

Written Ministerial Statement

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The Executive Office

STATEMENT BY THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER ON THE LEGISLATIVE PROGRAMME

Published on Monday 10 February 2020

Ministers: Following agreement today by the Executive Committee, we wish to advise the Assembly of the legislation which we and the Ministers of the Executive Committee intend to introduce during the remainder of this 2019-20 session. In doing so we are also fulfilling the obligation placed on the Executive Committee by the New Decade New Approach Deal to publish a Legislative Programme within one month of its operation.

This Legislative Programme has been prepared following consultation with all Ministers and focusses on those legislative proposals which, on the basis of their state of readiness, we believe can be introduced as Bills before the summer recess. We would wish to emphasise that this Programme does not represent the totality of legislation which Executive Ministers expect to introduce before the end of the mandate. As the work of the Executive gains momentum, we fully anticipate the inclusion of new legislative proposals as these become more fully developed. There will also be a need to respond flexibly to Ministerial priorities and the need for legislation to deal with urgent and critical issues as these emerge.

We will therefore provide the Assembly with an update on progress and a revised Programme at an appropriate point later this year.

The Legislative Programme will therefore consist of the following Bills:

The Minister for Communities intends to introduce four Bills dealing respectively with Welfare Mitigation, Housing, Pension Schemes and Liquor Licensing.

The **Welfare Mitigation/ Social Sector Size Criteria Bill** will remove the current end date of 31st March 2020 in respect of mitigation payments for the Social Sector Size Criteria, usually referred to as the Bedroom Tax. This will fulfil the commitment in “The New Decade, New Approach” Deal that existing mitigation payments should continue beyond the 31st March.

The Pension Schemes Bill aims to ensure that those saving into a Master Trust scheme, which is a form of multi-employer occupational pension scheme, are protected. Introduction of automatic enrolment into workplace pension schemes has seen an increase in the number of people saving for

retirement. The pensions market has responded to this and, the Master Trust market in particular has developed significantly. The current regulatory regime for occupational pensions does not adequately fit with the particular characteristics and dynamics associated with Master Trusts and the Bill will therefore introduce an authorisation and supervision regime for Master Trusts and provide the Pensions Regulator with greater powers to take action where key criteria are not met.

The Bill will also remove barriers to capping excessive exit charges on savers accessing their pensions flexibly and a ban on member-borne commission charges.

The purpose of the **Housing (Amendment) Bill** is to make the changes urgently required to address the Office for National Statistics' classification of Housing Associations to the public sector. Reclassification to the private sector will allow Housing Associations to borrow money to facilitate the Social Housing Development Programme and to access Financial Transactions Capital, which supports the Co-ownership scheme, among other housing projects. Without such reclassification, all Housing Association borrowing would be charged against Executive Funds and Financial Transaction Capital would not be available.

A Licensing and Registration of Clubs Bill was introduced during the previous mandate but fell on the dissolution of the Assembly in 2017. The purpose of the proposed **Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill** is to tackle practices within the licensed trade which could contribute to alcohol misuse. It is also intended to support the hospitality sector in promoting tourism, by making its offering more sustainable and attractive. It will also recognise the role licensed premises and private registered clubs play in their local communities as places to socialise and providers of employment.

The proposals in the Bill will represent a balanced package of reforms which will:

- place restrictions on the advertising of alcoholic drinks in supermarkets and off sales premises;
- introduce occasional additional late opening for certain licensed premises and changes to holiday period opening hours for certain licensed premises and registered clubs;
- make provision for a Special Events Licence for events such as The Open Championship at Portrush;
- introduce a new category of licence for local producers of alcoholic drinks;
- introduce changes to the law affecting private members clubs.

The Minister of Finance will introduce the normal **Budget Bills** as part of the annual financial cycle.

The Minister of Justice intends to introduce a **Criminal Justice Bill** to reform the Committal process, and a **Domestic Abuse Bill**.

Committal Reform is one project within the wider 'Speeding Up Justice' programme of work. The speed that cases progress matters to victims and witnesses, their families and their communities and

can help offenders to better understand the implications of their actions and create a better opportunity for rehabilitation. The **Committal Reform Bill** is designed to address the recommendation of the Fresh Start Panel by abolishing oral evidence at the 'traditional committal hearing' stage, and provide clarity about the operational outworking of direct committal.

The **Domestic Abuse Bill** will create a new domestic abuse offence and therefore close a gap in the law to ensure that protection is not limited to cases of physically violent behaviour, as at present.

This new offence will apply where there are two or more occasions of abusive behaviour against a partner, former partner or close family member. It will cover behaviour that is abusive because it is controlling or coercive or amounts to psychological, emotional or financial abuse of the other person, and can also include behaviour that is physically violent, threatening or intimidating.

We, as First Minister and deputy First Minister, will introduce a three piece legislative package to implement commitments given in the New Decade, New Approach Deal. These will be entitled the **Northern Ireland Act 1998 Amendment No 1, 2 and 3 Bills** and will respectively:

- make provision for an Office of Identity and Cultural Expression and repeal the Administration of Justice (Language) Act 1737;
- to appoint an Irish Language Commissioner and to provide official recognition of the status of the Irish language;
- make provision to appoint a Commissioner to enhance and develop the language, arts and literature associated with the Ulster Scots and Ulster British tradition in Northern Ireland; and make provision for a duty on the Department of Education as regards Ulster Scots.

All these legislative proposals will be subject to the established procedures for Executive referral and consideration before their introduction.

In addition, and in recognition of the interest of members in this Legislative Programme, we also intend to table a motion for an early debate on its contents.



The Rt Hon Arlene Foster MLA
First Minister



Michelle O'Neill MLA
Deputy First Minister