



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for The Executive Office

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

The Executive Office: Ministerial Overview

5 February 2020

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Colin McGrath (Chairperson)  
Mr Mike Nesbitt (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Trevor Clarke  
Mr Fra McCann  
Mr George Robinson  
Mr Pat Sheehan  
Ms Emma Sheerin  
Mr Christopher Stalford

**Witnesses:**

Mrs O'Neill	deputy First Minister
Mrs Foster	First Minister
Mr Lyons	junior Minister

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** I welcome the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and the junior Minister. This is the first ministerial briefing of the mandate. Looking back, I want to take the opportunity to thank everybody for their efforts in preparing the 'New Decade, New Approach' (NDNA) document, which has facilitated and enabled us to get back to work. In that regard, I was struck by the words "new" and "approach" as being key. If we are to achieve that, we will have to do things differently and, hopefully, better as we move forward.

The job of the Committee is to scrutinise, but that can be done politely, courteously, respectfully and in an open and transparent manner. I will do my best to ensure that it is. Those virtues are, of course, two-way: they are expected of us as Committee members and of the Ministers. I would like to see these briefings happen regularly, because that will demonstrate a certain level of respect between the Executive and the Assembly. It will also show leadership from yourselves as First Minister and deputy First Minister to the other Ministers and their interactions with other Committees. That will help us to show that there is that new approach. I am not naive; I know that there will be differences. There will be differences of opinion, there will be differences of priorities and there will be political differences. However, we are all acutely aware that the public has asked and demanded that there be a mature and grown-up approach to politics. It is our duty to deliver that. I hope that our Committee can be a beacon to the other Committees in the way that we are going to get work done.

Shortly, I will ask the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide a short oversight and induction to their Department and priorities going forward. Afterwards, we will move to questions. If you are happy, First Minister and deputy First Minister, and junior Minister, I hand over to you.

**Mrs Foster (The First Minister):** Thank you very much, Chair and members. We very much welcome the opportunity to come along early and meet the Committee today to provide, I suppose, for some members, an introduction, and, for some, a refresher to our Department and the key priority work areas that we will focus on during the next few months. Like you, we look forward to regular and positive engagement with the Committee during the rest of the mandate. We know that your primary role is to scrutinise — we accept that — but we also hope that we can work together in a constructive way. We acknowledge that there have been problems previously around the timely receipt of key papers in advance of evidence sessions. We will try to work to ensure that, wherever possible, papers will issue in the agreed time protocols. We have already provided the Committee with the first-day brief, which contains a broad overview of the Department and its work. I understand that the Committee received a briefing from the head of the Civil Service last week and will have further briefings from our senior officials across the Department over the next number of weeks.

The 'New Decade, New Approach' document, which you have referred to, outlines the priorities of the new Executive and sets out our goal to bring positive changes to people's lives in areas such as the economy, healthcare, education, housing, welfare and mental health. Our Department will set out a multi-year Programme for Government and a legislative programme to underpin those Executive priorities. Of course, we will be delivering our objectives in the context of the United Kingdom having left the European Union. That in and of itself presents its own set of issues arising from the protocol agreed by the UK Government, and the Committee will be aware of some of the key concerns from the debate in the Assembly on 20 January. There was, as you will recall, unanimity that we should reject the request for consent to legislate on matters which belong to this place, and there was common ground on the need to get the right outcome for the economy. We are determined, together, to protect Northern Ireland's interests and the interests of our people and economy, and we are going to hold the UK Government to account on their various commitments that they have made in relation to the 'New Decade, New Approach' document.

The deputy First Minister and I have written to the Prime Minister setting out our expectations of engagement on matters such as unfettered access, on which there are very clear commitments in New Decade, New Approach for the Government to bring forward legislation. Just last week at the Joint Ministerial Committee (JMC), which was in Cardiff, we secured a commitment from the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster that there will be engagement on protocol matters. We expect that that engagement will be political engagement and, more than that, it needs to be meaningful engagement. For our part, we have established the Executive subcommittee on Brexit. It met yesterday. The subcommittee will provide us with the forum for collective discussion on Brexit matters that have the potential to impact on our citizens, businesses, local economy and place in the UK internal market and, indeed, wider markets.

The Committee will have an ongoing interest in our Brexit deliberations, and we look forward to working with you on that. Whilst Brexit and its implications are a key priority for our Department, it is also important that we continue to enhance our reputation and relationships internationally. Our priorities will continue to be in North America, Brussels and, of course, China. It is something that will remain an important element of our Programme for Government. Our three Executive offices in Washington, Brussels and Beijing play a significant part in promoting our international objectives. Equally, the international visit programme of Executive Ministers is important in establishing our position globally. We will review our international relations strategy to ensure that we are competitive in a changing international context.

Turning briefly, before the deputy First Minister comes in, to our own Department: we are working in a challenging financial environment. The Department's opening budget for 2019-2020 was £55 million, which represents a 3-6% reduction from 2018-19. It was probably closer to a 6-7% reduction after pay, price and other inescapable pressures. Our budget strategy for 2019-2020 follows the approach taken in previous years and seeks to address our statutory obligations, meet any contractual obligations and take forward Programme for Government commitments. We also have in the past protected the victims' budget, mitigated the impact on services delivered through our arm's-length bodies and minimised the impact on departmental programme budgets.

Our key goal is to facilitate economic growth through continuing to offer jobs, attract foreign direct investment and improve the skills of our young people. The Department is managing a resource funding deficit of some £2.97 million, which is 10.4% of our budget. That has arisen due to a

combination of budget cuts in each of the past five years, together with the impact of new and additional work that the Executive Office has taken forward for which baseline funding has not been received. Of course, that financial position has been exacerbated due to the additional work that we have undertaken — work that we wanted, of course, to undertake — in terms of the historical institutional abuse (HIA) legislation, and then, latterly, taking on work in relation to the victims' payments, each of which could amount to costs of between £25 million and £60 million.

Those are big figures that we really have to get to grips with. It is actually not possible for the costs to be absorbed in our existing budget. The source of funding for those areas will have to be confirmed as a matter of some urgency. The difficulty, of course, is that those are demand-led pieces, so we cannot really give you a definitive answer on the funding. In addition, shared future funding provided as part of the Fresh Start Agreement had been agreed at £60 million over five years. That ends on 31 March 2021, and the expiry of that funding stream will have a significant negative impact on the delivery of outcomes and on communities right across Northern Ireland, so it is something that we will need to have a very serious look at as well. Meeting all those financial challenges is a key priority for the Department as we look forward to planning for the next financial year and beyond.

**Mrs O'Neill (The deputy First Minister):** We look forward to working with you, Chair, and the Committee in a constructive way where possible. I am sure that there will always be a challenge, but that is your function; that is OK. We hope that we have a good relationship and that we have a regular role to play here in coming along to the Committee. I apologise for the junior Minister; he just could not make it today, but he will be here at future meetings.

As the First Minister said, we look forward to working with the Committee across a wide range of issues, not least the Brexit issue. There were, clearly, different starting points for our decision to recommend that the Assembly not give consent to the legislative consent motion that was requested, but there was an absolute agreement that consent be withheld. That was across the board, and it was a good outcome. There is common ground on the need to get the best deal that we can now for our people and our economy. We are both determined to do everything that we can to influence the next phase of the Brexit deliberations through any means possible here, with the British Government, in Europe and with the EU. Our economy, the integrated nature of trade and complex supply chains will require those in negotiations to properly understand our issues and circumstances here. Any kind of surface-level understanding will not be enough, so we have big work to do to follow that very closely and influence the events of the next 12 months.

It is equally important that impacts for our citizens are properly understood, that the Good Friday Agreement is protected and that we take a long-term view of the arrangements that are negotiated later this year. We are not interested in any superficial or sticking plaster approach. What we need are negotiations that deliver outcomes that enable our economy and people to flourish. I was very pleased last week, or maybe it was the week before, to meet Michel Barnier, along with Minister Dodds. We both took the opportunity to stress the importance of protecting the economy, and that was one of the key discussion points that we had yesterday at our first subcommittee on Brexit.

On matters closer to home, the issue of compensation for victims and survivors of historical institutional abuse is an urgent priority for the Executive. A sum of £850,000 has been secured in the January monitoring rounds for 2019-2020. That will enable the work underpinning the establishment of the redress board to be completed. The ongoing budgetary discussions will not impact that. The First Minister has highlighted the challenges that we have. It is important that we send a strong message to victims of historical institutional abuse that we have a statutory obligation, that this money is secure and that it will not be impacted by the other budgetary challenges that we have. I am sure that the Committee is glad to hear that but, more importantly, I am sure that the survivors are glad to hear that.

The Lord Chief Justice, Sir Declan Morgan, appointed Mr Justice Adrian Colton as president of the HIA redress board on 15 November. Given the challenging time frame to establish the two arm's-length bodies, we have set up a shadow redress board, and it is working on the development of the processes and procedures that will allow for the early and effective assessment of redress applications by the multidisciplinary panels. Brendan McAllister was appointed HIA interim advocate in July of last year. He is providing support to victims and survivors in advance of the appointment of the statutory commissioner. Working collaboratively, the interim advocate, redress board and TEO officials have been engaging with victims and survivors on the application process for compensation. That process needs to be straightforward — and should be straightforward — clear, easy to use and seek only the information that is needed to determine the application.

The Executive are determined to protect the most vulnerable in society. Our office coordinates the Executive's Delivering Social Change programme, which aims to deliver a sustained reduction in poverty and an improvement to the health and well-being and life opportunities of children and young people. We remain committed to the ongoing implementation of the Executive's Together: Building a United Community strategy for good relations, under the banner of which we support a range of funding programmes aimed at building strong and united communities. These include the Urban Villages initiative, the T:BUC camps programme, the central good relations fund, the district council good relations programme and the planned interventions programme.

Our Department works with the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) to deliver the Peace IV programme, which provides in the region of €270 million across four thematic objectives: shared education; children and young people; shared spaces and services; and building positive relations at local level. We are working to develop the new Peace Plus programme, which will have a budget of at least €650 million. This will build on previous Peace and INTERREG programmes. SEUPB aims to have a draft cooperation plan with the Commission by June and a final programme agreed by the end of 2020.

Our Department manages the social investment fund (SIF), which is now in full delivery mode, having made significant progress over the past three years. Of the 65 projects with committed funding, 35 capital projects and 17 revenue projects are now complete and delivering positive outcomes to local people in disadvantaged areas. To date, over 26,000 people have benefited from these revenue projects. That is quite substantial. We recognise that there were shortcomings, and some Members have expressed that in questions they have asked. There were certainly shortcomings in the early stages of SIF, although we welcome the acknowledgment from the Audit Office that governance improved once projects had been established. All Audit Office recommendations have been accepted by our Department and the Department of Finance, with agreement from all other Departments.

Finally, I want to touch on the strategic aims of the new office of identity and cultural expression as set out in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. These include the promotion of cultural pluralism and respect for diversity, building social cohesion and reconciliation, building capacity and resilience in how we address our unresolved cultural identity issues, and celebrating and supporting all aspects of the North's rich cultural and linguistic heritage, recognising the equal validity and importance of all identities and traditions. Consideration is being given to arrangements to bring forward the rights, language and identity proposals in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. I am quite sure that you will want to have a detailed conversation around some of those things soon.

I apologise if that was a bit long, but it is to try to set out the stall of the breadth of things that we have to deal with. We will have to have detailed conversations on all those things, I am sure, over the course of the weeks and months ahead.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** Thank you very much indeed, Ministers. I forgot to put on record my thanks to you for delaying by an hour the start of today's meeting at short notice in order to facilitate my attendance at a funeral. Thank you for that.

We will move on to questions. I have just a few points to make. It is probably more of a slant on some of the things that you have talked about, rather than on any new area. Obviously, Brexit is going to consume a lot of your Department's time during this Assembly mandate. Can we get a commitment from you that, although the Executive subcommittee is dealing with Brexit and, therefore, the Committee will be able to hold it to account, there will be some external work? It is just to acknowledge that, in the past three years, a lot of sectors out there have taken the lead, provided a lot of research and done a lot of the groundwork, the spadework, in the absence of the Executive and Assembly. The manufacturing, business, trade, agriculture and social sectors have actually gathered themselves together and are working quite effectively. If that model and level of engagement is there, is there a possibility for you, at the subcommittee level, to be able to tap into what they are doing so that they are not left to just fall away? They have their finger on the pulse of thousands of businesses and sectors across the North, and have been able to work with them. Can you give that commitment?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes, absolutely. It is actually one of the items that we discussed at our meeting yesterday. The subcommittee will probably have to meet every week, given the breadth of the range of decisions that we will have to take and for us to be ahead of the curve in the trade negotiations that will happen. As anybody knows, things can move very quickly in negotiations. We will have to be very nimble and able to adjust to that.

One of the key conversations that we had yesterday was about how we involve stakeholders, because you are absolutely right: we have all been on record commending the business community for the voice that they have had and the stance that they have taken. They have spoken out loudly, and we have all heard them. Not everybody agreed at all times, but we certainly all heard what people had to say. A key part of our ability to move forward to the next stage, because there is so much uncertainty, is for us to be involved in stakeholder engagement. We have agreed to come back to a dedicated conversation. Officials are going to draft a programme for engagement for next week's Brexit subcommittee, and we hope to be able to sign off on that. We recognise that as a fundamental element in how we progress over the next 12 months.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** I certainly welcome that. Just to reiterate, we all know what stakeholder engagement is: a lot of places conduct stakeholder engagement. It is about recognising the extra level of work that that group of people has already done, and tapping into that in order to get their expertise. In conversations with them, I have found their knowledge and research, right down to what is happening at the coalface, to be very useful. It is good to get the commitment that you will work with them.

My next question will probably be quite quick. It relates to the historical institutional abuse payments. My ears pricked up a little bit. Last week, I said this to David Sterling, and I want to get your commitment to it as well. With regard to the additional moneys allocated in the January monitoring round, the term was used that it was specifically for a "scoping exercise". I just want to keep pressing on that. The victims from this group have been led up the garden path a number of times. I know that you have given a real, clear commitment that the payments will start and things will move very quickly; hopefully, this side of the summer, but as soon as you see the words "scoping exercise" — maybe it is because of my old days in council — you know that that can equal one or two years. Can you reaffirm that commitment that things will start very quickly and that the scoping exercise is to assist that work and will not hold it up?

**Mrs Foster:** It is my understanding that this is very much an obligation on our part. We want to do it as well: it is not something that we are doing because we have to do it. We believe that it is absolutely morally the right thing to do. We are having continuous briefings on finance, but, as far as I understand it, the money that was allocated — I think that it was £850,000 — was to underpin the establishment of the redress board and then to get the commissioner in place as well. We have not seen the terms of reference for the commissioner yet, but the interim advocate will stay in place until the commissioner is put in place, so there is continuity. To be fair to the officials in the Department, this is an area that they have really grasped in the absence of an Executive. I know they have done a lot of work, and I pay tribute to the officials who have been involved in the HIA work.

**Mrs O'Neill:** To add to that, one of the things that we have talked about is the fact that we need to reach out to those institutions that also have a contribution to make. We want to make sure that no stone has been left unturned, that we move at pace and that these people, who have been led up the garden path time and again and then let down so many times, have this delivered in the fastest way we can. We also need to make sure other institutions play their part by allowing us to have proper funding in place in order to give people what they absolutely deserve.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** To conclude, I know it is a priority for you. Already, since last week, it has been identified as a priority for the Committee. In the months ahead, I am sure we will use our scrutinising role to keep the pressure on this to make sure that we get delivery on the payments as quickly as possible. It is good that we are all going in the same direction. Hopefully, there will be no friction.

Finally, as part of New Decade, New Approach, there was a conversation in the Programme for Government strand about a seventeenth indicator for housing. All parties that were part of the negotiations recognised that housing is a key social issue in our communities. Homelessness, for too large a number of people, is an issue in whatever form it presents itself and we want to address it. In the discussions, many of the parties felt that having it as a seventeenth indicator, as part of the Programme for Government, will be useful and helpful. Officials in the Department felt that it was something that they did not have any major issues or problems with. Can you make a commitment that you are agreeable to this and that it can be pursued quickly in the Department?

**Mrs Foster:** At the moment, we are looking at how we bring forward the Programme for Government. It will probably be a two-stage process, Chair, insofar as we will use the outcome delivery programme that was there from the Civil Service and that has been developed to allow us to move ahead. We will

then have a more strategic look at the ongoing Programme for Government. We have had, as you are probably aware, an awayday, where some of our Ministers gave presentations. The Minister for Communities gave us a very detailed presentation on housing. We are looking forward to another awayday — I think it is next week — where the remaining Ministers will give us their presentation on the challenges and opportunities in their Department. We are trying, at the Executive, to have a whole understanding of all the Departments so that we know where all the pressures are, where the opportunities are and how we can move forward together collegiately. That is a new approach, and I hope you will be in favour of it, because, in the past, there has been a lot of siloing in departmental bunkers. It is not something that we think is good for the Departments. I understand why in the past it happened. People felt quite territorial about their Department, but it is important for everybody, not least those Ministers, that we have an understanding of where the pressures are in their Department and where the opportunities lie.

I think we will be back with you again when we have the phase 1 Programme for Government piece and, of course, the legislative programme in place so that we can have a conversation with you around that.

**Mr Nesbitt:** May I echo the commitment to positive relations, notwithstanding the need to tackle difficult issues in way that is, I think the deputy First Minister put it, "constructive, where possible"? Maybe we can all agree that a characterisation of the last three years was a plummeting of public confidence in MLAs as people of integrity. I turn to Conor Murphy's comments on the murder of Paul Quinn and the revelations of the last 24 hours. Under other circumstances, we could, of course, say it is a matter for Sinn Féin, but he is an Executive Minister. You are running a joint office, and I suggest that you have the responsibility to protect the reputation and integrity of the Executive. I want to ask you both this: what is the best way forward to handle this?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I am happy to take the question first. We are here in our capacity as joint First Ministers — joint heads of Government. We are here to discuss our Department's remit. Chair, with your indulgence, because this is a political issue, I want to put my views on the record about what the Vice Chair raised. As we speak, Conor Murphy is going to make a public statement — as we speak, actually, I believe he is making a public statement — about his approach, where he will apologise for the remarks he made. He will make those remarks very clearly about what he said in the aftermath of the murder of Paul Quinn back in 2007. Conor will state very clearly that he offers those apologies to Paul Quinn's mother, Breege, who, over recent days has, obviously, been speaking on many outlets and is very hurt. I think it is right and proper that Conor will offer those words of apology today. He will also offer to meet Mrs Quinn, and hopefully she will take him up on that.

Paul Quinn was not a criminal. Paul Quinn was murdered by criminals. Conor will make that very clear on the record today, and then he will get back to his role as the Finance Minister.

**Mrs Foster:** Thank you, Mike. I will just reiterate that, of course, this is not a departmental issue. We are here to answer departmental issues today. However, on the political ramifications of it, we have heard from the deputy First Minister that the Finance Minister is apologising. I think that is absolutely the right thing to do.

I met Breege Quinn around this time last year. She was a person who was deeply hurting about the murder and death of her son, and, wherever possible, if mistakes are made, we should reflect and make apologies for those mistakes and we should make sure that those are sincere apologies. I have not heard Conor's apology, obviously, because he is making it only now, but I think it is right that it should happen. Of course, if anybody has any information about the murder of Paul Quinn, they should take it to the Police Service of Northern Ireland so that they can assist in the best way possible. I am sure that Mr and Mrs Quinn would want above all to have justice for the murder of their son, and that would give them the closure they seek.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I do not wish to labour it, First Minister, but just to be clear, are you happy to continue to work with Conor Murphy as Finance Minister?

**Mrs Foster:** As I say, that is not a departmental issue. As you well know, because you have a Minister in Government with us as well, Government appointments are made by the parties under the d'Hondt process. That is how Ministers are appointed, so Sinn Féin is responsible for appointing its Ministers, and that is a matter for Sinn Féin.

**Mr Nesbitt:** Thank you for those answers. I will move on to annex E of the 'New Decade, New Approach' document. There is a commitment there to bring forward an Ad Hoc Assembly Committee on a bill of rights. In fact, the commitment is that:

*"The terms of reference and timetable of the Committee will be agreed within 30 working days of the restoration of devolution."*

By my reckoning, that leaves you 12 days. Will you update me on the progress?

**Mrs Foster:** On that commitment and, indeed, a number of the commitments in New Decade, New Approach, a wide range of bodies, committees and structures have to be set up within a limited period. Officials are working through those at the moment. The deputy First Minister and I received a document just today that sets out all the commitments in New Decade, New Approach, which Departments are going to be taking those forward and who the responsible officers are going to be for all those matters. It is a huge document, and it will take some time to work through, but we recognise that some of those commitments have time limits attached to them. I am sure that our officials are aware that those time limits are there as well.

**Mr Nesbitt:** If I go back to the Stormont House Agreement, there was a commitment to a comprehensive mental trauma service, which has now become the regional trauma network. I asked about that at Question Time recently. It was couched in the agreement as the Commission for Victims and Survivors' recommendation, so it is definitely in that sector. The sector has come together in, perhaps, an unprecedented way — I am talking from South East Fermanagh Foundation to Relatives for Justice — to ask that there is a commitment that that service is primarily for victims and survivors rather than a general NHS service open to all. They are seeking reassurance from you — officials, particularly in Health, are looking for ministerial direction — to say it is primarily for victims and survivors. Can you give that assurance?

**Mrs Foster:** Part of the issue, Mike, has not just been that it is primarily for victims and survivors but that they wanted it exclusively for victims and survivors. The difficulty with that, as you well know, is that that is not how the National Health Service works. It is open to all at the point of need. Therefore, there was that bit of creative tension, if you do not mind me using that term, between what the National Health Service does and what is in the Stormont House Agreement. Officials have been working and have met a number of the victims' groups. I think that there has been good progress on that and that there is a way through. They are working through it at the moment. It seems to me to be the only outstanding issue. I stand to be corrected about the regional trauma network. If we can get a creative way around that, we can move on and get it established.

**Mr Nesbitt:** At this stage, I think the victims' groups would settle for "primarily" rather than "exclusively".

**Mrs Foster:** I hear what you are saying, and that is very helpful.

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes, it is. We know officials are working with the groups to try to get a resolution that satisfies everybody. Arlene is absolutely right. We are trying to have this delivered. It is a necessary piece of what we need in society. We can find an accommodation and a way forward on this, but we need to work with the groups.

**Mr Nesbitt:** Stormont House also set up a Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition (FICT), which has been meeting for nearly four years, quite expensively, and has not —.

**Mrs Foster:** We note your question, yes.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I have not got there yet. It has not yet reported. How does that sit with the New Decade, New Approach commitment to establish the office of identity and cultural expression with commissioners?

**Mrs Foster:** Again, as I understand it, the FICT group had not really met last year because there was a recognition that it had come to a bit of a standstill in what it was trying to do without there being an Executive and an Assembly in place. As I understand it, it will meet again in March and, no doubt, will reflect on the contents of the 'New Decade, New Approach' document. Obviously, it is not for us to direct it, but we look forward to hearing what it sees as the way forward.

**Mrs O'Neill:** That is it. It is going to meet again in March. It had not met for some time. We expect to get a final report that will be reflective of NDNA, which is easier said than "New deal, —" or "New Decade, New Approach". *[Laughter.]* See, I cannot even get that right.

**Mr Nesbitt:** Do you accept that there is a value-for-money question to be posed about FICT?

**Mrs O'Neill:** The First Minister said, "We note your question", because we know you have sent in some questions for written answer on this, and we are looking at it. I am not satisfied that that is the case yet, to be honest. We are to receive a briefing from officials. We will have to work our way through all that. I am very happy to respond to you on that when I have given it consideration.

**Mr Nesbitt:** This is my final question, if I may, and it is about financial transactions capital (FTC), which currently sits with you for, you could say, technical reasons. We know from the Finance Minister that over £150 million was returned.

**Mrs Foster:** Yes. I raised the use of financial transactions money with officials earlier today. We had hoped we would be able to make more use of it. We have talked about housing and that there needs to be a reclassification for us to be able to use the FTC money. I think it is probably key. Once we get that reclassification, you will see us being able to use it for housing associations and what have you. We have been trying — certainly, we did this when I was in the Department for the Economy — to get more use for FTC because it is there. Certainly, when the money is there and can be used in Northern Ireland, I would much prefer it is used here rather than hand it back.

**Mr Nesbitt:** If Northern Ireland Water were mutualised, would that open the door to it accessing FTC?

**Mrs Foster:** It may well do. Deirdre and her Department will have to look at that. I would just like to see us, across government, being more proactive in using the money that is there. It is not free money — of course it is not free money — but it is there, and we should try to make more use of it.

**Mr Sheehan:** I wanted to drill down a bit into the Brexit issue. I know the subcommittee has now been set up. It is no secret that there are diverging views on that subcommittee. What approach will the subcommittee take? Can you give us a flavour of its future work plan?

**Mrs O'Neill:** As I said, we had our first meeting yesterday. It is important to say that all parties are represented on the subcommittee, because everybody has an input to make. Given that everything is so cross-cutting in nature, it is vital we work together across Departments. There was a very firm commitment from all Ministers present yesterday to share information with each other, which probably is not how things worked previously. We will share information with each other, make sure we give a heads-up to each Department and work collectively on trying to influence, in the best possible way, the trade negotiations. The First Minister and I went to Cardiff last —

**Mrs Foster:** Tuesday.

**Mrs O'Neill:** — Tuesday, when we made a very strong case on the role we have to play in the negotiations. We do not want to be considered as an annex, add-on or thorn in the side of the negotiations; we want to be in the middle of the negotiations. We made a very strong case on making sure our voice is heard. We were joined in that, obviously, by Scotland and Wales, which, clearly, will also be impacted. We have work to do. We have agreed a plan for the next five to six weeks for the areas we will consider. It may change depending on how the negotiation moves on, but we have identified five or six areas that we will focus on. We can certainly share that with the Committee.

**Mr Sheehan:** I understand what you are saying about trying to influence the negotiations. However, given that Boris Johnson has said there will be unfettered access across the Irish Sea and that Michel Barnier and the Commission have effectively said the opposite and the withdrawal agreement and the Irish protocol need to be implemented, how will you be able to influence the negotiations?

**Mrs Foster:** We sent a letter to the Prime Minister on unfettered access. You are right: the Prime Minister is saying one thing and Michel Barnier is saying something different, but that is not just on Northern Ireland. That is just generally, because they have restarted a negotiation now because we are in phase 2, and they are both taking hard-line negotiation stances. I understand that, but, from our point of view, we have to try to get clarity on unfettered access from Great Britain to Northern Ireland and from Northern Ireland to Great Britain. We do not want the exit declarations for goods going from

Northern Ireland to Great Britain to become burdensome. I understand the Economy Minister was in front of the Economy Committee today. She pointed out that we do not want to see increased costs from goods coming from Great Britain to Northern Ireland or, indeed, a reduction in consumer choice, which should be of concern to us as well. We want to see that unfettered access put in place.

I understand we have common cause with Scotland and Wales on a lot of issues. Of course, if there are to be checks, they will happen in Scotland and Wales and, indeed, in England. It is important that we continue to try to make sure that our voice is heard in all the forums. The junior Ministers have been to preparedness meetings on no deal. We have been to the JMC on the negotiations. There will probably be a plenary meeting of the Joint Ministerial Committee in the coming weeks. We have asked for it to be in Belfast — in Northern Ireland. It is important we continue to make sure our voice is heard.

**Mr Sheehan:** Thanks for that. I have one other short question. David Sterling was in last week and told us he intends to retire in August. Has any process been put in place to appoint a new head of the Civil Service? Do you expect to have a new person in place by the time David goes?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes, that is the intention. We have just received a submission from officials, which we are working our way through, on getting an appointment process in place. That needs to happen ASAP, so we are very mindful of that. Our intention is to have someone to step in straightaway.

**Mr McCann:** Thank you for the presentation. It was very informative. In the last Executive, a subcommittee was set up to look at the whole question of mental health and suicide prevention. There was a belief that it was very poorly attended and sent out all the wrong messages to families. There is a growing expectation with the announcement of a new subcommittee. How can we ensure that that is different and delivers to meet families' expectations?

**Mrs Foster:** Thanks, Fra. We were aware as well that it was not a particularly well-attended subcommittee. I think it was just called the ministerial subgroup on suicide prevention. The deputy First Minister and I talked about this, and we are keenly aware of the growth in this terrible blight on society. We want to send out positive messages about well-being, resilience and mental health, therefore, we felt there was a need to have a new committee to send out those messages. Working with the Minister of Health, that has now been put in place. It is called the ministerial working group on well-being, resilience and suicide prevention, so it is trying to take in all those pieces. We are committed to attending as First Minister and deputy First Minister because we believe it is something we really need to tackle.

**Mr McCann:** Thank you. I have just one short question. In the past, there have been difficulties with lack of attendance or input from other Departments. That is the crucial element of trying to make anything like this work, especially delivering to meet those expectations of families.

**Mrs O'Neill:** That is why we think that promoting well-being and resilience and showing an Executive commitment to it is really important and that our leading by example in saying a whole-society approach is required and each Department will have a responsibility. That is why we wanted to elevate it to the level of joint office. We think it is important to send out a very strong signal. We brought the issue to our first Executive meeting because we thought it was so in need of our attention. We are committed to working with the Health Minister and working across all Departments to do better and do much more than the suicide prevention group did by itself previously.

**Mr Robinson:** I welcome the Ministers to their first meeting. Will you ensure that the future Programme for Government and investment flowing from it will extend to all parts of Northern Ireland, including my East Londonderry constituency —

**Mrs Foster:** Well done, George. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Robinson:** — which is in dire need of investment? I have a wee supplementary as well.

**Mrs O'Neill:** All politics is local, is that not right, George?

**Mr Robinson:** Yes, parochial.

**Mrs Foster:** That is a warning there. Yes, parochial.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** That is the 'Coleraine Chronicle' sorted, George.

**Mrs Foster:** We recognise that Belfast is our capital city; I know the man sitting beside you would want me to say that. It is an economic driver, but we, both of us, also believe that, fundamentally, there needs to be economic development right across Northern Ireland. That should not be surprising, given the areas we both represent — Mid Ulster and Fermanagh and South Tyrone. We want to ensure a balanced economic growth piece is put in place. Some of our programmes intervene right across Northern Ireland. We want to make sure that that continues, whether it is T:BUC or communities in transformation or, indeed, what is happening at the Ebrington site at the moment and the very good work that is going on there. Michelle and I hope to go to the Ebrington site in the near future to see the ongoing work.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** Do you have a supplementary?

**Mr Robinson:** The supplementary is on the Heathrow hub. Is there any update on that? It would produce a lot of economic benefit to the whole of Northern Ireland.

**Mrs Foster:** I should know this, George, but I cannot remember what stage it is at. I know they have identified the possibility of the Ballykelly site. Is it the Ballykelly site?

**Mr Robinson:** It is the Shackleton site.

**Mrs Foster:** Yes. There are a couple of sites.

**Mr Robinson:** There are a couple of sites

**Mrs Foster:** There are a couple of sites still in the running for the Heathrow hub. I very much hope that we have at least one Heathrow logistic hub here in Northern Ireland. I know there are a number across the UK still in the running for the final four sites, but I think it is very important that we have one of those sites here in Northern Ireland.

**Mr Robinson:** Can you try and make sure that happens — for the benefit of the whole of Northern Ireland, obviously?

**Mrs Foster:** We will certainly try our best, George.

**Mr Robinson:** Good.

**Mrs O'Neill:** For regional balance, I will just add that we are both committed to that. We must get it right. We have to see investment outside the greater Belfast area.

**Mr Robinson:** *[Inaudible.]*

**Mrs O'Neill:** I said "balance". *[Laughter.]* It is important we see a fair distribution. Even in your constituency, George, when I brought the then DARD headquarters to Ballykelly, that was a significant message.

**Mr Robinson:** Which I lobbied for greatly.

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes, absolutely. That was to say, "This is our commitment in government to be able to address regional imbalance", but there is a lot more we can do around infrastructure, broadband connections and everything that helps to make a place a good place to invest in, so we have to have the regional economy's needs right at the heart of the Programme for Government and what we are trying to do here.

**Mr Robinson:** Thank you very much.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** As we are in constituency mode, I will just say that "balance" suggests two extremes, but there is also a middle, and sometimes there is a band just beyond the

greater Belfast area but not far enough away to be considered as a further site that gets missed as well.

**Mr Nesbitt:** Strangford. Thank you.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** Strangford, which, of course, is a village in South Down.

**Mr Stalford:** I would have thought, Chair, that you would know that all of Northern Ireland is greater Belfast.

**Mrs Foster:** So controversial today.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** Greater than Belfast?

**Mr Stalford:** I want to start with questions about historical institutional abuse. During the previous period, before we went without an Executive, during a debate on this subject in the Assembly, I indicated my very strongly held view that religious institutions are among the wealthiest institutions in our society. They sit on vast banks of property and land worth lots and lots of money. Therefore, they are in a position where they need to be making a serious contribution to the financial redress. The state failed because the state handed people over to institutions where dreadful things happened to them, but religious institutions also failed in their duty of care. Has any indication been made by those institutions that there is a preparedness to make a contribution to the financial redress for victims of historical institutional abuse?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I know that engagement is continuing. On 25 November, I think, before the restoration of the Assembly, the head of the Civil Service contacted six of the institutions and started that conversation. The First Minister and I have been speaking about this and have asked for a detailed list of all the institutions, including Churches, that are involved. We think that we need to get involved with what we can do, and this is certainly one of the things that we want to bring forward. It goes back to the earlier conversation on how we can proceed at pace, how we can make sure that we get the redress to victims as best we can and as quickly as we can, and how we make others play their part in that. That has to be a priority for us. As I said, we have just received the list of all the institutions involved, and we now have to engage with them ourselves.

**Mr Stalford:** If people are not making a contribution, both of you should be unafraid to call them out. We saw in the Republic that when Enda Kenny called out religious institutions for their conduct, it shifted public opinion and put a moral pressure on them to do the right thing by innocent victims. I encourage you to be fearless in pursuing that cause.

The UK shared prosperity fund will have a role in replacing the European regional development fund (ERDF) and the European social fund (ESF). Has there been any indication from the Government yet about, first, how much will be in it and, secondly, how we go about accessing it?

**Mrs Foster:** No, not in relation to the fund, but you are right, and we will pursue that because Northern Ireland has had its fair share of, in particular, the ERDF, the sustainability fund. It is important that the new prosperity fund comes our way, and we will press very firmly on that. I am sure that the Economy Minister and the Finance Minister will do the same, but it is important that we raise our voices, particularly at the JMC. When we looked at the different pots of money that were talked about in relation to New Decade, New Approach, Brexit money was always separated out from the other pots of money, so we need to find out what we can access from all of that. Yes, that is on our agenda.

**Mr Stalford:** Related to finance, as you know, both Governments made commitments in NDNA. Can you update the Committee on where the discussions are with HM Treasury on honouring the commitments that it has made?

**Mrs O'Neill:** You are absolutely right: the two Governments are the authors of the 'NDNA' document. All parties were involved in months of conversation about shaping the Programme for Government and including things that we would all like to see achieved in that. However, as we know, the Governments published the document while negotiations were ongoing. Given that they have made these very public commitments, we expect them also to deliver on the finances. The Finance Minister has been back and forth with the Treasury. We will continue to do that on behalf of the Executive as a whole. We intend to push very hard on getting delivery because there is a lot of expectation here, and

rightly so, that we can deliver on all the commitments in the document. If we are to be successful in doing so, we need the finances to back that up. It remains a work in progress with the Treasury. The Finance Minister will keep us up to date with that, but we are moving very quickly into the new Budget, and we expect to see, as a result of policy decisions taken in Britain, Barnett consequential coming forward as part of that as well. We will keep the Committee up to date, but that is where it stands.

**Mr Stalford:** As part of our international strategy, we have the offices in Brussels, America and China. Given the context of Brexit, and with free trade being en vogue, has consideration been given to opening similar facilities elsewhere in the world in order to maximise our opportunities? If so, where?

**Mrs Foster:** We had a conversation with Andrew McCormick about the international strategy. Of course, that was just an initial conversation. At present, our thoughts are with our staff in China and with Madame Zhang, the consul general, in relation to the terrible coronavirus outbreak. China is almost in lockdown, so there is not much happening there. We are thinking of them.

The Brussels office will have to be reoriented, given that we will not be inside the European Union structures any more. How will that work? How do we need to structure all of that? We have a new lead person in the American office, Andrew Elliott, who replaces the much-decorated Norman Houston. We wish Norman well in his new endeavours.

We need to look at what else is available to us and assess strategically whether we are in the right places. We will do that, but we are very mindful of resource in all of this because, when we set up the Beijing office, there was no baseline cover for that in our budget; we are doing that on an ad hoc basis. That is not sustainable, frankly. We need that to be baselined in the budget. If we were to seek another office in India or somewhere, that would be another challenge because we would have to find the finances to do all of that. In answer to your question, we will look at our international strategy, but we always have to do so in the context of finance.

**Mr Stalford:** I have just one final question. The Urban Villages initiative had really positive impacts in my constituency. You just have to go and look at the replacement play park in Donegall Pass, and, as was said earlier, all politics is local. Is there an intention to expand the Urban Villages initiative — Urban Villages 2.0 or something like that — into the future?

**Mrs Foster:** Urban Villages has made a huge impact in Belfast and up in Londonderry. We will look at that programme in the coming weeks and months to assess its impact. You are right to say that it has had an impact on capital redesignation, derelict buildings and what have you. We look forward to the new play park on Donegall Pass being finished so that we will be able to visit it. We will look at all of that, but we will have to assess how it has gone. To use the Deputy Chairperson's comment, was it value for money? Did it make an impact on the ground? I think that it will come back in a positive way, but it will be a case of finding the resources and the finance to pull that forward.

**Mr Stalford:** Thank you very much.

**Miss Sheerin:** Thank you for coming in. I want to follow on from the conversations about the recommendations, or agreements, in NDNA. There is a list of strategies outlined. Last week, when David Sterling was before the Committee, he was asked how the strategies would be divided among Departments. He told us that there was a body of work ongoing to divide them. Has that concluded? Is there any update on that?

**Mrs O'Neill:** You are the only female on the Committee. I have just noticed that.

**Mrs Foster:** Have to do better at diversity.

**Mrs O'Neill:** Good luck.

For all the commitments in the document, what we need to produce, even for the Committee's scrutiny role, is a table that shows how each action has been allocated and the time frame within which it needs to be delivered. Then, we will be able to chart our way through. We received a paper today, which we will be able to share with the Committee in due course, that sets out clearly each strategy, each action point and a time frame for implementation. We can make sure that that is relayed to the Committee at some stage.

**Miss Sheerin:** Brilliant.

**Mrs Foster:** We touched on this yesterday when we met the Chair and the Deputy Chair. There will be a challenge for the Committees in how they monitor all of this because some of the commitments are cross-cutting. As the Executive Office Committee, you will have the remit to look into this document, but some pieces of it will sit better in Education or DFC or wherever. Therefore, there will be a need to be innovative and flexible in how you scrutinise this in the future. We will have to get to grips with that.

**Miss Sheerin:** More specifically, Michelle referred to the rights/language/identity piece, and I have been asked some questions about the commissioner. I know that there was an agreement that it would be worked out within three months; otherwise, a presentation would be made to the Assembly. If the process has started, should it not be "commissioners"?

**Mrs Foster:** It has started. We have not talked about the staffing of TEO. When the Assembly was down, a lot of the staff were redeployed or worked in other areas, and we are now staffing up TEO again. There are some big pieces of work in the Department, not least the one that you mentioned. We also have HIA and victims' payments. All of these need staff to work up the different structures and determine how they will be delivered. The officials have a big job of work. The first task is resourcing the office. Then, they need to get on with the job of work that has been set for them. It is a very challenging timescale. If you look at the document, you will see that it is three months. The timescale for victims' payments is the end of May; for the HIA, it is the end of March/beginning of April. All of these things are coming at us very quickly.

**Mrs O'Neill:** We will have to come back to the Committee because there is attached draft legislation that the Committee will have a role in. Given the three-month time frame, that will be very soon. In the immediate future, we will have to come back with the details of the legislation and give the Committee its place in that.

**Mr Clarke:** It is more difficult coming last, when most questions have already been asked. I will follow on from Emma's point and from what Christopher asked about the Finance Minister's work. The deputy First Minister suggested that this is a paper provided by the two Governments, then presented to and accepted by the parties. There has been an awful lot said, and some have made the accusation that some commitments are aspirational unless we can get the money for them. The deputy First Minister said that we had spoken to Her Majesty's Treasury about the money. What work has been done with the Southern Government to ask them to cough up some money as well?

**Mrs O'Neill:** Yes, they absolutely have to pay for what they committed to, and we will hold their feet to the fire on that. The Finance Minister has been in touch with the Southern Government, but there is an election in the South, the outcome of which we will know very soon. When their Finance Minister, Tánaiste and Taoiseach are back in place, we will be able to push, very firmly, for delivery. We will not let anybody off the hook on delivering on the commitments that were made.

**Mr Clarke:** The public perception, and the public are very — *[Inaudible]* — is that the two Governments were involved — it was a two-Government paper — but we are rushing across to Westminster to try to get more money from that side without being in a big rush to get money from others. That is what is being said publicly. So, I appreciate what you have said about that today.

Another point raised is one of my pet issues. I know that my colleagues accuse me of being a very negative person, which I am.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** A ray of sunshine.

**Mrs Foster:** Acknowledgement is always the first stage, is it not, Trevor? *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Clarke:** I have no issue with that.

Fra asked a question about mental health. I take encouragement from what the First Minister said at Question Time this week in response, I think, to a question from Mike about mental health. None of us underestimates the value of good mental health or what we need to do to tackle the issue. Yours is the lead Department, and one of the things that I have seen — this is a criticism of a former Government — is that each of the Departments work in isolation on their work on mental health. Outside of that, all these different wee groups have set up. We fund community groups to do particular pieces of mental

health work. I am critical of that and wonder whether any of that has ever worked. At what stage, before we spend this money, will there be a fundamental review of all of the work that has been carried out?

Work has not been done in the past to show whether we are getting value for money. We are all doing this work in isolation. Health is just one area doing that — that is not a criticism. People automatically think that mental health falls with the Department of Health, but that is not necessarily so. We need to look at that. That is why I took encouragement from what the First Minister said the other day about looking at mental health collectively as an Executive rather than creating another post. That is the first positive sign that I have seen on mental health.

**Mrs Foster:** That is the plan. To be fair, Trevor, your point about trying to collect all the actions and interventions that we currently engage in would be a useful piece of work to do across government. I slightly disagree, though, with another point: sometimes, the small groups are the people who actually make the difference. Some make a big difference to people's lives. Sometimes, the big glitzy things do not make as much of an impact. Certainly, on the ground, some of those small community groups make a difference. The thing for us to do now is to try to understand everything that is going on, from the very smallest pot of money that is being given out. Quite a lot of money for mental health comes from our Department, but, obviously, the Department of Health is very much involved on the money side, as are the Department for Communities and, through some of its work on prisoners and rehabilitation, the Department of Justice. We, therefore, need to understand all that and then see where the interventions are working and where they are not. I take that point.

**Mr Clarke:** That is why took encouragement from your response that the Executive will look at it collectively. The perception is that money is thrown at each Department, but is that working?

**Mrs Foster:** That is what we have to find out: is it really working?

**Mrs O'Neill:** I just want to put on record that I agree with you. Government could not pay for the work that is done on the ground by community groups, voluntary groups, charities and people who are passionate about intervention, prevention and dealing with real-life suicide situations. Government could not pay for that; these people are immense. When Government pay for something, you have to evaluate the usefulness of it. So, I agree with your point about whether we are doing the right things and whether we are all joined up in what we do.

Not all issues that affect people's mental health fall within the remit of the Health Department. It is about whether you have a job; it is about whether you are isolated; it is about whether you are living in poverty. It is all of those things. We must have a collective, rounded approach to supporting people in life and making sure that we have early intervention and prevention, as opposed to dealing with people when there is a crisis. When talking about suicide, it is too late.

**Mr Clarke:** I accept that. We can see and identify the problems in our communities. I do not think that we grasped the nettle previously with regard to the direction that we were taking and whether we were spending money in the right way. That is why I took encouragement from the First Minister's response, which was that the Executive as a whole will look at it, as opposed to looking at it in isolation or forming one department.

My other issue is the Victims and Survivors Service (VSS). As someone who was involved with a victims' group, I still wonder whether the value of some of the victims' groups is getting to the victims, and whether there is any intention to do something in the future on that. Your Department has invested lots of money in the sector, but some people who have been affected see that many groups have been formed on the back of this, but the money is not getting to the victims. Some people have even disengaged from some of the groups. Is there a possibility of looking at that?

**Mrs Foster:** I am sure that Margaret Bateson and the VSS monitor all of that and look at what is happening on the ground, but I am happy for us to have a conversation with her about that, Trevor, if you would like us to do that. In fact, I am sure that Margaret would come to the Committee to answer some of those questions. It is always an issue: some victims' groups are very effective and make a real difference, but there are individuals who do not want to get involved in victims' groups. It is very difficult to reach those people. That is the challenge because you have to respect that they may not want to be part of a wider group. That is just the way it is. It is about how we reach those people.

**Mr Clarke:** Where I am coming from is this: whether it is mental health or victims, it comes back to money. There are a lot of aspirational things in the new document that need to be funded. Those are two areas that I have always been critical of when it comes to whether we were getting the best bang for our buck. Maybe that new thinking, particularly in mental health, will help. It is like anything: money will not fix it. Throwing money at things does not necessarily fix them.

**Mrs Foster:** It is about getting what we can with what we have, Trevor. I take on board what you are saying on that, but people become very closely associated with different little pieces that they feel strongly about, and I understand that as well. We have to be very careful about how we look at all of these things. In mental health and well-being, we want to do things that do not necessarily cost money. We want to try to send out positive messages about well-being and resilience from the leadership of the Government — indeed, all in the Assembly — so that we can talk about this without any stigma being attached to it. We want to have those conversations. I hear what you are saying. We hope that this is a new start. Fra has raised it; you have raised it. It is an issue on which we very much want to see progress.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** Ministers, thank you very much. That concludes the meeting. Everybody has had their chance to ask questions. Earlier, I mentioned politeness and respect, but I cannot guarantee that it will always be this easy. We have had a good induction today. Thank you for coming up and making yourselves available. I look forward to continued opportunities to engage with you to scrutinise the work of the Department.

**Mrs O'Neill:** Thanks, Chair.

**Mrs Foster:** Thank you.