, and know what support and assistance they can expect from employers.

This work is almost complete but it has been delayed due to other Departmental priorities.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health whether he intends to ensure that the profession of psychology, in line with other health professional groupings, is directly represented at a strategic level in the design and commissioning of evidence-based psychological services. (AQW 3166/17-22)

Mr Swann: I refer to the answer provided to AQW 2914/17-22.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of people who have accessed gender identity services in each of the last five years, broken down by (i) age; (ii) local council area; (iii) gender; and (iv) treatment outcome. (AQW 3177/17-22)

Mr Swann: Due to changes in IT systems, data can only be provided for three of the last five years. It is not possible to break down the number of people who have accessed gender identity services by age, local council area, gender or treatment outcome, without a manual review of the patient's files. The total number of face to face attendances (new and review) at gender identity services are detailed in the table below.

Year	Number of Attendances
2017	1874
2018	1355
2019	990

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health (i) whether food testing by the Food Standards Agency is undertaken through a tendered contract; (ii) where the work is carried out; (iii) when the current contract is due to expire; (iv) if this work is carried out in Great Britain, what impact the Brexit Protocol arrangements will have; and (v) whether any instructions have been issued in this regard.

(AQW 3229/17-22)

Mr Swann: A broad range of food testing (microbiological examination and chemical analysis) is carried out by and on behalf of the Food Standards Agency (FSA). The table below outlines the detail of these arrangements.

(i) Test	(ii) Performed by and where	(iii) Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)
Official control testing of shellfish for marine biotoxins	Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) (Stormont)	Overarching MoU with AFBI. The current agreement is due to expire on 31 March 2022
Official control testing of shellfish for chemical contaminants	AFBI (Stormont)	Overarching MoU with AFBI. The current agreement is due to expire on 31 March 2022
Official control microbiological testing of shellfish	Carried out by the Northern Ireland Public Health Laboratory at Belfast City Hospital	NI Public Health Laboratory (NIPHLs), Belfast City hospital – non contractual and ongoing
Official control testing of milk	AFBI (Newforge, Belfast)	Overarching MoU with AFBI. The current agreement is due to expire on 31 March 2022
Official control testing of raw drinking milk	AFBI (Newforge, Belfast)	Overarching MoU with AFBI. The current agreement is due to expire on 31 March 2022
Official control testing of water samples (including at raw drinking milk suppliers, liquid milk processors and milk product plants where there are milk tanker wash facilities)	AFBI (Newforge, Belfast)	Overarching MoU with AFBI. The current agreement is due to expire on 31 March 2022
Official control testing of pig meat for Trichinella	AFBI (Stormont)	Overarching MoU with AFBI. The current agreement is due to expire on 31 March 2022
Official control testing of cattle and sheep for lead and copper	AFBI (Stormont)	Overarching MoU with AFBI. The current agreement is due to expire on 31 March 2022
Milk and canteen meals for radioactive contamination	Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (CEFAS) (Lowestoft, England)	Overarching MoU between FSA and CEFAS with specific schedule on monitoring for radioactivity. The current schedule on monitoring for radioactivity commenced on 1 January 2018 and is due to expire on 31 December 2020 with an optional 2-year extension until 31 December 2022

On an ad hoc basis, the FSA completes research and participates in surveys that could involve food testing. In these cases, contractors may be appointed relevant to the research or survey subject matter.

Food testing in Northern Ireland will also be carried out by the district councils and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA).

iv) Occasionally testing takes place in GB laboratories. This is usually due to the specifications of the survey or research that the FSA is participating in and or the lack of availability of an accredited laboratory in Northern Ireland to undertake the analysis. The FSA awaits guidance and information following negotiations between the UK and the EU regarding implications that the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol may have on food testing following the implementation period.

v) To date, no instructions have been given to or from the FSA in this regard.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health what specific provision his Department has planned for the specific needs of veterans.

(AQW 3231/17-22)

Mr Swann: In Northern Ireland (NI), healthcare services are provided on an equal basis across the general populace, irrespective of any demarcation. The Department's 2009 protocol, "Delivering Healthcare to the Armed Forces - A Protocol for Ensuring Equitable Access to Health and Social Care Services", sets out Departmental policy which ensures members of the armed forces, veterans and their families are not disadvantaged in terms of access to healthcare, when compared to any other person resident in NI. The Protocol provides for the equitable provision of healthcare to all those living in NI, irrespective of their occupation.

There is a commitment in the New Decade, New Approach agreement about the Armed Forces Covenant but it is currently not adopted in Northern Ireland. The Department of Health will consider specific service provision with regards to the needs of veterans when UK-wide legislation is introduced to further incorporate the Armed Forces Covenant into law.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health how many inpatient beds exist in psychiatric intensive care in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust; and how many times demand has exceeded capacity in each of the last five years.

(AQW 3234/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number of inpatient psychiatric intensive care beds available in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust (HSCT) in each of the last five years is presented in the table overleaf.

The Northern HSCT indicated that at no time in 2019 had demand exceeded capacity for psychiatric intensive care beds. They could not provide this information for previous years, as it would involve a manual trawl through patient records and would incur disproportionate cost.

Number of psychiatric intensive care beds in the Northern HSCT (2015 to 2019)

Year	No. of psychiatric intensive care beds as at 31 Dec.
2015	13
2016	13
2017	13
2018	14
2019	14

Source: Northern HSCT

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health whether his Department captures centralised, regional patient population data relating to (i) eating disorders; (ii) alcohol and drug-related brain injury; (iii) early years; (iv) intensive care; and (v) post-partum depression.

(AQW 3236/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department of Health does not capture centralised, regional patient population data relating to any of the above per se, but has systems available to it to provide certain information with respect to hospital admissions for a full range of clinically coded health morbidities and has systems available to derive certain health-related early years information.

The Department's Hospital Inpatient System (HIS) can provide the number of hospital admissions/ individuals hospitalised where an alcohol and drug-related brain injury was recorded. However, such information will not represent 'population data', as many individuals living with such a condition will be managed in a primary care setting and may not have been hospitalised within any given time frame examined. Diagnoses information in the primary care setting is largely unavailable. Additionally, hospitalisation data where an eating disorder or post-partum depression has been recorded will be more incomplete as the HIS does not cover hospitalisations within the Mental Health programme of care. Further information on such conditions may be available from individual Health & Social Care Trusts which will involve a trawl of their specific information systems.

Intensive care hospital episodes are not included in the Department's HIS. However, information on Intensive Care, in terms of demand and capacity, may be available via systems available to the HSCB or from each of the Health & Social Care Trusts individually.

Health-related early years information for the whole child population is captured on the Child Health System by each individual Health & Social Care Trust. This information is submitted to a regional database, held within the Business Services Organisation's data warehouse.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to outline his future plans for Altnagelvin Hospital.

(AQW 3278/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Western Health and Social Trust have submitted a proposal for the phased development of Altnagelvin Hospital as part of a Departmental capital planning review exercise. I will consider this proposal alongside other capital investment priorities put forward by our Health organisations. My ability to take forward new capital projects is subject to future budget availability.

In the interim, in order to alleviate ongoing service pressures, there are plans for the provision of a modular build extension to the existing emergency department facilities. It is anticipated these will be in place by Autumn 2020.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of children reported to social services as suffering abuse in each of the last five years.

(AQW 3281/17-22)

Mr Swann: When Social Services are notified of concerns that a child may be suffering abuse, it is recorded as a child protection referral. Abuse is categorised as neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse. The number of child protection referrals is set out in Table 1.

Child protection figures are published both quarterly and annually on the DoH website <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/child-protection-register>.

Table 1: The number of Child Protection Referrals in Northern Ireland (2014/15 - 2019/20)

	Number of Child Protection Referrals
2019/20*	2210*
2018/19	3139
2017/18	3407
2016/17**	4021
2015/16	4279
2014/15	4054

Sources:

“ Children’s Social Care Statistics for Northern Ireland”, DoH

“ Quarterly Child Protection statistics for Northern Ireland”, DoH

* The figure for 2019/20 covers only data for the first three quarters of the financial year.

** New protocols for recording child protection referrals were introduced during 2017 in line with “Regional Agreement on the use of Electronic Recording for Referrals into Children’s Social Work Services – Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Trust – September 2017”. These may have contributed to a decrease in the number of recorded referrals.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 705/17-22, whether Northern Ireland gets a financial benefit from any money recovered for services to residents of the Irish Republic under EHIC, S1 and S2 schemes; and how much is spent on the provision of such services.

(AQW 3288/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker’s letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal ‘business as usual’.

I am conscious that the Assembly not only has a desire, but also a duty to request the latest information relating to this unprecedented and rapidly changing situation, and I am therefore committed to providing Members with regular updates as developments occur. I trust that you will agree that it is in the public interest that my officials and I remain primarily focused on the task in hand over the coming period in relation to COVID-19 and I will therefore not be in a position to answer your written question at this time.

I appreciate your understanding.

Robin Swann, MLA

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health how many children and young people are waiting for speech and language appointments in each constituency.

(AQW 3297/17-22)

Mr Swann: Such appointments are not recorded on a constituency basis therefore the information requested could only be obtained at disproportionate cost. However, the number of children and young people waiting for an initial speech and language appointment in each Health and Social Care Trust is provided in the table below:

HSC Trust	Children and young people waiting for an initial SLT appointment
Belfast	410
Northern	348
South Eastern	266
Southern	846
Western	519
Total	2389

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of greater public involvement in the delivery of adult social care, including moves to deliver care home facilities mainly through public provision.

(AQW 3329/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Robin Swann, MLA

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether his Department has any plans to procure Personal Protective Equipment to help protect against coronavirus.

(AQW 3330/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Robin Swann, MLA

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health whether his Department has mapped all publically accessible defibrillators.

(AQW 3356/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Robin Swann, MLA

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to outline the policy areas he has instructed his Department to review since taking office.

(AQW 3357/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Robin Swann, MLA

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health for an update on the provision of GP services in the Brownlow Health Centre in Upper Bann.

(AQW 3361/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Robin Swann, MLA

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health to outline the legislation under which the prescription of medical cannabis is deemed illegal, even where it is recommended by a specialist as medically beneficial.

(AQW 3386/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

I am conscious that the Assembly not only has a desire, but also a duty to request the latest information relating to this unprecedented and rapidly changing situation, and I am therefore committed to providing Members with regular updates as developments occur. I trust that you will agree that it is in the public interest that my officials and I remain primarily focused on the task in hand over the coming period in relation to COVID-19 and I will therefore not be in a position to answer your written question at this time.

I appreciate your understanding.

Robin Swann, MLA

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health what actions he is taking to ensure there is a universal approach across Health and Social Care Trusts for people who receive a dementia diagnosis.

(AQW 3387/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

I am conscious that the Assembly not only has a desire, but also a duty to request the latest information relating to this unprecedented and rapidly changing situation, and I am therefore committed to providing Members with regular updates as developments occur. I trust that you will agree that it is in the public interest that my officials and I remain primarily focused on the task in hand over the coming period in relation to COVID-19 and I will therefore not be in a position to answer your written question at this time.

I appreciate your understanding.

Robin Swann, MLA

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health for an update on approval for patients requiring urgent life-saving or life-extending care to travel to other jurisdictions where necessary.

(AQW 3388/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

I am conscious that the Assembly not only has a desire, but also a duty to request the latest information relating to this unprecedented and rapidly changing situation, and I am therefore committed to providing Members with regular updates as developments occur. I trust that you will agree that it is in the public interest that my officials and I remain primarily focused on the task in hand over the coming period in relation to COVID-19 and I will therefore not be in a position to answer your written question at this time.

I appreciate your understanding.

Robin Swann, MLA

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether his Department has any plans to create immediately more high-standard isolation units to deal with the impact of coronavirus.

(AQW 3419/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

I am conscious that the Assembly not only has a desire, but also a duty to request the latest information relating to this unprecedented and rapidly changing situation, and I am therefore committed to providing Members with regular updates as developments occur. I trust that you will agree that it is in the public interest that my officials and I remain primarily focused on

the task in hand over the coming period in relation to COVID-19 and I will therefore not be in a position to answer your written question at this time.

I appreciate your understanding.

Robin Swann, MLA

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) the number of people waiting for assessment for domiciliary care packages; and (ii) the length of time on the waiting list, broken down by each directorate in (a) Lurgan; (b) Banbridge; and (c) Portadown.

(AQW 3443/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department does not hold this information centrally and cannot provide within the timeframe.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health for an update on his Department's input to the creation of dementia-friendly communities.

(AQW 3460/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Robin Swann, MLA

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health how much his Department spent on medicines in each year from 2010/11 to 2017/18; and what the average percentage growth in spend was each year.

(AQW 3461/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Robin Swann, MLA

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health what role social workers had in the development of the draft Family Parenting and Support Strategy.

(AQW 3463/17-22)

Mr Swann: The pre-consultation process for the draft cross-departmental Family and Parenting Support Strategy has involved significant engagement through focus groups, surveys, interviews and consultation workshops with a wide range of key stakeholders from across the statutory, voluntary and community sectors, including social workers.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health for an update on the Family Parenting and Support Strategy, including when the consultation will take place.

(AQW 3464/17-22)

Mr Swann: The draft Strategy is currently being considered by other departments for their final views and input. It is intended to publicly consult on the draft strategy in the near future.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the number of domestic electrical fires in rural areas.
(AQW 3481/17-22)

Mr Swann: The table below details the number of primary (major) fires in domestic premises in rural areas* started by electrical appliances over the last three financial years:

2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
98	114	108

* Rural areas defined as settlements with a population of <5,000 and all areas outside settlement boundaries

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) provide a range of information and advice to the community on fire safety including advice on how to prevent electrical fires in the home. NIFRS provide free Home Fire Safety Checks to members of the community who are deemed at risk. NIFRS completed 13,116 of these visits between 1 April 2016 and 31 March 2019.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Health what initiatives he is considering to support GP services' response to high demand, especially in rural areas.
(AQW 3499/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Robin Swann, MLA

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health what plans his Department has to implement a shorter diagnostic pathway for ovarian cancer.
(AQW 3520/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Robin Swann, MLA

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health what plans his Department has to reduce the waiting times for occupational therapy referrals.
(AQW 3521/17-22)

Mr Swann: The HSCB has provided non-recurrent funding in 2019/20 across the Trusts to undertake additional activity to reduce the backlog of patients waiting for occupational therapy. As a result of this investment, the number of patients waiting

longer than 13 weeks from referral to commencement of occupational therapy has reduced from 4,152 at the end of March 2019 to 3,379 at the end of January 2020.

Addressing waiting times for occupational therapy services is challenging due to a regional and national shortage of Occupational Therapists. While Trusts have experienced difficulties they continue in their endeavours to recruit staff to improve waiting times for patients.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health whether he plans to speed up the process of testing for ovarian cancer by combining the CA125 blood test with the ultrasound, as is the case in Scotland, or by another method.

(AQW 3530/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

I am conscious that the Assembly not only has a desire, but also a duty to request the latest information relating to this unprecedented and rapidly changing situation, and I am therefore committed to providing Members with regular updates as developments occur. I trust that you will agree that it is in the public interest that my officials and I remain primarily focused on the task in hand over the coming period in relation to COVID-19 and I will therefore not be in a position to answer your written question at this time.

I appreciate your understanding.

Robin Swann, MLA

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of domestic fires caused by electricity, and the resources allocated to the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service to tackle them.

(AQW 3531/17-22)

Mr Swann: The table below details the number of domestic electric fires in Northern Ireland caused by electricity for the last three years:

Year	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Number of domestic fires caused by electricity	492	556	481

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) provide a range of information and advice to the community on fire safety including advice on how to prevent electrical fires in the home. NIFRS provide free Home Fire Safety Checks to members of the community who are deemed at risk. NIFRS completed 13,116 of these visits between 1 April 2016 and 31 March 2019. The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service are appropriately resourced to respond to these incidents.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health what action he is taking to help prevent fires in domestic properties caused by electricity.

(AQW 3532/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am committed to reducing the number of accidental injuries and deaths in the home. Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) provides a range of information and advice to the community on fire safety including advice on how to prevent electrical fires in the home. NIFRS provides free Home Fire Safety Checks to members of the community who are deemed at risk. NIFRS completed 13,116 of these visits between 1 April 2016 and 31 March 2019.

In February 2015, my Department launched the Home Accident Prevention Strategy 2015-2025. As part of this strategy the Public Health Agency work in partnership with stakeholders to deliver advice on common hazards within the home. This includes advice on electrical safety and fire prevention.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health whether same-sex couples will be eligible for the three cycles of In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF), outlined in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 3534/17-22)

Mr Swann: Please see AQW 542/17-22 which covers the answer to this question.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health (i) to detail the number of critical care beds available in each Health and Social Care Trust to deal with coronavirus; (ii) whether additional beds and contingency workforce and space capacity have been put in

place to deal with coronavirus; and (iii) how many medical ventilators are available in Health and Social Care Trusts to deal with respiratory conditions that would be affected by coronavirus.

(AQW 3572/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department published the 'Health and Social Care (NI) Summary Covid-19 Plan for the Period Mid-March to Mid-April 2020' on the 19 March 2020 providing information on the above questions. Further updates will be published in due course.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Health (i) what plans are in place for the delivery of social care during the Covid-19 pandemic; (ii) what plans are in place to support independent and voluntary social care providers and families to respond to day centre closures; (iii) whether Public Health Agency guidance on staff pay applies to independent and voluntary social care providers and will constitute full rather than statutory sick pay; and (iv) what plans are in place for access to, and continuity of, payment for independent and voluntary social care providers in the event of disruption to financial services.

(AQW 3591/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) The HSC Board, HSC Trusts and social care providers are working together to ensure continuity of care during the COVID-19 situation as per their contingency plans;
- (ii) HSC Trusts and Day Centre providers are working through their contingency plans to ensure that families and service users are kept informed of developments in the event that Day Centres need to close;
- (iii) PHA guidance for HSC staff does not apply to non-HSC staff. However, separate guidance for employers and businesses is available online from the PHA website; and
- (iv) The HSC has contingency plans in place related to ensuring the financial stability of independent providers.

Guidance for care homes and on domiciliary care was published on 17 March.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health what support his Department is providing, at a regional level, to independent sector care providers with regard to contingency planning and possible hospital admissions from care homes as a result of COVID-19; and whether Health and Social Care Trusts will be providing resources.

(AQW 3596/17-22)

Mr Swann: Guidance for Nursing and Residential Care Homes and Domiciliary Care Providers was published on the 17th March. This includes admission and discharge arrangements to and from nursing and residential care homes and

how Trusts should work in partnership with nursing and residential care home providers throughout the period of the COVID-19 delay phase and in the event of widespread transmission.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the number of domestic electrical fires in rural areas.

(AQW 3624/17-22)

Mr Swann: I refer the member to my response to AQW 3481/17-22.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health how many adults are awaiting assessment for autism, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 3675/17-22)

Mr Swann: The number of adults waiting for an autism assessment as at 31 December 2019, and broken down by Health and Social Care Trust is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The number of adults waiting for an autism assessment by Health & Social Care Trust at 31 December 2019.

HSC Trust	Number of adults awaiting an autism assessment
Belfast	371
Northern	140
South Eastern	162
Southern	155
Western	132
Northern Ireland	960

Sources: Health and Social Care Board Return.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health (i) to detail (a) the number; and (b) location of sets of Personal Protection Equipment in each Health Service body; (ii) how long supplies are expected to last; (iii) what the policy is for allocation of Personal Protection Equipment across the Health Service; and (iv) how demand from Health Service staff for the use of Personal Protection Equipment is being managed.

(AQW 3698/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Robin Swann, MLA

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health (i) what is the lead-in time for delivery of the 40 ventilators on order; (ii) whether the 139 ventilators available at present include those in operating theatres; and (iii) whether an addition of 40 ventilators will be sufficient.

(AQW 3748/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department published the 'Health and Social Care (NI) Summary Covid-19 Plan for the Period Mid-March to Mid-April 2020' on the 19 March 2020 providing information on the above questions. Further updates will be published in due course.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health to publish the helpline numbers for people who need help to apply for benefits during the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 3777/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Robin Swann, MLA

Department for Infrastructure

Mr Clarke asked the Minister for Infrastructure what are her Department's plans to upgrade the sewerage network to allow further housing development to continue.

(AQW 985/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): Northern Ireland Water has developed its Business Plan for the period 2021-27 which sets out its capital requirements for water and wastewater and it will be considered by the Utility Regulator. The prioritisation of works during any Price Control period is led by the Utility Regulator, in consultation with NI Water and its other statutory regulators. It is also subject to adequate funding being made available.

As Minister I have inherited a range of capital pressures. I recognise the importance of prioritising investment in both water and wastewater infrastructure, not least to build homes and grow our economy. I am therefore working with Executive colleagues to help address this issue.

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline (i) whether staff in MOT centres will be forced to work on Sundays, or will this be optional; and (ii) if they refuse to work on Sundays, whether this will affect their employment contract. (AQW 1148/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Currently the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) has suspended all MOT tests for three months, until 22 June 2020. This decision was taken to protect the Health and Safety of both our staff and customers as a result of COVID 19; staff will continue to receive full pay.

Sunday overtime was being offered to staff to prioritise testing for taxis and four year old car customers, for private customers and car dealerships, but has now ceased for the foreseeable future. Sunday overtime is offered on a strictly voluntary basis and refusal to work will not affect their employment contract.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline plans to resurface Tower Road, Conlig. (AQW 1355/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department has earmarked Tower Road for possible inclusion on the programme of resurfacing works for the 2020/21 financial year. The road will, however, continue to be subject to monitoring during periodic inspections and in the meantime, any actionable safety defects at this location will be noted for repair, in line with my Department's current maintenance guidelines.

I have been raising the need for additional investment with the Minister for Finance in order to better maintain our roads and deal with other growing pressures facing my Department. I welcome the additional allocation made to my Department for winter service, urgent street lights and roads repairs. This money will help to begin to address the backlog. The extent of resurfacing plans among other pressures in my Department, will be determined by the forthcoming budget.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 642/17-22, to provide a breakdown of the maintenance allocation for each section office within Eastern Division. (AQW 1859/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Eastern Division has three section offices which deliver a number of roads related services. However, funding allocations are made at Division level, rather than at section office level. Consequently, maintenance allocations are not available by individual section offices.

As advised in my response to AQW 642/17-22, allocations are made to the four DfI Roads Divisions on the basis of need, using a range of weighted indicators tailored to each maintenance activity. The Divisions also use these indicators when apportioning budget across District Council areas to ensure, as far as possible, an equitable distribution of funds.

Mr Stewart asked the Minister for Infrastructure what legislation is in place for private and public port authorities in Northern Ireland with regards to security. (AQW 2566/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Security regulation in the UK is a reserved matter and is covered by The Ship and Port Facility (Security) Regulations (2004). Under these regulations, port authorities are required to designate appropriate security officers and personnel in each port facility.

The Port Security Regulations (2009) were brought in to implement European Directive 2005/65/EC on enhancing port security at individual ports in the UK. In Northern Ireland, they were enacted in Belfast and Londonderry ports under The Port Security (Port of Belfast) Designation Order 2013 and The Port Security (Port of Londonderry) Designation Order 2014. The regulations designate The Belfast Port Security Authority and The Londonderry Port Security Authority as the port security authorities at these ports.

The Harbours, Docks, and Piers Clauses Act 1847 provides for the appointment of Harbour Dock and Police.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Infrastructure when her Department intends to fix the e-charge point in Cromac Street carpark, Belfast. (AQW 3164/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The e-car public charge point network in the North is owned, operated and maintained by the Electricity Supply Board (ESB). Most of the public charge points were installed in 2011/12 and ESB has advised that there are reliability issues with some of the charge points. ESB recently identified charge points for replacement and has advised that it hopes to roll out a replacement programme commencing mid-2020. You may wish to contact ESB at ecars@esb.ie for assistance. Now that you have brought the issue of this e-charge point to my attention, I have also asked my officials to contact ESB to enquire as to when it will be fixed.

I fully recognise the importance of having modern, reliable public electric vehicle charging infrastructure in providing confidence for users of ultra-low emission vehicles and in respect of the connectivity improvements this would bring. I have met with the DAERA Minister to begin working collaboratively to promote the use of electric vehicles and specifically to improve the charge point network across Northern Ireland.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she intends to reform the taxi forum, as previously set up by the former Minister for Infrastructure.

(AQW 3201/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am advised the Taxi Forum has met twice since its establishment. At its first meeting members agreed that, where detailed work was required, the forum would form sub-groups which would then report back to the main forum as appropriate. Consequently two sub-groups were set up to look at driver licensing / operator licensing & accessibility issues; and vehicle licensing & tourism / hospitality issues. To date there have been over 30 meetings with stakeholders to gather information / data in relation to these issues.

I intend to consider these issues, including the Taxi Forum, in greater detail and am engaging with representatives from the industry to help inform my decisions.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether consideration has been given to adapting the A24 Saintfield Road from Cairnshill to Carryduff to a 'left-turn only' configuration with roundabouts, similar to the recently constructed A2 route from Jordanstown through Greenisland.

(AQW 3223/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department receives many requests for improvement works which unfortunately is not matched by available budgets. I have inherited severe and challenging budget constraints but I am committed to working to find solutions that deliver better for our communities and improve lives across Northern Ireland.

Given the constraints on funding, proposals for improvement works are assessed and prioritised to enable those schemes providing greatest benefit and value for money to go forward to compete for inclusion in a works programme. Adapting a 'left-turn only' configuration on the Saintfield Road between Cairnshill and Carryduff would require reconfiguration of many junctions and prohibition of turning movements which, if not complied with, would require enforcement by the PSNI. As such, there are currently no plans at this time to introduce a 'left turn only' arrangement.

An alternative arrangement to assist traffic movements on busy roads such as the Saintfield Road is the provision of right turn lanes and you will be aware that my Department has recently provided a road improvement scheme on the A24 Saintfield Road at Myrtledene. This included separate right turn lanes into Myrtledene Road and Glenhugh Park, and this will benefit road users in this area.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) for an update on the upgrade to the Sydenham Bypass to remove the traffic lights at Dee Street; and (ii) whether this will be connected to the upgrade of the York Street Interchange.

(AQW 3225/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The 2015 Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan proposed the widening of the A2 Sydenham Bypass. The preferred route was published in 2010, which included removal of 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. This scheme is not connected to, or dependent on, the York Street Interchange proposals.

I am committed to developing new integrated plans which deliver support for public transport, encourages 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.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline her plans to allow people who are unable to drive due to medical conditions to avail of full concessionary public transport fares.

(AQW 3255/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I recognise the concerns that have been raised about the concession available to people who are unable to drive due to medical conditions. However the Concessionary Fares Scheme, as with many areas across my Department, is already under significant pressure, reflecting the severe and challenging budget constraints under which my Department has operated over recent years. Therefore, in advance of taking decisions, I will be assessing the full range of pressures, reflecting on my priorities, the commitments in "New Decade: New Approach" and the budget made available for the period ahead.

I am continuing to engage with my Executive colleagues to ensure sustained levels of recurrent funding going forward to maintain high quality public transport including support for concessionary travel. This is essential to maintain the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of the region.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure what assessment has been made of the new thermal patching process of repairing road defects.

(AQW 3264/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In carrying out repairs to road surface defects, my Department's internal contractor, currently uses three recognised industry-standard repair methods:

- Cut out patching: this traditional repair method involves excavating an appropriate section of material surrounding the pothole and re-laying with a hot bituminous material in compacted layers. As well as repairing the surface layer it can also be used to repair underlying structural weaknesses.
- Velocity patching: my Department has been using this approach for approximately 15 years, to carry out repairs mainly on lesser trafficked rural roads. This innovative technique uses a cold bituminous material which is controlled and applied by the operative using a pressurised spray. In most cases these repairs can be completed more quickly, reducing the amount of excavated material and waste, and improving health & safety for operatives.
- Cold lay material: this involves use of a special cold lay bituminous repair material, for dealing with high priority pothole repairs. The quality of cold lay material has improved over the years and there are now versions that can be used to repair even highly trafficked roads in all weathers.

A number of vehicle mounted and portable thermal patchers were purchased around 15 years ago. At that stage the technology was not as advanced as it is now and they were removed from service due to operational difficulties with the machines and health and safety concerns.

My Department is always on the lookout for new methods that will enhance efficiency while improving the safety of staff and the public. I have asked my officials to look again at the concept, to see if it is something that would enhance our current capabilities.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she would consider introducing 20mph speed limits and other traffic calming measures outside (i) Foley Primary School, Ballymacnab Road, Armagh; and (ii) St. John's Primary School, Eglish Road, Craigavon.

(AQW 3317/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister responsible for promoting and improving road safety, I want to work actively with partners to reduce death and serious injuries on our roads. I believe that reducing the maximum speed traffic can travel at on some of our roads, particularly those near schools, can help.

My Department is committed to introducing measures that reduce the speed of traffic on our roads. We are currently trialling an arrangement of signs that is intended to allow the introduction of more part-time 20mph speed limits at schools. I am expecting receipt of the findings of the trial in the next month or so and I fully intend to see what potential there is to build on the work already undertaken.

The locations of both schools' have been previously assessed and traffic calming measures have been introduced. I have asked my officials to keep both locations under review for any change in circumstances.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how the additional £3m allocated for (i) winter gritting services; (ii) street lighting repairs; and (iii) roads maintenance has been allocated to each Roads Division.

(AQW 3319/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have allocated the £3m of additional funding to essential departmental services as follows: £1.2m for urgent Street Lighting repairs, £1.0m for Winter Gritting services and £0.8m for routine maintenance of the road network, including pothole repairs.

Allocations are made to the four DfI Roads Divisions on the basis of need, using a range of weighted indicators tailored to each activity.

The table below details the allocation to each Roads Division; East, North, South and West:

Function / Activity	East £k	North £k	South £k	West £k	Total £m
Routine maintenance activities	110	160	235	295	0.800
Winter Service	160	200	195	220	0.775
Street Lighting Operations / Outages	300	375	225	300	1.200
Total	570	735	655	815	2.775

Following the allocation of £2.775m to Roads Divisions, the remaining balance of £0.225m has been allocated internally to fund Gritter vehicle fuel, fleet maintenance and payroll costs for Gritter lorry drivers delivering the Winter Service programme across Northern Ireland.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) how many staff car parking spaces her Department and its agencies have in Belfast city centre; and (ii) whether she is taking any action to reduce this number.

(AQW 3337/17-22)

Ms Mallon:

- (i) My Department has use of 296 car parking spaces in the city centre, 199 of these are in the headquarters building at Clarence Court and 97 are at the Driver Vehicle Agency (DVA) premises at Corporation Street. The DVA office will be vacated prior to construction work on the planned York Street Exchange and the 97 car parking spaces at these premises will no longer be in use.
- (ii) Measures to reduce the need for staff car parking spaces and to support my commitments to tackle the impact of climate change have already been implemented in Clarence Court. My staff regularly hold teleconference meetings to reduce the need for travel by car to meetings and to the headquarters office. To encourage more active travel improved facilities for walkers and cyclists have been installed that includes storage racks for 80 bikes and shower and changing amenities. The department has a number of bicycles that staff can borrow to attend meetings during the day or simply to exercise. These include folding bikes which can be taken on public transport and help encourage multi modal commuting. In addition the department work with Sustrans to provide cycle training for staff.

There are 5 electric vehicle charging points available to facilitate the use of plug-in ultra-low emission vehicles and there is a car share scheme in operation to reduce the number of cars travelling into the city centre.

I am focussed on addressing the climate emergency and I am committed to developing greener infrastructure and more sustainable modes of transport. Under Outcome 2 of the current NICS Outcomes Delivery Plan (We live and work sustainably - protecting the environment) my Department is already progressing a range of initiatives to reduce carbon emissions. Proposed new actions in the draft PfG 2020/21 would further strengthen the Department's contribution to decarbonising transport by facilitating and promoting the use of low and ultra-low emission vehicles.

While I am relatively new in post, I have already asked officials to look at what options exist to increase infrastructure to support alternative modes of greener, cleaner transport such as cycling. I am committed to making changes within my department and externally. I'll be looking closely at the use of car parking spaces as part of my commitment to achieving a modal shift.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline what her Department has planned to recognise the centenary of Northern Ireland.

(AQW 3414/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department does not have any plans in place to recognise the centenary of Northern Ireland.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister for Infrastructure how much her Department has spent on producing materials in Irish, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 3432/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department supports the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML) commitments which protect and promote regional and minority languages including Irish.

Officials promote the Irish Language by helping customers conduct their business in Irish, and also offer an Irish translation of Departmental documents on request.

My Department's Irish Language Policy provides officials with guidance on how to translate documents and handle verbal and written communications in Irish.

The following table represents expenditure on producing materials in Irish since the establishment of my Department in May 2016:

	2016	2017	2018	2019
Translations	£628.74	£135.00	£479.73	£3,225.45

Total Figures for 2020 are not as yet available.

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail how the £3m capital budget for cycling and walking lanes was spent.

(AQW 3434/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As noted in response to your question AQW 1480/17-22, £3.4 million was spent on capital infrastructure schemes for walking and cycling in 2018/19.

This money was spent as follows:

- £430,000 on 0.5km of dedicated cycle provision on Middlepath Street, Belfast;
- £1.5 million on 12km of shared walking and cycling tracks;

- £460,000 on 2km of new or improved footway;
- £140,000 on seven new or upgraded controlled pedestrian and/or cycle crossings;
- £205,000 to Lisburn City and Castlereagh Council for the Dundonald Ice Bowl Walking and Cycling Bridge;
- £500,000 on 3km of improvements to the Comber Greenway; and
- £180,000 on other measures such as cycle parking and wayfinding.

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail how much (i) public money; and (ii) private funding, has been spent on bike-sharing schemes.

(AQW 3435/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Under the Active Travel Demonstration Projects competition in 2014, my Department provided capital funding of £1.14 million to Belfast City Council to deliver a public bike share scheme in Belfast. The Council launched the scheme in April 2015 and has since extended it with additional bike docking stations and additional bikes. Funding of the extensions to the scheme is a matter for Belfast City Council.

My Department does not maintain a register of bike-sharing schemes and has no detail of any other bike-sharing schemes in Northern Ireland.

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline what active travel infrastructure projects have had detailed designs carried out.

(AQW 3436/17-22)

Ms Mallon: All active travel infrastructure projects built by my Department go through a detailed design stage following consultation on the outline design and a decision to proceed to construction. Currently there are 18 projects at the detailed design stage:

- | | |
|---|---|
| ■ A55/Glen Road, Belfast, upgraded toucan crossing | ■ Edward Street/Ardglass Road, Downpatrick, footway |
| ■ Blaris, Lisburn, cycle path | ■ Todd's Hill, Saintfield, footway |
| ■ Black's Road improvements, Belfast, foot and cycle bridge | ■ Ballymaglave Road, Spa, footway |
| ■ Old Mountfield Road, Omagh, footway and puffin crossing | ■ Mayobridge, Newry, footway |
| ■ Glencam Road, Omagh, shared footway/cycle track | ■ The Folly, Antrim, footway |
| ■ Dublin Road, Omagh, shared footway/cycle track | ■ Foreglen Road, Stage 1a, Dungiven, shared footway/cycle track |
| ■ Quarry Lane, Dungannon, shared footway/cycle track and toucan | ■ Foreglen Road, Stage 2a, Dungiven, shared footway/cycle track |
| ■ Moneymore Road, Loup, footway | ■ Grove Road, Ballymena, shared footway/cycle track |
| ■ Temple Road, Strathfoyle, Derry, shared footway/cycle track | ■ Drumahiskey Road, Balnamore, Ballymoney, footway |

In addition, under Stage 3 of the Small Grants for Greenways programme, my Department made grant funding available to Councils to deliver a detailed design for the following eleven greenway proposals (the Ballymoney to Ballycastle proposal did not proceed):

Council	Greenway Route
Ards and North Down	Comber to Newtownards
Mid and East Antrim	Monkstown to Greenisland
Lisburn and Castlereagh	Carryduff to Cairnshill Park and Ride
Newry, Mourne and Down	Downpatrick to Newcastle
	Downpatrick to Comber
Causeway Coast and Glens	Ballymoney to Ballycastle
Antrim and Newtownabbey	Doagh to Larne
Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	Craigavon to Aghalee
	Portadown to Caledon
	Portadown to Moy
	Banbridge to Scarva

Mr Lynch asked the Minister for Infrastructure when she will make a decision regarding MOT exemptions for Vehicles of Historical Interest.

(AQW 3437/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am aware that this exemption was introduced in Great Britain in 2018 which has led to a difference as to how Vehicles of Historic Interest (VHIs) are treated in GB and NI.

I am also aware that following requests to align Northern Ireland legislation with that in GB, from both elected representatives and members of the public my Department ran a public consultation exercise in 2019 seeking views as to whether this exemption should be introduced here. Officials have prepared an analysis of responses for my consideration. As soon as I have fully considered all the details I will decide on the way forward.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of the need for speed-reducing measures on Derry Road, Strabane.

(AQW 3438/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There are a number of measures in place to alert motorists in relation to compliance with the 30mph speed limit on the Derry Road in Strabane. The central hatching and the traffic islands provide good visual impact to calm traffic as the motorist enters the 30mph zone on the northern suburbs of the town.

In addition to the 30mph speed limit signs on back boards, and "Please drive carefully" signs that are clearly visible on the northern approach, a central hatched area has been provided, continuing for approximately 1km towards the town centre. There are also four traffic islands located along this stretch of the Derry Road to further highlight the suburban character of the road, and the need to reduce speed. I have asked my officials to carry out a new speed survey on this section of the road network to ascertain if there have been any changes to driver behaviour over recent years.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline her Department's policy in relation to granting access off main protected routes, such as the A5.

(AQW 3439/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My policy in relation to the granting of accesses off main protected routes is contained in the Strategic Planning Policy Statement for Northern Ireland (the SPPS). Regional policy is to restrict the number of new accesses and control the level of use of existing accesses onto such roads (subject to some exceptions such as in the case of motorways and high standard dual carriageways, where an exception may be considered for motorway service areas, where there is demonstrable need).

This is a long established policy approach designed to maximise the efficient movement of goods and people over long distances in the North and also maintain road safety. Where a planning application proposes an access onto a Protected Route, the relevant planning authority will consider this policy in consultation with my Department, before taking a decision.

The A5 forms part of the Western Key Transport Corridor which links Derry and the north west to the border just south of Aughnacloy and due to its significance it has protected route status as reflected in regional planning policy.

It is one of five Key Transport Corridors in Northern Ireland, which are the top tier long distance routes connecting the cities and main towns to the major regional gateways. These routes contribute significantly to economic prosperity and it is important they are protected for this function.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the extent of the active travel provision planned for the Belfast Transport Hub.

(AQW 3446/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The current designs for the new station incorporate cycling links to the Belfast cycle network and the project has partnered with Belfast Bikes for the provision of two cycle stations at the new hub. The Belfast Transport Hub will also provide 200 cycle parking stands and Translink is working with Sustrans to provide a fully operational Active Travel Centre.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure what planning permissions for hotel developments have been issued by Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council, in the last five years.[R]

(AQW 3465/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I would advise the member to seek this information from Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council, as the responsible planning authority.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in relation to the contracts awarded for the A6 Randalstown to Castledawson scheme, to detail (i) the contractors names; (ii) the dates awarded; (iii) the contract amounts; (iv) the commencement dates; and (v) the completion dates.

(AQW 3476/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The contracts for the development and construction of the A6 Randalstown to Castledawson Dualling scheme were awarded to Graham Farrans Joint Venture on 1 May 2015. Advance works began in early October 2016, with full construction of the scheme commencing on 17 June 2017. Construction is expected to be completed in Spring 2021.

The costs are as follows: Professional Services contract - £3.0 million; Ground Investigation contract - £3.1 million; Construction contract - currently estimated at £145 million.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline (i) the objectives; and (ii) results of the Habitat Assessment used by her Department to inform the A6 Randalstown to Castledawson scheme.

(AQW 3477/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The A6 Randalstown to Castledawson Dualling scheme is an Executive Flagship roads infrastructure scheme currently under construction. A section of the route of the new road passes close to an environmentally designated Special Protection Area and a Habitats Regulations Assessment was carried out for the scheme.

In relation to the objectives and results of this assessment, extensive documentation associated is publically available on the Department's website at:

<https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/articles/a6-randalstown-castledawson-dualling-habitats-regulations-assessment-hra>

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to list all proposed new bus shelters in Bangor.

(AQW 3494/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Translink is considering requests for eight additional bus shelters in the Bangor area. The need and viability for them is currently being assessed by Translink's operational and installation teams. A decision on the installation of any new bus shelters will depend on the outcome of this assessment and the approval of the Business Case and funding for them.

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister for Infrastructure what consideration she has given to increase the Roads Recovery Fund in the next financial year.

(AQW 3503/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In the last two years the Department has allocated some £25m to a Roads Recovery Fund to help direct funding to those roads in most need following years of underfunding and severe winters.

Recognising the importance of investment in the roads network to improve connectivity, help communities and tackle regional imbalance, I have been raising the need for additional investment with the Finance Minister, in advance of the 2020/21 budget. I will decide the future funding for road maintenance once I know my overall budget

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) why Translink processes two single-journey tickets instead of a return journey ticket for passengers holding a Smart Pass; and (ii) whether there is additional cost to her Department by processing two single-journey fares for Smart Pass holders instead of a return ticket.

(AQW 3514/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Since the inception of free travel under the Northern Ireland Concessionary Fares Scheme in 2002 it has been the case that SmartPass holders must obtain a single ticket for each leg of their journey by bus or train. This requirement is based on audit advice received by the Department and aims to minimise the risk of fraud or waste due to the return portion of a subsidised journey either being used by an ineligible passenger, or not used at all.

Return journey tickets offered by Translink are a discounted product to passengers as a commercial incentive. This is intended to encourage, and increase patronage. These discounted fares are not offered in conjunction with any other discounts – which includes the discounts offered to SmartPass holders.

Whilst reimbursing Translink on return tickets would reduce costs on the Concessionary Fares Budget, this must be balanced against the risk of fraud of offering this ticket type through the Scheme. To that end, my Department ensures that reimbursement to Translink for single journey concessionary travel is based on a "no better and no worse off" principle. That is Translink is no better or worse off for providing the journey undertaken through the Scheme.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 2879/17-22, whether (i) the legal requirement of enforcement notices 2015/E0050 and 2015/E0052 now require the removal of 94,000 tonnes of illegal waste; (ii) if so, by what date; and (iii) this is in line with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs' remediation strategy for this part of the Mobyuoy site.

(AQW 3555/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The notices contains amongst others, a requirement for waste to be removed from the land. The time period for this requirement is 22 September 2021. My Department is working closely with DAERA (NIEA) on the remediation strategy for the entire site which is still under development and any non-compliance with the notices will be considered in collaboration with other stakeholders and in the context of that strategy.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure when she expects to announce the outcome of the Concessionary Fares Scheme survey undertaken in 2019.[R]

(AQW 3557/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department worked with a range of voluntary and community sector organisations to develop and promote the Concessionary Fares Scheme survey which was undertaken to seek views on how the Scheme improves access to public transport and to demonstrate the contribution of the Scheme towards Outcome 8 of the Outcomes Delivery Plan – “we care for others and help those in need”.

Analysis of the survey is ongoing and I will publish a survey report when I receive it in coming months.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment on what the speed limit should be in rural areas.

(AQW 3560/17-22)

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 looking to reduce the maximum speed that traffic can travel at on some of our roads can help. Rural roads must be part of that consideration and our work to reduce speed and improve safety.

My Department is committed to introducing measures that reduce the speed of traffic on our roads. Speed limits can be assessed on a site-by-site basis in line with current policy and in response to incidents and public requests. We are also currently trialling an arrangement of signs on some rural roads that is intended to allow the introduction of more part-time 20mph limits at schools. We are also trialling the effectiveness of ‘signed only’ 20mph limits. These would be more economical and could be used more widely in appropriate environments, such as residential areas with schools, than would be possible with the current approach of providing 20mph limits along with traffic calming features. I am expecting receipt of the findings of the trials in the next month or so, and I fully intend to see what potential there is to build on the work already undertaken in terms of these 20mph limits and other limits.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) all proposed new bus shelters; and (ii) any proposed improvements on existing shelters, in the South Antrim constituency.

(AQW 3593/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Translink is considering requests for eleven additional bus shelters in the South Antrim constituency. The need and viability for them is currently being assessed by Translink’s operational and installation teams. A decision on the installation of any new bus shelters will depend on the outcome of this assessment and the approval of the Business Case and funding for them. Translink are also exploring possible upgrades & improvements to existing bus shelters but this is at an early stage and will be also subject to approvals and funding.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 2882/17-22, whether her Department took account of the likely effects on the environment, including the River Faughan and Tributaries Special Area of Conservation, as a result of the remedies required to comply with the seven enforcement notices served in respect of the Mobuoy illegal dump.

(AQW 3628/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The 7 enforcement notices issued in respect of the Mobuoy Road site were issued by the Department of the Environment Northern Ireland. The notices were issued in accordance with the applicable provisions of the relevant Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) in force at the time of each notice.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 2882/17-22, (i) whether compliance with her Department’s seven enforcement notices served at Mobuoy requires the removal of illegal waste; (ii) for an estimate of the volumes of illegal waste to be removed; and (iii) where this illegal waste will be re-disposed.

(AQW 3629/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Of the 7 seven enforcement notices referred to in AQW 2882/17-22, 4 require the removal of waste material. The individual requirements are detailed in each notice. Due to sensitivities surrounding the ongoing prosecution of companies and individuals in relation to offences under the Waste and Contaminated Land (NI) Order I am unable to respond to the second part of your question.

Identification of a suitable facility for the re-disposal of waste is a matter for the person responsible for compliance with the enforcement notice.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will consider amending the online portal to allow customers to report (i) pavement parking that blocks access for pedestrians; and (ii) vehicles blocking cycle lanes.

(AQW 3631/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I fully appreciate the difficulties presented by cars parked inconsiderately on footways and cycleways and the impact this can have on many people.

I can advise that My Department's on-line reporting platform already allows for the reporting of problems associated with obstruction of the public road, footway and cycleway however it should be noted that in the majority of cases, enforcement will lie with the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI).

My officials will continue to liaise with the PSNI which has an extremely important role to play in resolving the issues you raise.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure what are the enforcement mechanisms to prevent vehicles from parking in cycle lanes.

(AQW 3632/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is committed to increasing the level of sustainable travel in Northern Ireland and cycling infrastructure has an important role to play in facilitating this. I want to encourage people to cycle and support people to make more sustainable choices. Cars parked inconsiderately on cycle lanes present real challenges to this.

There are two different types of on carriageway cycle lane. Mandatory cycle lanes are bounded by a solid white line, prohibiting all other vehicles from entering them. A Penalty Charge Notice can be issued if a vehicle is found parked in a mandatory cycle lane. Advisory cycle lanes are bounded by a broken white line, signifying that other vehicles should not enter unless it is safe to do so. Advisory cycle lanes are provided without the need for an Order, so there is no legal basis for carrying out enforcement. Drivers are, however, asked not to park in advisory cycle lanes in the Highway Code for Northern Ireland and a Penalty Charge Notice can be issued if there are parking restrictions, such as clearways, or waiting restrictions, on the same stretch of road. My Department's Road Safety and Sustainable Travel social media channels also posts reminders of the relevant rules to road users, on a regular basis.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure when are vehicles allowed to park on designated cycle lanes.

(AQW 3633/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is committed to increasing the level of sustainable travel in Northern Ireland and cycling infrastructure has an important role to play in facilitating this. I want to encourage people to cycle and support people to make more sustainable choices. Cars parked inconsiderately on cycle lanes present real challenges to this.

There are two different types of on carriageway cycle lane. Mandatory cycle lanes are bounded by a solid white line and all other vehicles are prohibited from entering or parking in them. Advisory cycle lanes are bounded by a broken white line and signify that other vehicles should not enter unless it is safe to do so. Advisory cycle lanes are provided without the need for an Order, so there is no legal basis to prevent parking. Drivers are, however, asked not to park in advisory cycle lanes in the Highway Code for Northern Ireland. Vehicles are prohibited from parking in advisory cycle lanes if there are parking restrictions, such as clearways, or waiting restrictions, on the same stretch of road. My Department's road safety and sustainable travel social media channels posts reminders of the relevant Highway Code rules to road users on a regular basis.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure when funding will be made available to extend the Waterside Greenway out to the villages of Strathfoyle and Maydown in Londonderry.

(AQW 3649/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As outlined in response to previous Assembly Questions about Derry City and Strabane District Council's proposed Strathfoyle Greenway project (AQW 1170/17-22, AQW 3028/17-22, AQW 3206/17-22 and AQW 3513/17-22), I am keen to work with other Ministers and with all stakeholders to deliver on projects that have the potential to improve the lives of people and connect communities. However, before I take decisions in relation to funding, I will need to consider carefully the budget position after the 2020/21 budget is allocated.

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 2213/17-22, (i) why in her response she did not refer to the UK Government and Ofgem joint statement of 2017 entitled Upgrading our Energy System 2017, in which it is stated that defining electricity storage as a subset of generation in the Electricity Act 1989 will confirm the Government's current position that storage facilities should be treated as a form of electricity generating station for planning purposes; (ii) whether she will review the current planning policies in light of this information.

(AQW 3684/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I understand that the Department for the Economy and the Utility Regulator will be examining the need to consider energy storage as generating facilities in discussions around implementation of the Clean Energy Package. My officials will be engaging with them to consider what accompanying planning changes may be necessary.

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Infrastructure why her Department can send a text message as a reminder to attend an MOT test, but not to inform of a postponement.

(AQW 3685/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have identified 3 categories of vehicles that should be tested as a priority. These are: four year old cars due a first MOT, taxis and car dealership vehicles. The text messages the DVA have been issuing have focused on the owners of four year old cars, as these vehicles cannot avail of a Temporary Exemption Certificate. These text messages have been issued where a mobile phone number is available.

In relation to all other categories of vehicle, clear guidance already exists, that those vehicles do not need to present for a test as a Temporary Exemption Certificate will be issued, and has been widely publicised through NI Direct and social media channels.

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 2214/17-22, given the growth of battery storage of electricity applications and the materials used in the equipment, whether she will review the provisions of the Planning (Hazardous Substance) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015, to ensure that Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service would be consulted with every application.

(AQW 3686/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Where a battery storage facility or any development is subject to an application for hazardous substance consent, the Planning (Hazardous Substance) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 currently require the council to consult with both the Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland (HSE(NI)) and the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service. A council is also required to notify HSE(NI) and any other consultees who made representations on the application as to their decision on the application.

Mr McCann asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans her Department has in rolling out residents' parking schemes for impacted communities.

(AQW 3720/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The first residents' parking scheme in Rugby Road / College Park Avenue, Belfast, came into operation during April 2018. A review of the scheme, which will reflect the needs, experiences and feedback of residents, is currently underway. I will want to make sure that any lessons learnt from this scheme inform wider policy on implementing residents' parking schemes to the benefit of communities.

At this stage, I am not in a position to advise on a timescale for completing the review, but I can confirm that any findings will be made publically available. I will consider any new schemes in light of these findings.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Infrastructure what steps she is taking to protect staff and passengers travelling on public transport from the transmission of COVID-19.

(AQW 3771/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am acutely aware of the concerns that many communities and people have regarding the COVID-19 virus and how best to tackle the outbreak. My Department is working with all Departments, agencies, operators and the Public Health Agency to respond to and plan for this evolving situation. No effort will be spared in our work to tackle the outbreak.

As of Monday 23 March Translink have been operating a reduced bus and train service. I approved this decision based on the clear advice from government to avoid all non-essential travel, contact and to practise social distancing. A social distancing policy is in place on all buses and trains with limits on the number of passengers per vehicle, and where flexibility in terms of additional service is required, especially for key workers at peak times, Translink will work to accommodate this.

My Department has received advice on the coronavirus epidemic from the Chief Medical Officer and this has been shared with Translink who have implemented a range of measures in the light of that advice. They include enhanced weekly cleaning of buses and enhanced twice-weekly cleaning of trains. This is in addition to the regular daily cleaning that is undertaken on the public transport fleet. Stations are being cleaned more frequently, and, when cleaners are on site, an enhanced cleaning of stations will take place. To ensure the safety of everyone involved, Translink is amending its procedures for staff on contact with customers, minimising contact between staff and the public for ticket checks. Posters are displayed across the public transport network to remind people of the latest advice to prevent the spread of infection. Hand sanitisers have been distributed to frontline bus and rail colleagues and stations are equipped with hand washing facilities in toilets. Translink is working closely with its supply chain to ensure continuity of supply of cleaning materials.

Department of Justice

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) the total value of illegal, criminal assets seized by law enforcement agencies in each of the last five years; and (ii) for a breakdown of the distribution of the Asset Recovery Community Scheme (ARCS).

(AQW 3148/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): The Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 (POCA) provides for the recovery of criminal assets by a number of means including confiscation, cash seizure and forfeiture, and civil and tax recovery. Along with supporting investigation powers these tools are designed to stop offenders from benefitting from the proceeds of their criminal conduct.

This answer provides information about criminal confiscation in Northern Ireland. Confiscation is the power that the Crown Court has to make orders depriving convicted offenders of their assets if they benefited from their criminal conduct.

Agencies with powers to conduct confiscation investigations in Northern Ireland include among others, the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), the National Crime Agency (NCA), HMRC, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, and the Department for Communities.

Figures for confiscation by PSNI only are listed below for each of the last five financial years and for 2019/2020 to date: This does not include figures for confiscation orders made in Northern Ireland by other agencies or UK-wide bodies, which are recorded separately.

PSNI Confiscation Orders

Years	Number of confiscation orders made ^	Total value of NI confiscation orders made ^ (ie value the orders were made in)
2014/15	24	£924,905.74
2015/16	17	£1,236,725.19
2016/17	13	£1,721,533.83
2017/18	20	£462,594
2018/19	15	£601,868
2019/20* To 18/3/20	12	£1,343,642

All figures provided from PSNI data source on 18 March 2020.

Once confiscation orders are made, the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS) is responsible for collecting payments and my Department is responsible for the administration and redistribution of these funds under the Assets Recovery Incentivisation Scheme (ARIS). The Home Office is responsible for the administration of proceeds from Northern Ireland cash seizures and civil recovery receipts.

The payment of confiscation orders is not always immediate once an order has been made. Orders can be challenged, revisited and varied and therefore it is not possible to link the values of confiscation orders made to the amounts paid. My Department keeps records of all payments of confiscation orders and these are listed below for the last five years:

Confiscations order payments through the courts – cases from all agencies

Years	Total value of NI confiscation orders paid
2014/15	£1,619,000
2015/16	£1,672,000
2016/17	£1,894,000
2017/18	£1,437,000
2018/19	£1,437,000
2019/20* To 18/3/20	£2,163,000

Half of all confiscation order receipts are distributed on an agreed-percentage basis across the agencies responsible for the confiscation cases and to the Public Prosecution Service and the NICTS. This ARIS funding is used by the agencies (for example, PSNI, HMRC, NIEA, PPS, NICTS) to support work to further the recovery of criminal assets and proceeds of crime. Further detail on this can be found in the Organised Crime Task Force (OCTF) Annual Report and Threat Assessments - <https://www.octf.gov.uk/Publications/OCTF-Annual-Report-And-Threat-Assessment>.

The other half of all confiscation order receipts provides the funding for the Assets Recovery Community Scheme (ARCS), which is also administered by my Department and which supports projects aimed at preventing crime or reducing the fear of crime. The breakdown of the allocation of ARCS funding is provided in the tables below for the years 2016/2017; 2017/2018 and 2018/2019 to 2020/2021:

ARCS allocations 2016/17

Project Lead	Project Title	Award
ESC (The Educational Shakespeare Company Ltd)	Second Chance for Change	£19,510.00
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon PCSP	Alcohol and Drugs Support Programme	£5,000.00
Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon PCSP	Scrap Heap Challenge	£4,000.00

Project Lead	Project Title	Award
SOS NI (SOS Bus)	SOS NI Response Teams	£7,200.00
Extern Group	Moving Forward Moving On – Justice Model	£27,298.00
The Welcome Organisation	Reduce the Use	£10,588.00
Interface Team, CSD	Public Policy and 'Peace' Walls in Belfast: Establishing Baseline Indicators	£28,640.00
Northern Health and Social Care Trust	Railway Street Drugs Centre	£60,000
Department of Health	The Early Intervention Transformation Programme	£300,000
Department of Finance	NICS Seed funding	£3,000
Department of Infrastructure	Street Lights	£38,000
Protection and Organised Crime Division	Human Trafficking Leaflets	£977
Men's Action Network	Breaking the Cycle	£18,080.00
North West Play Resource Centre (The Playhouse) in partnership with Derry Strabane PCSP	Street Talk Film	£11,750.00
Fermanagh PCSP	2 Fast 2 Soon	£40,000
Queen's University Belfast	New Psychoactive Substances (NPS) Research Project	£25,342.00
Largymore Royal Black District No. 9	Parade Safe	£600.00
Education Authority (North East Region)	Skills for staying safe	£4,880.00
MEAAP	Helping Older People be Scam Aware	£15,000.00
Dungannon Development Association Breakthru	Second Chance, Last Chance	£5,195.00
CRJI Newry/Armagh	"Finding My Way"	£22,690.00
Kingdom Youth Club	No Need 4 Speed	£1,500.00
British Red Cross (BRC)	BRC Prison Project	£24,247.30
Extern	Extern Drop In Centre- Community Hub	£50,000.00
Hydebank College and Women's Prison	Break the Cycle	£31,308.00
NIACRO	Disclosure Advice Project	£18,400.00
Autism NI	Think Safe to Stay Safe	£6,996.00
New Life Counselling and Probation Board NI	Engage - Therapeutic Support for Ex-offenders	£10,000.00
Artillery Youth Club	Artillery Youth Club	£2,465
Ashes to Gold	Ashes to Gold	£2,980.41
Milltown Regeneration	Milltown Regeneration	£2,500
Addiction NI	Mobile Unit for Drug Testing	£8,000
Monkstown Boxing Club	Monkstown Boxing Club	£3,000
Vineyard Compassion	The Link	£14,418
Belfast Unemployed Resource Centre	Belfast Unemployed Resource Centre	£1,185
SOS NI (SOS Bus)	SOS Bus	£47,998.16
PSNI	Starmount – Cultural Awareness & Understanding Diversity	£5,146.00
Total		£877,893.87

ARCS allocations 2017/18

Project Lead	Project Title	Award
Reducing Offending, NIPS	Thinking Cup project	£15,000.00
Reducing Offending, NIPS	Positive Outcomes for Short-Term Prisoners (POST)	£130,386.00
Reducing Offending, NIPS	Restorative Justice	£84,980.00
Reducing Offending, NIPS	Benefits Advice Service	£25,702.00
Reducing Offending, NIPS	Prison Smart Project	£12,000.00
Reducing Offending, NIPS	Blackout	£10,000.00
Department of Justice/NI Probation Board	Court mandated DV perpetrator programme	£89,000.00
Irish Football Association	Domestic Violence & Abuse Awareness	£20,000.00
PSNI	Re-run of PSNI eggshell campaign	£25,000.00
Community Safety Division	Domestic Violence & Abuse promotional campaign	£100,000.00
PSNI	Multi-agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) training	£13,000.00
Women's Aid	Production of criminal justice information map	£8,000.00
Woman's Aid	Provision of a regional specialised support agency database	£14,000.00
Woman's Aid	Regional emotional abuse campaign	£10,000.00
Woman's Aid	Provision of survivors guide	£5,000.00
Woman's Aid	Promotional materials for all specialised services	£5,000.00
Women's Aid	Older people conference	£5,000.00
Human Trafficking Team, Department of Justice	Modern Slavery awareness campaign	£6,550.65
PSNI	Cyberwolf – development of a software tool to identify victims of Modern Slavery	£21,776.00
Ulster Grand Prix	Motorbike Awareness Project (pilot)	£25,000.00
NI Environment Agency	Strategically Addressing Wildfire Arson (Project SAWA)	£11,500.00
The Advantage Foundation	LSN (Listen) - Restorative Justice project	£37,745.00
Every Day Harmony	Music Therapy in Hostel Accommodation	£6,300.00
NIACRO	Family Links Pathways project	£14,206.80
Lyric Theatre	Enhancing skills for Employability	£3,600.00
NI Raptor Study Group	PAW NI HAWK EYES - Raptor persecution prevention	£8,262.50
PSNI	Think Before you Buy - drugs awareness campaign targeting recreational drug use	£1,000.00
RADAR	RADAR	£130,000.00
Barnardo's NI	Families Matter	£5,000.00
Department of Justice	Strategic Communications	£1,469.54
Playing for the Future	The Craigavon Cup	£4,000.00
The Prince's Trust	The Prince's Trust 2017/18	£1,219.00
NIACRO	Working Well	£7,686.00
Reducing Offending, NIPS	Prisoner Rehabilitation Projects	£2,000.00

Project Lead	Project Title	Award
Lisburn Cathedral	Big Church Serve	£2,065.00
Total		£861,448.49

ARCS allocations 2018/19, 2019/20 and 2020/21

Project Lead	Project Title	Award
1st Rathfriland Boys Brigade	Safety in Numbers	£12,584
AGE North Down & Ards	PACE – Partner Anti-Crime Events	£12,600
Barnardo's	Families Matter - Beyond The Gate	£49,161
Belfast and South Eastern Trust Domestic Violence Partnership	Raising awareness of coercive control in relation to domestic violence	£2,500
Belfast City Centre Management (BCCM) Co. Ltd.	Retail Crimewatch Digitalisation	£10,500
Belfast Community Sports Development Network	Community Sports Support Hub	£85,117
Belfast Street Pastors	Home Safe and Sound	£3,672
British Red Cross	Promoting Reporting in the Refugee Community	£8,253
Children's Law Centre	Support for young people in Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre	£31,391
Community Intercultural Programme	Empowered to be Free	£58,000
Community Restorative Justice Ireland (CRJ)	South & East Belfast CRJ Engagement Project	£182,402
Corpus Christi Youth Centre	Ballymurphy Community Development	£26,700
Dialogue For Diversity	Support and Encouragement for Ex-Prisoners Through Mentoring	£15,033
Dreamscheme Northern Ireland	Diversionary and Inter-generational Youth Project (Breda and Belvoir Estates)	£4,910
East Belfast Community Development Agency	Street by Street Youth Work Engagement Project	£26,466
Edgarstown Residents Association	Rising of Edgarstown	£32,038
Feeny Community Association/ Feeny Youth Group	Youth Activity Programme	£7,400
Fermanagh and Omagh PCSP	Operation Online	£16,733
Hillcrest Trust	Law and Order Programme	£2,666
Leafair Community Association	Safer Communities	£20,000
Life Change Changes Lives	No Lost Cause programme	£144,920
Ligoniel Improvement Association	Ligoniel's Greater Assets	£9,842
Men's Action Network	Breaking the Cycle	£10,960
Mid & East Antrim Agewell Partnership (MEAAP)	MEAAP Friends Against Scams Campaign	£21,844
Department of Justice and PSNI	Modern Slavery Strategic Training and Data Co-ordinator	£108,000
Department of Justice	Strategic support for Gillen Review implementation	£248,950
Northern Ireland Alternatives	PACE Project (Policing and Community Engagement)	£120,346
North West Play Resource Centre	Listen To Use (Crime Prevention Films)	£66,770

Project Lead	Project Title	Award
Off the Streets (OTS) Community Youth Initiative	OTS City Centre Street Work Provision	£57,627
Organised Crime Task Force	OCTF financial investigators conference	£4,000
Parenting NI	RESPECT Parenting Project	£83,532
Pint-sized Productions	"Wasted" by Kat Woods, Theatre Production Tour	£3,000
Poleglass Community Association @ Sally Gardens	Safer Communities	£37,200
Prison Arts Foundation	Community Braille Service	£46,000
PSNI Crime Prevention Headquarters	Strategic Crime Prevention Initiatives	£25,000
PSNI Crime Prevention (Belfast)	Support Crime Prevention Role	£25,000
PSNI in partnership with Fermanagh & Omagh PCSP & District Council, Waterways Ireland, Forestry Service and Fermanagh Lakeland Tourism.	Beauty Spot & Public Jetty Crime Prevention Signage	£4,500
PSNI Neighbourhood Policing Team	Good Morning West Belfast Project	£19,266
PSNI Older Persons Acquisition Group	Cold Calling & DNA Marking Scheme	£16,672
PSNI, on behalf of Scamwise NI Partnership	Scamwise NI	£90,000
PSNI Rural Crime Partnership	Rural Crime Partnership Crime Prevention and Awareness Scheme	£5,000
PSNI Modern Slavery and Human trafficking Unit	Romanian Police Secondment project to support work on modern slavery and economic crime	£11,722
Redeeming Our Communities (ROC)	ROC Community Action Groups	£65,175
SOS NI	SOS Supporting a Safer City	£62,604
St. Peters Immaculata Youth Centre	Tackling Self-Harming Behaviours	£23,333
The Conservation Volunteers	Probation Men's Shed in Coleraine	£4,400
The Right Key (CIC)	The Changemakers and Probation Board NI Joint Project	£11,280
The Turnaround Project	Turnaround Grounds Maintenance Social Enterprise	£93,717
The Y Zone - Portadown Elim Church	Youth-hut Initiative	£11,780
Top Ten Women's Drama Group	Outside In	£20,828
Ulster GAA	Live To Play – Getting the Message	£10,000
Upper Springfield Resource Centre	Families Bereaved Through Car Crime (FBTCC) Youth Education Project	£17,200
Vineyard Compassion	Link to Work	£93,188
ZKJ Ltd	Fight2Unite	£7,500
Total		£2,189,282

Due to additional deposit of receipts late in 2019/2020 an additional 12 projects from the 2018/2019 – 2020/2021 merit list were funded for last four months of 2019/20

Project Lead	Project Title	Award £
The Advantage Foundation	The Impact Project	£10,860.00
Strabane Training Services	Youth Intervention Programme	£2,900.00

Project Lead	Project Title	Award £
Space – (Supporting people and communities everyday)	Space Walk	£20,000.00
The Cabbage Patchers	Tidy Up Tuesdays	£2,700.00
Craic Theatre and Arts Centre	Internet Safety Drama and Film Project	£3,900.00
Irish FA Foundation	Stay Onside – Reducing Offending Partnership	£10,000.00
Armoy Community Association	Armoy Learning Together	£3,200.00
Belfast Activity Centre (BAC)	Adventure Investigator - Protecting the Environment	£22,508.03
Colin Neighbourhood Partnership	Colin Community Adolescent Counselling Service (CCACS)	£3,120.00
RSPB NI in partnership with YouthAction NI and in consultation with the Youth Justice Agency	Positive Action for Communities and Environment (PACE)	£6,600.00
Active Communities Network	Youth Intervention Project	£9,900.00
Saints Youth Centre	Diversionsary & Education	£12,180.00
Total		£107,868.03

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of children and young people in the Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre, Bangor, in each of the last ten years.

(AQW 3205/17-22)

Mrs Long: The number of children and young people admitted to Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre in each of the past ten years is as follows:-

Financial Year	Total Young People
2009/10	172
2010/11	214
2011/12	207
2012/13	211
2013/14	196
2014/15	199
2015/16	163
2016/17	139
2017/18	167
2018/19	160

The average daily population in Woodlands in each of the same years was:-

Financial Year	Average Daily Population
2009/10	26
2010/11	26
2011/12	28
2012/13	29
2013/14	27
2014/15	34
2015/16	25
2016/17	22
2017/18	21

Financial Year	Average Daily Population
2018/19	18

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice to detail the (i) male; (ii) female; and (iii) juvenile prison population for each of the last five years.

(AQW 3216/17-22)

Mrs Long: The average daily adult prison population, split by gender and the average daily population of children in custody for each of the last five financial years is outlined below.

	Financial Year				
	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Adult Male	1,734	1,539	1,418	1,382	1,384
Adult Female	65	53	54	57	65
Children	34	25	22	21	18

Source: PRISM and Youth Justice Agency's data management information system

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister of Justice to outline (i) any plans that her Department has for the Old Townhall Building; (ii) the current extent of progress with those plans; and (iii) the expected timeframe for completion.

(AQW 3226/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service is developing an Estates Strategy to identify the optimal configuration of the NICTS Estate to meet future users' needs.

No decision has been taken on the long-term future of any courthouses, including Old Town Hall.

Old Town Hall, which is currently vacant, has been placed on the 'Heritage at Risk' register maintained by the Historic Environment Division (HED). A Conservation Management Plan for Old Town Hall is being developed.

A recent building condition survey for Old Town Hall has highlighted the need to address internal and external building fabric issues. It is not possible to provide a timeframe for undertaking this work until the findings of the Conservation Management Plan have been fully considered.

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister of Justice to confirm the current usage of the Old Townhall Building, Victoria Street, Belfast.

(AQW 3227/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service is developing an Estates Strategy to identify the optimal configuration of the NICTS Estate to meet future users' needs.

No decision has been taken on the long-term future of any courthouses, including Old Town Hall.

Old Town Hall, which is currently vacant, has been placed on the 'Heritage at Risk' register maintained by the Historic Environment Division (HED). A Conservation Management Plan for Old Town Hall is being developed.

A recent building condition survey for Old Town Hall has highlighted the need to address internal and external building fabric issues. It is not possible to provide a timeframe for undertaking this work until the findings of the Conservation Management Plan have been fully considered.

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister of Justice whether there are any issues with the condition of the Old Townhall Building.

(AQW 3228/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service is developing an Estates Strategy to identify the optimal configuration of the NICTS Estate to meet future users' needs.

No decision has been taken on the long-term future of any courthouses, including Old Town Hall.

Old Town Hall, which is currently vacant, has been placed on the 'Heritage at Risk' register maintained by the Historic Environment Division (HED). A Conservation Management Plan for Old Town Hall is being developed.

A recent building condition survey for Old Town Hall has highlighted the need to address internal and external building fabric issues. It is not possible to provide a timeframe for undertaking this work until the findings of the Conservation Management Plan have been fully considered.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice to detail the current number of (i) prison officers; and, (ii) prisoners, across all prison service establishments.

(AQW 3322/17-22)

Mrs Long: The most recent official statistics published by the Department of Finance indicate the number of permanent staff in prison grades employed by the Northern Ireland Prison Service at 01 October 2019 was 1,268. The most recent management information available to the Northern Ireland Prison Service indicate the number of prisoners across all establishments at 15 March 2019 was 1,617.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 3068 17-22, what actions can be taken when the property is in joint ownership with someone not subject to an Unexplained Wealth Order.

(AQW 3342/17-22)

Mrs Long: An Unexplained Wealth Order (UWO) requires a respondent who is suspected of involvement in or association with serious criminality, or a Politically Exposed Person, to explain the origin of any property held by them that appears to be disproportionate to their known income.

If a person is issued with a UWO, they, the respondent, must provide a statement:

- setting out the nature and extent of their interest in the property or assets that is the subject of the order;
- explaining how they obtained the property (including, in particular, how any costs incurred in obtaining it were met);
- where the property is held by the trustees of a settlement, setting out such details of the settlement as may be specified in the order; and
- setting out such other information in connection with the property as may be so specified.

UWOs are made by the High Court on application by an enforcement agency. There are a number of requirements set out in the legislation under Section 362B of the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002, as inserted by Section 1 of the Criminal Finances Act 2017, including that the Court must be satisfied that there is reasonable cause to believe that the respondent holds the property. It does not matter whether or not there are other persons who hold the property.

Unexplained wealth orders are an early-stage investigation tool intended to precede a potential civil recovery application. Civil recovery investigations and recovery proceedings target property which is, or includes, recoverable property. This acknowledges the reality that a property may be only part recoverable. The part or interest in the property which is not recoverable is called "associated property" and that interest is protected under a variety of provisions within POCA.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 3068 17-22, to detail what items or possessions would not meet the description of property.

(AQW 3343/17-22)

Mrs Long: In my response to AQW 3068 17-22, I provided the legal definition of property for the purposes of the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 (POCA). The definition is widely encompassing and includes all property, wherever situated, and includes money, all forms of property, real or personal, heritable or moveable, things in action and other intangible property. It also includes any interest held in the property. An interest is defined as any legal estate or equitable interest or power. For the purposes of unexplained wealth orders, in cases where a person is to be taken to hold property, this includes where a person has effective control over the property, where they are a trustee of a settlement or actual or potential beneficiary in relation to such a settlement. The definition, therefore, addresses circumstances where property is held in trust or owned in a complex corporate structure arrangement.

The definition of property under POCA is augmented under the Criminal Finances Act (CFA) 2017 to enable the seizure and recovery of specific assets of personal or moveable property ("listed assets"). A listed asset means an item of property that falls within one of the following descriptions of property:

- (a) precious metals (gold, silver or platinum (whether in an unmanufactured or a manufactured state));
- (b) precious stones;
- (c) watches;
- (d) artistic works (a piece of work falling within section 4(1)(a) of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988);
- (e) face-value vouchers (a voucher in physical form that represents a right to receive goods or services to the value of an amount stated on it); and
- (f) postage stamps.

The CFA also extends the definition of cash available for seizure under POCA to allow for the forfeiture of cash in bank and building society accounts and the forfeiture of betting slips, gaming vouchers and fixed value casino tokens. While Northern Ireland does not have any legal casinos, this will not prevent the seizure of such an item.

Enforcement authorities can recover property which they can prove on a balance of probabilities has been acquired through unlawful conduct or, where applicable, is to be used in criminal conduct. Property is available for consideration, unless already subject to certain kinds of forfeiture and deprivation orders.

The definition therefore is broad. However it is not possible to provide a comprehensive list of examples of items or possessions that fall outside this definition.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 3068 17-22, to clarify (i) the national; (ii) international; and (iii) Republic of Ireland, reach of pursuant wealth orders when being enforced.
(AQW 3344/17-22)

Mrs Long: Unexplained wealth order (UWO) provisions are inserted in the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 (POCA) by Sections 1 to 3 of the Criminal Finances Act 2017 ("CFA"). A UWO is an investigative tool which can be used by specified enforcement agencies in connection with civil recovery investigations; a UWO is not a standalone power to recover assets. A UWO, when served, requires the respondent to provide information on certain matters, including the extent of their interest in specified property and the means by which it was obtained.

UWOs have international reach; a respondent does not need to be a UK resident, and property can be located outside the UK. There is no distinction to be made under POCA between the Republic of Ireland and other international jurisdictions.

External assistance for enforcement of UWOs abroad can be sought provided that:

- the High Court makes a UWO in respect of any property, in other words that all the legal requirements for making an order are met;
- there is a risk of any recovery order that might subsequently be obtained being frustrated; and
- the enforcement authority believes that the property is in a country outside the UK.

If a UK enforcement authority believes that property which is the subject of a UWO is in a country outside the UK, that authority can make a request to the Secretary of State (the Home Secretary) for assistance in relation to property with a view to the request being forwarded to the government of the receiving country. The request is to seek to secure that any person is prohibited from dealing with the property and to seek assistance in connection with the management of the property, including with securing its detention, custody or preservation.

In a similar fashion, if an interim freezing order is in place in relation to property and a receiver has been appointed, the receiver may send a request for assistance in relation to the property to the Secretary of State with a view to it being forwarded. The Secretary of State must send the request for assistance to the government of the receiving country, again, to seek assistance in connection with the management of the property, including with securing its detention, custody or preservation.

It is not an offence to fail to comply with an UWO. However, if a respondent fails to comply with the requirements imposed within the time stipulated by the court, the property which is the subject of the UWO is presumed to be recoverable property for the purposes of any future civil recovery proceedings but only in so far as it relates to the respondent's interest in the property.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Justice what measures are being taken by the Northern Ireland Prison Service to protect staff and prisoners against coronavirus.
(AQW 3377/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Northern Ireland Prison Service take the threat presented by COVID19 extremely seriously and have undertaken significant work in preparation for the challenges an outbreak would bring in a custodial environment.

Preparations have included the purchase of additional protective clothing for staff and the preparation of areas within each prison where prisoners suspected and or diagnosed with the virus can be accommodated. Both the Prison Service and our partners in the South Eastern Trust have been following guidance issued by the Public Health Agency which has also been provided to staff and prisoners.

The Director General has put in place specific operational planning and implementation structures and established a dedicated team to oversee planning arrangements and to support Governors in dealing with the challenges they will inevitably face. The Prison Service recognise the importance of good communication and is committed to working with staff, prisoners, families and stakeholders as operational decisions are taken.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice whether her Department, under section 41 (3) of the Modern Slavery Act 2015, have requested over the last five years any reports from the UK Anti-Slavery Commissioner on modern slavery in Northern Ireland; and, if not, whether her Department proposes to ask the Anti-Slavery Commissioner to produce any such reports in this Assembly mandate.
(AQW 3398/17-22)

Mrs Long: My Department has not requested any reports on modern slavery in Northern Ireland over the last five years under section 41 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015. However, reports undertaken by the IASC have a UK reach and we have taken note of those which have been produced.

As indicated in my response to AQW 3010/17-22, there has been very positive engagement between my Department and the two UK Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioners (IASC) appointed since 2017.

My Department has no current plans to commission any reports from the IASC specific to Northern Ireland but we will continue to keep this area under consideration.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice how much her Department has spent on producing materials in Irish, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 3431/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Department of Justice and its Agencies has had no expenditure on producing materials in Irish over the five financial years from 2014-15 to 2018-19.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice (i) to detail the amount of legal aid paid to date for cases 15/095107 and 11/103100; and (ii) whether the Minister will give a commitment to provide me with a summary of total final costs processed for these cases by the Legal Services Agency.

(AQW 3507/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Freedom of Information Act 2000 gives two rights of access when information is requested. It provides the right to know whether the information requested is held, and the right to have the information provided. These rights may only be overridden if the information requested is covered by an exemption in the Act. In accordance with the exemption provided by Section 40 (5B) (a)(i) I can neither confirm nor deny whether the Department of Justice holds the information you have requested. This section absolves the Department from the requirement to say whether or not we hold information where, to confirm or deny we hold any personal data about an individual, would contravene any of the data protection principles of the Data Protection Act 2018.

As such I can provide no commitment in respect of part (ii) of your question.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice, given the recent statements she made to the Committee for Justice and to the Assembly, whether she will investigate parental alienation within the family justice system, and, if so, when will this commence.

(AQW 3508/17-22)

Mrs Long: Research on parental alienation in family proceedings is a cross-cutting matter and to date I have not been involved in any discussions on commissioning a study. The merits of research could potentially be considered in the future under the new cross-departmental Family and Parenting Support Strategy. I understand that the Department of Health, which is leading on the Strategy, has already committed to considering guidelines for social services on parental alienation as part of that work and I expect the Strategy will provide ongoing opportunities to collectively consider how better to support relations between parents and parents and children. My current focus in that regard is on early intervention and my Department is already working with the Department of Health to consider actions which might be introduced to reduce acrimony and negative behaviours to improve outcomes for families and children.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 1737/17-22, to detail (i) how many cases the Legal Services Agency have referred to the Police Service of Northern Ireland; (ii) how many of these referrals involve the legal profession, in the last three years; and (iii) how she will involve court users, in particular Litigants in Persons, in the review of legal aid for family cases..

(AQW 3510/17-22)

Mrs Long:

- (i) The Legal Services Agency has engaged with Police Service of Northern Ireland in respect of 25 cases in the last 3 years.
- (ii) Four of these cases involved the legal profession.
- (iii) Any proposals for substantive change to legal aid policy are subject to public consultation. This provides stakeholders, including all types of court users, the opportunity to put forward their views.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Justice whether she has any human rights concerns arising from the implementation of the Investigatory Powers Act 2016.

(AQW 3568/17-22)

Mrs Long: Responsibility for the Investigatory Powers Act 2016 is reserved to the Westminster Government and therefore does not fall within my remit as Minister of Justice. The exercise of powers under the Act is subject to a framework of oversight mechanisms.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice, given the ongoing concerns about the rate of conviction in rape cases, what work is being undertaken by her Department, in coordination with the PSNI, to ensure that we can have more confidence that those who have perpetrated such a crime will be brought to justice.

(AQW 3611/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Gillen Report into the law and procedures in serious sexual offences in Northern Ireland contained 253 individual recommendations and 16 key recommendations. It is important to appreciate that the purpose of the Gillen review was not to increase convictions but rather to ensure complainants and accused persons alike receive a fair and just outcome.

Implementation of the Gillen Review is included in New Decade, New Approach and is a key priority for me and my Department.

The Department is working with multi-agency partners, including the PSNI, the PPS and others to develop a phased implementation plan for the current mandate and beyond. The Criminal Justice Board has agreed that recommendations which will have the greatest impact on complainants going through the system should be prioritised. Therefore a range of work aimed at increasing both the complainant's and the public's confidence in the criminal justice system is included in the implementation plan. This includes work in relation to; consent, dispelling rape myths, strengthening juror social media responsibilities, tackling delay, providing greater support to complainants through the provision of legal advice and representation pre-trial and research and training across a range of areas. It is anticipated that this work will contribute to increasing the reporting of and reducing the attrition rates in serious sexual offence cases.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of attacks on Prison Service staff in each prison establishment, in each year since 2017.

(AQW 3712/17-22)

Mrs Long: The number of attacks on Prison Service staff in each prison establishment, in each year since 2017 is detailed in the table below.

	Maghaberry	Magilligan	Hydebank Wood College and Womens Prison
2017	43	2	21
2018	44	3	11
2019	28	5	9

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Justice what measures are being taken to ensure guidance around COVID-19 is being upheld within our prisons.

(AQW 3737/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Northern Ireland Prison Service take the threat presented by COVID19 extremely seriously and have undertaken significant work in preparation for the challenges an outbreak would bring in a custodial environment.

Preparations have included the purchase of additional protective clothing for staff and the preparation of areas within each prison where prisoners suspected and or diagnosed with the virus can be accommodated. Both the Prison Service and our partners in the South Eastern Trust have been following guidance issued by the Public Health Agency which has also been provided to staff and prisoners.

On Friday 20 March I agreed with the Director General that all prison visits should be suspended. This was a decision taken with regret but in the interest of staff, prisoner and family safety.

The Director General has put in place specific operational planning and implementation structures and established a dedicated team to oversee planning arrangements and to support Governors in dealing with the challenges they will inevitably face. The Prison Service recognise the importance of good communication and is committed to working with staff, prisoners, families and stakeholders as operational decisions are taken.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Justice to confirm how she intends to fund the Executive Action Plan for Tackling Paramilitarism or successor policy post 2020-21.

(AQW 3751/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Action Plan is a cross-Executive effort and is co-ordinated by a team within the Department of Justice. The initial funding period runs from 2016/17 to 2020/21 and has an associated ring-fenced funding allocation of £50m, which is jointly provided by HM Treasury and the Executive. The expenditure for 2020-21 is part of those ring fenced funds.

Ending the harm caused by paramilitary groups was a stated commitment in the New Decade New Approach document. My officials are working with departmental colleagues and delivery partners to ensure that the learning generated through implementing the existing commitments is built into delivery going forward. Funding of a successor action plan will be a decision for the Executive, and I will be writing to the Executive on this matter in due course.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice whether she will direct that defendants should stop attending court unless specifically required, in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

(AQW 3754/17-22)

Mrs Long: The management and listing of court cases is the responsibility of the NI Judiciary under the direction of the Lord Chief Justice (LCJ).

My officials in NICTS continue to work closely with the Office of the Lord Chief Justice on practical arrangements to reduce the need for attendance at court, including the adjournment of cases administratively and dispensing with the requirement of parties to attend save for certain specified circumstances.

The LCJ has directed that from 18 March 2020, judges should not require the attendance at court of persons who do not need to be there, or who express individual concerns. This includes individuals where it may be sufficient for their legal representatives to act on their behalf and individuals should contact their legal representatives for assistance in this regard. More information can be found at <https://judiciaryni.uk/>.

I welcome the LCJ's direction which is appropriate and proportionate in the current circumstances. These arrangements will be carefully monitored and adjusted as the public health situation develops.

Department for the Economy

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for the Economy to outline the number of small savers yet to receive payment from the Scheme of Arrangement, following the collapse of the Presbyterian Mutual Society.
(AQO 49/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): No saver who had shares and / or a loan in the Presbyterian Mutual Society has yet to receive a payment from the Scheme of Arrangement.

Savers who invested less than £20,000 in total received a payment of 100% of their shares and / or 85% of their loans.

Savers who invested more than £20,000 in total received a payment between 77% and 85% of the value of their holdings before deducting an individually agreed voluntary deferral.

Payments were made in August 2011.

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister for the Economy to provide an update on Project Stratum, to improve broadband connectivity.
(AQO 46/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Project Stratum is at the mid-procurement stage, with contract award expected in mid-2020.

On 16 December 2019, my Department published its response to the Open Market Review EU State aid public consultation. This confirmed a target intervention area of some 97,000 premises.

However, upon receipt of updated supplier data and following a nationwide data refresh by Openreach this month, the number of premises requiring intervention will be reduced. The revised number will be shared as soon as it is available.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for the Economy whether she plans to develop a manufacturing strategy.
(AQO 51/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Manufacturing comprises a wide and diverse range of industries and, despite a number of setbacks and challenges, remains at the very heart of business and industry in Northern Ireland. It contributes to 11.2% of all jobs and accounts for 50.8% of our external sales.

I do not have any plans to develop a dedicated manufacturing strategy. However the Northern Ireland Economic Strategy will set a clear direction to ensure the appropriate support and policy instruments are in place, in terms of skills, innovation and research and development that will collectively continue to assist growth in manufacturing and the wider economy.

My Department and Invest NI will also continue to provide support for manufacturing. Over the past five years, Invest NI has offered £294 million of support to support for the manufacturing sector in NI.

I recognise that our exit from the EU may present challenges for manufacturing. My focus will be on implementation of the NI Protocol to ensure our access to, and place within, the UK internal market.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy how she proposes to counter the impact of a regulatory and customs border in the Irish Sea.
(AQO 47/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The UK Government has promised that there will be unfettered access for our businesses to the whole of the UK internal market.

I intend to hold them to that promise.

Mr Catney asked the Minister for the Economy what plans she has to address the low productivity rate in Northern Ireland.
(AQO 50/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Raising productivity will be a key focus of an economic strategy for Northern Ireland.

The emphasis will be on policies and programmes to support the drivers of productivity. There will include more effective innovation and research, development of high quality jobs with the skills pipeline to match and the development of the business environment and infrastructure to support businesses to thrive and grow.

Our exit from the EU will present challenges. We must make strategic choices to support productivity gains in those higher value adding sectors, where Northern Ireland has strength, capacity and export potential, while at the same time ensuring we have effective programmes that better support all businesses to reach their full potential.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department will commission a study on the causes and long-term economic effects of the outward migration of students from Northern Ireland.
(AQO 48/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The outward migration of students is an ongoing trend, with a quarter of Northern Ireland students studying elsewhere in the UK and the Republic of Ireland every year. There are many causes of this, with some students being 'determined leavers' and some being 'reluctant' leavers. This outward flow of students is not a recent phenomenon and has been ongoing for a number of decades.

My Department continues to assess the outward migration of students annually, however, I am keen to commission a more in-depth study into this matter.

In addition, my Department is currently working with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development to develop evidence and recommendations on addressing Northern Ireland's skills challenges. This will inform a new Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland, to be launched at the end of this year. Evidence gathered to date has highlighted that addressing current and anticipated skills imbalances in Northern Ireland's labour market is a key priority for our economy.

As part of this work, the OECD has highlighted an opportunity to consider how inward and outward labour mobility impacts our economy, and what measures can be put in place to ensure our approach actively supports economic development.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for the Economy what actions her Department is taking to secure regional air connectivity.
(AQO 52/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Regional air connectivity is essential to the growth of the Northern Ireland economy. My Department works with airlines and airports in a number of ways.

The Department currently provides financial support to airlines in the form of Co-operative and Destination Marketing through the All-Ireland body Tourism Ireland (TI). Destination marketing involves marketing Northern Ireland/Ireland in key external markets as a means of driving inbound tourism. Co-operative marketing is when TIL works directly with an airline to market that airlines route into NI.

I have written to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Secretary of State for Transport asking to meet to discuss the recently announced review of regional air connectivity and provide input. My officials are also currently making arrangements to discuss the review with colleagues in the two Departments.

We have, in partnership with the Department for Transport, confirmed funding for the City of Derry airport to London Southend Public Service Obligation flight until 31 March 2021.

My Department is always willing to consider any requests for support from airports/airlines that deliver value for money and are compliant with EU State Aid regulations.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister for the Economy to detail what progress has been made to improve the provision of broadband in rural areas.
(AQO 54/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Since 2007, over £77m of public investment has been channelled into broadband initiatives by my Department and its predecessor Departments, to encourage private sector upgrade to broadband networks, primarily in rural areas and where the market alone would not invest.

In line with the draft Programme for Government 2016 - 2021, my Department has developed Project Stratum to utilise the £150m additional broadband funding from the Confidence and Supply Agreement, together with a further £15m contribution from the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, to build on previous achievements and improve internet connectivity for those premises currently unable to access broadband speeds of 30 Megabits per second or greater, primarily across rural areas of Northern Ireland.

Project Stratum is at mid-procurement stage, with contract award expected in mid-2020. Through this procurement process, my Department will seek to maximise broadband coverage across the intervention area through the utilisation of the total £165m public funding, along with an anticipated industry contribution.

On 16 December 2019, my Department published its response to the Open Market Review EU State aid public consultation. This confirmed a target intervention area of some 97,000 premises.

However, upon receipt of updated supplier data and following a nationwide data refresh by Openreach this month, the number of premises requiring intervention will be reduced. The revised number will be shared as soon as it is available.

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister for the Economy what plans her Department has to grow the Co-operative and Credit Union sectors.

(AQO 299/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Over the last decade, the Department for the Economy has been delivering a long-term plan to enhance and support the regulatory framework, allowing the sector to grow, while at the same time maintaining prudential governance.

This has resulted in credit unions being able to offer a greater range of services, and giving members additional consumer protection under the Financial Services Compensation Scheme.

It has allowed corporate members to join credit unions for the first time; and raised the limit on withdrawable shareholding for other mutual societies, removing a potential barrier for those societies which seek to grow their business activities.

In 2018, two further provisions were commenced when the registration of societies was transferred to the Financial Conduct Authority. This move reduced red tape for societies and removed transactional fees.

Last week, departmental officials held meetings with sectoral representatives as part of the final stage of this plan, and will shortly be issuing a 'Call for Evidence' so that a root and branch review of the mutuals legislative framework can be completed.

Modernising the legislative framework will ensure that bureaucracy does not frustrate growth, while still protecting members' interests. This in turn will provide the sectors with ample opportunity to grow.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of the duty in the Energy (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 to promote the development of the gas industry, in the context of net zero objectives.

(AQO 300/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: In line with its principal objective for gas under the Energy Order, the Department for the Economy has a statutory duty to promote the development and maintenance of an efficient, economic and co-ordinated gas industry in Northern Ireland.

The Department has supported extending the natural gas network to further towns and villages in Northern Ireland, helping to reduce dependency on more polluting fossil fuels, such as oil and coal.

In 2013, the Northern Ireland Executive approved grant support of up to £32.5 million towards the Gas to the West project. It is anticipated that some 40,000 homes and businesses in eight towns in the West will connect to the new gas networks over several years with a target of saving over 60,000 tonnes of CO₂ by the end of 2022, mainly from the largest new gas consumers on the network.

The Department for the Economy is committed to setting policy to support the achievement of the UK Government's legislated target of net-zero carbon by 2050. A new Energy Strategy for Northern Ireland will set out the way forward for a transition to a zero carbon economy. Future policy on gas will be considered as part of the development of that Strategy.

As part of the on-going public engagement process to help inform and shape the Energy Strategy, the Department has published a Call for Evidence with responses due by 20 March. Following analysis of responses, a consultation paper on draft options for the future Energy Strategy will be published during fiscal year 2020/21.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy whether she supports the industrial action being taken by University and College Union staff at higher education institutions.

(AQO 301/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I am aware of the ongoing industrial action by members of the University and College Union over pay, workloads and pensions.

I respect the right of staff to take part in mandated industrial action and recognises that these decisions are not taken lightly. I also recognise that many of the staff that do take part in industrial action are putting in place resources and alternative arrangements so that their students do not miss out on learning.

However, I appreciate how unsettling this can be for students who may be impacted by the action.

I am aware that the universities are working hard to minimise the impact of any disruption during this period of industrial action.

The Department has been advised that Ulster University is taking steps to ensure that students are not disadvantaged, as a consequence of industrial action, at the point of assessment. Ulster University students will not be assessed on content or materials not delivered by the course or module as a result of industrial action.

Queen's has advised that the University and all of its services will remain open throughout the period and interventions are being implemented at a local level to mitigate the impact on a School-by-School basis as required.

Any student who is unsure of whether their classes will go ahead during this strike action is encouraged to contact their university directly for further information.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for the Economy to outline her plans to protect and develop an all-island economy in the context of Brexit.

(AQO 303/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I have no plans to develop an all-island economy. Our approach to Brexit needs to work for all of our trade flows; north-south, east-west and globally. The Minister wants to grow trade in all directions to benefit all in our economy.

It is important that Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland continue to co-operate on areas of mutual economic interest.

Great Britain is by far our largest external market, accounting for £24.6 billion of sales and purchases in goods and services annually. It is vital to ensure that access to that valuable market is maintained.

I recently made these points to the Minister of State for Business and the Minister of State for International Trade.

I will continue to press UK Government to ensure that it meets its commitments to guarantee unfettered access for Northern Ireland's businesses to the whole of the UK internal market, to engage with the Executive on measures to protect and strengthen our place in the UK internal market, and to develop an international trade policy that works for the whole of the UK.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy why only one of the three companies that successfully tendered to carry out inspections of non-domestic Renewable Heat Incentive boilers has been engaged to do so.

(AQO 304/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: In June 2018 three contractors were appointed, onto a Framework Agreement, to complete site visits of installations accredited to the Non-Domestic Scheme. The procurement process to appoint these contractors was open and in accordance with EU requirements.

The Framework Agreement was awarded for an initial period of twelve months, with an option to extend for two further periods of twelve months each. In June 2019, the Department exercised the option to extend the Agreement for the first additional twelve month period.

The three contractors on the Framework Agreement are ranked in merit order on the basis of value for money. Each site is then automatically offered to the contractor ranked first and offering best value for money. Sites are only offered to the second, and then third ranked contractors, where the first ranked contractor either declares a conflict of interest, or confirms that it cannot complete a site visit within the required period.

To date, the Department has not been required to engage the second or third ranked contractors. Between July 2018 and February 2020, the first contractor completed 417 site visits, which equates to around 1,050 installations on the non-domestic RHI scheme.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister for the Economy what plans she has to promote and expand microgeneration as a way of improving energy self-sufficiency for homes, businesses and farms.

(AQO 305/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Micro-generation helps to facilitate consumers to produce energy for their own consumption through low carbon technologies. In the case of electricity, this can also be exported to the grid for consumption by others.

Northern Ireland has been successful at promoting micro-generation to date. Over 22,000 micro-generators are accredited under the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation, the vast majority of which have installed solar panels. These micro-generators contributed 2.5% of the renewable electricity generated over the period 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019.

The future for renewable energy of all capacities, including any potential future targets and the need for new support schemes, will be considered as part of the development of a new Energy Strategy.

A Call for Evidence to inform the development of a new Energy Strategy was published on 17 December 2019 and runs to 20 March 2020.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for the Economy to advise how the tourism offering of other areas is being actively promoted through Visit Belfast promotions.

(AQW 3413/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department's arms-length body, Tourism Northern Ireland, supports Visit Belfast to handle visitor enquiries about products and experiences, across all of Northern Ireland. In addition, there is also a full programme of activities to attract business tourism to Belfast and Northern Ireland.

In the last financial year Visit Belfast handled 260,723 visitor enquiries seeking information on areas beyond Belfast.

However, as Visit Belfast is a destination marketing organisation who work on behalf of Belfast City Council, I would recommend that you contact Visit Belfast directly for any further information.

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister for the Economy to provide an update on Project Stratum, to improve broadband connectivity.

(AQO 46/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Project Stratum is at the mid-procurement stage, with contract award expected in mid-2020.

On 16 December 2019, my Department published its response to the Open Market Review EU State aid public consultation. This confirmed a target intervention area of some 97,000 premises.

However, upon receipt of updated supplier data and following a nationwide data refresh by Openreach this month, the number of premises requiring intervention will be reduced. The revised number will be shared as soon as it is available.

Mr Catney asked the Minister for the Economy what plans she has to address the low productivity rate in Northern Ireland.
(AQO 50/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Raising productivity will be a key focus of an economic strategy for Northern Ireland.

The emphasis will be on policies and programmes to support the drivers of productivity. There will include more effective innovation and research, development of high quality jobs with the skills pipeline to match and the development of the business environment and infrastructure to support businesses to thrive and grow.

Our exit from the EU will present challenges. We must make strategic choices to support productivity gains in those higher value adding sectors, where Northern Ireland has strength, capacity and export potential, while at the same time ensuring we have effective programmes that better support all businesses to reach their full potential.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Mr Humphrey asked the Assembly Commission whether Parliament Buildings will be illuminated red for 24 hours, in future years, to mark European Remembrance Day for Victims of Terrorism.
(AQO 425/17-22)

Mrs D Kelly (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): Under the Assembly Commission's Parliament Buildings Special Lighting Policy requests can be submitted until a month before the relevant date so no future request has been received for European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Terrorism (11 March) and it would be too early to consider it.

The policy contains a provision that other than the four days agreed by the Assembly Commission, special lighting will not be approved to mark an event that occurs repeatedly, unless it is a significant anniversary of that event. Furthermore, no such event can be marked by special lighting more than once in any three-year period. Parliament Buildings was lit for European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Terrorism in 2019.

However, the Assembly Commission has undertaken to consider whether lighting of the Building might be appropriate to mark additional events over and above the existing four days chosen by the Assembly Commission. Officials have been asked to provide a list of events for consideration at a future Assembly Commission meeting.

Mr Frew asked the Assembly Commission for an update on progress to establish a new Independent Financial Review Panel.
(AQO 426/17-22)

Mr O'Dowd (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): As agreed by the Assembly, oral question time for the Assembly Commission on Tuesday 24 March was cancelled and the question you tabled for oral answer on 24 March 2020, could not therefore be taken. Instead, a written response is being provided.

The Independent Financial Review Panel ("IFRP") was established pursuant to the Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Act (NI) 2011 ("the 2011 Act"). Under the 2011 Act, the IFRP is required to be independent and is not, in the exercise of its functions, subject to the direction or control of the Assembly or the Assembly Commission.

The Chair and two other Panel members are appointed by the Assembly Commission for a term of five years. The terms of office of persons appointed to the IFRP expired in July 2016. The Assembly Commission considered a range of options for the reform of the IFRP during 2015 and early 2016, but agreed that the incoming Assembly Commission that would be appointed following the May 2016 Assembly elections, should itself consider the options.

Following initial consultation with Assembly Commission Members during the summer of 2016, a comprehensive consultation document entitled "Independent Financial Review Panel: Reform" was issued to Assembly Commission Members on 28 October 2016, requesting an outline of their Party's views on the matters by 13 January 2017.

This work was overtaken by political events, namely that the Assembly did not resume normal business after the March 2017 election until 11 January 2020. The Assembly Commission was mindful that it was inappropriate for it to prioritise issues related to Members' salaries and allowances when the Assembly was not meeting.

It was anticipated that this work would recommence once normal Assembly business resumed and a new Assembly Commission could be appointed. In order to enable officials to undertake some preparatory work in advance of a potential return to normal Assembly business, at its meeting on 5 September 2019, the Assembly Commission asked officials to issue a fresh consultation document in order to seek the views of the Parties represented on the Assembly Commission and identify areas of agreement for possible reform of the IFRP. It was also agreed that following this, a wider consultation with all Members could take place.

A further consultation document was issued to Assembly Commission Members on 21 November 2019, requiring written responses from their Parties on the key issues outlined, by 17 January 2020. This deadline was extended to 7 February 2020 following appointment of the new Assembly Commission. There have been two responses to the consultation to date.

Discussions have taken place at the first meeting of the new Assembly Commission on 19 February 2020 and options for the potential reform of the system for determination of Members' salaries, expenses/allowances and pensions was considered by an Assembly Commission working meeting on 18 March 2020.

Following those discussions, officials are now working to develop the detail of a potential way forward for the Assembly Commission to consider.

Mr McGlone asked the Assembly Commission what plans it has to introduce technology for Member electronic voting in Plenary sittings.

(AQO 428/17-22)

Mr Butler (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The Standing Orders of the Assembly do not currently provide for electronic voting by Members. Standing Order 26 provides that the Speaker shall judge whether or not a question be carried by collecting voices. Standing Order 27 provides that, in certain circumstances, rather than collecting voices the Speaker shall ask the Assembly to divide with Members voting by passing through the relevant lobby.

In order for electronic voting by Members in plenary sittings to be introduced, it would require the Committee on Procedures to bring forward new standing orders and for the Assembly to agree these with cross-community support.

It is not the role of the Assembly Commission to seek to amend the Assembly's Standing Orders. However, the Assembly Commission has supported a previous Committee on Procedures through the provision of advice and options in relation to electronic voting.

Should the current Committee on Procedures wish to consider bringing forward new standing orders to provide for electronic voting, the Assembly Commission would, of course, work closely with it to ensure that the necessary infrastructure and technology could be put in place.

Mr Middleton asked the Assembly Commission to outline the policy, process and criteria for the external illumination of Parliament Buildings.

(AQO 429/17-22)

Mrs D Kelly (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The external lighting of Parliament Buildings is covered by the Parliament Buildings Special Lighting Policy 2020.

Under this policy, which is published on the Assembly website, the Assembly Commission may agree to light the Building for occasions that are significant in the wider community. The Assembly Commission has, for some years, agreed that the Building be lit annually on four days to mark International Women's Day, Saint Patrick's Day, the Twelfth of July and Armistice Day.

In addition, requests for special lighting can be made by Members, subject to cross-designation support, registered charities, public-sector, community or other non-profit making organisations.

Such requests must meet certain criteria to be approved. Those criteria include that the special lighting must be in connection with an event that is:

- Of exceptional local, national or international significance and/or achievement.
- Of constitutional or democratic significance.
- A significant anniversary of a significant local, national or international event.

Other than the four days agreed by the Assembly Commission, special lighting will not be approved to mark an event that occurs repeatedly, unless it is a significant anniversary of that event. Furthermore, no such event can be marked by special lighting more than once in any three-year period.

All requests for special lighting are put to the Assembly Commission and approval must be based on consensus.

Mr Allister asked the Assembly Commission whether arrangements will be made to fly the national flag from Parliament Buildings on the occasion of the centenaries of the creation of Northern Ireland and of the first sitting of the Northern Ireland Parliament.

(AQO 430/17-22)

Mr Blair (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): There are two aspects of Assembly Commission policy related to the Member's question. Firstly, the Assembly Commission agreed an approach in 2012 in relation to how anniversaries within the decade of centenaries would be marked within Parliament Buildings. This approach is guided by a set of principles including that all events will be inclusive, of a sensitive tone and respectful of our shared history and differing views on it.

In October 2018, the Assembly Commission agreed the anniversaries which would be marked in this mandate and this includes the centenaries of the creation of Northern Ireland/ partition and the first sitting of the Northern Ireland Parliament in 2021.

In line with the agreed approach, the Assembly Commission is required to agree by consensus early next year the nature of the events it will organise and will do so in the context of the events which have already been held.

Secondly, on flags, in June 2015, the Assembly Commission agreed to fly the Union flag on the days designated by the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. This decision followed an Equality Impact Assessment including a public consultation. The Assembly Commission has not agreed a Civil Occasions Protocol and is awaiting the outcome of a final report by the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition.

Miss Woods asked the Assembly Commission for an update on the establishment of a new Independent Financial Review Panel.

(AQO 432/17-22)

Mr O'Dowd (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The Independent Financial Review Panel ("IFRP") was established pursuant to the Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Act (NI) 2011 ("the 2011 Act"). Under the 2011 Act, the IFRP is required to be independent and is not, in the exercise of its functions, subject to the direction or control of the Assembly or the Assembly Commission.

The Chair and two other Panel members are appointed by the Assembly Commission for a term of five years. The terms of office of persons appointed to the IFRP expired in July 2016. The Assembly Commission considered a range of options for the reform of the IFRP during 2015 and early 2016, but agreed that the incoming Assembly Commission that would be appointed following the May 2016 Assembly elections, should itself consider the options.

Following initial consultation with Assembly Commission Members during the summer of 2016, a comprehensive consultation document entitled "Independent Financial Review Panel: Reform" was issued to Assembly Commission Members on 28 October 2016, requesting an outline of their Party's views on the matters by 13 January 2017.

This work was overtaken by political events, namely that the Assembly did not resume normal business after the March 2017 election until 11 January 2020. The Assembly Commission was mindful that it was inappropriate for it to prioritise issues related to Members' salaries and allowances when the Assembly was not meeting.

It was anticipated that this work would recommence once normal Assembly business resumed and a new Assembly Commission could be appointed. In order to enable officials to undertake some preparatory work in advance of a potential return to normal Assembly business, at its meeting on 5 September 2019, the Assembly Commission asked officials to issue a fresh consultation document in order to seek the views of the Parties represented on the Assembly Commission and identify areas of agreement for possible reform of the IFRP. It was also agreed that following this, a wider consultation with all Members could take place.

A further consultation document was issued to Assembly Commission Members on 21 November 2019, requiring written responses from their Parties on the key issues outlined, by 17 January 2020. This deadline was extended to 7 February 2020 following appointment of the new Assembly Commission. There have been two responses to the consultation to date.

Discussions have taken place at the first meeting of the new Assembly Commission on 19 February 2020 and options for the potential reform of the system for determination of Members' salaries, expenses/allowances and pensions was considered by an Assembly Commission working meeting on 18 March 2020.

Following those discussions, officials are now working to develop the detail of a potential way forward for the Assembly Commission to consider.

Mr Muir asked the Assembly Commission for an update on the consultation on the Independent Financial Review Panel.

(AQO 435/17-22)

Mr O'Dowd (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The Independent Financial Review Panel ("IFRP") was established pursuant to the Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Act (NI) 2011 ("the 2011 Act"). Under the 2011 Act, the IFRP is required to be independent and is not, in the exercise of its functions, subject to the direction or control of the Assembly or the Assembly Commission.

The Chair and two other Panel members are appointed by the Assembly Commission for a term of five years. The terms of office of persons appointed to the IFRP expired in July 2016. The Assembly Commission considered a range of options

for the reform of the IFRP during 2015 and early 2016, but agreed that the incoming Assembly Commission that would be appointed following the May 2016 Assembly elections, should itself consider the options.

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Following those discussions, officials are now working to develop the detail of a potential way forward for the Assembly Commission to consider.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Assembly Commission what plans it has to invest in the WiFi network in Parliament Buildings to ensure that Members and staff can work efficiently.

(AQO 436/17-22)

Mr K Buchanan (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 supports up to 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 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.

Following the resumption of normal Assembly business in January of this year and the allocation of tablet PCs for use by Members and staff, the IS Office is aware that in some areas, particularly around the Assembly Chamber, Wi-Fi connectivity and signal strength has been an issue for some users.

In response, the IS Office is currently deploying 15 new higher speed access points to replace some of the older ones in areas where signal strength has been reported as problematic. This work was expected to be complete by the end of April 2020, however this has now been paused due to COVID-19. The IS Office is also currently preparing written advice to Members on how best to manage Wi-Fi connections on mobile devices and this will be issued shortly.

As the current Wi-Fi system is approaching end of life, the IS Office intends to undertake a review of the system and will consider setting 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. 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.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 3 April 2020

Written Answers

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) how he intends to increase the number of trees in West Tyrone; and (ii) whether his Department has earmarked land for planting.
(AQW 3440/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I made a statement in the Assembly recently announcing a new Programme of Afforestation which will plant 18 million trees by 2030 throughout Northern Ireland to contribute to the UK's net zero carbon target. I hope that woodland can be created in West Tyrone as part of this programme. I have written to Ministerial colleagues and Chief Executives of Councils, including Fermanagh & Omagh Council and Derry City & Strabane Council, requesting their support to develop plans for woodland creation on suitable public land under their control.

The Afforestation Programme, as outlined in my statement, will need also to further encourage rural landowners and other businesses to plant more woodland. Support for this through forestry grant schemes is currently under review, including the development of a specific small woodland grant scheme designed to help landowners to incorporate woodlands into their land holdings and farms.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs when funding will be made available to advance the Strathfoyle Greenway project.
(AQW 3492/17-22)

Mr Poots: Officials in my Department continue to engage with officials in Derry City and Strabane District Council, the Department for Communities (DfC) and the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) with the intention of progressing the Strathfoyle Greenway Project.

Derry City and Strabane District Council are currently developing a Business Case for the project which will determine how it progresses and funding requirements.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how he will reassure farmers concerned by recent incidents of avian flu.
(AQW 3623/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department continues to take a range of actions to reassure farmers concerned by the recent cases of non-notifiable avian influenza. The detection of any animal disease is always a concern and the prevention of epizootic disease incursions is one of my Department's main priorities.

The Department has published a control strategy for dealing with avian influenza outbreaks and these plans are continuously reviewed. Surveillance to detect disease is carried out on wild birds and poultry in accordance with European legislative requirements.

When a report of a suspect notifiable disease is received restrictions are immediately placed on the affected premises. These measures prevent any movements, on or off the premises, of susceptible species and/or products. Restrictions remain in place until veterinary enquiries are complete and notifiable disease has been ruled out.

My officials have been working closely with industry representatives in respect of the recent non-notifiable avian influenza cases to determine the potential sources of disease introduction and methods of spread. This information has enabled officials to provide further advice and recommendations to industry on risk pathways, and assist with voluntary depopulation and other biosecurity measures to minimise the risk of spread to other premises.

My Department continues to communicate messages which encourage vigilance, early reporting of suspect cases and the importance of maintaining excellent levels of biosecurity. Flock keepers are also encouraged to subscribe to a bird text alert service and reminded of the need to register their flocks with the Department.

These steps will help keep farmers informed of the current disease risk in Northern Ireland and of the practical steps that can be taken to mitigate that risk.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what percentage of forest cover will be delivered by the planting of 9,000 hectares of trees through the Forests for our Future programme.

(AQW 3836/17-22)

Mr Poots: Woodland cover in Northern Ireland is 8.2% at present (113k hectares) and will increase to 8.8% (122k hectares) following planting of an additional 9,000 hectares of woodland by 2030 through the Programme of Afforestation: Forests for our Future.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline what COVID-19-related restrictions are on (i) the farming community; and (ii) their operations, including livestock trading and testing.

(AQW 3880/17-22)

Mr Poots: The response provided here was correct at 30 March 2020.

(i) The farming community:

DAERA Direct Offices

Additional measures are now in place to protect citizens and staff by ceasing all public facing direct services offered by DAERA Direct Offices.

All customers must now conduct their business through DAERA Online services, which can be accessed from the DAERA Website home page or, if appropriate, via the Cattle Registration Telephony line (0300 200 7855).

Documents can still be delivered to a DAERA Direct office and left in a designated post box at the entrance to the building. To ensure protection of the food supply chain, current certification arrangements will continue to apply until further notice.

Digital Assistance with applications to the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) or the Environmental Farming Scheme (EFS) can be accessed through the SAF Advisory Service on 0300 200 7848.

All other appointments and general queries can be made directly with the local DAERA Direct office on 0300 200 7840.

Farm Family Health Checks Programme

After discussions with our partners in this initiative (the Public Health Agency and the Northern Health and Social Care Trust) the Farm Families Health Checks Service has been currently paused, this decision will be kept under review.

College of Agriculture Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE)

CAFRE has ceased all face-to-face teaching with students and all Knowledge Transfer events delivered to the agri-food industry. However, it is delivering education programmes remotely and is also providing reactive support and advice to the agri-food industry. Processing of applications for tranche 5 of the Business Development Groups (BDGs) scheme and registration of farmers/growers are continuing remotely. CAFRE will keep this situation under review.

(ii) Their operations, including livestock trading and testing:

Farm Quality Assurance Scheme (FQAS)

Following an emergency meeting of the Northern Ireland Beef and Lamb Farm Quality Assurance Scheme (FQAS) Industry Board, all face to face farm inspections have been deferred due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. This policy came into effect from Wednesday 18th March at 5pm.

NI livestock markets

NI livestock markets have taken the decision to close initially for 2 weeks starting from 23 March 2020. This follows continued high numbers of farmers attending markets, despite warnings and pleas from farming unions. Other means of sale will be explored including virtual sales, buyer only markets and specialist sales. DAERA are working with the markets to ensure livestock movements can be facilitated by a combination of Aphis on-line and telephony services.

Farm Inspections and Animal Testing

DAERA, in consultation with the local agri-industry and colleagues across the UK, has drawn up guidelines for the safe delivery of on-farm inspections and tests. DAERA is committed to helping the industry in maintaining the food supply chain, which is central to everyone's wellbeing.

Routine farm inspections

All routine farm inspections will be paused until 30 April 2020. This move comes in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and is part of the wider effort to reduce the spread of the virus. It also takes pressure off the agri-food sector, which is working extremely hard to ensure the food supply chain keeps moving.

All routine farm inspections in the areas of the Environment, EU Area Based Scheme, Agrifood and Veterinary work, will be paused until 30 April. However essential inspections such as Public Health Risk Sampling, will continue where possible.

Where it has been reported or suspected that there has been, or there is likely to be, potential for a significant impact on public health, animal health or pollution of the environment, the pausing of inspections will not apply. In those cases DAERA staff may undertake site inspections on farms (or elsewhere) to assess and resolve any issues.

TB testing

From 30 March 2020, DAERA has updated its advice on TB testing: the general advice is that TB testing should not be carried out. This updated position is designed primarily to protect farmers and farm families and has taken account of feedback received from veterinarians and farmers.

Under exceptional circumstances, visits to carry out TB tests may continue if they can be done safely in accordance with guidance issued by the Public Health Agency. For each arranged test, the testing veterinarian must discuss the conduct of the test with the herd keeper before commencing. If the herd keeper has any doubts or concerns that he/she cannot provide the necessary facilities to maintain social distancing throughout the test, the test should not be undertaken. If a test commences, the testing veterinarian must ensure that social distancing is maintained throughout. If it cannot the test must be abandoned.

Inspections paused:

NIEA

- Planned inspections for SMR1 (nitrates and phosphates)
- Inspections for SMR2 (Wild Birds) and SMR3 (Semi-natural Habitats)

EU Area Based Schemes Inspections

- Rapid Field Visits (RFVs) for the Basic Payment Scheme
- Hedge Mitigation inspections
- New Business ID inspections
- Inspections for the Farm Business Improvement Scheme-Capital Tier 2 grant payments

Veterinary inspections

- Routine Inspections –These include animal welfare, cross-compliance, cattle identification inspections, sheep identification inspections and enforcement inspections. The only exceptions would be reactive inspections, if absolutely necessary, to investigate serious animal welfare incidents or serious animal health breaches (for example bovine TB fraud)
- Scheduled Official Control inspections
- Other Animal Disease Surveillance - including; post import sampling of GB sheep for Maedi-Visna and the scrapie monitoring scheme for sheep

Inspections continuing;

- All suspect epizootic disease cases on farm, such as Foot-and-Mouth, Avian Influenza, Bluetongue etc. will continue to be investigated
- Public health risk sampling
- Environmental Farming Scheme inspections

The position will be kept under review as the situation develops and a further announcement on routine inspections is planned by 30 April 2020.

The Department is also considering alternative ways of working, in some cases this could be making greater use of imagery, considering different types of evidence that customers can provide, or to look at options which reduce face to face interaction.

“The overall approach and proposals to pause inspections is generally in line and consistent with what is happening in other jurisdictions within the UK, for many of their routine inspection programmes. We will of course keep all these steps under review.”

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how he plans to incentivise farmers to participate in tree planting on small portions of their farmland.

(AQO 404/17-22)

Mr Poots: I made a statement in this Assembly recently announcing a new Programme of Afforestation which will plant 18 million trees to create 9,000 hectares of new woodland by 2030 throughout Northern Ireland to contribute to the UK's net zero carbon target.

My plans include planting on any available land on the public estate and to further encourage rural landowners, farmers and other businesses to plant more woodland to complement their holdings, and at the same time provide environmental benefits to the wider society.

Regarding incentives for this, support through forestry grant schemes is currently under review. As part of this, I plan to develop a specific small woodland grant scheme, designed to help landowners to integrate woodlands into their farm or other businesses. Integration of woodland into the farm business can provide buffer strips to reduce the risk of accidental breaches of water pollution. For example, in soils of high fertility, the location and extent of the woodland buffers can be refined by using

LiDAR to identify which parts of the farm are contributing most to water pollution through rapid surface runoff. Woodlands can also provide shelter to improve crop and livestock productivity and reduce ammonia loss to the atmosphere from point sources. Farmers may wish to convert the steeper slopes which are hazardous for farming and unproductive bracken or gorse dominated areas to woodland.

There is a clear case for expanding woodland cover, it is not without its challenges and it will require partnership working across the Executive, the wider public sector, and importantly the participation of farmers, rural landowners and communities in woodland support schemes.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the development of a new rural framework for Northern Ireland.

(AQO 406/17-22)

Mr Poots: The ongoing work to develop the new Rural Policy Framework was endorsed by stakeholders at an engagement event attended by over 120 delegates on the 16th January in Loughry College.

Following this each of the five working groups took on board feedback from the engagement event and finalised their agreed reports during February. Officials are now reviewing the reports and using this information to develop the overarching draft rural framework policy. Although we are focusing efforts on the Covid 19 response it is still planned that a draft framework will go to for full public consultation later this year.

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline any progress on the establishment and structure of the proposed Office of Environment Protection.

(AQO 407/17-22)

Mr Poots: DAERA is working with Defra to support the passage of the Environment Bill through Parliament. Parallel to that process, I will very shortly be consulting on the plans, principles and governance aspects of the Bill. It will be for the Assembly to determine whether to give legislative consent for and implement the provisions in the Bill which extend to Northern Ireland, including the Office for Environmental Protection. The Bill sets out the role and functions of the OEP. I do not expect full details of the administrative arrangements for the OEP to be ironed out until later this year. I will continue to work towards ensuring appropriate environmental governance arrangements are in place by the end of the Implementation Period.

Department for Communities

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Communities what data is held on the number of people presenting in each Health and Social Care Trust suffering from problem gambling; and how this information informs policy on addressing addiction.

(AQW 2442/17-22)

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): I refer the member to the answer given to AQO 366/17-22 on 16 March 2020.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities what progress has been made to remove historical debt from the NI Housing Executive and to exclude it from having to pay corporation tax as outlined in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 2957/17-22)

Ms Hargey: "New Decade, New Approach" outlines that the Executive will examine options to remove historical debt from the Housing Executive and to exclude it from having to pay Corporation Tax.

I have met with Minister Murphy to discuss the matter and to explore what may be done in relation to the Housing Executive Landlord's legacy debt.

Corporation Tax legislation is an Excepted Matter under Schedule 2 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and any changes to tax legislation need to be made at Westminster. Representations continue to be made through the Department of Finance and my officials will be working closely with the Minister for Finance and his Department to find a solution to this matter.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Communities to detail the planned (i) current; and (ii) future projects in Upper Bann which will be (a) fully; and (b) part-funded by her Department.

(AQW 3360/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Current and future projects within the Upper Bann area funded by my Department are listed in the tables below at Annexes A and B.

Annex A - each of these projects was funded at the level the applicant requested.

Annex B - as the Housing Executive does not group services under Parliamentary Constituency Area, the table at Annex B shows the relevant information for Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Council Areas most closely aligned to "Upper Bann".

Annex A

Programme	Funding £
Neighbourhood Renewal Programme	
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon Borough Council Technical Assistance Project	34,883.34
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon Borough Council Building Sustainable Communities Project	105,418.91
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon Borough Council Sport in the Community Project	81,687.71
Education Authority Craigavon Count Read Succeed Project	137,639.88
Education Authority Craigavon Inclusion in Education Project	90,809.88
Education Authority Youth Engagement Project	92,124.87
Education Authority Craigavon Transitions Project	48,162.72
Education Authority Portadown Early Intervention Learning Mentor Project	59,073.23
Southern Health and Social Care Trust Craigavon Health Improvement Project	72,956.43
Southern Regional College Craigavon Training and Opportunities Programmes	77,757.68
Southern Regional College The Glow Project Craigavon Region	19,353.60
Southern Regional College Southern Region Oceans Project	20,824.59
Areas at Risk Programme	
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council Gilford Areas At Risk	21,500.00
Regional Development Office (part funded by DfC and Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council)	
Lurgan & Portadown Environmental Improvement Scheme	200,000
Craigavon Bridges - Marlborough	360,000
Woodhouse Street Portadown Environmental Improvement Scheme	10,000
Armagh Banbridge Craigavon Vitality*	65,000
Armagh Banbridge Craigavon Branding*	85,000
Banbridge Tourism Project	61,984
Shared Housing Scheme	
Dromore Street, Banbridge	343,000

*Note: These projects were across the entire council area, and therefore extend beyond the Upper Bann constituency

Supporting People Services not jointly funded with Health & Social Care

Annex B

Organisation	Service	Units	Primary Client Group	Council Area	Max Funding Agreement Value (364 days) (£)
Abbeyfield & Wesley Housing Association Ltd	98 Sloan Street - Abbeyfield UK NI	10	Older people with support needs	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	37,050
Abbeyfield & Wesley Housing Association Ltd	Scarva Street - Abbeyfield UK NI	7	Older people with support needs	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	25,935
Alpha Housing (NI) Limited	Carrickeden Grange (Alpha)	25	Older people with support needs	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	17,979
Alpha Housing (NI) Limited	Legacorry House (Alpha)	16	Older people with support needs	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	2,962
Alpha Housing (NI) Limited	Quarry Gardens (Alpha)	25	Older people with support needs	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	18,356

Organisation	Service	Units	Primary Client Group	Council Area	Max Funding Agreement Value (364 days) (£)
Belfast Central Mission	Floating Support for Older People Armagh and Dungannon	80	Older people with support needs	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	214,084
Choice Housing Ireland Limited	Hill Court	39	Older people with support needs	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	21,618
Choice Housing Ireland Limited	Millmount House	31	Older people with support needs	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	17,361
Choice Housing Ireland Limited	Stevenson Park (OT)	39	Older people with support needs	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	13,162
Choice Housing Ireland Limited	The Beeches	26	Older people with support needs	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	16,170
Choice Housing Ireland Limited	The Oaks	34	Older people with support needs	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	13,437
Clanmil Housing Association	Legion Court	3	Older people with support needs	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	1,746
Clanmil Housing Association	Legion Court 2	29	Older people with support needs	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	18,548
Clanmil Housing Association	Stronge Court	9	Older people with support needs	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	5,377
Clanmil Housing Association	Stronge Court 2	24	Older people with support needs	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	15,762
Clanmil Housing Association	Templer Court	10	Older people with support needs	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	5,793
Clanmil Housing Association	Templer Court 2	21	Older people with support needs	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	13,388
Homecare Support Services Ltd	Homecare Floating Support Southern Area	145	Homeless Families with Support Needs	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	313,033
Inspire Wellbeing	Abbey Street	4	People with Mental Health Problems	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	29,218
Mencap	Fairgreen	6	People with Learning Disabilities	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	131,093
Mencap	Riversley Housing Complex (Shared Accom)	8	People with Learning Disabilities	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	152,044
Mencap	Riversley Housing Complex (Supported Accom)	9	People with Learning Disabilities	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	59,530
Mind Wise New Vision	Millmount	6	People with Mental Health Problems	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	41,705
Praxis Care Group	Banbridge SPFS	25	People with Mental Health Problems	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	44,290
Praxis Care Group	Castle Lane, Lurgan 2*2 Bungalows	4	People with Learning Disabilities	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	74,412
Praxis Care Group	Castle Lane, Lurgan 4*1 Flats	4	People with Learning Disabilities	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	66,454
Praxis Care Group	Edenmill House	3	People with Mental Health Problems	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	25,378

Organisation	Service	Units	Primary Client Group	Council Area	Max Funding Agreement Value (364 days) (£)
Radius Housing Association Limited	Bronte Fold	23	Older people with support needs	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	9,771
Radius Housing Association Limited	Carrickblacker Fold	38	Older people with support needs	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	15,986
Radius Housing Association Limited	Constabulary House (Fold)	23	Older people with support needs	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	14,041
Radius Housing Association Limited	Edenderry Fold	23	Older people with support needs	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	9,843
Radius Housing Association Limited	Fairgreen Rd, Markethill	8	Older people with support needs	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	1,872
Radius Housing Association Limited	Knock Eden	16	People with Learning Disabilities	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	184,579
Radius Housing Association Limited	Lir Fold	25	Older people with support needs	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	10,543
Radius Housing Association Limited	Oakleigh Fold	46	Older people with support needs	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	19,136
Radius Housing Association Limited	Oran Fold	42	Older people with support needs	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	17,647
Radius Housing Association Limited	Patricks Fold	34	Older people with support needs	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	14,356
Radius Housing Association Limited	Riversley Fold	12	Older people with support needs	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	4,692
Radius Housing Association Limited	Spelga Mews / Avenue	24	Older People with Mental Health Problems / Dementia	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	204,485
Simon Community	Simon Community 21 Edward Street	20	Offenders or People at risk of Offending	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	427,256
Simon Community	Simon Community Avon House	9	Single Homeless with Support Needs	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	28,330
Simon Community	Simon Community FFS	30	Young People	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	66,548
Simon Community	Simon Community Linen Court	29	Single Homeless with Support Needs	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	348,675

Supporting People Service Jointly Funded with Health & Social Care

Organisation	Service	Units	Primary Client Group	Council Area	Max Funding Agreement Value (364 days) (£)
Autism Initiatives	Boyds Row, Armagh	3	People with Learning Disabilities	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	57,761
Inspire Wellbeing	The Heathers Supported Living Service	23	People with Learning Disabilities	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	312,060
Leonard Cheshire Disability	Cheshire Mews	15	People with a Physical or Sensory Disability	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	137,077

Organisation	Service	Units	Primary Client Group	Council Area	Max Funding Agreement Value (364 days) (£)
Leonard Cheshire Disability	Leonard Cheshire Mews	27	People with a Physical or Sensory Disability	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	71,133
Leonard Cheshire Disability	The Meadows	6	People with a Physical or Sensory Disability	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	103,740
Praxis Care Group	179 Union Street	21	People with Mental Health Problems	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	145,302
Praxis Care Group	Castle Lane, Lurgan 2*4 Core House	8	People with Learning Disabilities	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	81,898
Praxis Care Group	Crozier House	7	People with Mental Health Problems	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	143,496
Praxis Care Group	Crozier Mews	6	People with Mental Health Problems	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	58,503
Praxis Care Group	Locke House	14	People with Mental Health Problems	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	152,829
Praxis Care Group	Portadown DISH	17	People with Mental Health Problems	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	177,649
Southern Health And Social Care Trust	1,2,3 Bowens Close	9	People with Learning Disabilities	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	65,024
Southern Health And Social Care Trust	5 & 8 Lilburn Hall	6	People with Learning Disabilities	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	58,094
Southern Health And Social Care Trust	Bowens Close Peripatetic (SHSCT)	24	People with Learning Disabilities	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	29,328
Southern Health And Social Care Trust	Hawthorn Drive (SHSCT)	14	People with Mental Health Problems	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	221,851
Southern Health And Social Care Trust	Housing Support Mental Health (SHSCT)	18	People with Mental Health Problems	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	57,845
Southern Health And Social Care Trust	Lisanally Lane (SHSCT)	7	People with Mental Health Problems	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	67,540
Southern Health And Social Care Trust	Loughgall Road (SHSCT)	10	People with Mental Health Problems	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	103,641
Southern Health And Social Care Trust	Novara House (SHSCT)	10	People with Mental Health Problems	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	115,794
Southern Health And Social Care Trust	Orchard House (SHSCT)	10	People with Learning Disabilities	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	234,744
Southern Health And Social Care Trust	Stay Project	5	Young People	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	24,105
Special Needs Management Allowance (SNMA) Organisation					
Radius Housing Association Limited	Manor Court (SNMA)	36	Frail Elderly	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	67,243
Praxis Care Group	Little Forest (SNMA)	3	People with Learning Disabilities	Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	7,248

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister for Communities whether she will allow extensions to completion deadlines for benefits applications and benefit renewal applications.

(AQW 3696/17-22)

Ms Hargey: My Department is taking steps to ensure in the current circumstances no one will lose out if a benefit form is not returned within the normal specified time. Legislation already exists to allow the time for claiming to be extended under the relevant regulations for that benefit.

In addition to reassure vulnerable people about the continuity of their benefits during the Covid – 19 outbreak all reviews and reassessments for health and disability benefits will be paused for the next three months.

Arrangements will be put in place to extend awards that have an end date to ensure benefit remains in payment.

If people experience a change in their needs they are still encouraged to contact the Department to ensure they are receiving the correct level of support.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 2262/17-22, to outline the process taken to identify Drumellan as being the best site for this development.
(AQW 3725/17-22)

Ms Hargey: High level feasibility was conducted across Housing Executive owned land in this area to determine suitability for development based on the need for complex needs and accessible properties in the area.

Site A, land adjacent to 17 Drumellan Park, was first considered as a former brownfield site. It could also provide continuity of frontage and would require the least disturbance to the current road network. A Pre-Application Discussion (PAD) with Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Council (ABC) took place who confirmed Policy OS 1 – Protection of Open Space within Planning Policy Statement 8 (Open Space, Outdoor Sport and Recreation) would apply. This will require an exception case to demonstrate substantial community benefits that decisively outweigh the loss of open space. The Department for Infrastructures Rivers Agency confirmed that a Flood Risk Assessment is required. A 5m wide working strip is also required as the site is adjacent to a watercourse reducing the development potential of the lands.

Site B, North West of 33 Drumellan Park was also considered as a potential site. The dwellings to the east 28-33 Drumellan Park are designed as a courtyard/cul-de-sac with the rears facing the main road and DfI Roads have confirmed that access should be from the cul-de-sac. Landscaping has been proposed for the new units to provide privacy and soften their impact particularly around the rears. ABC planners confirm that PPS 8 would also apply to this site however given the planning history and the nature of the proposal for special needs this policy could be overcome through a supporting statement.

Site C, land at Drumellan Brownlow, was considered as an option if Site A and Site B prove unsuccessful. However, this is a large site and careful design is required to incorporate these units within the setting. Mature trees are placed sporadically along the frontage and throughout the site. The lands have provided an amenity space/area within the estate for a number of years. Nonetheless the lands are zoned as housing lands C/H 8 with the following Key Site Requirements;

- 1 Detailed planting plan. Outline or full permission to incorporate new planting of trees and bushes of appropriate species within the site and on the boundaries to provide screening for the development and to break up housing mass.
- 2 Layout designed that no houses back onto public road.
- 3 Footway required all along site frontage, and within the site, to link with the existing footway network in the area. Direct access for individual dwellings will not be permitted onto the public road.

Progressing to Social Housing Development Programme

Choice Housing Association were nominated to progress the scheme and a briefing meeting took place in October 2018 where a development brief dealing with each of the sites (listed above) was provided.

Choice Housing Association also secured detailed feasibility from Turley planning consultants who deemed Site A + B high risk due to the PPS 8 requirement and Site C low risk due to its housing zoning. However, given the number of units required Site A+B were the most feasible and the council planners have acknowledged the open space within the area.

Choice Housing Association appointed a design team in June 2019 and a planning application was submitted LA08/2019/1342 - Proposed erection of 5 no. complex needs bungalows with car parking, amenity space and landscaping, works to the public road and associated site works at Lands to the north of 17 & 33 Drumellan Park and south of 35-40 Drumellan Gardens Moyraverty Craigavon.

Staff from the Housing Executive are in regular contact with Choice and the Planners in relation to this scheme and anticipate that planning permission will be granted to enable the scheme to start within the current financial year or early next year subject to necessary statutory and regulatory approvals.

In summary the site was selected in terms of suitability with prevailing planning policy, planning history, brownfield status, size requirements of bespoke units with regards to overall size of site, suitability of site for applicants with complex needs due to location of family support and location to Craigavon hospital.

Ms Ennis asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the recent Audit Office report into Governance Issues in Sport NI.
(AQO 417/17-22)

Ms Hargey: I welcome the publication of this report and the opportunity to look carefully at lessons learned.

The report examines, in detail, the circumstances around a period of internal instability and change within Sport NI.

This period included suspension of the Chief Executive and resignation of Board members. There were also very significant delays in the submission of financial statements.

There are important lessons to be learned highlighted in the report, not just for Sport NI and the Department for Communities, but for the wider public sector.

I am committed to ensuring that the recommendations for my Department and Sport NI and are taken forward collaboratively in the interests of sport and the positive impact it has on all our lives.

I also recognise the importance of good relationships between Boards, Chairs, Chief Executives and Senior Management teams of ALBs and the need for my Department to be proactive in its role with ALBs.

We have already seen financial statements for Sport NI certified up to 2017/18 with 2018/19 to be certified in the next few months. My Department and Sport NI have considered lessons learned in respect of the preparation of financial statements and I am confident that this key governance requirement, providing accountability for public funds will be back on track and the lessons learned will ensure that financial statements do not fall into backlog again.

My Department will work closely with the Department of Finance as they consider wider recommendations within the report and we will support further actions for improvement that come forward.

My Department will continue to support the Board of Sport NI and its Chief Executive as they deliver their plans to transform the organisation.

Crucially, we are working in partnership with Sport NI to ensure that the organisation operates within an appropriate governance framework to deliver positive outcomes in terms of sport and physical activity, from the very grassroots community level up to the highest performance level so the we can all benefit from the significant contribution sport plays in our communities and our lives.

Department of Education

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education how much his Department has spent on producing materials in Irish, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 3428/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): The Department's expenditure on producing materials in Irish, in each of the last five complete financial years, was as follows:

	Total £
2014/15	67,792.88
2015/16	20,605.47
2016/17	5,810.33
2017/18	524.44
2018/19	36.35

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Education to provide a breakdown of schools that have participated in the Battlefields project from the South Antrim constituency.

(AQW 3527/17-22)

Mr Weir: The schools that participated in the Battlefields Project from the South Antrim constituency are as follows:

School Ref.	School Name	Management Type
3210134	Ballyclare Secondary School	Controlled
3250207	Parkhall Integrated College, Antrim	Controlled Integrated
3410008	Ballyclare High School	Controlled
3410209	Antrim Grammar School	Controlled

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education what plans are in place to disinfect schools in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

(AQW 3646/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) has confirmed that, when requested to do so by schools, an 'Enhanced Clean' is carried out by the EA cleaning service. This facility is available to all schools, including Voluntary Grammar and Grant Maintained Integrated schools. An enhanced clean pays particular attention to surfaces and areas of shared use (taps, door handles etc.), as part of the regular cleaning team's normal system of work.

EA are also currently undertaking an enhanced clean in all schools and premises, as a preventative measure. This is not placing any additional workload on the Cleaning Service or consequently any additional financial cost to schools.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education what plans are in place for private bus hire companies who provide school transport services in the event of school closures.

(AQW 3811/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority has confirmed that it issued correspondence to all private bus and taxi operators on 23 March 2020 in relation to the provision of home to school transport during the period of school closures.

Its letter outlined that it will require some contracted operators to undertake alternative journeys, for example in providing home-school journeys for the children of key workers, small deliveries of teaching/cleaning materials and other goods, or to assist in the transportation of school meals.

It also confirms that the EA will continue to pay all existing home to school transport contracts until the end of June or the end of the current school closures, whichever is soonest. The EA will seek assurance from operators that during this period they will sustain the employment of drivers and escorts employed to provide school transport services and an assurance that during this period they will have the capacity to continue normal service delivery.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education whether there is any anticipated impact by the COVID-19 crisis on the holding of the transfer tests in 2020.

(AQW 3901/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department plays no role in the operation or administration of the tests including their timing. This is a matter for schools and test providers to consider. However, I am sensitive to the issues you have raised and while this is not something I can intervene in directly, I will bring your concerns to the attention of the test providers.

I would hope that the providers will reflect on the unique circumstances we currently find ourselves in and give due consideration to ensuring that the next transfer test series does not unduly burden young people or their parents.

Department of Finance

Mr Stewart asked the Minister of Finance to detail the additional rates anticipated to be raised in 2020/21 compared to 2019/20 following REVAL 2020.

(AQW 3578/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): The Regional Rate will be adjusted to offset the change in the total rateable value due to the revaluation. No additional rates revenue therefore will be raised.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Finance whether he will consider extending the small business rate relief scheme to businesses with properties of higher Net Annual Value than the current scheme accepts.

(AQW 3579/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I am considering the small Business Rate Relief Scheme as part of the Budget.

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister of Finance what the timeframe is for the Permanent Secretary in his Department to respond to written correspondence from (i) an MLA; and (ii) member of the public.

(AQW 3714/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The timeframe for the Permanent Secretary to respond to any correspondence received from both MLAs and members of the public is normally 2 weeks. However this is subject to all the relevant information being available. More complex correspondence can require a longer time period.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Finance what consideration is being given to the provision of a short-term basic income model, especially for self-employed people, to assist them during the COVID-19 outbreak.

(AQW 3815/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I have lobbied the British Government on provision for the self-employed and the Chancellor announced the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Self-employment Income Support Scheme on the 26th of March 2020.

I am disappointed that the first payments from this scheme are not expected until the beginning of June. My officials will be working with their Treasury counterparts to monitor its impact locally and I will continue to press Treasury Ministers on their support for the self-employed.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Finance what help and assistance is being considered and implemented to help self-employed people who have no income due to the lack of work due to the COVID-19 outbreak.
(AQW 3816/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I have lobbied the British Government on provision for the self-employed and the Chancellor announced the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Self-employment Income Support Scheme on the 26th of March 2020.

I am disappointed that the first payments from this scheme are not expected until the beginning of June. My officials will be working with their Treasury counterparts to monitor its impact locally and I will continue to press Treasury Ministers on their support for the self-employed.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance how relevant civil servants, who retire over the coming months, will be made amenable in respect of any disciplinary matters arising from the RHI report.
(AQW 3849/17-22)

Mr Murphy: No civil servant can be disciplined after they cease to be an NICS employee therefore no disciplinary action can be completed in respect of any civil servant after their retirement date.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance what support arrangements exist in respect of councils arising from delaying rates collection.
(AQW 3867/17-22)

Mr Murphy: District Councils will continue to be paid on the basis of their 2020/21 estimates in twelve equal instalments on the first of each month throughout the rating year. Therefore, the delay in the billing will not have any impact on a Council's funding.

After the end of the 2020/21 rating year, Land & Property Services will determine the actual amount of money raised for each Council and will pay any additional money raised in the following rating year (that is, in 2021/22); conversely, where there is a shortfall this will be clawed back the following year. This is the usual arrangement that my Department has with Councils.

You will be aware that my Department is in the process of putting measures in place to allow businesses to benefit from a three month rates holiday for April, May and June 2020. The corresponding total loss in rates revenue will be borne by the regional rate, in a similar fashion to arrangements for the Small Business Rate Relief. As such, the rates holiday will have no impact on the revenue of District Councils.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance whether social distancing requirements are being observed in NIDirect call centres; and whether staff are required to share headphones and keyboards.
(AQW 3891/17-22)

Mr Murphy: In line with current advice and requirements the NIDirect contact centre staff are working to adhere to social distancing through spacing of desks. Hot desking has been stopped and staff are not required to share headphones and keyboards.

Increased breaks for handwashing and increased additional cleaning has been introduced. To maintain service delivery, and as call volumes reduce, further steps are being taken including working with IT Assist to relocate staff to remote working from home.

Department of Health

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health to outline his plans to meet New Decade, New Approach targets for rheumatology patients.
(AQW 652/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Planning is already underway to secure additional capacity to meet the commitment to reduce waiting times as set out in New Decade New Approach.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health (i) to provide the names of the manufacturers of insulin pumps being used in the Health Service; (ii) for a breakdown of the amount of pumps being distributed to diabetes patients; and (iii) for an update on the average waiting times for insulin pumps in each Health and Social Care Trust.
(AQW 1522/17-22)

Mr Swann: The names of the manufacturers of insulin pumps being used in the Health Service are as follows: Medtronic, Roche, Tandem, Insulet (Omnipod) Ypsomed and Air Liquide.

The number of pumps distributed to adult and paediatric patients with diabetes since 2016/17 is shown below. Figures relate to new pumps and do not include replacement pumps issued to pre-existing insulin pump users.

Number of insulin pumps issued

	Belfast HSCT	Northern HSCT	South Eastern HSCT	Southern HSCT	Western HSCT
2016/17	34	20	51	42	12
2017/18	22	29	40	25	14
2018/19	21	8	33	26	19
2019/20 (up to 31st Jan 2020)	23	21	48	28	12

- (iii) There are a number of factors to consider before a patient can access an insulin pump including adherence to NICE guidelines, patient readiness and clinical priority. However, waiting times in each Health and Social Care Trust are as follows:

Belfast HSCT	The waiting list for pre pump assessment is approximately 24 months. There is no waiting list for insulin pumps.
Northern HSCT	Details of the average waiting time for an insulin pump is not available.
South Eastern HSCT	Waiting time for pre-pump assessment varies but can be up to 12 months.
Southern HSCT	No waiting times for insulin pumps or assessment for insulin pumps for children and young people. Adult waiting time for pre pump assessment is currently 13 months.
Western HSCT	For patients prioritised as having an urgent clinical need, access to insulin pump therapy is within 1-2 months. Average waiting time for routine pump start for paediatric patients is 6-12 months after assessment is completed.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health whether he plans to publish any consultations before summer recess; and, if so, to outline the topics for consultation.

(AQW 2689/17-22)

Mr Swann: You will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the covid-19 pandemic.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'. Therefore at this current time no consultations will be published before summer recess.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of times each GP Out Of Hours base in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust has had to close because of no medical cover in each month since April 2017.

(AQW 2716/17-22)

Mr Swann: The table below outlines the number of times each SHSCT Out of Hours base has had to close since April 2017.

SHSCT GP Out of Hours: Number of occasions closed by Base 1st April 2017 – 31st January 2020

Month	Armagh	Craigavon	Dungannon	Newry	Kilkeel
Apr-17	12	3	12	5	16
May-17	14	5	8	3	11
Jun-17	12	4	10	3	7
Jul-17	14	14	18	4	11
Aug-17	9	12	24	6	11
Sep-17	11	3	12	5	18
Oct-17	12	3	15	6	16
Nov-17	3	6	10	5	14

Month	Armagh	Craigavon	Dungannon	Newry	Kilkeel
Dec-17	11	5	14	10	23
Jan-18	8	5	10	6	15
Feb-18	9	5	19	4	16
Mar-18	7	4	10	2	10
Apr-18	5	7	14	2	14
May-18	5	2	12	4	21
Jun-18	8	4	15	2	16
Jul-18	8	16	22	6	18
Aug-18	9	15	12	6	20
Sep-18	8	9	11	4	12
Oct-18	7	11	6	1	14
Nov-18	7	9	6	5	14
Dec-18	8	8	9	5	19
Jan-19	13	14	16	13	20
Feb-19	6	13	13	4	17
Mar-19	10	18	25	8	20
Apr-19	14	14	32	13	21
May-19	20	15	30	18	26
Jun-19	21	14	22	11	25
Jul-19	17	10	43	14	22
Aug-19	24	22	32	13	27
Sep-19	19	18	28	10	26
Oct-19	14	17	32	10	26
Nov-19	23	11	26	6	23
Dec-19	23	16	30	15	22
Jan-20	19	15	38	25	23

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister of Health whether he plans to intervene to save the services at Compass Counselling and provide much needed financial support.

(AQW 2999/17-22)

Mr Swann: I refer the member to the answer given to priority AQW 828/17-22 on 30 January 2020.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health what proposals he is bringing forward to increase the number of mental health social workers; and under what timescale.

(AQW 3088/17-22)

Mr Swann: There are a number of initiatives ongoing which will inform future workforce planning.

My department is working on an overall workforce planning strategy for health and social care and social work officials from my department are involved in this.

In addition, my Department is working on a separate social work workforce review which is scoping social work demand in all areas including mental health.

Social work officials are also working on a regional Approved Social Work (ASW) workforce plan which will make a recommendation on ASW numbers.

My Department is also rolling out the new model of multi-disciplinary teams in primary care which includes significant investment in social work staff. While these social workers have a generalist remit, much of their work will involve prevention and early intervention in relation to mental health problems.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health whether his Department has conducted an analysis on the potential impact on social care resulting from the loss of existing and new workers from 26 EU nations as a result of Brexit; and to outline the results of any such analysis.

(AQW 3122/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department will be assessing the likely impacts across health and social care in Northern Ireland, with a view to completing an assessment by early summer.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Health (i) why Evorel Sequi patches have been unavailable; (ii) when these patches will be available; and (iii) what other options there are for patients who have tried other HRT treatment but have been unsuccessful.

(AQW 3187/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department is aware that manufacturing issues have impacted on the supply of Evorel HRT patches. However, most of the Evorel HRT range of products should now be available in community pharmacies and the Evorel Sequi product range is due back in stock from the end of March 2020.

Patients who may be experiencing issues with accessing HRT products on prescription should contact their GP who will be able to advise them about alternative HRT preparations and the most appropriate option for them.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health what support his Department can offer to carers.

(AQW 3195/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

I am conscious that the Assembly not only has a desire, but also a duty to request the latest information relating to this unprecedented and rapidly changing situation, and I am therefore committed to providing Members with regular updates as developments occur. I trust that you will agree that it is in the public interest that my officials and I remain primarily focused on the task in hand over the coming period in relation to COVID-19 and I will therefore not be in a position to answer your written question at this time.

I appreciate your understanding.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to detail the funding provided to Western Urgent Care in each of the last five years.

(AQW 3279/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Robin Swann, MLA

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the reforms of the individual funding request process; and whether this has led to greater access to non-NICE approved drugs.

(AQW 3280/17-22)

Mr Swann: A key element of the reform of the Individual Funding Request (IFR) process is the introduction of a new Regional Scrutiny Committee (RSC). The Chair of the Committee and the associated administrative support took up post in February 2020 and work is ongoing to secure appropriate representation from each Trust.

The Health and Social Care Board is currently working with the Chair of the RSC to review the procedural documentation including the Standing Operating Procedure (SOP), guidance for patients and the IFR application form. It is anticipated that following a training event in April 2020, the RSC will formally convene on 5 May 2020.

Once established for a period of approximately six months, a review of the arrangements will be made to ensure compliance with the new policy and to provide an assessment on whether greater access to non-NICE approved drugs has been realised.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health what advice his Department has provided on the organisation of large-scale public events during the coronavirus outbreak.

(AQW 3332/17-22)

Mr Swann: On 23 March the UK Government introduced three new measures, requiring people to stay at home, except for very limited purposes; closing non-essential shops and community spaces, and stopping all gatherings of more than two people in public.

The Public Health Act (Northern Ireland) 1967, amended by The Coronavirus Act which received Royal Assent on 25 March, confers on my Department powers to take action to restrict events and gatherings. Under the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020, which came into force on 28 March, gatherings of more than two people are prohibited, subject to certain exceptions including where all the persons in the gathering are members of the same household; where the gathering is essential for work purposes, or to attend a funeral.

Contravention is an offence, punishable on summary conviction by a fine of up to £5000. A person over 18 years of age can also receive a fixed penalty notice of £60, increasing with any subsequent offence up to a maximum of £960.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, given the statutory care sector can build-in resilience and response plans to the coronavirus outbreak, whether similar protections will be afforded to domiciliary care staff and similar agencies.

(AQW 3458/17-22)

Mr Swann: Guidance for care homes and domiciliary care on COVID-19 was published on 17 March.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health (i) whether contingency plans are in place to protect the welfare of vulnerable adults and the elderly within a care or nursing home setting should a resident or care staff member contract COVID-19; (ii) whether his Department will engage with the private care home sector to ensure preparedness and precaution is taken; and (iii) what support could be given to care homes to ensure safe staffing levels are maintained for a period should a number of employees be out of work temporarily due to contracting COVID-19.

(AQW 3529/17-22)

Mr Swann: Guidance for care homes and on domiciliary care was published on 17 March.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health what plans he has to implement policies which will make up for the absence of a rapid redress scheme in the event of avoidable fatality or injury of baby during birth.

(AQW 3533/17-22)

Mr Swann: There are currently no plans to introduce a rapid redress scheme for Northern Ireland. However, the Department is committed to providing high quality, safe and effective health and social care services to reduce the number of avoidable deaths or injuries during birth. A wide range of policies are already in place with others currently under development to ensure that we deliver high quality maternity services that are safe and sustainable for the future.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how many buildings are abandoned on the Musgrave Park hospital site.

(AQW 3561/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

I am conscious that the Assembly not only has a desire, but also a duty to request the latest information relating to this unprecedented and rapidly changing situation, and I am therefore committed to providing Members with regular updates as developments occur. I trust that you will agree that it is in the public interest that my officials and I remain primarily focused on the task in hand over the coming period in relation to COVID-19 and I will therefore not be in a position to answer your written question at this time.

I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health what are the plans for the abandoned military hospital on the Musgrave Park hospital site.

(AQW 3562/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether he has produced social distancing guidelines for vulnerable groups in relation to coronavirus.

(AQW 3569/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether he has identified shortages of buildings, beds, staff and medical equipment in dealing with COVID-19.

(AQW 3570/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) how many staff are employed within his Department's information service; (ii) of these, how many are classed as press officers; and (iii) the annual cost of this service.

(AQW 3605/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister of Health what action his Department will take to financially support qualified nurses re-entering the profession after a period of leave.

(AQW 3619/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister of Health whether the current arrangements relating to local nurses re-entering the profession puts these nurses at a disadvantage to newly qualified nurses and nurses entering the workforce from other places in Europe.

(AQW 3620/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister of Health whether he will consider allowing local nurses re-entering the profession to be paid as healthcare assistants in a similar way to their European counterparts, who can be paid in these roles while training to meet the Nursing and Midwifery Council requirements relating to the English language.

(AQW 3621/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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the task in hand over the coming period in relation to COVID-19 and I will therefore not be in a position to answer your written question at this time.

I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Health what processes are being put in place to ensure there is an adequate number of intensive care beds to manage the impact of coronavirus.

(AQW 3643/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health how many people have requested COVID-19 testing; and how many have been tested.

(AQW 3645/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to outline why there are no COVID-19 testing pods in the North West.

(AQW 3659/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the Republic of Ireland's approach to COVID-19 compared to Northern Ireland's.

(AQW 3660/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Health how the statutory duty to include family carers in the design of the new regional model for adult learning disability has been discharged.

(AQW 3665/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Health what meetings he has had, or plans to have, with voluntary and independent social care providers for adults with a learning disability to ensure there is a comprehensive strategy in place during the COVID-19 pandemic to support vulnerable citizens.

(AQW 3666/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health to detail the amount spent by each Health and Social Care Trust paying energy bills in each of the last five years.

(AQW 3670/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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developments occur. I trust that you will agree that it is in the public interest that my officials and I remain primarily focused on the task in hand over the coming period in relation to COVID-19 and I will therefore not be in a position to answer your written question at this time.

I appreciate your understanding.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health (i) what mental health services are available for military veterans; and (ii) whether there is a specific service for former or current service personnel only.

(AQW 3673/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health whether he has made any proposals to introduce a breast implant register.

(AQW 3674/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department is currently engaging with NHS Digital in England to enable Northern Ireland providers to participate in the Breast and Cosmetic Implant Register in 2020/2021.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health for an assessment of services provided by the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust to people with high risk of contracting HIV since the summer of 2018.

(AQW 3676/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health what steps are being taken to recruit staff to bring down the waiting times for autism assessment.

(AQW 3677/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Health whether he plans to review the suitability of mental health facilities.
(AQW 3687/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Health whether he plans to recruit more mental health staff to the Health Service.
(AQW 3688/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Health what criteria is used to establish whether a ward is a suitable environment to treat patients with mental health issues.
(AQW 3689/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health what actions he has taken to date to source personal protection equipment and ventilators from companies in the south of Ireland.
(AQW 3695/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health what reassurances he can give to people currently in receipt of mental health services, including talking therapies, that these forms of help and support will continue despite the COVID-19 outbreak.

(AQW 3699/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health to explain the rationale of closing Bangor minor injury unit due to COVID-19.

(AQW 3702/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Robin Swann, MLA

Ms Dillon asked the Minister of Health what data is being collected to ascertain the true infection rate of COVID-19.

(AQW 3717/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Health what diagnostic techniques, and equipment, are being used to detect COVID-19. (AQW 3723/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister of Health whether healthcare workers are being offered testing for COVID-19 if they have come into contact with a person who is later confirmed of having tested positive for COVID-19. (AQW 3724/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to detail his plans to protect health workers from the COVID-19 pandemic, including the provision of protective clothing for frontline workers and testing frontline workers for the virus. (AQW 3726/17-22)

Mr Swann: ANSWER

Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Robin Swann, MLA

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health how many ICU beds are available in hospitals in each Health and Social Care Trust; and how he plans to increase capacity following COVID-19 pandemic. (AQW 3727/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to detail the Western Health and Social Care Trust's action plans and budget to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 3728/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health whether he has engaged with his counterpart in the Irish Government with regards to (i) sharing resources; (ii) sharing staff; and (iii) having an all-island action plan in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 3729/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) the number of ventilators available in hospitals, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust; (ii) his plans for the purchase of additional ventilators; and (iii) how his Department will allocate ventilators.

(AQW 3730/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Health whether the restrictions on earnings imposed on retired staff who return to work in the Health Service to assist with coronavirus have been lifted.

(AQW 3734/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, in light of the COVID-19 outbreak, what advice and extra resources are being provided to Health Service staff, including to domiciliary care workers; and whether consistent practices exist across Health and Social Care Trusts.

(AQW 3738/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health what plans he has to invest in, and provide, showering and changing facilities for hospital staff, and in Filtering Face Piece 3 equipment for staff working with suspected and confirmed cases of COVID-19.

(AQW 3743/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health how many publicly accessible defibrillators have been funded by his Department in each Health and Social Care Trust in the last ten years.

(AQW 3752/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health how many patients in Northern Health and Social Care Trust have been prescribed immunosuppressants in each of the last twelve months, broken down by age of recipient.

(AQW 3753/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Health what measures are in place to ensure the safety of patients and staff at Strule Lodge, Lakeview Hospital.

(AQW 3756/17-22)

Mr Swann: A range of measures have been taken and continue to be risk assessed and reviewed on a daily basis to ensure the safety of patients and staff in Strule Lodge. Staff absence is being covered by overtime, redeployment and external agency. Additional physical space has been created to allow separation of patients.

Guidance has been published to support healthcare professionals throughout the COVID-19 delay phase and in the event of widespread transmission. This is an evolving situation and guidance will be subject to constant review to ensure it remains contemporaneous.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health how many tests for COVID-19 can be carried out in a single day.

(AQW 3762/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Health to outline the current COVID-19 testing capacity; and how this has increased since January 2020.

(AQW 3764/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health whether he will open discussions with hotels that are closing during the COVID-19 crisis for their possible use for patient quarantine.

(AQW 3769/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health whether testing for COVID-19 is being performed solely by the Health Service or is it being outsourced.

(AQW 3770/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health what plans his Department has to implement a shorter diagnostic pathway for ovarian cancer.

(AQW 3773/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how many dentists are practising; and what proportion are Health Service.
(AQW 3774/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether he plans to increase the number of available ventilators.
(AQW 3780/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Health what specific guidance on COVID-19 has been issued to dental practices and pharmacies.
(AQW 3781/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health whether year 1 nursing students have to be in clinical settings as part of their training; and whether protective clothing will be provided given the risk of contracting COVID-19.

(AQW 3802/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, what guidance is being given to social support workers concerning the spread of the virus to (i) vulnerable patients; and (ii) their own family members.

(AQW 3803/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health whether his Department would provide any additional support to Charitable Care organisations, such as Marie Curie and NI Hospice, in the urgent provision of extra personal protective equipment as a precaution for increased demand on their services due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 3814/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health whether there is a common protocol across Health and Social Care Trusts in dealing with tests for coronavirus in respect to wearing protective clothing and masks; and to outline the rationale for this decision.

(AQW 3823/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health to detail the estimated turnaround for patients being tested for a suspected coronavirus diagnosis in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust; and for a comparative breakdown with other local Trusts and health authorities in Great Britain.

(AQW 3824/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health how many premises in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust have been closed for deep cleaning since the first case of coronavirus was confirmed in Northern Ireland; and to provide a breakdown of these premises by organization type and size of workforce.

(AQW 3825/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Health what efforts are being made to recruit and train workers from other sectors to work as ancillary staff in the Health Service.

(AQW 3852/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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the task in hand over the coming period in relation to COVID-19 and I will therefore not be in a position to answer your written question at this time.

I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health to outline the most recent medical advice on testing for COVID-19.
(AQW 3855/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of confirmed COVID-19 infections, broken down by Council Area; and whether this information will be published by the Public Health Agency on a daily basis.
(AQW 3862/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health why Health and Social Care Trust staff who can carry out all of their work remotely from their homes are not being permitted to do this during the COVID-19 crisis.
(AQW 3865/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health how many extracorporeal membrane oxygenation machines are available to the Health Service in Northern Ireland; and how far is such equipment relevant to treating coronavirus.
(AQW 3866/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health what changes have been made in respect of offers of chemotherapy to cancer patients.

(AQW 3868/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health how extensive and secure are supplies of oxygen for use in ventilation; and where the Health Service sources oxygen.

(AQW 3881/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health to detail the current capacity of mobile intensive care; and whether he has plans to increase this capacity.

(AQW 3882/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

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the task in hand over the coming period in relation to COVID-19 and I will therefore not be in a position to answer your written question at this time.

I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether hospitals will provide on-site staff with pre and post-work shower and changing facilities that are compliant with World Health Organisation infection control standards.

(AQW 3883/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether he will adopt a hub and spoke model of intensive care, as deployed in Italy, to deal with capacity issues in intensive care units.

(AQW 3884/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health what plans are in place for the creation of cohort intensive care beds for COVID-19 patients, to isolate risk from non-COVID-19 intensive care patients.

(AQW 3885/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether sufficient personal protection equipment capacity exists for health care workers, including cleaners, carers and health care assistants, who work in rooms where patients are being ventilated or are undergoing aerosol generating procedures.

(AQW 3886/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health whether measures are being taken to ensure that pharmacists install barriers between staff and the public, to protect people who are effectively frontline public servants during the present crisis without going to the expense of personal protection equipment.

(AQW 3888/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health whether the release of personal protection equipment is linked to the mortality rate.

(AQW 3890/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health how many extra geriatric consultants have been drafted into COVID-19 in-patient hospitals.

(AQW 3894/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health how many additional (i) respiratory physiotherapists; (ii) occupational therapists; and (iii) general physiotherapists have been brought into each of the COVID-19 in-patient hospitals.

(AQW 3895/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health to detail the increase in staffing numbers and finance his Department has planned for supporting community and residential care workers.

(AQW 3896/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health what steps he has taken to ensure that the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service is operating safe social distancing; and what specific steps are being taken to ensure adequate distancing in fire engine cabs.

(AQW 3898/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health (i) what agreement exists on the provision of a Nightingale Hospital in Northern Ireland, as in the rest of the UK; and (ii) what services would be used to make such provision.

(AQW 3909/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

I am conscious that the Assembly not only has a desire, but also a duty to request the latest information relating to this unprecedented and rapidly changing situation, and I am therefore committed to providing Members with regular updates as developments occur. I trust that you will agree that it is in the public interest that my officials and I remain primarily focused on the task in hand over the coming period in relation to COVID-19 and I will therefore not be in a position to answer your written question at this time.

I appreciate your understanding.

Department for Infrastructure

Mr McAleer asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she plans to provide additional funding for the repair and maintenance of rural roads.

(AQW 1960/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): The independent review (by Barton 2018) identified an annual funding requirement for structural maintenance of around £143m at today's prices. This report makes the case for timely, targeted road maintenance interventions, noting that late interventions can cost up to four times as much representing poor value for money.

Regrettably, due to severe budgets constraints imposed on my Department in recent years, it has had to operate a limited road maintenance service. I recognise the importance to communities of repairing and maintaining rural roads. I have highlighted this in representations to the Finance Minister in respect of the 2020/21 budget in the hope of securing the necessary funding to deliver essential services including repair and maintenance of our rural roads.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment on being able to enhance grass cutting services as a result of the new budget currently being worked on by the Executive.

(AQW 2535/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Grass cutting is key to road safety and forms part of my Department's environmental maintenance work programme which has been curtailed in recent years due to significant budget cuts. As a result, my Department has had to reduce its routine road maintenance activities to a limited service, which prioritises delivery of essential services for maintaining public safety and protecting the transport network. As a consequence, all roadside grass verges and sightline grass was cut at least twice in the period April to October 2019. Whilst a normal grass cutting service in rural areas was provided, it was not possible, within the funding envelope available, to reinstate the three cuts per year in urban areas. However, to ensure public safety was not compromised sightlines were cut as required throughout the season.

I have engaged with the Finance Minister setting out my Department's funding needs for the 2020/21 budget period including the requirement for acceptable routine maintenance services including adequate grass cutting. I will continue to work with the Finance Minister and Executive colleagues on the 2020/21 budget and as a result I hope to secure the necessary funding to deliver essential services such as grass cutting in the year ahead.

Mr McCann asked the Minister for Infrastructure how her Department plans to improve the condition of streets in West Belfast.

(AQW 2727/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In addition to carrying out a programme of cyclical maintenance safety inspections on all of the adopted road network using well established guidelines, my officials carry out assessment and prioritisation of streets for inclusion in the annual resurfacing programme using a range of factors.

You may be aware there has been severe cuts to the funding allocated to my Department for a number of years. I have been raising the need for additional investment with the Minister for Finance, in order to better maintain our roads, including street lighting and deal with other growing pressures facing my Department.

Of the £2.2m capital funding allocated to the Belfast North Section Office for resurfacing work in the financial year 2019/20, I can confirm that £900k was spent in West Belfast. Major works in West Belfast over the last few years include resurfacing of Divis Street, Falls Road, Andersonstown Road, and Stewartstown Road prior to the introduction of Belfast Rapid Transit.

I welcome the additional £3m allocation made to my Department after making representations to the Finance Minister and I am keen to allocate all of that available funding, after fully funding the winter gritting services up to 31 March, to fix broken Street Lights and improve road surfaces by filling potholes across the North.

In common with other parts of the public service we continue to face severe budget challenges which means we have to strike a balance between maintaining existing infrastructure in water and sewerage, the road network and public transport, and investing in new infrastructure. The extent of future improvement programmes among other pressures in my Department, will be determined by the forthcoming budget factoring in of course the full impact of the current Covid 19 crisis.

Mr Wells asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AWQ 2100/17-22, whether she has plans to amend the Motor Vehicle Testing Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003 to include checking for the presence of bull bars.
(AQW 2966/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Frontal protection systems (including bull bars) are not listed as a testable item under the Motor Vehicle Testing Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003 or the Goods Vehicles (Testing) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003. However, during the annual roadworthiness inspection tests, DVA carry out a general safety inspection on parts of a vehicle, including a bull bar if fitted, to ensure they are not likely to cause a danger on the roads. I have therefore no plans at present to amend these Regulations to include checking for the presence of bull bars.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Infrastructure why there has been a delay in legalising the taxi parking bay in Lancasterian Street, Carrickfergus.
(AQW 3129/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The provision of Taxi Stands requires the making of a Statutory Rule which is subject to a legislative process including a consultation period. The statutory consultation period in respect of this proposed taxi stand has ended and as part of the legislative process I have recently considered the draft Statutory Rule and an SL1 has been sent to the Committee for Infrastructure for consideration. After the Committee has considered the SL1 the Order may be made enabling the required works to implement the Taxi Stand on the ground, however due to the Covid-19 situation it is not possible at present to give a timeline for completion of this matter.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how the new vehicle lifts will be distributed across MOT centres.
(AQW 3203/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Member will be aware of the decision I took to close MOT centres to protect DVA staff and customers from the spread of the coronavirus. The current COVID-19 situation will lead to delays in the delivery and deployment of the 52 newly purchased lifts and therefore at this stage the plan cannot be finalised.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister for Infrastructure to provide a breakdown of the maintenance allocation for each section office within the Southern Division.
(AQW 3210/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Southern Division has five section offices which deliver a number of roads related services. As funding allocations are made at Divisional rather than section office level, details of maintenance allocations for each individual section office are not available.

Allocations to the four DfI Roads Divisions are made on the basis of need, using a range of weighted indicators tailored to each maintenance activity. The Divisions also use these indicators when apportioning budget across District Council areas to ensure, as far as possible, an equitable distribution of funds across Northern Ireland.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) when the findings of the Culmore study, to assess sewerage and wastewater capacity in Derry, will be published; and (ii) what steps she will take to ensure sewerage and wastewater capacity issues do not put building planning applications in Derry on hold.
(AQW 3493/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Northern Ireland Water is currently progressing a Drainage Area Plan (DAP) for the Derry drainage area (i.e. the Culmore study). The current forecast completion date for the DAP is summer/autumn 2021.

NI Water's role in the planning process is that of a Statutory Consultee. It has been engaging with Derry City and Strabane District Council on wastewater system capacity issues over several years

Over the last 2 years, substantial survey/investigative work has been undertaken throughout Derry to inform the DAP process (including flow survey, network asset surveys and CCTV investigations). At this point, NI Water will have a more detailed understanding of the capacity issues and as such be better positioned to provide outline solutions.

NI Water has advised me that it has included 8 projects for the Derry area in its business plan for the period 2021-2027, known as Price Control 21. These 8 projects would cost an estimated £31.25 Million. However, this investment will only happen if all of the funding requested for Price Control 21 is funded. The business case for Price Control 21 is currently being

reviewed by the Utility Regulator who will work with NI Water and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency to prioritise all of the projects in the business case.

As Minister, I aim to ensure that my Department will do all it can to assist in tackling these capacity issues. However, my budget is subject to a number of competing priorities. I have, therefore, engaged with the Finance Minister to highlight the critical need to secure the funding that I require to ensure sewerage and wastewater capacity issues do not put building planning applications in Derry and across the north on hold.

Mr McCann asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will review the criteria used when determining whether to fill potholes, as many potholes in residential areas go unrepaired due to the current intervention level being high.

(AQW 3505/17-22)

Ms Mallon: For a number of years there have been considerable pressures on my Department's Resource budget which is used to deliver day-to-day maintenance activities including repair of potholes. As a result, my Department has had to reduce its routine road maintenance activities to a limited service which prioritises delivery of essential services for maintaining public safety and protecting the transport network. In relation to repair of potholes budget cuts imposed on my Department means that only the highest priority defects across the network can be repaired.

I acknowledge the impact this limited service has had on road users but the restoration of road maintenance activities to previously established levels ultimately depends on the available budget. I have been raising the need for additional investment with the Minister for Finance in order to allow better maintenance of our roads and deal with other growing pressures facing my Department.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in regard of the volume of traffic on the road, whether she will consider the upgrade of the C554 road, between Sixtowns and Omagh, from a C road to a B road.

(AQW 3550/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Road classification dates back to pre-Local Government Reorganisation in 1973 and its use today is limited to route identification. Road classifications are intended to reflect the importance of each road within the overall road network and to assist road users with knowledge of the network to navigate across the network.

Classification of roads is not predicated on traffic volumes, nor indeed does it influence traffic management measures or maintenance and winter service regimes, all of which are influenced by traffic volumes rather than road classification.

Given this position my Department has no current plans to upgrade the C554 between Sixtowns and Omagh, however, I have asked my officials to keep this under review.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the post-project review of the Alfred Street cycle lane, commenced in 2018.

(AQW 3589/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I understand that you met with officials from my Department on 26th October 2018 to discuss a number of concerns that you had about the operation of the Alfred Street / Upper Arthur Street segregated cycle lane. Subsequent to that meeting the Department undertook to do a review of the operation of the cycle lane.

This review has taken longer to complete than was initially expected as some information was not available until recently. It should not have taken this long and I am keen to see this work finalised so that we can learn any lessons from it as I move to further develop a sustainable transport network across the North.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department would consider measures, such as traffic lights or a roundabout, to alleviate congestion of vehicles on Lough Road at the junction with Dublin Road, Antrim.

(AQW 3594/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is aware of reports of congestion at this junction and in response has undertaken traffic surveys and monitoring during peak times to determine the extent of any traffic delays.

These have shown that, whilst traffic emerging from the junction does experience delays when events are being held at the Antrim Forum or Massereene Golf Club, there are no significant delays during normal peak times. Therefore as traffic is generally moving satisfactorily at this location, there are currently no plans to change the junction layout at this time.

My officials will continue to monitor the junction to determine if any further changes are required when the newly opened Lough Shore Gateway Centre is fully operational.

Mr Blair asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of adding Translink to the list of organisations that are accountable to the Rural Needs Act.

(AQW 3622/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Whilst Translink is not included in the schedule to the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016, the Department wrote to Translink on 28 February 2018, highlighting good practice to pay 'due regard' to rural needs and further recommended that it commits to rural proofing practices in future.

All Translink's rural services are provided under contract to the Department for Infrastructure. As a Government Department, DfI is subject to the Rural Needs Act and takes regard to rural needs when developing, adopting, implementing or revising policies, strategies and plans, and when designing and delivering public services, including the public transport services that the Public Service Contract between DfI and Translink define. Given the Public Service Agreement signed by the Department and Translink, any changes to the level of the public transport network coverage would have to be approved by the Department and therefore be given consideration under the Act.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether there are plans to (i) improve enforcement measures to prevent pavement parking; or (ii) make it illegal, as it is in England.
(AQW 3630/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is committed to increasing the level of sustainable travel in Northern Ireland and I am aware that cars parked inconsiderately on footways present real challenges for footway users. Because of this, my Department already carries out enforcement action against cars parked on footways where there are parking restrictions on the adjacent carriageway. PSNI officers can and do also take enforcement action against cars found to be obstructing footways. Our road safety and sustainable travel social media channels also regularly post reminders of the relevant Highway Code rule on footway parking.

I am, however, keen to explore what further can be done. I will monitor closely the current consultation exercise in England and consider any learning points.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in order to address any potential DfI Roads concerns, whether representatives from DfI Roads will meet with stakeholders involved in the Sean Dolan's scheme in Derry as soon as possible.
(AQW 3635/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Department has recently been consulted by the planning authority, Derry City & Strabane District Council, regarding an application associated with the Sean Dolan's scheme. After my officials have had an opportunity to review and respond to the Council on this latest submission, they would be happy to meet with the applicant. However, in line with established protocol, it is important that such meeting requests are submitted through the planning authority.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure what action she is taking to mitigate the adverse effects COVID-19 may have on the freight industry.
(AQW 3637/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have been in contact with freight industry representatives and understand their concerns regarding the developing COVID-19 situation.

I recognise the importance of undertaking contingency planning to deal with the impact on the various supply chains and I have already announced a number of measures to help the freight industry and ensure the continuing flow of goods into and out of Northern Ireland. These include a temporary relaxation on drivers' hours for all Goods Vehicle Drivers, a suspension of all MOT tests for commercial vehicles including HGVs, Trailers and buses and the lifting of planning restrictions on delivery times to retailers.

Officials and I continue to work closely with the Freight industry and we are working together to address any emerging issues including difficulties for drivers in completing their driver CPC hours of training, accessing medicals to renew their driving licences, having digital tachograph cards that are lost/damaged/due to expire and accessing the temporary relaxation of the daily rest requirement from 11 hrs to 9 hours on ferry crossings.

I will continue to monitor the situation and do all I can to help those most impacted in the freight industry whilst recognising that it is important that I get the balance right and offer solutions that do not jeopardise road safety.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she plans to introduce deep cleaning for (i) Glider buses; (ii) Metro buses; (iii) their stops; and (iv) train stations to help address the spread of COVID-19.
(AQW 3647/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am acutely aware of the concerns that many communities and people have regarding the COVID-19 virus and how best to tackle the outbreak. My Department is working with all Departments, agencies, operators and the Public Health Agency to respond to and plan for this evolving situation. No effort will be spared in our work to tackle the outbreak.

From Monday 30 March, Translink Bus and Rail Services will operate a further reduced frequency timetable. These measures are being implemented following the new NI Executive advice issued during the week to stay at home. I would reiterate the advice that we all must avoid non-essential travel and continue to practise social distancing in the fight against COVID-19. It is advice we must all follow.

The timetable changes will ensure continued public transport coverage across Northern Ireland, so that our essential workers can continue to travel at peak times. Translink will also have additional buses and relief trains on standby for heavier used services to facilitate and accommodate social distancing.

My Department has received advice on the coronavirus epidemic from the Chief Medical Officer that has been shared with Translink which has implemented a range of measures in the light of that advice. They include enhanced weekly cleaning of buses and enhanced twice-weekly cleaning of trains. That is in addition to the regular daily cleaning that is undertaken on the public transport fleet. Stations are being cleaned more frequently, and, when cleaners are on site, an enhanced cleaning of stations will take place. Translink is working closely with its supply chain to ensure continuity of supply of cleaning materials. Throughout all of this, I would underline the Public Health Agency's advice that personal hygiene is the appropriate method to protect all of us. As part of that, Translink provides guidance on COVID-19 on its website to keep customers updated on the latest developments. The safety of the public and its staff will remain Translink's priority and Translink continues to review its guidance in the light of advice from the Public Health Agency.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the total value of recent projects undertaken by her Department to utilise unspent 2019/20 budget money.

(AQW 3707/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department does not routinely have unspent budget, not least, due to year on year cuts to funding as a result of government austerity.

In the most recent Monitoring Round, January 2020, I was allocated £1.8m in Capital to make safe dangerous street lighting columns which I allocated in full to improve public safety.

I also received £1m Resource funding in the first stage of January Monitoring, with a further £3m in the Treasury additions to the NI Block. I directed this funding to street lighting outage repairs, winter gritting services and routine maintenance of the road network, which includes repairing potholes which are important to all our citizens.

My Department is not forecasting any unspent funding in 2019/20.

Mr McCann asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she plans to review the (i) powers; and (ii) service provided by utility companies and their impact on communities.

(AQW 3721/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister for Infrastructure I am responsible for overall policy and legislation in relation to the water and sewerage provided by NI Water. Other utilities fall within the responsibilities of the Minister for the Economy.

The actual delivery of water and sewerage services is the responsibility of the Company and is subject to regulatory oversight by the NI Authority for Utility Regulation and environmental regulators. If you have specific concerns about utility service provision I would encourage you to contact the Regulator.

In 2018/19, NI Water achieved its best ever performance for the quality of drinking water and the environmental compliance for used water. I will keep NI Water's powers under review to ensure that the company can meet new challenges, such as climate change and the current Covid 19 crisis as we work together to keep communities across the North safe.

Every day, NI Water staff are working tirelessly to make sure that supply interruptions are avoided or minimised. At this time it is particularly important when we all need to be washing our hands regularly. In doing so it is playing a major role in helping to support our communities by delivering essential services every day.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many staff are employed by Waterways Ireland in (i) Northern Ireland; and (ii) the Republic of Ireland.

(AQW 3747/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Waterways Ireland currently employs 81 staff in Northern Ireland with a further 2 employed through an employment agency and 238 staff in the Republic of Ireland.

Mr McCann asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of the criteria her Department uses when determining when streets and footpaths are repaired.

(AQW 3787/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Article 8 of the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993 places a duty on my Department to maintain all public roads in reasonable condition. This duty is fulfilled by complying with a set of Maintenance Standards which adopt a risk based approach that seeks to ensure a proportionate allocation of resources when the repair of roads and footpaths is being considered.

Our current maintenance standards, under the severe funding constraints imposed on my Department, specify a range of response times for the repair of road defects which depend on factors such as their severity and the volume of traffic on the road. Response times range from one calendar day for the most serious defects, to periods of five working days and four weeks for less serious defects with the least serious defects having to be repaired within the next work programme for that

route. Similarly inspection and repair of footpath defects are prioritised based on usage and this seeks to ensure that higher risk defects, such as those identified in busier town and city centres, are quickly addressed.

When it comes to maintaining our roads, street lighting and other essential infrastructure, I would like to be able to do more and I have been raising the need for additional investment to do so with the Minister for Finance in budget discussions as I recognise how important it is to citizens and communities across the North.

Mr McCann asked the Minister for Infrastructure how much is currently paid to private contractors to carry out grass cutting and weed removal.

(AQW 3788/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department records expenditure on Environmental Maintenance, which includes grass cutting, weed control and tree related (urban and rural) maintenance.

Expenditure on Environmental Maintenance, across the north, paid to private contractors during 2019/20 up to February 2020 was £1.9m.

Mr McCann asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether contracts to the private sector for the cutting and removal of grass and weeds are a single contract, or broke down into smaller contracts.

(AQW 3790/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There are currently nine contracts in operation for environmental maintenance across the public road network. Within each contract, the services include maintaining grass areas; controlling weed growth; and cleaning, jetting and inspection of roadside drainage systems.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure, if there is a partial or full COVID-19 lockdown, and with specific regard for workers or carers who need access to their vehicle, (i) whether MOT testing will go ahead as scheduled; and (ii) if not, whether she has plans to temporarily defer upcoming MOT dates.

(AQW 3840/17-22)

Ms Mallon: On 24 March I took the decision to close all MOT test centres and suspend all MOT tests for three months, until 22 June 2020. I took this decision because my top priority is the safety of customers and staff and to limit the spread of COVID 19. Therefore, customers, including the owners of four year old cars, who have booked an MOT within the next 3 months do not need to present for a test and a Temporary Exemption Certificate (TEC) will be issued. My officials are urgently working on a solution to resolve this issue for taxis as PSV tests are subject to different legislation and regulations. Customers should continue to book their tests when they are due so that a TEC can be issued.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) what measures she is putting in place to help facilitate the practice of social distancing on public transport to protect drivers and customers from COVID-19; and (ii) whether she will issue any urgent guidance on COVID-19 for private taxi operators and customers.

(AQW 3841/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am acutely aware of the concerns that many communities and people have regarding the COVID-19 virus and how best to tackle the outbreak. My Department is working with all Departments, agencies, operators and the Public Health Agency to respond to and plan for this evolving situation. No effort will be spared in our work to tackle the outbreak and I have outlined the work undertaken on public transport and taxis below.

- (i) In response to the COVID-19 pandemic I took the decision on 30th March 2020 to further reduce the public transport network. These measures are being implemented following the NI Executive advice to stay at home and in line with the significant reductions in public transport numbers that we are seeing as the public follow that advice. This has allowed us to reduce the network to primarily protect citizens and keep people safe. My department also continues to work to protect our public services and provide resilience in responding to COVID 19. The changes to the timetables provide resilience in responding to COVID 19 and ensure we can continue to provide public transport coverage across the North of Ireland for essential workers at peak times. In introducing those changes a key priority has been to maintain the ability of passengers to follow social distancing guidance on public transport. Translink continue to monitor demand on individual services. Drivers have been instructed to limit passenger numbers to enable social distancing, with additional vehicles brought on should demand require it. Translink has also continued to liaise with the Public Health Agency on this matter. PHA has produced new posters on social distancing and these are being distributed throughout all vehicles and stations.
- (ii) I have been engaging with the taxi industry and have also issued an open letter to to set out the work that I am doing in my capacity as Infrastructure Minister and also the work I am doing with other Ministers across our Government. My officials are working hard to put new legislation in place so that within coming days I can grant an extension to the PSV testing period. My officials are working hard to find solutions to licensing and other regulation related challenges arising from this crisis.

While my responsibility for taxis only extends to the regulation of the industry, I am very aware of the increasing financial hardships this crisis is creating. I pushed hard with Executive colleagues to secure the self-employed financial package

announced by the British Government last week. This package has weaknesses, not least the delay until June for payment, which as an Executive we are pushing the British Government to address. With Executive colleagues, I will continue to press for more assistance.

I also know that social distancing is a real worry and a challenge for those taxi drivers continuing to provide a service to the public. The Department for Economy is the Department responsible for issuing this guidance. I have been engaging with the Minister for Economy and am assured that guidance on social distancing, to keep taxi drivers and their customers safe, is being prepared as quickly as possible.

With the numbers of taxi journeys greatly reducing, there is also now a real opportunity to explore how taxi drivers can play their part in the emergency response to this crisis. To look at, for example, opportunities for delivering food and vital supplies or to get patients to essential appointments. To help progress this, I have raised this with Executive colleagues to examine how taxis can be re-purposed to support the emergency efforts. I am pleased to tell you that my officials are already working together with the Department for Communities and, through them, local government to explore how this can be done. The Department for Communities will lead on this.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) whether she has engaged with the British Government in order to provide emergency transport for citizens from across the island of Ireland whose flights have been cancelled due to COVID-19 in Spain; and (ii) has she engaged with her counterparts in Dublin to co-ordinate an all-Ireland response. **(AQW 3843/17-22)**

Ms Mallon: Responsibility for aviation matters in Northern Ireland remains a reserved function of the United Kingdom (UK) Department for Transport (DfT). I have not therefore been directly engaged with either the British Government or my counterparts in Dublin regarding this matter.

However I understand that both Jet2 and EasyJet recently operated a number of additional flights from Spain to the Belfast International Airport, and that Aer Lingus and Ryanair operated additional flights from Spain to the Republic of Ireland as well. In addition the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office and The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Ireland have been providing on-line advice for travellers in Spain returning home.

Department of Justice

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) how many staff are employed within her Department's information service; (ii) of these, how many are classed as press officers; and (iii) the annual cost of this service. **(AQW 3604/17-22)**

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): There are a total of 6 staff, all of which are press officers, seconded from Executive Information Service in my department. The staffing costs are estimated at £335,598 annually.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice what plans she has to mark the centenary of the formation of the Ulster Special Constabulary. **(AQW 3679/17-22)**

Mrs Long: My Department has no plans to mark the centenary of the formation of the Ulster Special Constabulary.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Justice to detail when her Department last issued formal guidance to medical practitioners involved in assessing applications and appeals for payments under the PSNI injury on duty schemes. **(AQW 3749/17-22)**

Mrs Long: The Northern Ireland Policing Board appoints Selected Medical Practitioners who consider applications made under the Scheme, whilst my Department appoints Medical Referees for the purposes of medical appeals.

Joint formal guidance by the Department of Justice and the Northern Ireland Policing Board was last reviewed in September 2016 and can be viewed on the Department's website.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Justice to detail what contribution her Department is making to address the recorded decrease in crime outcomes for older people. **(AQW 3826/17-22)**

Mrs Long: Addressing the recorded decrease in crime outcomes for older people is an operational matter for PSNI. However speeding up justice and ensuring support for victims through the justice system, which assists quicker and better outcomes is a matter for my Department.

You will be aware that the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland published his report on Crime and Justice: The Experience of Older People in Northern Ireland (available at <https://www.copni.org/media/1540/206567-online-a4-crime-report-56p.pdf>). This report was discussed at the recent motion on older people's experience of crime and the justice system

on 3 March 2020. The report makes a number of recommendations aimed at improving the experience of older people who have been victims of crime, including speeding up justice and improving outcomes.

The Department is currently working on these recommendations, in conjunction with other delivery partners, with an initial draft action plan prepared.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Justice to confirm whether she will seek to roll-out the Support Responder Initiative for older victims of crime in Ards and North Down to other parts of Northern Ireland, including North Antrim.

(AQW 3827/17-22)

Mrs Long: Addressing the fear of crime, particularly in older people who are vulnerable, is a key area of work for my Department. Whilst figures show that older people are statistically less likely to be the victim of crime, they also show that older people have the highest level of fear of crime.

In recognising the impact that crime can have on an older victim, my Department worked with the Commissioner for Older People, the PSNI and St John Ambulance to develop a pilot for a Support Responder Service for older victims of crime.

This service launched in December 2018 in two Council areas (Ards & North Down and Lisburn & Castlereagh), providing immediate practical and emotional support to older people if they become victims of crime. It is designed to reduce the immediate impact of crime on an older person. The service was reviewed in December 2019 and it was noted that uptake was limited due mainly to immediate support being provided by family and/or friends.

The service continues to operate in the two council areas and consideration is being given to extending the service to at least one other council area at this time.

Partners remain open to an extension of the scheme. However further rollout

into other Council areas will be dependent on demand as assessed by PSNI and St John Ambulance being in a position to recruit and train volunteers for the service.

Department for the Economy

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister for the Economy, in light of our successful peace process, how she intends to fulfil local tourism potential.

(AQO 55/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): Political stability over the past two decades and the normalisation of society in Northern Ireland over that period, has allowed us to very successfully market Northern Ireland as an attractive tourism destination.

As the member will be aware, tourism has now become a very important sector within the local economy, with tourists now spending one billion pounds annually across Northern Ireland and employing almost sixty five thousand people.

Since 2000, we have seen visitor numbers from Great Britain & overseas rise from just over one million to two million two hundred and eighteen thousand, and spend from two hundred and thirty five million pounds to five hundred and sixty one million pounds.

The sixty five thousand jobs supported represents eight point seven percent of employee jobs in Northern Ireland showing that the sector can deliver meaningful benefit to all parts of Northern Ireland as well as employing people from all sections of society.

Tourism Northern Ireland and Tourism Ireland jointly launched a new tourism brand Northern Ireland - Embrace a Giant Spirit at the World Travel Market in London last November. This was an important development and will help us to continue to promote Northern Ireland as a must see destination.

My officials are currently working to bring forward a draft Tourism Strategy for public consultation later this year, which will set out how we intend to continue on a journey of sustainable tourism growth over the next decade.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for the Economy whether she plans to develop a manufacturing strategy.

(AQO 51/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Manufacturing comprises a wide and diverse range of industries and, despite a number of setbacks and challenges, remains at the very heart of business and industry in Northern Ireland. It contributes to 11.2% of all jobs and accounts for 50.8% of our external sales.

I do not have any plans to develop a dedicated manufacturing strategy. However the Northern Ireland Economic Strategy will set a clear direction to ensure the appropriate support and policy instruments are in place, in terms of skills, innovation and research and development that will collectively continue to assist growth in manufacturing and the wider economy.

My Department and Invest NI will also continue to provide support for manufacturing. Over the past five years, Invest NI has offered £294 million of support to support for the manufacturing sector in NI.

I recognise that our exit from the EU may present challenges for manufacturing. My focus will be on implementation of the NI Protocol to ensure our access to, and place within, the UK internal market.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy how she proposes to counter the impact of a regulatory and customs border in the Irish Sea.

(AQO 47/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The UK Government has promised that there will be unfettered access for our businesses to the whole of the UK internal market.

I intend to hold them to that promise.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for the Economy to outline the number of small savers yet to receive payment from the Scheme of Arrangement, following the collapse of the Presbyterian Mutual Society.

(AQO 49/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: No saver who had shares and / or a loan in the Presbyterian Mutual Society has yet to receive a payment from the Scheme of Arrangement.

Savers who invested less than £20,000 in total received a payment of 100% of their shares and / or 85% of their loans.

Savers who invested more than £20,000 in total received a payment between 77% and 85% of the value of their holdings before deducting an individually agreed voluntary deferral.

Payments were made in August 2011.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department will commission a study on the causes and long-term economic effects of the outward migration of students from Northern Ireland.

(AQO 48/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The outward migration of students is an ongoing trend, with a quarter of Northern Ireland students studying elsewhere in the UK and the Republic of Ireland every year. There are many causes of this, with some students being 'determined leavers' and some being 'reluctant' leavers. This outward flow of students is not a recent phenomenon and has been ongoing for a number of decades.

My Department continues to assess the outward migration of students annually, however, I am keen to commission a more in-depth study into this matter.

In addition, my Department is currently working with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development to develop evidence and recommendations on addressing Northern Ireland's skills challenges. This will inform a new Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland, to be launched at the end of this year. Evidence gathered to date has highlighted that addressing current and anticipated skills imbalances in Northern Ireland's labour market is a key priority for our economy.

As part of this work, the OECD has highlighted an opportunity to consider how inward and outward labour mobility impacts our economy, and what measures can be put in place to ensure our approach actively supports economic development.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for the Economy what actions her Department is taking to secure regional air connectivity.

(AQO 52/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Regional air connectivity is essential to the growth of the Northern Ireland economy. My Department works with airlines and airports in a number of ways.

The Department currently provides financial support to airlines in the form of Co-operative and Destination Marketing through the All-Ireland body Tourism Ireland (TI). Destination marketing involves marketing Northern Ireland/Ireland in key external markets as a means of driving inbound tourism. Co-operative marketing is when TIL works directly with an airline to market that airlines route into NI.

I have written to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Secretary of State for Transport asking to meet to discuss the recently announced review of regional air connectivity and provide input. My officials are also currently making arrangements to discuss the review with colleagues in the two Departments.

We have, in partnership with the Department for Transport, confirmed funding for the City of Derry airport to London Southend Public Service Obligation flight until 31 March 2021.

My Department is always willing to consider any requests for support from airports/airlines that deliver value for money and are compliant with EU State Aid regulations.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister for the Economy to detail what progress has been made to improve the provision of broadband in rural areas.

(AQO 54/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Since 2007, over £77m of public investment has been channelled into broadband initiatives by my Department and its predecessor Departments, to encourage private sector upgrade to broadband networks, primarily in rural areas and where the market alone would not invest.

In line with the draft Programme for Government 2016 - 2021, my Department has developed Project Stratum to utilise the £150m additional broadband funding from the Confidence and Supply Agreement, together with a further £15m contribution from the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, to build on previous achievements and improve internet connectivity for those premises currently unable to access broadband speeds of 30 Megabits per second or greater, primarily across rural areas of Northern Ireland.

Project Stratum is at mid-procurement stage, with contract award expected in mid-2020. Through this procurement process, my Department will seek to maximise broadband coverage across the intervention area through the utilisation of the total £165m public funding, along with an anticipated industry contribution.

On 16 December 2019, my Department published its response to the Open Market Review EU State aid public consultation. This confirmed a target intervention area of some 97,000 premises.

However, upon receipt of updated supplier data and following a nationwide data refresh by Openreach this month, the number of premises requiring intervention will be reduced. The revised number will be shared as soon as it is available.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Mr Dunne asked the Assembly Commission why there is evidence of water leakage from the roof in Parliament Buildings, given the roof replacement project in 2014.

(AQW 3715/17-22)

Mr K Buchanan (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): It is not unusual in large construction projects, particularly those involving repair and refurbishment work, for issues to arise in subsequent years relating to the works that were carried out. Although the roof project was successfully completed in 2014 to provide a waterproof solution to a problem that had plagued Parliament Buildings for many years, there were and continue to be issues to be resolved under the terms of the contract.

One such issue, water ingress on the 3rd floor South corridor, first came to light shortly after the handover of the roof project and was addressed at that time, as a defect, by the contractor. Recently, however, a similar problem came to light in the same vicinity, causing water damage to the corridor area on the 3rd floor. The contractor and the design team responsible for the roof project have been instructed to address this and investigative work has begun to determine the source and how this will be repaired.

Once the cause has been identified, the problem will be addressed as a latent defect under the terms of the contract and the damaged areas made good at no cost to the Assembly Commission.

Another issue currently being investigated is a sporadic water leak in the vicinity of the North lift lobby on the fourth floor. This problem arose after the roof project was completed and initial investigations suggest that it relates to the structure of the lift as opposed to an issue that was included in the remit of the project. Building Services Branch is considering how best to address this issue.

Mr Carroll asked the Assembly Commission whether agency staff employed in Parliament Buildings can avail of measures similar to agency workers in the Civil Service in relation to job protection throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 3875/17-22)

Mr O'Dowd (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The Assembly Commission has replicated the measures introduced in the Civil Service in respect of agency workers. These include support for agency workers if they become ill or are required to self-isolate, support for agency workers who require time off work to make alternative childcare arrangements and support for the continuation of salary payments if alternative working arrangements cannot be found by either the Assembly Commission or by the recruitment agency.

In line with the Civil Service, these measures will remain under review as the position with COVID-19 develops.

Mr Hilditch asked the Assembly Commission what action it is taking to address COVID-19.

(AQO 427/17-22)

Mr K Buchanan (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): Since 10 March 2020, a COVID-19 Response Group has been in operation. At its inception, the purpose of the Group was to:

- Monitor advice provided by the PHA and NHS in relation to COVID-19;
- Provide Parliament Buildings users with information and advice issued by the PHA and NHS;
- Ensure that practicable actions recommended by the PHA and NHS in relation to workplaces and public buildings are implemented;

- Ensure that the Assembly Commission has planned for and is ready to respond to future developments; and
- Maintain regular contact with other legislatures to share best practice and learning.

In addition, the Speaker has met with officials to review the Assembly Commission's actions by way of response. The Assembly Commission has also met to review the emerging situation.

In terms of specific actions, the Assembly Commission has maintained a strict policy of adhering to Public Health Authority and Government guidance on many of the aspects of dealing with COVID-19 that have now become an established part of daily life such as regular hand-washing and social distancing.

As this is a fast-moving and rapidly evolving situation, the Group has met every other day since the first meeting on 10 March. Updates are provided to all users of Parliament Buildings after each meeting. These updates have included advice on the various services within Parliament Buildings that have been curtailed at this time including the closure of the building to the public, necessary changes to catering arrangements and the widespread use of electronic communications to limit face-to-face interactions for various services. The Group has arranged for more specific advice to be provided to Members on a range of topics including support for Members' staff and support for facilitating home working for Members' staff.

The Assembly Commission has also taken its legal responsibilities as an employer seriously. The necessary steps have been taken to ensure that those staff who have a serious underlying medical condition (as advised by official guidance) are no longer working in Parliament Buildings and a comprehensive programme of home working arrangements has been put in place. Naturally, there remains a cadre of staff whose presence is required in the building but that number of staff will be kept to the minimum that is absolutely necessary to support Assembly business.

While not a matter for the Assembly Commission, it is however worth noting that there has also been considerable liaison with the Executive, the Speaker has made practical arrangements for the conduct of plenary business and Committee Chairs have met to review the need for Committee meetings to take place.

The Assembly Commission will continue to assess the range of services required in Parliament Building, in close liaison with Executive colleagues and with its staff to seek to ensure that there is a safe working environment in Parliament Buildings.

Mr McGrath asked the Assembly Commission what plans it has to make the Assembly chamber more accessible for people with disabilities.

(AQO 431/17-22)

Mr Butler (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The Assembly Commission is very aware of the need to ensure that the Assembly Chamber is accessible for people with disabilities and a number of alterations and improvements have been carried out for that purpose in recent years.

In addition, temporary measures have been put in place specifically to improve access for wheelchair users. The reduction in the number of Members provides the opportunity to design a permanent solution for better access and the Speaker has indicated to parties that this is a priority in any future work in the Chamber.

Therefore, the Assembly Commission will continue to give consideration to opportunities to improve the facilities in the Chamber for people with disabilities

and will consult with Members when any workable proposals have been developed.

Mr Harvey asked the Assembly Commission what steps are being taken to mitigate the threat of interruption to Assembly business as a result of COVID-19.

(AQO 433/17-22)

Mr K Buchanan (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): Since 10 March 2020, a COVID-19 Response Group has been in operation. At its inception, the purpose of the Group was to:

- Monitor advice provided by the PHA and NHS in relation to COVID-19;
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The Assembly Commission will continue to assess the range of services required in Parliament Building, in close liaison with Executive colleagues and with its staff to seek to ensure that there is a safe working environment in Parliament Buildings.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 10 April 2020

Written Answers

The Executive Office

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they will be in Northern Ireland for the publication of the RHI Inquiry report.
(AQW 1979/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): Prior to the release of the publication date, we had accepted an invitation to an event overseas but due to the situation with COVID-19 we decided not to travel at that time.

Ms Sugden asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when they intend to publish a successive child poverty strategy, as committed to in New Decade, New Approach.
(AQW 3154/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: In line with New Decade, New Approach, I will be publishing a timescale for the delivery a range of social strategies, including anti-poverty in the coming weeks. The principles and practice of citizen and community engagement, co-design and co-production will be a key part of the development and delivery of these strategies.

It is my intention that the co-design group for the anti-poverty strategy will consider and make recommendations to me on the requirement for a stand-alone child poverty strategy or alternatively for the development of a single anti-poverty strategy that considers and make recommendations for all sections of the community, including children.

Mr Easton asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the Irish Language Commissioner will be fully accountable to them.
(AQW 3261/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: The Northern Ireland Act 1998 (Amendment No.2) Bill, as published, alongside the New Decade New Approach Agreement provides for the appointment of the Irish Language Commissioner by the First Minister and deputy First Minister acting jointly (the Ministers).

The Bill further provides for the Commissioner to be a corporation sole with powers to do whatever is appropriate for the exercise of the functions of the office. In exercising these functions the Bill provides for Ministers to give guidance in respect of proposed best practice standards for the use of the Irish language by a public authority and for Ministers approval of those standards. There is also power for Ministers to give directions as to the exercise of the Commissioner's functions.

The Commissioner must also provide to the Department annually a report on the carrying out of its functions and a statement of financial accounts.

Mrs D Kelly asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme.
(AQO 377/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: To date 1,815 refugees have been resettled here under the Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme. This has required a high degree of collaboration from departments, the community and voluntary sector and the refugees themselves to ensure the families are supported to build a new life, realise their full potential and be active members of our communities. Much has been achieved to date.

Given the current Covid-19 pandemic, we have agreed to postpone the arrival of the last group under the current scheme due to arrive in April in order to minimise the risks to staff, volunteers and the refugees themselves.

The current scheme, which was due to come to an end in March 2020, has been consolidated into a new Global Resettlement Scheme as announced by the Home Secretary on 17 June 2019. We agreed to continue to receive refugees under the new scheme for a year initially, principally to allow an evaluation of the scheme to take place here.

We will continue to liaise with the Home Office on future arrivals as the situation around Covid-19 develops.

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the level of input the Executive Office has had to the Joint Ministerial Committee (EU Negotiations).

(AQO 378/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: We attended the most recent Joint Ministerial Committee (EU Negotiations) meeting, held on 28 January in Cardiff.

The meeting focused on the role of the devolved administrations in the negotiations on the future relationship between the UK and EU.

We emphasised the importance of meaningful engagement and stressed that we have a key role to play in all future negotiations to ensure the protection of our economy and citizens' rights after Brexit.

At that meeting, we successfully secured UKG agreement to a dedicated protocol workstream and relevant commitments in New Decade New Approach.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Dr Archibald asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) to detail the number of trees that are felled every year by the local forestry and timber industry; and (ii) for his assessment of the impact of this on his Department's plans to plant an additional 18 million trees over the next decade.

(AQW 3837/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Each year approximately 1.14 million trees are felled in the Department's forests and a further 0.11 million trees are felled in other woodlands. Both the Department's forests and other woodlands where trees have been felled are required to be replanted or naturally regenerated with trees, except under certain exemptions, in accordance with the Forestry Act (Northern Ireland) 2010.

The new Programme of Afforestation, which I announced in the Assembly, will plant 18 million trees to create 9,000 hectares of new woodland by 2030, which will be in addition to the regeneration or replanting of woodlands following felling.

Department for Communities

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail how many (i) individuals were referred for social security benefit sanctions; and (ii) sanctions or adverse decisions were imposed since 2014, broken down by sanction reason.

(AQW 249/17-22)

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities):

- (i) In 2015/16 1,538 individuals were referred for consideration of an Employment & Support Allowance sanction. The number of individuals referred for a sanction in respect of other social security benefits from 2014 is not available as this data is not collected.
- (ii) Information on the number of sanctions imposed for each social security benefit, together with the reasons for imposing the sanctions, from 2016/17 through to 2018/19 is provided below where the data is available. This Information for 2019/20 is not yet available but will be published in due course. Information for 2014 through to 2016 has been provided in responses to previous Assembly Questions AQW 9384/16-21 and AQW 3792/16-21.

More detailed information on sanctions is available in my Department's Annual Reports on Welfare Supplementary Payments, Discretionary Support, Standards of Advice and Assistance and Sanctions. These Reports have been laid before the Northern Ireland Assembly and are available on the Departmental website at the following link: -

<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/welfare-supplementary-payments-discretionary-support-standards-advice-assistance-and-sanctions>

I am currently considering how the Department uses its powers to sanction people. Whilst conditionality is a key part of the existing rules, I want to further explore how we can use that to incentivise rather than punish people, and to make sure we have the necessary safeguards in place to protect the most vulnerable and particularly those with underlying health conditions.

I plan to make further announcements about this in the time ahead.

Sanctions**Universal Credit**

Reason for Applying Sanction	Number of sanctions imposed	
	2017/18	2018/19
Failure to comply with interview requirement	<10	1,020
Failure to undertake reasonable job search	<10	80
Fail to meet other work related requirements	<10	20
Left work voluntarily / or lost job through misconduct	<10	20
Total Number of Sanctions Imposed	10**	1,140

< 10 (cannot be reported)

** Universal Credit was introduced in NI on 27 September 2017 so this figure covers 27 September – 31 March 2018.

Income Support

Reason for Applying Sanction	Number of sanctions imposed	
	2017/18	2018/19
Failure to attend work focused interview	60*	250
1 strike / 2 strike fraud penalty	0	20
Total Number of Sanctions Imposed	60	270

No data available before 2017/18

* Sanctions were introduced on 29 January 2018, so this figure covers 29 January - 31 March 2018.

Employment & Support Allowance

Reason for Applying Sanction	Number of sanctions imposed		
	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Failure to attend work focused interview	60	40	70
1 strike / 2 strike fraud penalty	0	0	20
Total Number of Sanctions Imposed	60	40	90

In 2015/16 there were 1,538 Employment & Support Allowance sanction referrals for consideration.

Jobseeker's Allowance

Reason for Applying Sanction	Number of sanctions imposed		
	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Failure to attend / failure to sign	5,140	2,060	600
Failure to participate in Steps 2 Success	3,390	1,550	540
Refusal to apply for a job	580	100	<10
1 Strike / 2 Strike fraud penalty	20	30	30
Failure to comply with direction	<10	<10	<10
Lost job/place through misconduct	100	40	60
Left job voluntarily	210	50	120
Other	<10	<10	<10
Total Number of Sanctions Imposed	9,460	3,840	1,350

< 10 (cannot be reported)

Figures in all of the above tables are rounded to the nearest ten to protect individual records and totals may not sum due to rounding.

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister for Communities when the recommendations of Private Rented Sector in Northern Ireland – Proposals for Change report will be implemented.

(AQW 3219/17-22)

Ms Hargey: Housing, and in particular the role and regulation of the Private Rented Sector, is one of my priorities. My Department's consultation exercise on proposals for change to the role and regulation of the private rented sector ended on 3 April 2017. The Department is currently carrying out a comprehensive review of the role and regulation of the private rented sector to ensure the regulatory framework and supporting policy improve standards for the benefit of both tenants and landlords. The areas being reviewed include:

- Supply
- Affordability
- Security of tenure
- Tenancy management
- Property standards
- Dispute resolution

I am currently considering how to take forward the recommendations in that review, and what other measures may be necessary.

Department of Education

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education how free school meal provision will be maintained in the event of school closures.
(AQW 3662/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): The Executive has placed lead responsibility on the Department for Communities on feeding vulnerable children and families. The Department of Education has been working closely with the Department for Communities to ensure families do not experience hardship as a result of schools closing. On Thursday 26 March, the Communities Minister Deirdre Hargey and I announced these plans. The Department of Education's input to this process has been to ensure families in receipt of free school meals receive £2.70 per child per day for each day of term the schools are closed. This money will be paid to families on a fortnightly basis and to date around 51,000 families have received their first payment.

The Department for Communities is leading on plans to ensure that low income families and vulnerable people get the vital support they need in response to the Coronavirus outbreak.

Further details can be found at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/news/ministers-take-action-relation-free-school-meals-payment-0>

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education what guidance has been issued to schools catering for the children of essential workers as to the staff-pupil ratio which should be operated.

(AQW 3887/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department issued a range of guidance to schools on 24 March which included advice on the implications of class sizes and teachers pupil ratios, which should be assessed based on what is being delivered in the classroom and bearing in mind guidance in relation to PHA advice about social distancing. For non-statutory pre-school providers, the ratio of adults to children is 1:8.

Here is a link to the full guidance to date:

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/faqs-schools-opening-children-key-workers-24-march-2020>

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education whether he will introduce a scheme of financial assistance for teachers currently on the Northern Ireland Substitute Teacher Register who have been forced to self-isolate due to COVID-19.

(AQW 3907/17-22)

Mr Weir: Substitute teachers will continue to receive their normal pay over the period of the Covid-19 crisis, for any periods that they have been engaged to work. Normal pay applies regardless of whether people are quarantined, medically advised to self-isolate, unable to work due to caring responsibilities or unable to attend their workplace due to closure.

I recognise that some workers in education, such as the substitute teaching workforce providing day-to-day cover, will no longer have access to secure work. Proposals have been developed for a hardship fund for those substitute teachers who were providing day-to-day cover in recent months but whose regular work has now ended as a result of Covid-19.

A separate bid for this has been made to the Department of Finance and this will be dependent on additional funding.

Department of Finance

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance how far the normal rules governing procurement have been relaxed in terms of the Coronavirus crisis; and how were procurement rules applied in terms of the order of Personal Protection Equipment from China in association with the Government of the Republic of Ireland.

(AQW 3906/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): These are not normal times and there are procurement rules for urgent contracts which can be reverted to in such circumstances.

Procurement rules provide for direct negotiation with suppliers for reasons of extreme urgency to respond to unforeseeable events. The rules also allow members states to act jointly to procure supplies, works and services.

The Cabinet Office and the EU Commission have published new guidance highlighting the provisions within the public procurement rules that can be used to respond to urgent requirements during the COVID-19 emergency.

The Executive has also approved Procurement Guidance Note 01/20 – Supplier Relief due to COVID-19- This modifies the approach for existing contracts, e.g. prompt payment to improve cash flow.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance, in light of his statement in the Assembly on 31 March 2020 when he stated that, as of last week, we have a joint approach to PPE procurement, the one that is identified in the joint order with the Government in Dublin, to detail (i) whether an order was placed, in association with the Government of the Republic of Ireland, with China for personal protection equipment; (ii) when any such order was placed; (iii) what was ordered; (iv) whether there was a written contract; (v) who signed any such contract; (vi) what was the total contract price; (vii) what was the contracted delivery date; (viii) what procurement process was followed and who approved it; (ix) for which departments and services was the equipment intended; (x) has such equipment been delivered and, if not, when it is expected; and (xi) was the order approved by the Executive.

(AQW 3914/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The joint order with the Government of the Republic of Ireland was not completed due to major economic powers entering the market. However, I can confirm that the consignment of 5 million PPE items organised through the British government has arrived today.

Department of Health

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to detail the reported underspend on all services provided by each Health and Social Care Trust, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2501/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): In order to ensure Health and Social Care Trusts achieve a breakeven position, the budget for each Trust is managed, over the course of the financial year, at an organisation level, with pressures in one area being covered by easements in another.

Individual Trusts' annual financial performance is reported through their annual accounts which may be accessed via individual Trust's websites.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health how many people in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust have received direct payments for carers in the last five years, broken down by (i) age of recipient; and (ii) nature of the illness or disability.

(AQW 2677/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number of people in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust who have received direct payments for carers is not available.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to detail the amount of money raised by each Health and Social Care Trust through care home provision in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2743/17-22)

Mr Swann: Due to the ongoing situation in relation to the COVID19 outbreak, we are unable to provide a response to this question.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health (i) whether his Department will test all suspected cases of COVID-19; and (ii) to outline how the Department will track the virus should this not be the case.

(AQW 3661/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

I am conscious that the Assembly not only has a desire, but also a duty to request the latest information relating to this unprecedented and rapidly changing situation, and I am therefore committed to providing Members with regular updates as developments occur. I trust that you will agree that it is in the public interest that my officials and I remain primarily focused on the task in hand over the coming period in relation to COVID-19 and I will therefore not be in a position to answer your written question at this time.

I appreciate your understanding.

Robin Swann, MLA

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health what measures have been taken to increase the usage of labs for the processing of COVID-19 testing.

(AQW 3910/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether he plans to take control of private hospitals and healthcare facilities for use in tackling COVID-19.

(AQW 3912/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health to detail the types and quantities of personal protection equipment delivered within the last week to (i) each Health and Social Care Trust; (ii) the NI Ambulance Service; (iii) the NI Fire and Rescue Service; and (iv) other agencies within his Department's responsibility.

(AQW 3913/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

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I appreciate your understanding.

Department for Infrastructure

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline plans to implement a pedestrian crossing at Mulkern's on Forkhill Road, Newry.

(AQW 2774/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): Following requests from elected representatives my Department has programmed traffic surveys to inform the assessment for the provision of a controlled pedestrian crossing at this location. Once the surveys have been completed, the proposal will be assessed in accordance with the current policy, to determine if it meets the minimum criteria required to merit further development for the provision of a pedestrian crossing.

Progress of schemes will be dependent on the funding allocated to my Department in the 2020/21 budget.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for Infrastructure when she will answer AQW 951/17-22.

(AQW 2823/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I refer the Member to my response to AQW 951/17-22.

Mr Wells asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of the impact to pedestrians who are in collision with vehicles which have bull bars attached.

(AQW 2968/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department has liaised with the PSNI and there is currently little recorded evidence available which details collisions involving pedestrians with vehicles which have bull bars fitted. I am therefore unable to offer an accurate assessment of the impact to pedestrians who are in collision with vehicles which have bull bars attached to them.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) how many staff are employed in her Department's information service; (ii) how many are classed as press officers; and (iii) what is the annual cost of this service.

(AQW 3603/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My department has four Executive Information Service Press Officers broken down as follows: one Principal Press Officer, and three Senior Press Officers (FTE)

The total salary cost for EIS Press Officers in my department from 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019 was £211,694.50.

Mr McCann asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) for an update on the financial position of the Water Service; and (ii) how she will ensure that it is fit for purpose.

(AQW 3789/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In Public Expenditure terms, I can report that NI Water currently has a cash resource DEL allocation of £105.6m and capital DEL spend of £151.4m for 2019/20. NI Water has delivered over £60m in annually recurring savings since formation in 2007. In 2018/19, NI Water achieved its best ever performance for the quality of drinking water and the environmental compliance for used water.

However, these results mask the underlying problem of lack of capacity for new customers, particularly in relation to waste water. Additionally, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic shutdown, has had an immediate impact in reducing NI Water's income from non domestic customers, and increasing operational expenditure needs in 2019/20. The response to COVID-19 will also require additional funding support for NI Water to operate safely and effectively into 2020/21. I have advised the Department of Finance of these additional financial pressures.

In terms of looking forward, NI Water has submitted a business plan to the Utility Regulator, detailing investment priorities for the next Price Control period from 2021-2027. The Regulator will make a draft determination which will be consulted on in summer 2020. I will be working with my Executive colleagues to secure adequate finances for a fully funded water and sewerage service. Without this, we will not be able to deliver the services needed to support affordable homes, economic growth, public health and a safe environment.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will publish, or place in the Assembly Library, the advice by her Chief Planner to all Council Heads of Planning on the implications of the COVID-19 emergency for the planning system.
(AQW 3900/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Chief Planners Update (5) dated 27 March on COVID 19 issues affecting the planning system in Northern Ireland was published on the DfI website on 27 March. The link is attached below:

<https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/chief-planners-updates>

Department for the Economy

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for the Economy whether she is in a position to offer reassurance to EU workers, currently employed in the hospitality sector, that their employment and residency rights will not be affected as a result of the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union.
(AQW 1461/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): This has been passed to the First Minister and deputy First Minister for response as the EU Settlement Scheme is a departmental responsibility in The Executive Office.

All EU, EEA or Swiss citizens must apply to the EU Settlement Scheme to continue living in the UK after 30 June 2021. The Executive Office is working closely with the Home Office to facilitate and support the implementation of the scheme in Northern Ireland.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has met, or plans to meet, the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation of the Irish Government.
(AQW 3421/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I have not yet had the opportunity to meet with the Minister of Business, Enterprise and Innovation. When the new Irish Government is in place, I will engage with them on areas that are mutually beneficial.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Ms P Bradley asked the Assembly Commission to outline the difference in cost to the Assembly of employing the three on-site tradesmen directly, as opposed to paying via a contractor.
(AQO 434/17-22)

Mr Blair (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): In common with the majority of the public sector estate, the Assembly Commission avails of a pan-governmental collaborative framework for planned maintenance and minor works, tendered by Central Procurement Directorate, Department of Finance, to undertake the maintenance of Parliament Buildings as well as relevant minor works building projects.

Due to the nature of our business and the heritage of Parliament Buildings, the Assembly Commission uses the services of a small team of tradespeople, consisting of two joiners and an electrician, based in Parliament Buildings, under the terms of the framework.

In addition to their own trades, these workers carry out a supervisory role in respect of other construction-related work being undertaken by other tradespeople, also under the terms of the framework agreement.

The three tradespeople based in Parliament Buildings are employed by H&J Martin, the current provider, under the terms of the framework agreement. The Commission separately records the cost of all tradespeople who provide services under the framework (for example, painters, plumbers, plasterers, etc.) including the three workers who are based in Parliament Buildings. From these costs, the Commission typically pays approximately £220k per annum to the contractor for the services of the three tradespeople.

The likely costs of directly employing the required staffing levels to undertake the full range of services that are available under the framework is not known at this time as no analysis of the grade of staff that would be employed has been undertaken. These costs will include salary costs including all employer's pension and national insurance contributions. In addition, the cost of specialist training, the cost of tools and equipment and the cost of the transport of materials, etc. would need to be assessed as these costs are included in the current contractual arrangements.

The Assembly Commission has already commenced a review of options for the future provision of maintenance and minor works building services for the Commission and a range of options, including direct appointment of tradespeople, will be investigated in that study.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 17 April 2020

Written Answers

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Dr Archibald asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, with regard to the Forests for our Future programme, whether he plans to introduce restrictions or regulations on the forestry and timber industry to prevent deforestation.

(AQW 3835/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): My Department already regulates deforestation under the Environmental Impact Assessment (Forestry) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006 (as amended). These regulations were last amended in 2017 following a public consultation and I have no plans to introduce further amendments at present.

Department of Finance

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance (i) what representations have been made to HM Treasury in respect of recently self-employed with no 2018/19 tax return; and (ii) whether she will press for recently self-employed people to be given four weeks from 6 April 2020 to file their 2019/2020 tax return as a means of qualifying such individuals for the lump-sum payment under the Self-employment Income Support Scheme in June 2020.

(AQW 3908/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I have pressed the Treasury a number of times now to ensure that proper support is available to all those impacted by this crisis.

In terms of the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme (SEIS) specifically, my department has raised a number of issues with the Treasury, including eligibility and whether it would be possible to allow 2019/20 tax returns to be submitted early and income assessed on that basis. The Treasury responded that there are a number of operational reasons why they could not agree to this, but referred to the other support that is available to those that started trading after April 2019.

Rest assured, I am committed to addressing the gaps that exist in the current schemes and will continue to press Treasury so that adequate support is provided for all those that need it during this difficult time.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance to detail his Department's efforts to access supplies of personal protection equipment.

(AQW 3911/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Construction and Procurement Delivery (CPD) is working closely with Health, Justice and other public bodies to source Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) items locally and globally.

In addition, we are working on a 4 Nations basis to source and co-ordinate PPE items. We saw an example of this cooperation when our Health Service received 5.5 million PPE items from England at the beginning of April.

CPD, Department of Health (DoH) and InvestNI are also working with local manufacturers on repurposing to produce essential medical clothing, PPE items and hand sanitisation products.

My Department intends to continue to work collaboratively with all jurisdictions and sectors to help staff on the frontline and those fighting the COVID-19 virus.

Department of Health

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Health (i) whether victims of crime will be considered within the new mental health strategy; (ii) who will take the lead on victims affected by crime due to mental health issues; and (iii) whether he will consider a victims forum to inform mental health issues.

(AQW 1568/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): The work of my department is currently focussed on dealing with COVID-19. Once work resumes on a mental health strategy consideration will be given to issues related to mental health and crime.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health for an update on his Department's Brexit preparations in line with the Northern Ireland protocol; and how many people are working on ensuring compliance with the protocol.

(AQW 1970/17-22)

Mr Swann: The means by which the Northern Ireland Protocol may be implemented, and any corresponding impact this may have on the health and social care sector, is not yet fully known. My Department continues to engage extensively with the Department of Health and Social Care and other Whitehall Departments, the other Devolved Administrations, the Department of Health in the Republic of Ireland and with The Executive Office and other Northern Ireland Civil Service Departments regarding preparations relating to the Northern Ireland Protocol.

Work is being taken forward on a number of fronts including health security, regulation and supply of healthcare products (medicines, medical devices and clinical consumables), regulation relating to tobacco and E-cigarettes, and issues surrounding the movement of people, such as the Mutual Recognition of Professional Qualifications.

It is not possible to provide an exact number of staff working in this area. There are 6 posts which directly support Brexit preparations; however, there are others working within existing policy teams who support preparations as part of normal business. In recent weeks it has been necessary to reprioritise the work of my Department and it has been necessary to re-deploy some staff to deal with the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the situation is being monitored and is being kept under review.

Department for Infrastructure

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 642/17-22, to provide detail around the differentiation between Eastern Division and other divisions, especially around capital maintenance.

(AQW 1858/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): As outlined in my response to your AQW 642/17-22, capital maintenance is allocated to the four DfI Roads Divisions on the basis of need, using a range of weighted indicators tailored to each maintenance activity. Divisions also use these indicators when apportioning budget across District Council areas to ensure, as far as possible, equitable distribution of funds.

The four Divisions boundaries are coterminous with local government areas; the Table below shows which District Councils fall into each Roads Division. I have included an analysis of road lengths, by way of example, which is one of the indicators that is used to allocate budgets. Other indicators relate to traffic volumes and condition assessments of roads. Application of the weighted indicators provides a fair and equitable basis for budget allocation and results in Eastern Division receiving a relatively equitable capital maintenance allocation.

Division	Council	Route Length (km)
Eastern	Belfast	1,088.4
Eastern	Lisburn and Castlereagh	1,360.7
Eastern	Total	2,449.2
Northern	Antrim and Newtownabbey	1374.7
Northern	Causeway Coast and Glens	2,649.3
Northern	Mid and East Antrim	1748.0
Northern	Total	5,772.0
Southern	Ards and North Down	1,162.7
Southern	Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon	3,574.8
Southern	Newry, Mourne and Down	3,067.4
Southern	Total	7,804.9
Western	Derry City and Strabane	2,327.4

Division	Council	Route Length (km)
Western	Fermanagh and Omagh	3,985.6
Western	Mid Ulster	3,396.0
Western	Total	9,709.0
Grand Total		25,735.1

This information is available from my Departments website on Page 11 of my Departments Transport Statistics for 2018-2019 which are available via this HTML link <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/infrastructure/northern-ireland-transport-statistics-2018-2019-publication.pdf>.

Eastern Division's resource maintenance budget includes £2.5m for the cost of running the Traffic Information Control Centre and its associated traffic management equipment.

Department of Justice

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Justice what plans her Department has to address the issues raised in the Audit Office report, entitled Injury on duty schemes for officers in the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Prison Service.

(AQO 382/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): I welcome the recently published Northern Ireland Audit Office Report on Injury on Duty schemes for officers in the police service and the Northern Ireland Prison Service. My Department is considering the recommendations for the Police Service Injury on Duty scheme raised in the report in detail. The Department of Finance is also considering the recommendations in relation to the Northern Ireland Civil Service Injury on Duty scheme which includes the Northern Ireland Prison Service. A working group, led by my Department, has already been established to consider how best to ensure a proportionate use of public money in the future while providing an appropriate level of support to officers who have suffered injuries in the course of performing their duties.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of the commitment in New Decade New, Approach to introduce legislation to implement the Stormont House Agreement, to address Northern Ireland legacy issues.

(AQO 383/17-22)

Mrs Long: The UK Government announced a new approach for dealing with the legacy of the past on 18 March. This approach differs in a number of respects from the arrangements set out in the Stormont House Agreement, with a stronger focus on information recovery and the proposal that full investigations should only be undertaken in those cases in which there is a realistic prospect of a prosecution as a result of new compelling evidence. There would then be a legal bar on any future investigation. Instead of the ICIR and HIU sitting separately, as set out in the Stormont House Agreement, their intended functions would be brought together in a new Legacy Commission.

The Secretary of State has stated that he intends to begin an intensive period of engagement on the proposals with the Northern Ireland political parties and the Irish government. These have not yet commenced. Given the details provided in the Secretary of State's statement are limited, I am unable to make a comprehensive assessment of these latest proposals. I do, however, have significant reservations that what is outlined reflects the content of the Stormont House Agreement or the UK Government's Article 2 obligations, as well as how practicable they may be to operate in practice.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the development of a new, streamlined, advocacy support service for victims of domestic and sexual abuse.

(AQO 384/17-22)

Mrs Long: My officials have been working with key statutory and voluntary sector partners - including Victim Support NI, Women's Aid, Nexus, Men's Advisory Project and NSPCC – to develop a streamlined advocacy service to support victims of domestic and sexual violence and abuse across Northern Ireland. I intend to introduce the new service next year.

In practice, the service will build on existing services, by providing a co-ordinated response to the needs of victims. It will apply to those engaging with the criminal justice system, and regardless of the level of risk posed to them, their gender or age or where they live within Northern Ireland.

It is important to provide the best possible service within the funding that may be available and in this regard, my officials continue to work collaboratively with police colleagues – our intended funding partner - to finalise the detail of the model and how it could operate.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Justice to outline what measures are being taken to contain and mitigate the risk of COVID-19 in the Prison Service and prison population.

(AQO 385/17-22)

Mrs Long: It is important to note that while there has not to date been a coronavirus case in any of our prisons, the Prison Service take the threat presented by COVID19 extremely seriously and have undertaken significant work in preparation for the challenges an outbreak would bring in a custodial environment. This has included placing a small number of recent committals in isolation as a precaution.

Preparations have included the purchase of additional protective clothing for staff and the preparation of areas within each prison where prisoners suspected and or diagnosed with the virus can be accommodated. Both the Prison Service and our partners in the South Eastern Trust have been following guidance issued by the Public Health Agency which has also been provided to staff and prisoners.

The Director General has put in place specific contingency planning structures and established a dedicated team to oversee planning arrangements and to support Governors in dealing with the challenges they will inevitably face. The Prison Service recognise the importance of good communication and is committed to working with staff, prisoners, families and stakeholders as operational decisions are taken.

Notwithstanding the disruption and challenges ahead, supporting staff and keeping safe those in our care remains our primary focus. I know the House will join me in supporting the Prison Service as they seek to manage what is an unprecedented situation.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Justice what action she has taken to implement the recommendations of the May 2019 Report of the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland entitled Crime and Justice: The Experience of Older People in Northern Ireland Report, in line with the motion adopted without division in the Assembly on 3 March 2020.

(AQO 386/17-22)

Mrs Long: I would like to reassure the member that work on considering the recommendations in the Commissioner's report is being progressed. An initial action plan has been prepared and is being further developed by my officials in conjunction with our partner organisations.

While it is not within my Department's gift to deliver on all of the recommendations, discussions continue with other delivery partners within the criminal justice and other sectors.

My Department will work closely with the Commission to deliver on the recommendations and will discuss the Action Plan with the Commission before it is finalised.

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister of Justice for a timeline for the introduction of domestic homicide reviews in order to support best practice in safeguarding potential victims.

(AQO 387/17-22)

Mrs Long: I intend to introduce Domestic Homicide Reviews locally by the autumn. A recruitment exercise to identify suitable individuals to Chair the domestic homicide reviews is currently underway. Once appointed we will ensure that the Chairs have access to a period of appropriate training before commencing reviews.

The Chairs will work alongside a multi-agency panel to see what issues can be learnt from these tragic cases, to prevent future abuse and deaths. It is hoped to begin the reviews around autumn.

Worryingly there are, on average, 6 domestic homicides each year in Northern Ireland, with a domestic abuse incident every 17 minutes. Each domestic homicide is a tragedy, and behind every statistic there is a person, with family and friends, whose life has ended in traumatic circumstances. I want to do all I can to prevent this happening in the future.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of the Assets Recovery Community Scheme.

(AQO 388/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Assets Recovery Community Scheme, or "ARCS", is an important fund that has been used to good effect to prevent crime and reduce the fear of crime. It funds valuable initiatives – mainly in community settings – that are actively helping victims, or communities, or the environment, in support of a culture of lawfulness.

By redistributing the value of criminal assets that have been recovered through the Courts via confiscation orders, ARCS is not only helping to prevent crime and reduce the fear of crime but is also sending a strong message to those who seek to disregard the law and cause harm, that crime does not pay and that their activities will not be tolerated.

In early 2019 my Department announced an allocation of over £1.8 million under ARCS up to 31 March 2021, taking the total funding support provided to over £5million since the Scheme began. This was the first time that applications were invited for longer-term projects, allowing my Department to fund more strategic interventions. In addition to projects in local areas, a number of projects are operating on a Northern Ireland-wide basis. A range of interventions are being supported including drug support projects, restorative justice initiatives, youth diversionary projects, crime prevention projects and initiatives to reduce environmental and wildlife crime.

Mr Stewart asked the Minister of Justice what representations she has made to the Minister of Finance and HM Treasury on the position of police officers to help resolve the Northern Ireland public service pension scheme dispute.

(AQO 389/17-22)

Mrs Long: The impact of the McCloud judgment on all public service pension schemes is under active consideration. The police pension scheme, like all public sector pension schemes, take their direction from the Department of Finance with regard to the outcome of this judgment.

The employment tribunal cases relating to the Police Service of Northern Ireland have been stayed pending the final remedy of the McCloud judgment and, therefore, it is not appropriate for me to comment.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Justice to outline her plans for police training facilities.

(AQO 390/17-22)

Mrs Long: Decisions relating to plans for police training facilities are an operational matter for the Chief Constable. However, I can advise that the PSNI's Police College Redevelopment Board is currently developing a business case. My Department will consider that case, when received, as part of wider discussions with the PSNI on the Chief Constable's plans for transformational change.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice to outline how many military veterans are currently serving a custodial sentence.

(AQO 391/17-22)

Mrs Long: There are currently 33 individuals serving a custodial sentence who have self-disclosed the military as a previous employer.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Justice for an update on her plans to introduce an offence of controlling or coercive behaviour.

(AQO 392/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill received Executive approval on 16 March.

While I had previously indicated that the Bill would be introduced in April or May work took place at an accelerated pace to allow the Bill to be introduced on Tuesday 31 March. This is a significant step forward in our efforts to criminalise patterns of psychological and emotionally harmful behaviour through the creation of a domestic abuse offence.

While I have indicated to the Assembly that Royal Assent may be secured around April/May 2021, with the goodwill of the Committee in considering the Bill expediently, I would hope to be in a position to secure Royal Assent before this.

My officials continue to have discussions with operational and voluntary sector partners in relation to operationalisation of the new offence, as well as colleagues elsewhere to identify lessons learned. The advice from other local jurisdictions has been that a 9-12 month period is needed, however, my Department, along with our statutory and voluntary sector partners, will do all that we can to ensure that the introductory timeframe is kept to the minimum needed.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of the representation of people from a Catholic background in the composition of the Prison Service workforce, in comparison to the wider population.

(AQO 393/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Northern Ireland Prison Service is part of the community and the staff perform a hugely important role by supporting and challenging people in our care to change.

It is very disappointing that the Catholic community are underrepresented in the workforce. This is despite huge efforts by the Director General and his team to try to secure a more representative workforce.

The Prison Service's outreach in the last few years is well beyond anything that has happened before. Each time there is a recruitment campaign, efforts are made to secure as wide a base of applications as possible.

The Prison Service will continue their work to reach out to under-represented sections of the community and I have asked the Director General to meet political parties represented in this House to see how we can support the Prison Service to address this issue. I understand he will be meeting representatives of the Member's Party on 2 April.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice what measures her Department is taking to address the level of sickness absence amongst prison officers.

(AQO 394/17-22)

Mrs Long: As members of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, prison officers who are off work due to sickness absence are managed in accordance with the NICS Sickness Absence policy. Every effort is being made to reduce the levels of absence further. Management is committed to continue to work with staff and their Trade Unions to address the current levels of sickness absence.

Under Prisons 2020, the Northern Ireland Prison Service is committed to employee well-being support to ensure there are suitable provisions in place to build staff resilience and enable staff to meet the needs of the challenging work environment.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Justice what plans are in place to protect prisoners and prison officers from an outbreak of COVID-19 in the Northern Ireland Prison Service.

(AQO 395/17-22)

Mrs Long: It is important to note that while there has not to date been a coronavirus case in any of our prisons, the Prison Service take the threat presented by COVID19 extremely seriously and have undertaken significant work in preparation for the challenges an outbreak would bring in a custodial environment. This has included placing a small number of recent committals in isolation as a precaution.

Preparations have included the purchase of additional protective clothing for staff and the preparation of areas within each prison where prisoners suspected and or diagnosed with the virus can be accommodated. Both the Prison Service and our partners in the South Eastern Trust have been following guidance issued by the Public Health Agency which has also been provided to staff and prisoners.

The Director General has put in place specific contingency planning structures and established a dedicated team to oversee planning arrangements and to support Governors in dealing with the challenges they will inevitably face. The Prison Service recognise the importance of good communication and is committed to working with staff, prisoners, families and stakeholders as operational decisions are taken.

Notwithstanding the disruption and challenges ahead, supporting staff and keeping safe those in our care remains our primary focus. I know the House will join me in supporting the Prison Service as they seek to manage what is an unprecedented situation.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Justice what progress has been made to introduce a local scheme, similar to the Places of Worship protective security funding scheme operating in England and Wales.

(AQO 396/17-22)

Mrs Long: I have commented on this issue previously and want to reiterate that I recognise the effect that an attack on a place of worship can have for members of a faith community in terms of the distress and disruption from any damage it causes.

My officials are continuing to explore evidence based information in relation to attacks on places of worship, in liaison with the police, as well as the criteria for the Places of Worship Security Fund that operates in England and Wales.

The scheme in England and Wales, which is not a statute provision, focuses on religiously motivated hate crime. Early indications are that there would be little evidence to support the introduction of a scheme in Northern Ireland based on similar criteria.

If a scheme were to be introduced in Northern Ireland there are other issues that may need to be considered such as: the types of building to be included; security measures that could be covered; administration of the scheme and available funding.

I will want to reflect on these issues and the findings provided by my officials before reaching a conclusion in the months ahead.

Department for the Economy

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy, further to her statement to the Assembly on 24 March 2020, what steps her Department are taking to ensure that agency workers are treated the same way as other employees when it comes to Her Majesty's Government 80% Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme.

(AQW 3893/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): It is my opinion that all workers eligible for the UK-wide Job Retention Scheme, including eligible agency workers, should be treated in the same way. Ensuring this happens falls to Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs.

It is my understanding that furloughed workers must have been on a PAYE payroll on 28 February 2020, and can be on any type of contract, including agency contracts, flexible or zero hours contracts as well as full-time and part-time workers and employees.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 24 April 2020

Written Answers

The Executive Office

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 2758/17-22, to address and answer the specific question posed in both its parts.
(AQW 3870/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): We would refer the Member to the answers previously provided.

Mrs Barton asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the salaries for each of the Commissioners within the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression.
(AQO 371/17-22)

Mrs Foster and Mrs O'Neill: To clarify, the draft legislation for the creation of the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression provides that the Office holder will be known as the 'Director of Identity and Cultural Expression', not a Commissioner.

We are not in a position to provide details of the Director's likely salary, as the required legislation has not yet been introduced and approved by the Assembly.

Department of Education

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Education, in the course of preparation for eventual school closures as a result of COVID-19, (i) what practical contingency plans is he considering for those pupils in receipt of free school meals, to ensure they still receive one hot meal per day; (ii) whether he will, where necessary, liaise with relevant Executive colleagues to roll-out any such plans, and (iii) whether he will give consideration to assisting with local solutions.
(AQW 3829/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): The Department of Education has ensured that families in receipt of free school meals will receive £2.70 per child per day for each day of term the schools are closed, including the Easter break. This money will be paid direct to parents' bank accounts on a fortnightly basis and to date over 53,354 payments (representing 96,000 children) reached bank accounts by 15th April.

The Executive has placed lead responsibility on the Department for Communities on feeding vulnerable children and families. The Department of Education has been working closely with the Department for Communities to ensure families do not experience hardship as a result of schools closing. On Thursday 26 March, the Communities Minister Deirdre Hargey and I announced these plans. Further details can be found at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/news/ministers-take-action-relation-free-school-meals-payment-0>

The Department for Communities is leading and co-ordinating the wider response on plans to ensure that low income families and vulnerable people get the vital support they need in response to the Coronavirus outbreak. A weekly service will see 10,000 food boxes being delivered to the most vulnerable during the COVID-19 lockdown. Food boxes are available for people who cannot afford food and who do not have a support network of family and friends to help them through this emergency. These boxes will also be available to those who are not shielding, but who are in critical need of food including families and older citizens. Further information is available at: <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/landing-pages/covid-19-service-updates>

The EA youth service is also contributing to these plans and will provide essential services particularly around children and vulnerable young people.

Department of Health

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health what support he will provide to boost the workforce and funding within community pharmacy, to alleviate the risk to community pharmacy services.

(AQW 2045/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Completion of a review of the pharmacy workforce commissioned by the Department has been delayed due to the focus on responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. It is the intention, however, that the Action Plan developed in response to the review will include actions to address workforce challenges across all pharmacy sectors, and community pharmacy in particular.

When appropriate, discussions will be progressed with the Health and Social Care Board and Community Pharmacy Northern Ireland (CPNI) with the aim of establishing new contractual arrangements for community pharmacy and a corresponding financial envelope. In the meantime, £10.5m has been made available to provide support for community pharmacy in responding to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the findings of the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee report into health funding in Northern Ireland, of November 2019, with specific reference to the recommendation for his Department to agree a sustainable funding package for community pharmacy to enable it to play a vital role in transforming health and social care.

(AQW 2046/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee report makes a number of helpful recommendations to address challenges currently facing the health service in Northern Ireland.

In relation to the recommendation on community pharmacy, a stable and sustainable community pharmacy network commissioned to provide services which contributes to population level improvements in health will ultimately support health and social care reform. Current levels of funding for community pharmacy services have been informed by a Cost of Service Investigation, alongside other sources of information, including an ongoing margins survey and the Department considers the level of remuneration sufficient to meet its statutory objectives for current commissioned services.

The current focus of the Department and wider HSC system is responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. When appropriate, discussions will be held with the Health and Social Care Board and Community Pharmacy Northern Ireland (CPNI) with the aim of establishing new contractual arrangements for 2020/21 and a corresponding financial envelope. In the meantime, £10.5m has been made available to community pharmacy to support its response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health how many support workers have been tested for COVID-19; and when all support workers, who are still working, will be tested for COVID-19.

(AQW 3915/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

I am conscious that the Assembly not only has a desire, but also a duty to request the latest information relating to this unprecedented and rapidly changing situation, and I am therefore committed to providing Members with regular updates as developments occur. I trust that you will agree that it is in the public interest that my officials and I remain primarily focused on the task in hand over the coming period in relation to COVID-19 and I will therefore not be in a position to answer your written question at this time.

I appreciate your understanding.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health when people who have had to suspend contact with care workers because of COVID-19 will be able to regain access to support and respite services.

(AQW 3916/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thank you for your Assembly Written Question.

Following the Speaker's letter to all MLAs (18 March) you will be aware of the significant pressure that my Department is currently under in dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has ever faced.

To that end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland caused by the COVID 19 Virus. My approach means that I have had to significantly redeploy Departmental resources which, in turn, has created unavoidable pressures in carrying out normal 'business as usual'.

I am conscious that the Assembly not only has a desire, but also a duty to request the latest information relating to this unprecedented and rapidly changing situation, and I am therefore committed to providing Members with regular updates as developments occur. I trust that you will agree that it is in the public interest that my officials and I remain primarily focused on the task in hand over the coming period in relation to COVID-19 and I will therefore not be in a position to answer your written question at this time.

I appreciate your understanding.

Department for Infrastructure

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) what obligations exist for (a) contractual; and (b) insurance purposes for regulatory inspections of lifts at MOT centres by contractors; and (ii) whether the Minister is satisfied that these were honoured.

(AQW 1427/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): DVA had a vehicle testing equipment maintenance contract in place with MaHa Ireland Ltd. consisting of two elements:

- 1 Service, Maintenance and Calibration of all vehicle testing equipment
- 2 Reactive Repairs to all vehicle testing equipment

As part of a regular preventative maintenance programme (PPM), there were minor inspections every eight weeks and major service inspections every six months of the DVA's equipment, including lifts, within its MOT centres. As part of the six monthly major inspection the vehicle lifts also received an independent examination by an independent insurance company.

Based on expert engineering, audit, procurement and legal advice, on 27 February I announced that an order for 52 new lifts had been placed, with an accelerated production, delivery and installation programme agreed with the contractor which would see all lifts replaced between April and mid July. Based on advice from the same sources, I also initiated a review of the contract and strengthening of the inspection process. New arrangements were agreed and are now in place. The revised contract includes improvements to the maintenance and inspection regime; provision for ongoing review of the condition of equipment; and ensures that regular insurance inspections will be conducted independently in future. The contract management regime has also been strengthened with provision for additional processes and reporting.

These new arrangements will provide a more robust assurance on the maintenance and

condition of vehicle lifts to ensure this situation does not occur again. The safety of staff and customers remains my top priority.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how much has been spent on flood prevention measures, broken down by constituency, for each year since 2010.

(AQW 3318/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department does not hold all of its expenditure information, on flood protection measures, in the format you have requested. However, I can provide you with details of expenditure on flood prevention measures, for the geographical areas covered by each Rivers operational office over the last seven financial years. Details prior to 2011/12 are not available. This information is provided in table 1.

Table 1

Area	2018/19	2017/18	2016/17	2015/16	2014/15	2013/14	2012/13	2011/12
Lisburn	£517k	£490k	£426k	£204k	£114k	£469k	£359k	£149k
Belfast	£2,331k	£1,526k	£3,925k	£5,892k	£3,772k	£3,176k	£1,369k	£855k
Armagh	£424k	£1,617k	£641k	£402k	£226k	£1,315k	£786k	£206k
Omagh	£1,181k	£1,083k	£326k	£543k	£1,529k	£241k	£202k	£407k
Coleraine	£333k	£656k	£213k	£57k	£24k	£393k	£1,162k	£2,393k
Fermanagh	£363k	£218k	£68k	£27k	£71k	£97k	£211k	£103k
Total	£5,149k	£5,590k	£5,599k	£7,125k	£5,736k	£5,691k	£4,089k	£4,113k

In addition, my Department administers the Homeowner Flood Protection Grant Scheme (HFPGS) where successful applicants can receive 90% of the costs (up to £10,000) to modify their properties to make them more resistant to flooding. Expenditure information for this scheme is readily available by constituency area and expenditure since the HFPGS was introduced is provided in table 2.

Table 2

Constituency	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020
Belfast South	£23k	£7k	£13k
Belfast East	£35k	0	£8k
Belfast West	0	0	£9k
East Antrim	£29k	0	0
South Antrim	£43k	£16k	0
North Antrim	£8k	0	£5k
South Down	£16k	£34k	0
North Down	£5k	0	0
East Derry	£7k	0	0
Foyle	0	£149k	£46k
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	£14k	0	0
Newry & Armagh	£27k	£13k	0
Strangford	£17k	0	£9k
Mid Ulster	£10k	0	£5k
Upper Bann	£9k	0	0
West Tyrone	£48k	£11k	£6k
Total	£292k	£230k	£101k

My Department also carries out road drainage improvement works to remove surface water from carriageways and footways, which could potentially cause flooding. Table 3 below provides detail of expenditure in each Roads Division across the same years as Table 1.

Table 3

Area	2018/19	2017/18	2016/17	2015/16	2014/15	2013/14	2012/13	2011/12
Eastern	£616k	£934k	£800k	£646k	£868k	£1,079k	£1,410k	£1,123k
Northern	£1,177k	£1,278k	£1,310k	£684k	£1,753k	£2,568k	£1,984k	£2,076k
Southern	£1,771k	£1,413k	£1,518k	£1,583k	£2,725k	£2,811k	£2,187k	£2,176k
Western	£3,026k	£2,949k	£1,719k	£1,539k	£2,456k	£1,932k	£1,708k	£1,988k
Total	£6,590k	£6,574k	£5,347k	£4,452k	£7,802k	£8,390k	£7,289k	£7,363k

In addition, there are in the region of 160 properties identified by NI Water that are at risk of internal flooding, on a list known as the DG 5 register. NI Water has, to date, since 2015 invested £15.8m to address internal flooding issues identified on their DG5 register. NI Water are unable to provide details by Council area or prior to 2015.

Mr Lynch asked the Minister for Infrastructure what action she is taking to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 for people using (i) public transport; and (ii) taxis.

(AQW 3656/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am acutely aware of the concerns that many communities and people have regarding the COVID-19 virus and how best to tackle the outbreak. My Department is working with all Departments, agencies, operators and the Public Health Agency to respond to and plan for this evolving situation. No effort will be spared in our work to tackle the outbreak and I have outlined the work undertaken on public transport and taxis below.

- (i) In response to the COVID-19 pandemic I took the decision on 30th March 2020 to further reduce the public transport network. These measures are being implemented following the NI Executive advice to stay at home and in line with the significant reductions in public transport numbers that we are seeing as the public follow that advice. This has allowed us to reduce the network as we continue to focus on protecting our public services and provide resilience in responding to COVID 19. The changes to the timetables provide resilience in responding to COVID 19 and ensure we can continue to provide public transport coverage across the North of Ireland for essential workers at peak times. In introducing those changes a key priority has been to maintain the ability of passengers to follow social distancing guidance on public transport. Translink continue to monitor demand on individual services. Drivers have been instructed to limit

passenger numbers to enable social distancing, with additional vehicles brought on should demand require it. Translink has also continued to liaise with the Public Health Agency on this matter. PHA has produced new posters on social distancing and these are being distributed throughout all vehicles and stations.

- (ii) While my responsibility for taxis only extends to the regulation of the industry, I am very aware of the increasing financial hardships this crisis is creating. I pushed hard with Executive colleagues to secure the self-employed financial package announced by the British Government. This package has weaknesses, not least the delay until June for payment, which as an Executive we are pushing the British Government to address. With Executive colleagues, I will continue to press for more assistance.

I have been engaging with the taxi industry and have also issued an open letter to set out the work that I am doing in my capacity as Infrastructure Minister and also the work I am doing with other Ministers across our Government. To help progress this, I have raised this with Executive colleagues to examine how taxis can be re-purposed to support the emergency efforts. I am pleased to tell you that my officials are already working together with the Department for Communities as the lead Department and, through them, local government to explore how this can be done.

I also know that social distancing is a real worry and a challenge for those taxi drivers continuing to provide a service to the public. The Department for Economy is the Department responsible for issuing this guidance. I have been engaging with the Minister for Economy and am assured that guidance on social distancing, to keep taxi drivers and their customers safe, is being prepared as quickly as possible.

With the numbers of taxi journeys greatly reducing, there is also now a real opportunity to explore how taxi drivers can play their part in the emergency response to this crisis. To look at, for example, opportunities for delivering food and vital supplies or to get patients to essential appointments. To help progress this, I have raised this with Executive colleagues to examine how taxis can be re-purposed to support the emergency efforts. I am pleased to tell you that my officials are already working together with the Department for Communities and, through them, local government to explore how this can be done. The Department for Communities will lead on this.

On the regulatory side for which I have responsibility, I am pleased to report that my officials have completed work on new legislation to grant an extension to the PSV testing period. Finding a means to exempt taxis from PSV tests was more difficult than I would have liked and has required a temporary change to regulations which has now been put in place. I can confirm that the Taxi Licensing (Amendment) (Coronavirus) Regulations (Northern Ireland) became operational on 10 April 2020

These Regulations cover taxi vehicle licences which expire during the current emergency. They provide for the automatic renewal of these licences – without prior testing. This will ensure that vehicles can remain on the road during this period. Automatic renewals will be for a six month period and will apply to all existing licences that expire between 10 March and 9 October 2020, unless normal testing can resume before this date. They will also be issued free of charge. To keep this simple for everyone, there is no application process and those with licences that have expired recently or are due to expire shortly, will be prioritized. This is a temporary measure reflecting the exceptionally challenging times of this current pandemic.

Please be assured that I am doing everything within my remit as Infrastructure Minister to help the industry through this crisis and I will continue to work with Executive colleagues to do as much as we can together to help the industry for as long as this crisis lasts.

Department for the Economy

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy whether Education Maintenance Allowance payments will continue as normal throughout social distancing and the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 3872/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): The Minister for Education and I have agreed that Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) weekly allowance and bonus payments will continue as normal for eligible school and FE college students following closures due to Covid-19. This will apply for the remainder of this academic year, or earlier should the schools and colleges re-open before then.

Schools and colleges have been advised accordingly, and have a key role to play in this process, as in order for a student's payment to be released, EMA administrators must continue to confirm attendance to the Student Loans Company on a weekly basis in the normal way.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy how will small businesses that pay their rates in their rent to the landlord be able to claim the Small Business Support Grant; and when this will happen.

(AQW 3897/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Small Business Support Grant has been designed to support small businesses and not landlords or managing agents.

If a business pays rent, including rates, to a landlord or managing agent and the property is eligible for Small Business Rates Relief, the standard online form for registering details should not be used. A new online form for rental properties will be available on nibusinessinfo.co.uk in the coming days. Work is underway to make this available as soon as possible.

Journal of Proceedings

Minutes of Proceedings

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 9 March 2020

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Assembly Business

2.1 Motion: Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Mr Pat Catney replace Mr John Dallat as a member of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

Mrs Dolores Kelly

Mr Colin McGrath

The Question being put, the Motion was carried.

2.2 Motion: Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Mr Fra McCann replace Ms Emma Sheerin as a member of the Committee for Communities; that Ms Martina Anderson replace Mr Fra McCann as a member of the Committee for the Executive Office; and that Ms Emma Rogan replace Ms Martina Anderson as a member of the Committee for Justice.

Mr John O'Dowd

Ms Sinéad Ennis

The Question being put, the Motion was carried.

3. Executive Committee Business

3.1 Final Stage – Budget Bill (NIA Bill 02/17-22)

The Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy, moved that the Final Stage of the Budget Bill (NIA Bill 2/17-22) do now pass.

Debate ensued.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

The Budget Bill (NIA Bill 2/17-22) passed Final Stage with cross-community support (Division).

3.2 Motion: The Bereavement Support Payment (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019

Proposed:

That the Bereavement Support Payment (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 be approved.

Minister for Communities

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the motion was carried.

3.3 Motion: The Social Security Benefits Up-rating (No. 2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2019**Proposed:**

That the Social Security Benefits Up-rating (No. 2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2019 be approved.

Minister for Communities

Motion: The Social Security Benefits Up-rating (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019**Proposed:**

That the Social Security Benefits Up-rating (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 be approved.

Minister for Communities

A single debate ensued on the two motions.

The Question being put, the motion on the Social Security Benefits Up-rating (No. 2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2019 was carried.

The Question being put, the motion on the Social Security Benefits Up-rating (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 was carried.

3.4 Motion: The Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions and Amounts) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019**Proposed:**

That the Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions and Amounts) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 be approved.

Minister for Communities

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the motion was carried.

The sitting was suspended at 1.51pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with Deputy Speaker McGlone in the Chair.

4. Question Time

4.1 Communities

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Communities, Ms Deirdre Hargey.

4.2 Economy

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Education, Mr Peter Weir, on behalf of the Minister for the Economy Mrs Diane Dodds.

The Speaker took the Chair

5. Question for Urgent Oral Answer

5.1 Coronavirus Advice to Schools

The Minister of Education, Mr Peter Weir, responded to a Question for Urgent Oral Answer tabled by Mr Chris Lyttle.

6. Executive Committee Business (cont'd)

6.1 Statement – Response to the Emergence of Coronavirus

The Minister of Health, Mr Robin Swann, made a statement regarding the novel Coronavirus COVID-19, following which he replied to questions.

7. Matter of the Day

7.1 Flybe Administration

Mr Andrew Muir made a statement, under Standing Order 24, in relation to Flybe entering administration on 5 March 2020. Other Members were also called to speak on the matter.

8. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 5.25pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

9 March 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

9 March 2020

Division

Final Stage – Budget Bill (NIA Bill 02/17-22)

Minister of Finance

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 66

Noes: 4

AYES

Nationalist

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGuigan, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilin, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin

Unionist

Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Mr Butler, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Frew, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.

Other

Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Lyttle, Mr Muir.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Boylan, Ms Kimmins.

NOES

Unionist

Mr Allister.

Other

Ms Bailey, Mr Carroll, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms Bailey, Mr Carroll.

Total Votes	70	Total Ayes	66	[94.3%]
Nationalist Votes	34	Nationalist Ayes	34	[100.0%]
Unionist Votes	28	Unionist Ayes	27	[96.4%]
Other Votes	8	Other Ayes	5	[62.5%]

The motion was **carried** with cross-community support.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 4 March 2020 – 9 March 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

Committee Report on the Draft Budgets 2020-21 of the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIA 10/17-22) (Audit Committee)
6. Statutory Rules

SR 2020/24 The Food Information (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/25 The Provision of Health Services to Persons Not Ordinarily Resident (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/26 The Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Communities)
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 10 March 2020

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Matter of the Day

2.1 Death of Barney Eastwood

Mr Patsy McGlone made a statement, under Standing Order 24, in relation to the death of Barney Eastwood on 9 March 2020. Other Members were also called to speak on the matter.

3. Executive Committee Business

3.1 Motion: The Pension Schemes Act 2015 (Transitional Provisions and Appropriate Independent Advice) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019

Proposed:

That the Pension Schemes Act 2015 (Transitional Provisions and Appropriate Independent Advice) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 be approved.

Minister for Communities

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the motion was carried.

4. Private Members' Business

4.1 Motion: Independent Review of Education

Proposed:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Education to implement urgently the New Decade, New Approach commitment to establish an external, independent review of education provision with a focus on greater efficiency in delivery costs, raising standards, access to the curriculum for all pupils, and an inclusive single education system.

Mr Chris Lyttle

Ms Kellie Armstrong

Deputy Speaker McGlone took the Chair.

Amendment 1**Proposed:**

Leave out all after 'calls on' and insert:

'the Executive to implement urgently the New Decade, New Approach commitment 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.'

Ms Karen Mullan

Ms Catherine Kelly

Amendment 2**Proposed:**

Leave out all between 'greater' and 'raising' and insert:

'expansion of public funding to support the delivery costs identified within the review, addressing pay disputes with teaching unions,'

Mr Gerry Carroll

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, Amendment 1 was made.

The Question being put, the motion, as amended, was carried without division.

4.2 Motion: Childcare Strategy**Proposed:**

That this Assembly believes that access to good quality and affordable childcare can help empower those parents who want to stay and progress in paid work; accepts that this, in turn, will contribute to the local economy; recognises the transformative role that good childcare can play in supporting the educational, social and physical development of a child; supports the aim of providing 30 hours of free childcare for 38 weeks a year for 3 to 4 year olds, in line with the rest of the United Kingdom; further recognises that there are significant pressures already on the budget of the Department of Education; and calls upon the Executive to implement a childcare strategy and any legislation required to enable this to proceed.

Mr Robin Newton

Mr Maurice Bradley

Amendment 1**Proposed:**

Leave out all between 'help' and 'accepts' and insert:

'tackle disadvantage and poverty by closing the educational gap between the most and least advantaged children, can empower parents who want to stay and progress in paid work, and those who want to return to education or training;'

Ms Catherine Kelly

Ms Jemma Dolan

Mr Pat Sheehan

Debate ensued.

The sitting was suspended at 12.55pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Principal Deputy Speaker in the Chair.

4. Question Time

4.1 Education

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Education, Mr Peter Weir.

The Speaker took the Chair.

4.2 Finance

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

5. Private Members' Business (cont'd)

5.1 Motion: Childcare Strategy (cont'd)

Debate resumed.

The Question being put, Amendment 1 was made.

The Question being put, the motion, as amended, was carried without division.

5.2 Motion: Mental Health in the Workplace

Proposed:

That this Assembly recognises that mental health problems affect one in six workers each year, and that poor mental health is the leading cause of sickness absence; further recognises that Northern Ireland records the highest instance of mental ill health across the UK and has an on-going mental health crisis; welcomes warmly the partnership between the Northern Ireland Retail Consortium, Time to Change, and the Retail Trust to address mental health in the retail industry; notes the important role that the retail industry plays as Northern Ireland's largest private sector employer; supports the initiatives being progressed, including a mental health toolkit and mental health first aid training; and recommends that other industries follow this lead.

Mr Robbie Butler

Ms Órlaithí Flynn

Mr John Blair

Mr Keith Buchanan

Mr Mark Durkan

The Motion was not moved.

6. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 4.36pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

10 March 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 10 March 2020

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly

Northern Ireland Audit Office Report – Injury on Duty Schemes for Officers in the Police Service Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Prison Service. (Northern Ireland Audit Office)

Base 2: Working to Support Individuals Under Threat - An Inspection of the Role of Base 2 in Threat Verification (Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland)
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules

SR 2020/29 The Public Service Pension Revaluation Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Finance)

SR 2020/30 The Occupational and Personal Pensions Schemes (General Levy) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Communities)
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly Legislation:

Stages in Consideration of Public Bills

First Stage: Introduction of Bill.

Second Stage: General debate of the Bill with an opportunity for Members to vote on its general principles.

Committee Stage (Comm. Stage): Detailed investigation by a Committee which concludes with the publication of a report for consideration by the Assembly.

Consideration Stage (CS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, the details of the Bill including amendments proposed to the Bill.

Further Consideration Stage (FCS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, further amendments to the Bill.

Final Stage: Passing or rejecting of Bill by the Assembly, without further amendment.

Royal Assent.

Proceedings as 10 March 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	

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							

/ Bills progressing by accelerated passage

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 16 March 2020

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

2.1 COVID-19

The Speaker made some remarks recognising the effect that the COVID-19 virus would have on Assembly Business.

2.2 Audit Committee Deputy Chairperson

The Speaker informed the Assembly that he had received notification of the resignation of Mr Andrew Muir as Deputy Chairperson of the Audit Committee, with effect from 10 March 2020.

2.3 Question Time

The Speaker informed Members that he had received a request from the Minister of Health to switch his Question Time with that of the Minister for Infrastructure today, 16 March 2020. The Speaker also informed Members that in light of the current circumstances, he had agreed to the change to allow the Minister of Health to attend an urgent COBRA meeting.

3. Assembly Business

3.1 Motion: Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Mr Pat Sheehan replace Ms Jemma Dolan as a member of the Committee for Health; and that Ms Jemma Dolan replace Mr Pat Sheehan as a member of the Committee for Justice.

Mr John O'Dowd

Ms Sinéad Ennis

The Question being put, the Motion was carried.

3.2 Motion: Suspension of Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4)

Proposed:

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 16 March 2020.

Mr Keith Buchanan

Mr John O'Dowd

Mrs Dolores Kelly

Mr Robbie Butler

Ms Kellie Armstrong

Ms Clare Bailey

The Question being put, the Motion was carried with cross-community support.

3.3 Motion: Assembly Commission Budget 2020-2021

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes the report of the Audit Committee (NIA 10/17-22) on the scrutiny of the Assembly Commission's budget for 2020-21, as laid before the Assembly on 6 March 2020; and agrees the Assembly Commission's budget for 2020-21.

Mr Keith Buchanan

Mr John O'Dowd

Mrs Dolores Kelly

Mr Robbie Butler

Ms Kellie Armstrong

Ms Clare Bailey

Debate ensued.

Deputy Speaker Beggs took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Motion was carried.

The Speaker took the Chair.

4. Executive Committee Business

4.1 Motion: The Renewable Heat Incentive Inquiry Report

Proposed:

That this Assembly takes note of the publication of the Renewable Heat Incentive Inquiry Report.

Minister of Finance

Debate ensued.

The debate was suspended for Question Time.

5. Question Time

5.1 Health

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Health, Mr Robin Swann.

Deputy Speaker McGlone took the Chair.

5.2 Infrastructure

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Infrastructure, Ms Nichola Mallon.

6. Question for Urgent Oral Answer

6.1 COVID-19: Guidance to Schools

The Minister of Education, Mr Peter Weir, responded to a Question for Urgent Oral Answer tabled by Mr Chris Lyttle.

6.2 COVID-19: Support for Small Businesses

The Minister for the Economy, Mrs Diane Dodds, responded to a Question for Urgent Oral Answer tabled by Ms Claire Sugden.

The Speaker took the Chair.

6.3 COVID-19: Support for Businesses

The Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy, responded to a Question for Urgent Oral Answer tabled by Mr Andrew Muir.

7. Executive Committee Business (cont'd)

7.1 Motion: The Renewable Heat Incentive Inquiry Report (cont'd)

Debate resumed.

The Question being put, the Motion was carried.

7.2 Motion: The Common Agricultural Policy (Direct Payments to Farmers) (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Proposed:

That the Common Agricultural Policy (Direct Payments to Farmers) (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Debate ensued.

Deputy Speaker Beggs took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Motion was carried.

8. Private Members' Business

8.1 Second Stage: Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill (NIA Bill 01/17-22)

Mr Jim Allister

Mr Jim Allister moved the Second Stage of the Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill (NIA Bill 1/17-22).

Debate ensued.

The Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) (NIA 01/17-22) passed Second Stage.

9. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 8.46pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

16 March 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on

11 March 2020 – 16 March 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

NIAO Report - Governance Issues in Sport Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland Audit Office)

Ilex Urban Regeneration Company Final Report and Accounts (The Executive Office)

The Report of the Independent Inquiry into the Non-Domestic Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) Scheme (Department of Finance)

5. Assembly Reports

Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees: Fourth Report of Session 2019–2020 (NIA 14/17-22)

6. Statutory Rules

SR 2020/32 The Statutory Sick Pay (General) (Coronavirus Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Communities)

SR 2020/31 The Electrically Assisted Pedal Cycles (Construction and Use) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2020/34 The Recovery of Health Services Charges (Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/35 The Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Communities)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

The Minister of Finance - Budget 2020-21 UK Funding Available

The Minister of Finance - Transparency, Accountability and the Functioning of the Executive

The Minister of Justice - Response to Coronavirus

8. Consultation Documents

9. Departmental Publications

10. Agency Publications

11. Westminster Publications

12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 23 March 2020

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

2.1 The Speaker made some remarks on the effect that the COVID-19 virus will have on Assembly Business.

2.2 The late Mr Ivan Davis.

The Speaker announced the death of Mr Ivan Davis, a former Member for the Lagan Valley constituency.

Members paid tribute to Mr Davis on behalf of their parties.

3. Assembly Business

Motion: Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Mr Colin McGrath replace Ms Sinead Bradley as a member of the Committee for Health.

Mrs Dolores Kelly

Mr Patsy McGlone

The Question being put, the Motion was carried.

Motion: Suspension of Standing Order 10(2)(a) and Standing Orders 20 and 20A

Proposed:

That Standing Order 10(2)(a) and Standing Orders 20 and 20A be suspended until 13 May 2020.

Mr Keith Buchanan

Mr John O'Dowd

Mrs Dolores Kelly

Mr Robbie Butler

Ms Kellie Armstrong

Ms Clare Bailey

The Question being put, the Motion was carried with cross-community support.

Motion: Suspension of Standing Order 15(1)**Proposed:**

That Standing Order 15(1) be suspended on Tuesday 24 March 2020, for the purposes of the Legislative Consent Motion on the Coronavirus Bill introduced at Westminster; and that amendments to the motion shall be given in writing to the Speaker not later than 9.30am on Tuesday 24 March 2020.

Mr Keith Buchanan

Mr John O'Dowd

Mrs Dolores Kelly

Mr Robbie Butler

Ms Kellie Armstrong

Ms Clare Bailey

The Question being put, the Motion was carried with cross-community support.

4. Executive Committee Business

4.1 Motion: The Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020**Proposed:**

That the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be affirmed.

Minister for Communities

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was carried.

4.2 Statement – COVID-19 Preparations

The Minister of Justice, Mrs Naomi Long, made a statement regarding COVID-19 Preparations, following which she replied to questions.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

4.3 Statement – Response to COVID-19

The deputy First Minister, Mrs Michelle O'Neill, made a statement regarding the Executive Office's Response to COVID-19, following which she replied to questions.

5. Committee Business

Motion: Amend Standing Orders 49(2)(a) and 52(2)(a)**Proposed:**

That the Standing Orders of the Assembly be amended as follows:

In Standing Order 49(2)(a), for '11' is substituted '9'; and in Standing Order 52(2)(a), for '11' is substituted '9'.

Chairperson, Committee on Procedures

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was carried with cross-community support.

6. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 2.42pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

23 March 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 16 March 2020 – 23 March 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

Criminal Justice Inspection NI: Driving Change Follow-up Review – A Follow-up Review of the 2016 Enforcement of Road Traffic Legislation in Northern Ireland Inspection (Department of Justice).

Press Recognition Panel - Annual Report on the Recognition System March 2020 (Department for Communities).

Legislative Consent Memorandum - Coronavirus Bill (Department of Health).

5. Assembly Reports

Report on Legislative Consent Memorandum on the UK Government Agriculture Bill 2019-2020 – NIA 11/17-22 (Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs).

6. Statutory Rules

SR 2020/36 The Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions and Amounts) (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Communities).

SR 2020/37 The Statutory Sick Pay (General) (Coronavirus Amendment) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Communities).

SR 2020/39 The Motorways Traffic (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure).

SR 2020/40 The Social Security Benefits Up-rating Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Communities).

SR 2020/41 The Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Communities).

SR 2020/42 The Employment Rights (Increase of limits) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020.

SR 2020/43 The Whole of Government Accounts (Designation of Bodies) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Finance)

For Information Only

SR 2020/38 The Parking Places (Disabled Persons' Vehicles) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Infrastructure).

7. Written Ministerial Statements

Minister of Finance – Budget 2020-21 Funding Available.

Minister of Finance – Transparency, Accountability and the Functioning of the Executive.

Minister of Justice – Response to Coronavirus.

The Minister of Health – Health and Social Care Planning for the period Mid-March to Mid-April 2020 during the delay phase for Coronavirus.

8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 24 March 2020

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Executive Committee Business

2.1 Legislative Consent Motion: Coronavirus Bill

Proposed:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Coronavirus Bill dealing with: Emergency registration of health professionals in Clauses 2 and 4 and Schedules 1 and 3; Emergency volunteers in Clauses 7 and 8 and Schedule 6; Mental health and mental capacity in Clause 9 and Schedules 9 and 10; Health service indemnification in Clause 12; Registration of deaths and still-births etc in Clauses 17 and 20 and Schedule 12 (Part 3); Food supply in Clauses 23 to 27 and Schedule 14; Inquests in Clauses 29 and 30; Schools, childcare providers, etc in Clauses 35 and 36 and Schedules 15 (Part 3) and 16 (Part 3); Statutory Sick Pay in Clauses 40 to 42; Pensions in Clause 45; Protection of public health in Clause 46 and Schedule 17; Powers relating to potentially infectious persons in Clause 49 and Schedule 20 (Part 5); Powers relating to events, gatherings and premises in Clause 50 and Schedule 21 (Part 5); Courts and tribunals: use of video and audio technology in Clause 55 and Schedule 26; Powers in relation to bodies in Clause 56 and Schedule 27; Commencement in Clause 73; Power to suspend and revive provisions in Clause 74; Expiry in Clause 75; Power to alter expiry date in Clause 76; Power to amend Act in consequence of amendments to subordinate legislation in Clause 77; Power to make consequential modifications in Clause 78 and Procedure for certain orders made by a Northern Ireland department in Clause 82.

Minister of Health

Amendment

Proposed:

At the end insert:

“as introduced to Parliament on 19 March 2020; and those provisions made by amendment during the passage of the Bill as they extend to Northern Ireland.”

Minister of Health

Debate ensued.

Deputy Speaker Beggs took the Chair.

The sitting was suspended at 12.57pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with Deputy Speaker Beggs in the Chair.

2.2 Legislative Consent Motion: Coronavirus Bill (cont'd)

Debate resumed.

The Question being put, the Amendment was made.

The Question being put, the motion, as amended, was carried.

2.3 Motion: The draft Discretionary Support (Amendment) (COVID-19) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020**Proposed:**

That the draft Discretionary Support (Amendment) (COVID-19) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Minister for Communities

Debate ensued.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

The Question being put, the motion was carried.

2.4 Statement – The Economy in Light of COVID-19

The Minister for the Economy, Mrs Diane Dodds, made a statement regarding the Economy in Light of COVID-19, following which she replied to questions.

3. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 5.32pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

24 March 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 24 March 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
 - Legislative Consent Memorandum - Fisheries Bill (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs).
 - Legislative Consent Memorandum - Environment Bill (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs).
 - Addendum to Legislative Consent Memorandum - Coronavirus Bill (Department of Health).
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 24 March 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	

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						

/ Bills progressing by accelerated passage

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 31 March 2020

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

Royal Assent

The Speaker advised Members that Royal Assent had been signified on 27 March 2020 to the Budget Act (Northern Ireland) 2020.

Assembly Business

The Speaker made some remarks in respect to the items on the Order Paper and how, if agreed, they would help the Assembly conduct business in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Matter of the Day

Abortion Regulations

Mr Jim Allister made a statement, under Standing Order 24, in relation to Abortion Regulations on 31 March 2020. Other Members were also called to speak on the matter.

4. Assembly Business

4.1 Motion: Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Mr Andrew Muir replace Mr Trevor Lunn as a member of the Public Accounts Committee.

Ms Kellie Armstrong

Mr John Blair

The Question being put, the motion was carried.

4.2 Motion: Trustees of the Assembly Members' Pension Scheme

Proposed:

That this Assembly appoints Dr Caoimhe Archibald, Mr Pat Catney and Mr Andrew Muir as Trustees of the Assembly Members' Pension Scheme.

Mr Keith Buchanan

Mr John O'Dowd

Mrs Dolores Kelly

Mr Robbie Butler

Mr John Blair

The Question being put, the motion was carried.

4.3 Motion: Establishment of an Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 response**Proposed:**

That, as provided for in Standing Order 53(1), this Assembly appoints an Ad Hoc Committee to receive oral statements from Ministers on matters relating to the COVID-19 response and to question Ministers on such statements.

Composition: All Members of the Assembly shall be members of the Committee. The Chairperson of the Committee shall be the Speaker or, in his absence, a Deputy Speaker.

Quorum: The quorum shall be five members including the Chairperson.

Procedure: The Committee may not meet on days when the Assembly is sitting. The procedures of the Committee shall otherwise be such as the Chairperson may determine. Any report of the Committee shall be limited to its minutes of proceedings together with the minutes of any evidence taken before it.

Timeframe: Unless the Assembly previously resolves, the Committee shall exist for a period of 12 months.

The establishment of this Ad Hoc Committee does not prevent Ministers from continuing to make statements to the Assembly in line with the provisions of Standing Order 18.

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.

5. Executive Committee Business**5.1 Statement – Budget 2020-21**

The Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy, made a statement regarding the Budget 2020-21, following which he replied to questions.

5.2 First Stage - Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill (NIA 3/17-22)

The Minister of Justice, Mrs Naomi Long, introduced a Bill to create a course of conduct offence and a sentencing aggravation concerning domestic abuse and make rules as to procedure and giving evidence in criminal cases involving domestic abuse; and prevent cross-examination in person of certain witnesses in particular circumstances in family proceedings in the civil courts.

The Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill (NIA 3/17-22) passed First Stage and was ordered to be published.

Deputy Speaker Beggs took the Chair.

5.3 Legislative Consent Motion: Agriculture Bill**Proposed:**

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the Agriculture Bill, as introduced into the House of Commons on 16 January 2020, and consents to the Agriculture Bill being taken forward by the Westminster Parliament.

Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Debate ensued.

The sitting was suspended at 12.56pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Principal Deputy Speaker in the Chair.

6. Executive Committee Business (cont'd)

6.1 Legislative Consent Motion: Agriculture Bill (cont'd)

The Question being put, the motion was carried.

6.2 Motion: The draft Discretionary Support (Amendment No. 2) (COVID-19) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Proposed:

That the draft Discretionary Support (Amendment No. 2) (COVID-19) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Minister for Communities

The motion was not moved.

7. Committee Business

Motion: Amend Standing Orders

Proposed:

After Standing Order 109 insert -

110. Temporary Provisions

(1) Unless the Assembly previously resolves, Standing Orders 110-116 ('the temporary provisions') apply in the period from 31st March 2020 - 30th September 2020.

(2) A resolution under paragraph (1) shall require cross-community support.

111. Voting – General

(1) The temporary provisions of this Standing Order supersede those in Standing Order 26 (and see Standing Order 114).

(2) The Speaker, or a Deputy Speaker when in the chair, shall not be entitled to vote on any decision.

(3) A vote shall not be taken on any matter if a quorum is not present.

(4) The Speaker shall judge whether a question is carried or not in accordance with Standing Order 113.

(5) Except where paragraph (6) applies, every decision of the Assembly shall be taken by a simple majority.

(6) This paragraph applies to any decision where these Standing Orders or any statutory provision requires a decision to be taken with cross-community support or other form of enhanced majority.

112. Voting by Proxy

(1) This Standing Order contains temporary provisions for proxy voting.

(2) A member may vote in person or by proxy.

(3) A member who wishes to vote by proxy must give notice in writing to the Speaker.

(4) A notice under paragraph (3) must contain–

- a. the name of the member who wishes to exercise the proxy vote (M);
- b. the identity of the member who will vote on M's behalf (P) – see paragraph (6);
- c. confirmation that P is willing to vote on behalf of M; and
- d. details of the period for which P will vote on behalf of M - see paragraph (7).

(5) A notice under paragraph (3) may include confirmation from M that P is authorised to nominate another member to carry out P's functions.

(6) P shall be–

- a. the whip or deputy whip of the party of which M is a member;
- b. another member; or
- c. where—
 - (i) M has identified a person under sub-paragraph (a) or (b);
 - (ii) that person is for any reason unable to act for M; and
 - (iii) M has provided confirmation under paragraph 5

such other member as that person may in writing to the Speaker identify as voting on behalf of M.

(7) M may authorise P to exercise M's vote in the Assembly—

- a. in respect of one or more items of business;
- b. in respect of one or more sitting days; or
- c. until further notice.

(8) Notice under paragraph (3) must be given to the Speaker's Office not later than 9:30am on the sitting day (or as the case may be the first sitting day) on which M intends P to vote on M's behalf.

(9) P shall exercise M's vote in the Assembly by communicating M's name to the lobby clerks and tellers and M's vote shall be included in the numbers counted.

113 Voting – Divisions

(1) The temporary provisions of this Standing Order supersede those in Standing Order 27.

(2) The Speaker shall first seek to judge whether a question is carried by collecting voices.

(3) In collecting voices under paragraph (2) the Speaker may take account of the number of proxy votes exercised by any member.

(4) Subject to paragraph (5), the Speaker shall direct that the lobbies be cleared and the division bells sounded if—

- a. the Speaker is unsure whether or not a question is carried following the collection of voices under paragraph (2); or
- b. the Speaker's judgement as to whether a question is so carried is challenged.

(5) Where a question is put immediately after the result of a previous division is announced, and paragraph 4(a) or (b) applies—

- a. the Speaker may direct that the lobbies be cleared and the division bells sounded; or
- b. the Speaker may direct that the lobbies be cleared and proceed immediately in accordance with paragraphs (7) to (13)

and in deciding whether to direct that the lobbies be cleared and the division bells sounded under this paragraph, the Speaker shall have regard to any representations made by or on behalf of any party whip.

(6) Three minutes after a direction under paragraph (4) or (5)(a), the Speaker shall put the question again, and if paragraph (4)(a) or (b) still applies, he or she shall proceed as set out below. Otherwise he or she shall judge whether the question be carried in accordance with paragraph (2).

(7) The Speaker shall call for the nomination of two tellers for each side of the question but, if within a reasonable time after this call—

- a. two tellers for one side but not the other have been nominated, the determination of the Assembly shall be that of the side which has nominated the two tellers;
- b. two tellers for each side have not been nominated, the question shall not be carried.

(8) After tellers have been nominated, the Speaker shall direct the Assembly to divide, "ayes" to the right and "noes" to the left, and that the division bells be again sounded.

(9) Four minutes after this direction, the Speaker shall direct that the doors from the corridors to the Chamber and lobbies are secured.

(10) When all members in the lobbies have voted, the tellers shall bring the division lists to the table clerks who will announce the result.

(11) In a division, a member—

- a. is not obliged to vote;
- b. may vote although he or she did not hear the question put; and
- c. may vote by proxy (see Standing Order 112).

(12) If the votes in a division are equal the question shall not be carried.

(13) If any member is present within the precincts of the Assembly and is disabled by infirmity from passing through a lobby, his or her name may be communicated by his or her party whip to the lobby clerks and tellers and may be included in the numbers counted.

114. Financial Acts

(1) This Standing Order makes temporary provision equivalent to Standing Order 26(1)(b).

(2) A vote, resolution or Act which—

- a. appropriates a sum out of the Consolidated Fund of Northern Ireland or increases a sum to be appropriated; or
- b. imposes or increases a tax

shall require cross-community support (within the meaning of section 4(5) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998).

115. Temporary provision for statutory committees

(1) This Standing Order contains temporary provisions relating to committees established under Standing Order 48, and supersedes paragraphs (3)-(6) of Standing Order 46 and paragraphs (5) and (7) of Standing Order 49.

(2) A committee may meet on any day.

(3) Any member(s) of a committee, including the chairperson and deputy chairperson may attend a meeting remotely, for example by video-link or telephone attendance.

(4) Decisions taken by a committee shall be taken by consensus, and in the absence of consensus following a vote.

(5) A member of a committee may vote in person, by video-link or by telephone.

(6) A member of a committee who is for any reason unable to attend in person, or by video-link or telephone may delegate authority to another member of the committee, including the chairperson or deputy chairperson, to vote on his or her behalf.

(7) The minimum number of members required for a decision, whether by consensus or vote (including delegated votes under paragraph (6)) shall be five.

(8) A committee may agree to make decisions (including a decision not to meet) without meeting.

(9) This paragraph applies where a committee has agreed, or proposes to make, a decision without meeting:

- a. Before a decision is to be taken, the chairperson must:
 - (i) inform members of the subject matter of the decision;
 - (ii) provide members with such supporting information as the chairperson considers relevant;
 - (iii) allow a reasonable time for members to consider the subject matter and supporting information; and

seek consensus among members on the decision.

b. Where—

- (i) there is no consensus on the decision; or
- (ii) any member of the committee requires a vote to be taken on that decision

the committee shall vote on that decision.

c. Committee members may communicate their views under sub-paragraph (b)(i), and their votes under sub-paragraph (b)(ii) to the Committee Clerk by telephone, video-link or e-mail.

d. A member of a committee who is for any reason unable to participate in decision-making under this paragraph may delegate authority to another member of the committee, including the chairperson or deputy chairperson, to act on his or her behalf.

- e. The minimum number of votes required for a decision shall be five.
- f. Where the chairperson is for any reason unable to exercise functions under this paragraph, those functions may be exercised by the deputy chairperson, and if the latter is for any reason unable to exercise those functions, they may be exercised by a member of the committee determined by the committee.

(10) Votes under this Standing Order shall be carried (or negatived) by simple majority.

(11) Notice of a delegation of authority under paragraph (6) or (9)(d) shall be given in writing to the Committee Clerk.

(12) A general record of the proceedings of a committee shall be maintained by the Committee Clerk.

116. Temporary provision for standing committees

(1) This Standing Order contains temporary provisions relating to committees established under Standing Order 51, and supersedes paragraphs (5) and (6) of Standing Order 52, and that part of Standing Order 58(4) relating to quorum.

(2) Standing Order 115 shall apply to standing committees as it applies to statutory committees, subject that:

- a. The minimum number of members required for a decision of the Audit Committee, whether by consensus or vote, (including delegated votes under paragraph (6)) shall be two.
- b. In its application to the Business Committee—
 - (i) a reference to a member of a committee shall include, where appropriate, a substitute member attending in place of a member and a reference to a deputy chairperson shall include a nominee of the Speaker;
 - (ii) The quorum shall be five members attending in accordance with Standing Order 115, except when no decision is taken or question put, when the quorum shall be four; and
 - (iii) Paragraph (10) shall not apply to votes (and Standing Order 55(7) will continue to apply).

Chairperson, Committee on Procedures

Debate ensued.

The Speaker took the Chair.

The Question being put, the motion was carried.

5. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 3.13pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

31 March 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 25 March 2020 – 31 March 2020

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly

Budget Act (Northern Ireland) 2020

2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly

Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill (NIA Bill 03/17-22)

3. Orders in Council

4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly

Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service Trust Statement for the year ended 31 March 2019 (Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service).

Northern Ireland Assembly Members' Pension Fund- Annual Report and Accounts as at 31 March 2019 (The Assembly Commission)

5. Assembly Reports

Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees Fifth Report of Session 2019 – 2020, NIA 15/17-22 (Examiner of Statutory Rules)

6. Statutory Rules

SR 2020/42 The Employment Rights (Increase of Limits) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Economy)

SR 2020 (draft) The Discretionary Support (Amendment) (COVID-19) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Communities)

SR 2020/44 The Discretionary Support (Amendment) (COVID-19) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Communities)

SR 2020/45 The Employment and Support Allowance and the Housing Benefit (Transitional Provisions) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Communities)

SR 2020/46 The Mental Health (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) Order 2020 (Department for Health)

SR 2020/49 The Occupational and Personal Pension Schemes (General Levy) (Revocation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Communities)

SR 2020/50 The Historical Institutional Abuse Redress Board (Applications and Appeals) Rules (Northern Ireland) 2020 (The Executive Office)

SR 2020/51 The Automatic Enrolment (Earnings Trigger and Qualifying Earnings Band) Order (Northern Ireland) (Department for Communities)

SR 2020/ 55 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

For Information Only

SR 2020/47 The Pensions Increase (Review) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Finance)

SR 2020/48 Historical Institutional Abuse (Northern Ireland) Act 2019 (Commencement No. 1) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (The Executive Office)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

Minister for the Economy - Small Business Grants

Minister for Infrastructure – COVID-19 Update

Minister of Justice - COVID-19 Temporary Release of certain types of prisoners who have 3 months or less remaining to serve

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 March 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	27/03/20
Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill (NIA Bill 03/17- 22)	31/03/20							

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						

/ Bills progressing by accelerated passage

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 21 April 2020

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Principal Deputy Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

Assembly Business

The Principal Deputy Speaker expressed condolences on behalf of the Assembly to all those who had lost loved ones due to coronavirus, and made some remarks on how the Assembly has been, and will be, conducting business in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Committee Business

The Principal Deputy Speaker advised Members that the nominating officer of the DUP had notified the Speaker's Office that Ms Joanne Bunting has been nominated to fill the vacancy of Deputy Chairperson of the Audit Committee with effect from 16 April 2020 and that the Speaker is satisfied that the requirements of Standing Orders have been met.

3. Executive Committee Business

3.1 First Stage - Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill (NIA 4/17-22)

The Minister for Communities, Ms Deirdre Hargey, introduced a Bill to make emergency modifications in connection with coronavirus in relation to notices to quit to be given by landlords of private tenancies.

The Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill (NIA 4/17-22) passed First Stage and was ordered to be published.

3.2 Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Proposed:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

The Executive Office

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the motion was carried.

3.3 Motion: The draft Discretionary Support (Amendment No. 2) (COVID-19) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Proposed:

That the draft Discretionary Support (Amendment No. 2) (COVID-19) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Minister for Communities

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the motion was carried.

The sitting was suspended at 1.10pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with Deputy Speaker Beggs in the Chair.

4. Executive Committee Business (cont'd)

4.1 Motion: Accelerated Passage – The Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill

Proposed:

That the Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill proceed under the accelerated passage procedure.

Minister for Communities

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the motion was carried with cross-community support.

4.2 Second Stage – The Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill (NIA 4/17-22)

Minister for Communities

The Minister for Communities, Ms Deirdre Hargey, moved the Second Stage of the Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill (NIA 4/17-22).

Debate ensued.

The Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill (NIA 4/17-22) passed Second Stage.

4.3 Suspension of Standing Orders 31(d), 37, 39(1) and 42(5)

Proposed:

That Standing Orders 31(d), 37, 39(1) and 42(5) be suspended in respect of the passage of the Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill.

Minister for Communities

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the motion was carried with cross-community support.

5. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 3.09pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

21 April 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on

1 April 2020 – 21 April 2020

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly

2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly

The Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill (NIA Bill 04/17-22)

3. Orders in Council

4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly

Legislative Consent Memorandum – Pension Schemes Bill (Department for Communities)

Minute on the Direction of Accruing Resources (Department of Finance)

NISRA Statistical Review of Northern Ireland Agriculture 2019 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

Northern Ireland Certification Officer 2018- 2019 Annual Report of the Certification for Northern Ireland (Department for Economy)

Legislative Consent Memorandum - Private International Law (Implementation of Agreements) Bill (Department of Justice)

5. Assembly Reports

Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees Sixth Report of Session 2019 - 2020 (NIA 16/17-22)

Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees Seventh Report of Session 2019 - 2020 (NIA 17/17-22)

6. Statutory Rules

SR 2020/59 The Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Finance)

SR 2020/60 The Establishment and Agencies (Fitness of Workers) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/62 The Social Fund Funeral Expenses Payment (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Communities)

SR 2020/64 The Taxi Licensing (Amendment) (Coronavirus) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2020 (draft) The Census Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Finance)

SR 2020 (draft) The Discretionary Support (Amendment No. 2) (COVID-19) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Communities)

SR 2020/65 The Police Trainee (Amendment) (Coronavirus) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Justice)

SR 2020/66 The Statutory Sick Pay (General) (Coronavirus Amendment) (No.3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Communities)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

Minister of Finance - COVID-19 Response Funding Allocations

Minister for Infrastructure – Taxi Licensing Regulations

8. Consultation Documents

9. Departmental Publications

Notice temporarily disapplying or modifying education duties No. 1 (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Education) (made under the Coronavirus Act 2020)

The Temporary Modification of Education Duties (No 2) Notice (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Education) (made under the Coronavirus Act 2020)

Coronavirus Act 2020 Temporary Modification of Education Duties (No 2) Cancellation Notice (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Education)

Coronavirus Act 2020 Temporary Modification of Education Duties (No 3) Notice (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Education)

Letter on the delay in the laying of the Shared Education Report to the NI Assembly (Department of Education)

10. Agency Publications

11. Westminster Publications

12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly Legislation:

Stages in Consideration of Public Bills

First Stage: Introduction of Bill.

Second Stage: General debate of the Bill with an opportunity for Members to vote on its general principles.

Committee Stage (Comm. Stage): Detailed investigation by a Committee which concludes with the publication of a report for consideration by the Assembly.

Consideration Stage (CS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, the details of the Bill including amendments proposed to the Bill.

Further Consideration Stage (FCS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, further amendments to the Bill.

Final Stage: Passing or rejecting of Bill by the Assembly, without further amendment.

Royal Assent.

Proceedings as 21 April 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	27/03/20
Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill (NIA Bill 03/17-22)	31/03/20							
The Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill (NIA 4/17-22)	21/04/20	21/04/20	/	/				

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						

/ Bills progressing by accelerated passage

Proxy Voting Notices

The following Members notified the Speaker, under Standing Order 112, that they wished to avail of proxy voting arrangements for the sitting on Tuesday 21 April 2020:

Martina Anderson	Dolores Kelly
Caoimhe Archibald	Liz Kimmins
John Blair	Naomi Long
Cathal Boylan	Gordon Lyons
Maurice Bradley	Séan Lynch
Paula Bradley	Chris Lyttle
Sinéad Bradley	Nichola Mallon
Thomas Buchanan	Declan McAleer
Jonathan Buckley	Fra McCann
Joanne Bunting	Daniel McCrossan
Pat Catney	Patsy McGlone
Trevor Clarke	Philip McGuigan
John Dallat	Maolíosa McHugh
Stewart Dickson	Michelle McIlveen
Linda Dillon	Sinead McLaughlin
Diane Dodds	Justin McNulty
Jemma Dolan	Andrew Muir
Gordon Dunne	Karen Mullan
Mark Durkan	Conor Murphy
Alex Easton	Robin Newton
Sinéad Ennis	Carál Ní Chuilín
Arlene Foster	Michelle O'Neill
Paul Frew	Matthew O'Toole
Órlaithí Flynn	George Robinson
Colm Gildernew	Emma Rogan
Paul Givan	Emma Sheerin
Deirdre Hargey	Christopher Stalford
Harry Harvey	Mervyn Storey
David Hilditch	Robin Swann
William Humphrey	Peter Weir
William Irwin	Rachel Woods
Catherine Kelly	