



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Infrastructure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

First-day Briefing: Ms Nichola Mallon MLA,
Minister for Infrastructure

5 February 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)
Mr David Hilditch (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Roy Beggs
Mr Cathal Boylan
Mr Keith Buchanan
Mrs Dolores Kelly
Ms Liz Kimmins
Mr Andrew Muir

Witnesses:

Ms Mallon	Minister for Infrastructure
Mrs Katrina Godfrey	Department for Infrastructure

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): I welcome the Minister to the Committee, along with Katrina Godfrey, permanent secretary. You are both welcome. You are obviously no stranger to Committees either, although, I suppose, it has been a little time since you have been before us.

Mrs Katrina Godfrey (Department for Infrastructure): Absolutely.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Minister, you may want to make an opening statement. I am mindful of the fact that you are just new to the post and have probably been thrown into the deep end and had to face a crisis that you certainly did not predict. I am conscious and, maybe, worried in some respects that you may not have received full information from officials in advance of this. I suppose it raises the question of whether there are other areas that you or other colleagues were not fully briefed by officials on either, but we are where we are. You are welcome to the Committee. If you would like to make an opening statement, members will follow up with questions.

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): Thank you, Chair. With your indulgence, I will set the scene, set out some of the significant challenges that I have inherited and then outline my priorities and direction of travel over the next two years. I really am delighted to take on the Infrastructure portfolio, despite the baptism of fire of the first few weeks. It really is a portfolio that impacts on people's daily lives. It is so important to our communities, environment and economy.

I thank the Committee for its diligence and speed in progressing the SRs as well. I know that that was a lot of work, and the Committee got through it very quickly, so I put on record my thanks for that. I genuinely want to work well with the Committee. I stress that I want to be constructive. The five parties that make up the Executive have a monumental job to do in the two years ahead, and partnership is

key to progress. Committees have an important role to play in scrutiny and ensuring good governance and democratic accountability, but I am also keen to learn and hear about the Committee's ideas and proposals on solutions that we can work on together as we try to address some of the key challenges facing us.

I am committed to improving the infrastructure, because I want to help communities and make people's lives better with the funding made available to me. Having a modern and sustainable water, drainage and transport infrastructure is an essential enabler of growing our economy and improving well-being for all. It is a key enabler in ensuring regionally balanced growth and improving connectivity, and it is central to the delivery of the Executive's Programme for Government commitments.

I turn now to some of the issues and challenges facing the Department. I want to set the scene factually with regard to the financial climate in which the Department has to operate. I have inherited a very challenging financial position, for many reasons beyond ministerial control. The central resource issue for the Department remains the recurring structural deficit arising from the cut to the Department's resource budget that was evident in 2015-16. The structural deficit has resulted in significant reductions to opening budgets, sustained only through in-year monitoring, of between £19 million and £34 million in the period from 2015 to 2019. The provision of public transport was sustained only by Translink's reliance on reserves, which have been reduced significantly since 2015 to the extent that working capital is currently below an independently assessed minimum threshold. For Translink to continue to provide public transport at a deficit will have a dangerous impact on the company's ability to trade and would run its working capital to a more precarious position going into 2021. Roads maintenance has also suffered from inadequate baseline funding, resulting in a skeleton maintenance service, half the number of grass-cutting and gully-emptying operations and much-reduced pothole repairs. Winter service and full-year street light repairs have also been subject to significant funding cuts. It has not been possible to fund NI Water to the levels recommended by the regulator. The current level of service has been possible only with increased efficiency and benign levels of inflation over the past number of years.

The Northern Ireland block funding from Treasury has failed to keep up with inflation, so all Departments, including the Department for Infrastructure, have had to absorb inflationary pressures, with flat baselines rolling forward from one year to the next. That has had the effect that unfunded pay awards and price inflation have eroded the purchasing power of my resource budget significantly. As a result of all that, we have had disproportionate budget cuts, which have had to be made across areas of discretionary expenditure but nonetheless areas of importance: roads, water and transport infrastructure maintenance and street light repairs. I know that those issues are of huge concern to members and the public across Northern Ireland, so I am happy to delve into some of the detail during the question-and-answer session.

My Department has identified resource pressures of £53 million, £67 million, then moving up to £79 million for the period from 2020-21 to 2022-23. There has also been over-reliance on in-year monitoring to mitigate my Department's pressures. That is just not sustainable. This year, the Department of Finance has sought and been granted Treasury approval to switch £130 million from the Northern Ireland block capital budget to supplement the resource budget shortfall. That amount has increased from the 2018-19 switch, which was £100 million. That trend looks set to continue, and it is unsustainable, as it funds recurrent spending from non-recurrent funding. Non-recurrent confidence-and-supply funding has helped to supplement inadequate budgets over the past two years, but that, too, is ending. It is therefore imperative that the UK Government step up to their responsibilities and commit the funding that is required for the delivery of the New Decade, New Approach agreement.

Brexit will also present significant funding challenges, among many other challenges. It is widely accepted that my Department has, for many years, actively pursued European Union funding to support the delivery of many transport- and water-related projects across the North. Our success in doing that has been exceptional, and I put on record my thanks to the officials who have been involved. In headline terms, we have secured over £130 million of EU support through seven different EU programmes in just over 10 years. That funding represents around one third of the total capital investment of £384 million in a wide range of road, rail, water, environmental and clean transport projects. It is self-evident that, without recourse to alternative or substitute funding streams, my Department will face significant challenges in co-financing major infrastructure projects in the post-European Union environment.

That said, I have recently approved the submission of an application for funding under the EU's Connecting Europe Facility (CEF). The application relates to the undertaking of enabling works for the

Belfast transport hub and would, if supported, provide some £6 million of co-financing for the project. Clearly, the conditions for approval are much less favourable than before. Nonetheless, I am committed to exploring all opportunities that could bring additional funding to my Department. That includes examining ways in which proposed domestic funds, such as the shared prosperity fund, can be optimised for the benefit of all infrastructure service users in the future.

Moving forward, I have asked my officials to continue discussions with counterparts here and in the UK to ensure that no stone is left unturned in exploring options that are available to me. My officials have fed and continue to feed into the Department of Finance-led work streams that lead directly to the Treasury, and I have taken up membership of the Executive's Brexit subcommittee. Through that and other channels, I intend to continue to press the case for prioritisation and funding of infrastructure-related projects that support social and economic development.

My Department continues to engage heavily in the development of the 2020-27 Peace Plus programme, and officials have been in active discussions with Department of Finance colleagues, the Special EU Programmes Body and colleagues from the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. As currently envisaged, we expect Peace Plus to offer opportunities for our participation. As a programme, it is basically an amalgam of the previous Peace and INTERREG programmes. We expect it to offer opportunities for territorially focused infrastructure — water and transport and environmentally friendly projects — to be supported. It is clear, however, that Peace Plus is highly unlikely to offer support for the largest infrastructure projects, especially those that the European Commission has identified as CEF priority projects for the region. We are talking about the Belfast hub, York Street interchange and the Newry southern relief road. While Peace Plus is very much to be welcomed, it cannot realistically be viewed as a sufficient substitute.

It is perhaps opportune to make the point that not all EU funding awards are received directly by the Department that makes the application. There are block implications that need to be considered. For example, the Connecting Europe Facility funding is receipted at block level, and normal practice is that it is accrued back from the Department of Finance. Clearly, we need to understand how any negotiated arrangements relating to substitute funds may impact on the overall block, and I will encourage a full examination of that as we move through the implementation phase.

Members will be glad to know that I now intend to move onto the more positive side of the picture and talk about my priorities, the direction of travel and the vision and the aspirations that I have. I am determined to approach the role recognising that infrastructure is not an end in itself; rather, it is a means to an end. It is about what my Department can do to connect people and connect them to opportunities, because it is about people, communities, the economy and the environment. I believe, as a Minister, that, working with Executive colleagues and the Committee, we can have a real impact and make a positive difference to people's lives. I will just give a few examples.

Water and sewerage infrastructure is key to unlocking potential growth and delivering on the Programme for Government. It is essential if we want to create jobs, build more social and affordable homes and grow our economy. In transport terms, the Executive's flagship schemes — the A5, A6, Belfast transport hub, York Street interchange and Narrow Water bridge schemes — are front and centre in the New Decade, New Approach agreement, and I want to progress those projects as much as possible in my two-year tenure. I am also conscious of the issue of regional imbalance, and I want to play my part in tackling that. I point to the A5 and A6, but there are also opportunities for our public transport network, and that feeds very much into the need for greater connectivity North and South. I welcome the commitment to that in 'New Decade, New Approach' as well.

My Department also has an important role to play in how we address the climate emergency. I will focus on greener infrastructure and greater sustainable transport that connects communities. I will promote public transport and encourage more of us to make our journeys by walking and cycling. To that end, as you referenced, Chair, I announced yesterday my intention to introduce legislation to simplify the use of e-bikes here, specifically to ensure that users will not have to register and license them before use and that the rider is exempt from holding a valid or full driving licence. I fully appreciate that I must formally seek the views of the Committee and the Assembly on the proposal, which falls under the Assembly affirmative resolution procedure. I will ensure that my officials provide the necessary documents for Committee scrutiny so that we can progress this together as quickly as possible.

I am also keen to promote the Active School Travel programme to encourage more children to walk and cycle to school. My Department co-funds the programme with the Public Health Agency. Like many Members, I am sure, I was shocked to learn of the number of primary-school children who live

less than one mile from school but make that journey via car. There is a lot that we can do around that as well.

Safety on our roads is a concern for me. Again, I was shocked by the significant increase in drink-driving detections over Christmas just past. In the coming weeks, I intend to look closely at current policy and proposals for change in respect of both drink- and drug-driving. That work will include identifying best practice elsewhere across these islands. I have already issued an invitation to meet the Chief Constable as a key partner in moving that forward. I also recognise the important role that the taxi industry plays in Northern Ireland, and I am aware of the concerns that they have raised. I intend to consider all the issues relating to the current taxi regime in greater detail in the coming weeks.

As I have said before, we have significant challenges. If we were to approach them with the glass half full we could get very down about the financial situation, but I believe that we have a real opportunity and could make a big difference in the two years that remain. While there are significant challenges, I have a lot of ambition and an appetite for change. There are things that we can do that do not cost huge sums of money but can make a real difference in people's lives.

Going forward, I want to work as positively with the Committee as I can. My officials are open to meeting you at any time, and I am happy to come to the Committee at any time to engage with you on any issues. It might be helpful for me to give an update on the MOT situation, but I am subject to the Chair's discretion; you may wish to leave that to questions.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): If you are content, we will take that through questions.

Ms Mallon: OK.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Obviously, you have mentioned the MOT centres, and it would be remiss of the Committee not to ask you questions while you are here. I appreciate very much that you have commissioned two reviews and that it will take some time for that information to come to you. The most important issue for the general public is when they will get their MOT carried out. I understand that different lifts are now in place, and that is very welcome because it will move the backlog that has been created over the last couple of weeks. When do you anticipate that the MOT centres will become fully operational?

Ms Mallon: I cannot give the Committee a date at this moment. As part of one of the two independent reviews, I have appointed an engineering expert company, which is currently on site assessing the situation. They have been tasked with providing independent expert advice to me on business recovery. That will include contingency arrangements in the here and now to maximise capacity but also the steps that are required to get our MOT centres back fully and safely operable as quickly as possible. However, I will not speculate or in any way lead the Committee to a position that I cannot stand over. At the moment, then, I cannot give a date for when we will have the MOT centres fully and safely operable.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): At this stage, has any decision been taken in relation to the purchase of new lifts? Obviously, a procurement process will have to take place, which will extend the time before new lifts can be installed. Has any decision been taken about that?

Ms Mallon: I have asked for independent assessments of all the lifts so that we can ascertain which can be repaired, but I have also asked officials to prepare a sub for me on the purchase of equipment and a range of options, and the expert review will feed into that. It is around repair, the possibility of hiring and the purchase of equipment. The wheels are in motion in terms of putting all the options out there and assessing the best way forward.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): OK. There is clearly a capacity issue in relation to this, anyway. We have seen cyclical backlogs of MOTs, and those have been created by the fact that we have far more cars on the road than we have ever had. There is work that needs doing in relation to changing people's mindsets about using their car in the first place, but that is a different challenge. A backlog has been created, but we now have cars on the road that are in much better condition than they ever were. They have much longer guarantees from the manufacturers, yet we still test them every year after the first four years. Have you given any consideration to how you might review that so that MOTs are not just as frequent?

Ms Mallon: I have, Chair, and steps have been put in place. Car owners who have had their DVA appointment cancelled will be automatically issued with a temporary exemption certificate for the four months. I am now moving to extend temporary exemption certificates to three-year-old vans — light goods vehicles. You and I had a separate conversation about that, and I thank you for that. I have looked at what I can do under the current legislation, and I can do that. Where things become more challenging is when we look at the four-year-old vehicles and at moving the MOT from every year to, say, every two years. I have asked for legal advice on that. The Departmental Solicitor's Office (DSO) is currently preparing legal advice that will come to me so that I can make a decision. Moving the MOT from annually to biennially is certainly something that I have requested information on and am actively considering.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Do you have a timescale for when that may come to you?

Ms Mallon: I have requested a meeting with DSO for either this afternoon or tomorrow morning. I am waiting for confirmation of when they can appear.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Another issue that I wrote to you about was the exemption for 40-year-old cars. Obviously, that exemption exists in the rest of the United Kingdom but not in Northern Ireland. I know that a consultation was carried out during the time when this place was not meeting, and I was wondering when we may see parity in that regard.

Ms Mallon: As you say, a consultation was carried out. The majority of responses were supportive of bringing it into line, so I have asked officials to provide me with a submission on the consultation responses and views so that I can make a decision. It is a decision that we can move to quite quickly.

The situation with the MOT centres has brought to my attention the fact that we need to have a review of the entire system. I am conscious that my job is, first of all, to ensure the safety of DVA staff and customers. It is then to do what I can to minimise the disruption to motorists and get business recovery back as soon as possible. It is also to understand what happened and why it happened and to put in steps that are required to ensure that it does not happen again. Inevitably, that leads to us needing to take a look at the entire system, how it operates and the legislation around it. That is on my radar. I am not able to do it at present because we have to work through things sequentially, but I assure the Committee that my focus is on not just firefighting and getting over the crisis but looking at the entire system and service.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): I am mindful that the MOT situation has, perhaps, been a distraction from the rest of the issues in your Department. Another pressing issue is in relation to Translink, which you mentioned in your opening comments. It is another crisis that is coming down the tracks and needs to be averted. Obviously, your Department was unsuccessful in the January monitoring round. We will be presented with a Budget by the end of this month. What assurances have you been given from Finance that we will be in a situation where Translink will not go into insolvency?

Ms Mallon: I have an imminent bilateral with Minister Murphy to discuss the financial challenges facing the Department. Translink will feature heavily in that, as will the situation facing Northern Ireland Water and our waste water infrastructure. I am also due to present to Executive colleagues next week, and those two issues will very much feature in my presentation. The challenges are huge, and we have to do something. It is not an issue for just Translink; it is an issue for the sustainability of our public transport network. It is that critical. The solution lies in a collective response from the Executive. I will push that issue with Minister Murphy at our bilateral, and I will very much press the issue with Executive colleagues when I present to them next week.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Have you had conversations in advance of that with him?

Ms Mallon: The only engagement was the January monitoring round bid, where the Department made a clear bid on behalf of Translink. We were not successful in that, but I hope for a more positive outcome from the bilateral and in the forthcoming Budget in March.

Mr Hilditch: Good morning, Minister. You are welcome. I want to look at a couple of the capital projects. You indicated that, over a few years now, about £220 million had been taken out of capital and put in to resource. I understand your words about the European bid of £6 million. Together with that information, we know that the transport hub has planning permission, so things must be moving

on there fairly well. Where are we, as a Department, situated in relation to trying to progress that project and the York Street interchange? They impact on people's daily lives, as you indicated.

Ms Mallon: The transport hub is slightly different, but the procurement process for the York Street interchange has been challenged, so we have to commence a new procurement process, which will elongate the process there. I am clear that the York Street interchange is a flagship project. It is a commitment of five parties that is specifically referenced in 'New Decade, New Approach', so I will do what I can to progress that. The transport hub is part of the city deal, isn't it?

Mrs Godfrey: It is an Executive flagship, yes.

Ms Mallon: It is an Executive flagship within the city deal, so I understand how it is a catalyst for change. If I am serious about wanting to encourage people out of cars and onto public transport, we have to invest in our public transport and transport hubs. As well as being Executive flagship projects, they are key in terms of me trying to tackle my priorities as Minister.

Mr Hilditch: On the York Street interchange, there obviously were difficulties, maybe legally or whatever. I take it we have learned the lessons of that and they will not reoccur.

Ms Mallon: Yes, I hope. We have an issue around legal challenges and the amount and the impact that they have on projects. Everyone has the right to pursue legal challenge, but I have asked officials to make sure that the processes, whatever the issues, should be as robust as possible to make sure that we make the right decisions in the right way.

Mr Hilditch: Community confidence in the Department would relate more to your street lighting and pothole situation and how people feel safe in their home, particularly elderly folk. You indicated that you had been operating on a skeleton budget. How do you plan to take that forward, considering the financial climate?

Ms Mallon: You are absolutely right: street lighting and potholes are key to public confidence and safety. I have made the argument to some Executive colleagues and will make the point again when I meet Minister Murphy in particular, that, if we want to send a message to residents and communities that having an Executive back makes a difference, they need to be able to see that in a tangible way. Yes, we have a responsibility to be strategic and transformative, and that requires a long-term approach, but I honestly believe that, in the areas of street lights and potholes, if we were to see a physical improvement on people's doorsteps, it would signal to them that having an Executive back actually makes a difference.

The budget situation has been very challenging. Take street lighting, for example: the annual budget for repair is £3.2 million and the current budget is £1 million, so there is a significant shortfall. As a result, we have seen in all our constituencies that there has been a severe restriction on the street lighting repair service. Previously, there would have been external contractors supplementing the work. The reality now is that our street lighting repair team is five full-time and three part-time workers servicing the whole of Northern Ireland. We have over 12,000 outages and 2,000 non-outage defects. The cost to clear the backlog of repairs is £710,000.

The Department has been engaging in the LED replacement scheme. That makes savings maintenance-wise and is good for the environment. Seventy-five thousand have been replaced, but we still have 213,000 to be replaced, so it is an area that I want to address. We made a bid in the January monitoring round. We got some money, but it is capital, not resource, so I cannot use it for repairs. I am looking to see how I can best use it for the replacement of LEDs. For me, this is a priority area for the reasons that I have outlined. Potholes are the same. The independent Barton review of 2018 stated that we needed £143 million annually just to maintain to an acceptable standard. The current capital and resource budget is £104 million, so we are in the crazy situation where we are doing the patchworking, which actually works out four times more costly. Those are two areas where we need to more on, and I really want to have a positive conversation with Minister Murphy about that. I am also conscious that, even within the significant constraints that I have on my budget, it is an area that we need to do more in.

Mr Hilditch: With regard to potholes, is the Department subject to claims being made by the public? There is a balance there.

Ms Mallon: That is the other side of it: the liability in terms of people making claims for their vehicles. The situation just continues to deteriorate. The Department has put in place a triaging system for street lighting, so the highest priority gets repaired, but, because the underfunding has been so prolific over so many years, more and more fall into the high-priority, high-risk category. We are now at a stage when we have to do something substantial about this.

Ms Kimmins: Thank you for your briefing, Minister. It has been very helpful.

I am being parochial, because these issues relate to my area. The A1 is probably one of the most dangerous roads in the North. At what stage is phase 2 of the A1 scheme?

Ms Mallon: The A1 will be subject to public inquiry very shortly. I see the A1 as falling across a number of my absolute priorities around road safety. There have been a number of lives tragically lost on that road. I pay particular tribute to those who have suffered a loss and are campaigning on the safety issue with a number of Members. There is also an issue around connecting communities. That is an important aspect. The A1 also plays an important role in the economic corridor between Belfast and Dublin that is referenced in 'New Decade, New Approach'. I have to let due process take its course, but I recognise the importance of the A1 in those three, at least, priority areas, and I am looking at the matter very closely.

Ms Kimmins: You mentioned the southern relief road for Newry. We have been strongly lobbying, as, I am sure, have some of your colleagues, for the southern relief road to be either higher or have a lifting bridge. One of the key issues for a lot of people, particularly in Newry, is that it would completely close down the Albert Basin, which is a huge tourism area. As you will probably know, our council is in the process of developing the Albert Basin park. There is a lot of work going on there to develop tourism for Newry city and the surrounding areas. We are mindful of the effect of completely closing it down. We have talked about Tall Ships, but yachts and other boats currently use the Albert Basin. Where is the Department on that? In the past, the Department indicated that it would be up to the council to pay for a lifting bridge — I do not feel that that would be the case — and it is proceeding with a fixed bridge. Have you more information on that?

Ms Mallon: I am always open to looking at all options. As I have said to officials, I want detailed briefings on all these things. It is also important for me as a Minister go down to have a look for myself and to engage so that I can get a fuller picture of how the benefits of all those projects can be maximised. I am keen to look at the site and to engage with the local community, councillors, MLAs etc so that I have a rounded picture before I take decisions. I am up for doing that.

Ms Kimmins: People will be pleased to hear that. I recently met some of the groups there.

The Narrow Water bridge has also been mentioned. I am delighted to see that it is back, front and centre, on the agenda, particularly with 'New Decade, New Approach'. Where are we with that? What is the next step?

Ms Mallon: As you say, it is referenced in 'New Decade, New Approach'. I see a lot of benefits in the project in connecting communities, promoting tourism and protecting our natural environment. I have asked officials to revise the business case, so I am waiting for information. There is also an election in the South. It has had a knock-on effect on North/South Ministerial Council meetings and engagement at ministerial level. The Narrow Water bridge is certainly a project that I want to pick up on with counterparts in the South as soon as I can.

Ms Kimmins: That is grand. The projects are not mutually exclusive, so it is important that we get them right. We have only one chance to do it.

I move now to my last point, you will be glad to hear, which is on NI Water and the water infrastructure. A lot of it seems to be Belfast-centric. Last week, our council received a presentation from NI Water. One of the issues raised was that a lot of the infrastructure in other areas is underused but, in Newry, particularly, it is probably at full capacity. There are huge issues with flooding in the centre of Newry. Will there be any scope to look at investment in that? One issue that has come up recently is future development in the centre of Newry. Flood risk will hinder that. I want to ensure that that is a priority, because it is very important.

Ms Mallon: I fully take that on board. Yes, there is the Living with Water programme (LWWP), which has a Belfast focus, but I am conscious, when I have been engaging with Executive colleagues and others, that there is an issue there. There is a wider issue, which is that so many places across Northern Ireland are at maximum capacity or near capacity. There is the £2.5 billion figure for the next two price control periods. That is not just Belfast-centric. We need to do that work. It is key. If we are serious about growing our economy and if we are serious about building homes, we have to address the waste water infrastructure problem. If we are serious about tackling regional imbalance, we have to take a needs-based approach when looking across all the areas across the North. I reassure the member that I am very conscious that, as I have said in an interview, the world does not reside in Belfast. I am from Belfast, and I say this in jest, but I am conscious that Belfast has an importance and Derry has an importance, but there are a lot of communities and a lot of opportunities that we are not maximising across the North that I want to play my part in utilising.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive presentation, and I am sure that she knows that our late colleague P J Bradley would be delighted to hear about the Narrow Water bridge, for which he campaigned for so many years and on which he was a voice in the wilderness for a long time.

Has there been any progress made or are there any discussions ongoing on the commitments in 'New Decade, New Approach' regarding the categorisation of NIW and how it will draw down funding for water and sewerage?

Ms Mallon: 'New Decade, New Approach' contains a commitment to waste water infrastructure. There is a specific commitment to the Living with Water programme, and that is why I said that it is imperative for the British Government to live up to their responsibilities. The terminology used in 'New Decade, New Approach' is "turbocharging infrastructure": you cannot turbocharge if you do not significantly invest. I will do what I can with Minister Murphy and others to see that commitment of financial backing from the British Government realised.

The structure of Northern Ireland Water is not referenced in 'New Decade, New Approach', but, if we are serious about trying to get to grips with the significant funding shortfall, we have to look at a range of options. I am sure that that is a conversation that will be had when I have the presentation with Executive colleagues. At this stage, there is no decision taken, but we must look creatively at how we address that pressing problem.

Mrs D Kelly: On the subject of water, as I understand it, there is no strategy for Lough Neagh, which is the main source of drinking water for most if not all of Belfast. Minister, will you turn your attention at some stage to a strategy for Lough Neagh? Not only the lough itself but the area of special scientific interest (ASSI) around it has underused tourism potential, and it is a designated site under European directives. I wrote to the Department on the issue before the re-establishment of the Assembly, but I did not see any urgency on it at all in the Department.

Ms Mallon: I will take that away and look at it. I am sure that, if I do not, the member will make sure that I do.

Mrs D Kelly: To continue with the subject of water, I have written to you in the past couple of days about a draft policy on reservoir designation that is happening at Lurgan Park lake. It is stopping not only the building of social housing but the further development of the area. That is a matter of huge concern. We have specialists in the area who dispute the Department's claim and categorisation. Will you look further at that? I am meeting you soon, and I hope that that will be on our agenda, because we are due to lose some money from some of our social housing partners for much-needed social housing in the area. There is very little land where we have a developer who is willing to work with a housing association.

Ms Mallon: I assure the member that I am alive to the issue. There is an issue with the Reservoirs Act 2015 around transfer of functions: responsibility sits with DAERA that should sit with DFI. We are working up a process to enable the functions to transfer. The Department has carried out an audit of reservoirs, and we are proactively engaging with management and ownership of the reservoirs to address some of the issues. The Department is active on that, but I recognise that it has planning implications for the very reasons that you point out. It is an issue that I am aware of, and I am waiting for further detail. It is something that we are proactively pursuing.

Mrs D Kelly: It is an understatement to say that you inherited serious matters with the MOT centres, but there were other reports about the Department for Infrastructure from the Public Accounts Committee. 'New Decade, New Approach' suggests to me that there ought to be accountability across Departments. How will that be resolved? Resolving it will take an Executive approach, because substantive changes in the Civil Service itself will be required.

Ms Mallon: It will. The renewable heat incentive (RHI) report will soon be published. It will have implications and ramifications for all Departments, Ministers and so forth. I want to meet the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG). As you said, those reports predate my time, but I am keen to sit down with the auditor to understand the situation better and decide what we need to do going forward. There are genuinely issues there that need to be addressed and from which we need to learn.

Mrs D Kelly: I think, Minister, that the public will also want to hear that people in public office are held to account, and I am not just talking about politicians.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): You spoke to Mrs Kelly about the transfer of functions: when do you envisage that coming to you and to the Committee?

Mrs Godfrey: We think that it will be triggered through the Executive Office or, possibly, through the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. The process has to be initiated by the Department that currently has the function in order to transfer it to us. I know that DAERA and the Executive Office are alive to that, now that we have Ministers and an Executive back, and have work in place to effect the transfer of functions order. As the Minister said, it will put right the intention of the Executive at the time that Departments were recreated in 2016. I am not sure why that was missed, but it was. That is the reality.

I suspect that the bigger challenge will be the commencement of most of the provisions in the Reservoirs Act when they transfer to us. At the moment, the vast majority remain uncommenced. When I was initially made aware of the situation, I thought that the transfer of functions order might be the main solution. However, it is only the start of a process that allows us to take the action that the Minister has outlined to make sure that we have greater guarantees on safety and have the right, proportionate responses to the very issues that Dolores mentioned about not creating problems where they do not need to be created and making sure that there are robust proposals to keep people and places safe.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): There seems to be a bit of confusion about the audit of reservoirs. You said that an audit had been completed, but, when we put the question to officials last week, they said that it had not been completed. They were a little unclear as to when it would be done and what the outworkings and implications of it would be.

Mrs Godfrey: In the absence of the right sort of statutory functions being transferred to us, we have been keen to do as much as we legitimately can. There has been a process of looking at individual controlled reservoirs. "Controlled reservoir" is defined in the Act, as you probably remember from previous lives. There has been a process of looking at which of those would, perhaps, give concern. That process is under way up to a point. The next stage is visits by some of our technical experts, including a reservoirs engineer, to see whether the information that is available to us is borne out on the ground. One of the pieces of information that I learned about reservoirs was that that work is best done at this time of year, when vegetation is not as lush as it might be and you can get to see some of the problems. That work is under way. One of the practical issues that we have is that reservoirs are often privately owned and on private land, so we do not have right of access unless it is with the agreement of the reservoir owner. I know that that is a subject in your work programme, and colleagues who are working on it will be able to give you a more detailed update on where we are.

What we have also done in the meantime, while recognising the limitations of where we find ourselves, is to work hard with multi-agency partners to make sure that we have the right contingency arrangements in place. You will all be aware of the situation that unfolded in August at the Toddbrook reservoir. That has been a real reminder to us all of the need for multi-agency arrangements to be in place to make sure that people are kept safe in the event that anything happens. We are grateful for the support from other partners and have a very robust system. Chair, the team that I have on the rivers side will be familiar to you from your DARD days, and it is expert in managing such risks.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): I absolutely appreciate that where there is a risk and there is a potential danger, but there are also reservoirs that have been redundant for decades that are now having a critical impact on developers' plans in some of our towns and villages.

Mrs Godfrey: Absolutely. That is really why getting the function properly transferred and then getting the Act worked through to make sure that we have the right powers to do the right things is really important.

Mrs D Kelly: My experience of officials' responses to issues with the Silent Valley reservoir and Lurgan Park lake has not filled me with any confidence.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): We will revisit this, several times probably, over the next few weeks with various stakeholders.

Mrs Godfrey: Absolutely. One of the challenges has been the limited powers that we have. That has been a real difficulty. You are absolutely right.

Mrs D Kelly: It is also about consultation with other stakeholders, and we did not see any of that.

Mr Boylan: I welcome the Minister and wish her well in her post. I know that she has been bounced right into it.

MOT issues have been mentioned. I support you on the 40-year-old vehicles. A lot of people have contacted me about that. To go back to the specifics of the legislation, I think that there is a statutory instrument that we may be able to use relating to the extension of MOTs to every two years. I appreciate you saying that you would look at that and come back to us.

My other point is that the South is proposing to run with 80% or 90% of the test and to leave that section out. Is that something that you have considered?

Ms Mallon: It is. As soon as I became aware that the South had adopted that approach, I immediately looked at it. The difficulty that we have is that, under the system that I have initiated, once you get the temporary exemption certificate, the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) will allow you to tax your vehicle to keep it on the road; it will not allow you to tax a vehicle if you have done only a partial test. That is where it would fall down. We could give partial tests, but that would not allow people to tax their vehicle and keep it on the road. The cleanest and easiest way to deal with it was to move to the temporary exemption certificate. I did look at that as an option, but it would not have allowed for or facilitated the taxation of vehicles.

Mr Boylan: I appreciate that. I have three or four questions, so I will move through them as quickly as possible. I am mindful that other people have questions, and I will try and stay away from parochialism.

Ms Mallon: Do not worry. I know that it is difficult.

Mr Boylan: That has been covered fairly well. Fair play to my colleague.

Minister, you mentioned the taxi industry. We have had the legislation for a number of years, yet there are still concerns with it, definitely in the city and in west Belfast. When do you hope to engage with them to try to iron out some of the problems?

Ms Mallon: As I said, I have asked officials to get me a submission in the next couple of weeks. As soon as I have had time to consider that, I will want to move quickly to meet all stakeholders to make sure that I am as up to date and as informed on it as possible. I look forward to meeting representatives of the taxi industry very soon.

Mr Boylan: Will you give us an update on the application for gold-mining up in the Sperrins?

Ms Mallon: There are a number of applications. I am limited in what I can say, because I have to allow due process to be followed, but I am mindful of the complexity of that particular application. I am also mindful of the strength of feeling about it, so it is something that I want to consider in great detail.

Mr Boylan: You will have a lot of conversations with Minister Murphy. You may bring a picnic basket with you.

Ms Mallon: Yes. Put a good word in for me ahead of them.

Mr Boylan: Absolutely. You may bring a flask with you as well.

A lot of us now experience issues with traffic-calming measures and programmes run by councils, and there is no doubt that members will support any road safety measures. That is a budget that you will go after and try to address. In my area and, maybe, others, we as a Committee support a lot of the road safety measures, but those measures cannot be taken forward because of a lack of funding. Will you comment on that?

Ms Mallon: The budget there again has fallen as a result of significant cuts, and we are not able to do what we want to do. My approach is that I have a responsibility for road safety, but, if we are serious about trying to encourage children to walk to school, we need to make the traffic surrounding our schools safe. For me, those projects are not just about road safety but about the physical and mental well-being and health of our children. They are about community cohesion and all those things. Those are the things that I will press on. Again, it is the point that I made about street lights and the potholes: these are things that communities really care about. If parents taking their children to school and walking about their neighbourhoods feel safe, we know that the Executive are doing their job.

To reassure the Member, those are the issues that I am focused on. I will try to do what I can within my budget. In my presentation, I specifically laboured the point about the financial difficulties that I have so that I am being realistic with people in managing expectations. That does not mean that I am not ambitious about trying to do what we can. Sometimes, in those instances, it is not huge sums of money in the scheme of things that are required, but the multiple benefits that you get hugely outweigh the investment. That is something on which I am very keen to do more.

Mr Boylan: I appreciate that. What about the impact that Brexit will have on infrastructure? There is now a threat to that, as there is to transport. Have you any further comments? You mentioned Brexit in your presentation. I have some reservations, now that funding that was committed may not be committed.

Ms Mallon: I know.

Mr Boylan: We definitely need to continue that.

I have a couple of parochial issues, the first of which is the North/South interconnector. I understand that we definitely need the infrastructure, but there are 6,500 objections to it in my immediate area. The application is in for an overground connector. What are your views on that? Where is it at the minute? I hope that the Minister gets an opportunity to visit the constituency, because it is a major issue for us.

Ms Mallon: I appreciate that.

Mr Boylan: As I said, there have been a lot of objections to it. People support the interconnection, but they are asking for undergrounding. It is a difficult one for us.

Ms Mallon: Again, it is a live planning application, so I am restricted in what I can say. We have to follow due process. I am aware that it is a strategic project. I am also aware of community feeling. I am awaiting information from my officials. I have not received any submission on it yet, but, when it comes up, we will go through it in detail to try to understand it. I am conscious of the feeling on it, but I also have to weigh the strategic against the local and the financial viability of everything. That will not be an easy task, but I want to do it with an evidence-based approach and as fairly and robustly as I can.

Mr Boylan: Finally, this is one that we have been waiting for for a long time, and I have asked the officials previously: the North Link Road, West Link Road and East Link Road in Armagh. They have been touted for years. To travel through Armagh city in the morning, you need to leave at 6:00 am to travel one mile around the city.

Ms Mallon: I know.

Mr Boylan: I do not see it on the list, but I encourage the Minister to consider it, as it definitely needs to be looked at. As part of New Decade, New Approach, we are to take cars off the roads. Cars are sitting there with engines turning over, creating pollution. Armagh certainly has its fair share of pollution. I would appreciate it if the Minister were to come back to me on that to see what can be done.

Ms Mallon: I will have a look at it. I have gained a huge insight into the difficulties that we face with the road network right across the North. I have had multiple requests from Members to address issues, and they are all important. What I have to do is look through the priorities and be mindful of the financial situation, but I am happy to come back to the Member on that one.

Mr Boylan: Thank you.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): To follow on from what Mr Boylan has said — obviously, this is a regional issue — there is an ongoing greenways project to encourage people out of their car and to create safe spaces for both leisure and commuting. Can we have an update from you on the greenways project?

Ms Mallon: I am very supportive of it. It sits well with the priorities that I have about connecting communities and protecting the environment. I want to take a fresh look at some of the greenway strategies, although not to create a whole new strategy or process; I want to see what actions I can take in the next two years to advance that. It is something that I am up for. I want to look at it on an all-island basis, because there are big opportunities there. I look forward to working with my counterpart in the South.

I met Sustrans yesterday, and we spoke at length about greenways. I said to it that the greenways project is a piece of green infrastructure that I am committed to. I can see the benefits of it. I will do what I can, physically and actively, to promote that agenda in the two years ahead.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): There is evidence of very successful greenways, particularly in the Belfast area. It has captured people's imagination, and they want a safe space to travel in and for leisure time with their children.

Ms Mallon: If you look at the Comber greenway, you see huge benefits. It addressed so many issues and problems we were having, such as flooding and so forth, and it created a safe space, community cohesion and getting people active. Greenways are not the answer just to greater physical activity and sustainable transport; we can actually use them as a creative way to deal with problems such as antisocial behaviour and things that really trouble our constituents. It is a creative answer to a number of our problems.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Given that everyone is being parochial, perhaps I can put a bid in for lighting on the Comber greenway.

Mr Boylan: Throw it in there, Chair.

Mr Muir: For the record, I declare that I was previously an employee of Translink, and I was a councillor in Ards and North Down Borough Council.

I welcome the Minister to her role and give her my best wishes for the time ahead. The Assembly passed a motion on Monday declaring a climate emergency. It is incumbent on all of us, in whatever role we have, to act in response to that motion. One thing about that is rebalancing investment on sustainable transport. I would like a view from the Minister on how she would potentially take that forward. We are still a very car-dependent society in Northern Ireland, but it is important that we have appropriate infrastructure in place. What is your view on how we can ensure that we prioritise financing sustainable transport?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member. I am disappointed you are not wearing a dicky bow today, Andrew.

Mr Muir: Next week.

Mr Boylan: So are we, Andrew [*Laughter.*]

Ms Mallon: I welcome the fact that the Assembly declared a climate emergency. I believe that I need to do everything I can both in my Department and working with Executive colleagues. Minister Poots and I have already had a conversation about how we can work together and bring our Departments together to do what we can collaboratively to tackle the climate emergency. I look forward to that very much.

You have seen my intention to bring forward to the Committee the e-bike legislation. That has an important part to play. I attended the launch of the three new hydrogen-fuelled buses at Translink. Significant investment is required. It is a gear change in the move to zero-carbon emissions, and that is the kind of exciting project that I would like to see us more involved in. The big challenge for us will be in changing people's behaviour and cultures. As you rightly said, we are a very car-dependent society in many ways, and people feel very precious about their cars. The challenge for me — this is what I am trying to think through — is that my job is to try to change people's behaviour and encourage them out of their cars, but, at the same time, I need to be incentivising them to use public transport. That requires resource, and it is where the tension will always be, but I am committed to trying to do it.

Choosing an e-car was not a big step by any means, but I wanted to signal that, if I am going to preach to people to change their behaviour, I need to practise what I preach. I am genuinely committed to this agenda. There are a lot of opportunities with infrastructure, and it is about challenging people in their behaviours.

For me, the big answer is in encouraging people to use public transport. If you look at the Belfast rapid transit system, you see there is a 90% reduction in nitrogen oxide emissions across the rapid transit corridor. That is hugely beneficial. I hope to see that extended to north and south Belfast. Public transport, changing modes of behaviour and getting people more active in their travel are key ways of trying to deliver on that.

Mr Muir: Having an e-car is a small thing, but all the small things come together and allow us to deliver a change. It is a collective effort on everyone's behalf, and I welcome that.

Ms Mallon: We just need more charging points.

Mr Muir: Yes.

Mr Boylan: That is quite a major issue.

Mr Muir: I have just a couple of other things. The first-day brief mentioned class A private hire taxis in bus lanes. Has the Minister a view on that? It is a concern for quite a number of people.

Ms Mallon: Yes, it is very much an issue of concern. It is a concern for taxi drivers, and it is one that, for example, Sustrans raised with me yesterday. As part of what I said about the taxi situation, I want to get a better understanding of the issue and engage with a range of stakeholders to take a view on it. Going forward, that is something I want to do. Yes, I understand the difficulties from all sides. I want to hear from people and get informed, and then we need to move to a decision on that.

Mr Muir: Yes. It is important to move to a decision. I would encourage you not to permit that, but that is my personal view.

Councils have taken forward greenway schemes in the hope that the Assembly would be restored and there would be grant funding to enable them to proceed. A lot of them have done a lot of groundwork and consultation on that. I just hope that, as part of that review, we can get that concluded as soon as possible so that they can proceed.

Ms Mallon: Yes.

Mr Muir: Another issue — another thing that we were waiting for during our three-year hiatus — is the road closure legislation. That legislation was made in the dying days of the Assembly, and its impact is well known. Smaller events, in particular, have been cancelled, or the costs associated with running them have become quite significant. Does the Minister have a view on how to address those concerns? Government should be about enabling positive and healthy lifestyles, but this legislation inhibits that. Is there a way forward to resolve those concerns?

Ms Mallon: I will look certainly look at it, and I am happy to meet the member about it.

Mr Muir: One of the real desires is to have a review of the legislation. It would be useful if we could take that forward.

My last point is on the MOT situation. In all this, the key concern must be safety: safety of the staff and safety of road users. I urge the Minister, in whatever decisions are taken, to consider road safety. Motorists are obliged to ensure that their vehicle is roadworthy, and the MOT should not be, "That's you done"; it is your responsibility every day to do that. Whatever is done, road safety and the safety of staff must be the paramount concern. The situation came about that the lifts are no longer in use, but there is a view that the independent assessments that are being undertaken should have been done previously. This has come to light now, but I have a concern that independent assessments should have been done at an earlier stage.

Ms Mallon: On road safety: absolutely. One of the things I have said is that the Department needs to be direct and frequent in its communication with members and the public on the MOT situation. I have taken that decision myself. We have been putting out a consistent message about the importance of road safety. Yes, you are right: it ultimately is the responsibility of the vehicle owner. In the midst of all the difficulties, there is a helpful reminder for all of us. It is something we are considering now. People have raised with me the impact on road safety of the four-month extension. At the same time, some of the same people have been saying, "You need to move to testing every two years as opposed to one". Again, that just reinforces the need for owners and drivers of vehicles to make sure that, every day of the year, their car is safe to be on the roads and at its maximum roadworthiness.

On independent assessment, we are falling into the issue of the contracts. That is an issue of concern to me with the eight-weekly maintenance inspections and the six-monthly thorough inspections. It seems strange to me that cracks were identified only in November and then identified in so many lifts. That has thrown up serious questions and concerns for me, which is why one of the independent reviews on the auditors' side will look specifically at the contract itself. It is certainly something that I have been raising with officials, because it throws up questions and concerns for me.

Mr Beggs: Minister Mallon, I congratulate you on your appointment and welcome you to the Committee. I hope you will have an open, transparent and cooperative arrangement with the Committee. I thank you and your staff for being so open in the visit to the Balmoral DVA centre. It was useful for us to see the problem at first hand. In some instances, there are minute cracks, which, obviously, can grow. It was very worthwhile to get an understanding directly from those working in the area, and I appreciated that.

Ms Mallon: Thank you.

Mr Beggs: A major problem is coming in four months' time when, suddenly, the cars will double up. We still have the issue of the four-year-old cars where, I suspect, because of the pressure on incoming phone calls, some people are not being contacted when their appointment is coming due. I was contacted by a constituent on Friday where that was the issue. He went to the centre himself and got it dealt with. There is also the statutory off road notification (SORN) cars. As I understand it, we have only about half the capacity we used to. Are those who need to keep their roadworthy cars on the road being afforded timely opportunities or exemptions? The other side of road safety is that you could end up with members of the public walking on country roads or unlit roads or children perhaps not being collected by their parents because the car is off the road. That is another aspect of balancing road safety that you have to take into consideration. My question at the end of all of that is this: how soon, do you feel, will you have the information available to take a decision on further exemptions? You will have to create capacity in some way, and I see it coming only from further exemptions to get us over the spike that, we know, is coming.

Ms Mallon: You are absolutely right. There is an immediate issue in our need to prioritise four-year-old vehicles for testing. I am seeking legal advice because I understand that, if I were to try to extend or issue a temporary exemption certificate (TEC) to the four-year-old vehicles, I would be in breach of the roadworthiness directive, so it is not as straightforward as I initially thought it might be as a common-sense approach. We are prioritising those vehicles alongside taxis and car dealerships with imminent sales.

There is an issue around contact in the sense that the DVA does not hold contact details for all its customers. That is something it is working to rectify. It has come to light through this problem, so it is

working to resolve that. I asked for a helpline. I would have liked to be able to launch that helpline for the priority customers, but I want to be absolutely sure that, when it launches, it is at maximum capacity and will not create any further headaches for customers. I am hopeful that we can launch that as soon as possible. At the moment, it is being tested to make sure that it is an effective helpline service.

You are absolutely right. I am not focused just on the immediate crisis; I have to have the foresight to see that, in four months' time, there will be a big problem here. That is why I am looking to extend the TECs to the vans. I am also considering and making sure that, if required, I have measures in place to extend the period of the TECs for the other vehicles. I can do that for a further two months because it is only a six-month maximum period you can give for temporary exemption certificates, but I reassure members that I am trying to horizon scan to see what we need to do in the here and now and what we need to do, being mindful that, in four months' time, there will be a potential avalanche. How can we buy ourselves more time? Also, through all that, are we doing absolutely everything we can to make sure that we get business recovery back as quickly as possible? I reassure members that I am looking at that. As I said, part of that consideration is moving the MOT test from an annual one to one every two years. I am looking at options. I am doing everything I can that is possible within the current legislation, and I am proactively looking at what I need to do on changing regulations and legislation. I will be very much reliant on the Committee's support to help me to make that happen.

Mr Beggs: A backlog of investment is needed in Northern Ireland Water; I think about 100 sites need to be upgraded. At present, no new planning permissions are being granted because they would put additional pressure on the sewerage grid. That affects housebuilding and office and factory development. I flag up that it is vital that we move Northern Ireland Water forward. It is presently a Go-co — a government-owned company — so separate companies law has to be complied with. It is also a non-departmental public body (NDPB), so it has the public bureaucracy to deal with. Do you acknowledge that, if it were a mutual, not-for-profit private company, if it were a separate operation, we could cut down on bureaucracy and possibly access additional funds, even using the current payments that are being passed to it from the public purse, without requiring any further burden?

Ms Mallon: I totally understand and accept the scale of the problem in terms of the impact it has on limiting development, growth and housebuilding. I have to say that I have been impressed by the level of political awareness of the situation. You no longer have to make the case that Northern Ireland Water needs investment; that is widely recognised, so we are now in a situation where we can say, "Well, if we recognise that, what are we actually going to do about it?". I have not made a definitive decision on the nature of Northern Ireland Water as an organisation, but I want to have a conversation with Executive colleagues and with the Committee about how we might look creatively at the organisation. It has borrowing powers, so how do we utilise them? What is the best model? I also want to look at best practice, so I will look across these islands to see how water organisations are funded, how they are structured and what the benefits are to customers before I take a position. That is something that I will want to discuss with Executive colleagues, and it will certainly be an issue that I raise next week when I give my presentation to them. It is an issue we have to address.

Mr Beggs: Reservoirs were referred to, and I understand that just over 30 have been deemed to be "poor" or "very poor". Yet, nothing can be done because the transfer has not been completed and no enforcement is happening. This is an issue, potentially, of public safety. How urgently is the issue being addressed by other Departments and the Executive?

Mrs Godfrey: You are absolutely right. When I came into post, much importance was placed on me working with my DAERA colleague, who is in the happy position where the intention is for the function to transfer to us but it is not happening. We have been working closely with DAERA. I have no doubt that, now that we have Ministers back, we will see the transfer of functions moving very quickly. That has to happen.

To be honest, we have tried to flex the limited powers we have as much as possible to make sure that we understand the nature of the issue. As I mentioned to the Chair, we have to make sure we have the contingency arrangements in place and can develop the understanding of what "poor condition" looks like and what remedies might be put in place. We are hugely restricted in the powers we have. One of the uncommenced powers in the Reservoirs Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 is the placing of responsibility on reservoir owners to make sure they keep their assets in good condition. That is one of the areas that will be the subject, once we get the function transferred, of debate around this table. I understand that, at the previous ARD Committee, the right levels of responsibility, including between government and individual owners, was the subject of considerable debate.

Mr Beggs: Finally, you mentioned keeping your assets in an appropriate condition. That is not the case with our roads. There is a line of thinking that we need to secure our assets before continuing to add to them. Obviously, there are road safety improvements that have to be done, but we seem to be fixated on building more and more roads and bridges but then abandoning them and not maintaining them. Have we got the balance right?

Mrs Godfrey: We are responsible for somewhere in the region of £400 billion of public assets. That is a significant level. We ought, experts calculate, to spend around £400 million every year just on maintaining them. You are absolutely right: we are nowhere near that, and the Minister has outlined some of the challenges that presents. One of the particular frustrations for me is value for money, because, as the Minister said, it costs on average four times more to repair something than it does to structurally maintain it correctly in the first place.

Mr Beggs: That is why I ask whether we have the balance right.

Mrs Godfrey: You are absolutely right. A lot of our capital budget immediately goes out to key flagship projects. We should spend £140-odd million a year just on the structural maintenance of the roads infrastructure. We have had the best two or three years in recent times with an opening position of about £75 million. Every year you do not spend the £140 million, you store up bigger problems. There is a challenge for us in how seriously we take maintaining the assets that we have versus wanting to see new ones. It is not just the roads; it also applies to the rail infrastructure and the bus fleet, and we have discussed water and sewerage. You are absolutely right that there needs to be a conversation on what is the right balance.

Ms Mallon: The difficulty I am encountering on taking up this post is that budgets have been severely curtailed and you have flagship Executive projects that parties are committed to delivering. You then have 'New Decade, New Approach' commitments that parties want to deliver on, and you have ministerial priorities in that. If you had much more money, the truth is, you would get the balance better. The difficulty is that we are stuck in a bind where, particularly if you are serious about regional imbalance, you have to look at the A5 and A6. In the same sense, all of us around the table could name numerous roads in our constituencies where the quality is not acceptable, cars are being damaged and people are coming off bikes.

Is the balance is right? If we get significant uplift in Barnett consequentials from the UK Government — Boris Johnson says infrastructure will be his Government's real impetus in transforming things — and a significant proportion of that stays as capital, I can try to get the balance better. Unfortunately, that is the situation. I do not think any of us would ever say we get the balance absolutely right, because there are so many competing priorities. The question is what we can do within available budgets to maintain existing stock but offer opportunities for people who have not had the investment before. There is that tension all the time.

Mr Beggs: The funding has changed over the last number of years, and, even in the latest deal, the funding is not there for all the promises in it. Do we have to cut our cloth by our means? Yes, let us hope that something comes down the line with consequentials, but to continue with high-level schemes when we cannot fill potholes or do regular maintenance seems ridiculous and wasteful of public funds.

Mr K Buchanan: First of all, I welcome the Minister. They saved the best to last, as they say.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): There are two more *[Laughter.]*

Mr K Buchanan: Two more?

Mr Boylan: He is close. He nearly got it right.

Ms Mallon: Second last.

Mr K Buchanan: You are welcome, Minister. I welcome your point that life does not revolve around Belfast. I appreciate that, and I do not mean that in a flippant manner.

Ms Mallon: Neither did I.

Mr K Buchanan: Everybody is getting parochial. My colleague to my right does not want to build any new roads, but I do. If you look at mid-Ulster — I will be a little parochial — you see it is the engineering and food-processing capital of Northern Ireland, so it is something to bear in mind that the Magherafelt bypass is, effectively, pushing transport to Moneymore/Cookstown. Ultimately, we would need to look long-term at linking not by a dual carriageway but by bypassing all roads between the M1 and M2 to give a circular of the lough, because it is an engineering and, as I said, food-processing point.

I have a couple of points about the MOT issue, and I appreciate we are having a discussion on that shortly. With regard to the advice you are getting on the business recovery and engineering reports, I know that you cannot give us a timeline on when the centres will be up to full speed, but when will you have that report on your table so you can make decisions on whether you are buying lifts, repairing lifts or what you are doing with lifts?

Ms Mallon: The engineering consultants commenced their work on 3 February. On Monday, there will be an update report. I have said that I need an urgent report. I do not want to compromise the robustness of that by putting in place an artificial deadline, but the engineers know that it is a matter of urgency, so they are committed to getting that report to me as quickly as possible.

Mr K Buchanan: I do not need to know the company, but who are the engineers? Are they insurance inspection or a private company?

Ms Mallon: A private company.

Mrs Godfrey: Yes, that is right. They have been appointed through a framework contract and through Central Procurement Directorate (CPD), which gives the Minister and me assurance on the procurement approach, but they need a wee bit of space and time to get the work done and the report to the Minister very early next week, which will give us, I think, a better sense of the next steps. There is a balance between wanting something urgently and not wanting to constrain the auditors or the experts by saying, "If you have to have it done by x, does that constrain you in what you look at?".

Mr K Buchanan: You expect a report early next week.

Mrs Godfrey: Yes.

Ms Mallon: I expect an update on Monday.

Mr K Buchanan: Regarding the lifts in general, is the Minister aware of a life cycle or a time for those lifts? They were fitted in 2011 or 2012, I understand, so is the Minister aware of a time when they had to be changed — not in years, but purely in life cycles or cycles of the lift being —?

Ms Mallon: It may be a good idea to pick that up with the officials. My understanding is that there was an assessment in the latter part of last year that did not indicate that the lifts were beyond their life cycle.

Mr K Buchanan: The back end of 2019.

Ms Mallon: Yes.

Mr K Buchanan: I want to move on to insurance. We have road fatalities in Northern Ireland every year, unfortunately. My concern is that there will be a fatality caused by a car that has, technically, no MOT. Does that concern you?

Ms Mallon: Yes, it does. I became aware of the situation on Tuesday 21 January that there was an issue with the lift. On the Wednesday, I was advised of safety concerns about all the lifts and that they needed to be taken out of operation. I moved to issue the temporary exemption certificates on the Friday because I felt the situation was going to be quite expansive. Of course, one of the considerations I had was exactly that concern: do I issue a temporary exemption certificate and what if a situation develops after that involving a car with a temporary exemption certificate? As a human being, I would answer, "Yes", and that is why I have to press the message that drivers and owners are ultimately responsible for their vehicle. It would be helpful if the Committee were able to reinforce that

message too. That is also one of the reasons why I want to get the business operable as quickly and safely as possible. Issuing temporary exemption certificates is not ideal, and it is not a solution in itself. It is essentially buying us time to get over this difficulty and to get the problem properly resolved. That is why I am pushing for interim options to maximise capacity and make sure that every possible option for restoring the business as quickly as possible is put in place.

Mr K Buchanan: OK. I want to move on to street lighting and potholes. I appreciate your point, and you have covered it. It is a good signal to the man or woman in the street that they can see something happening and that the light outside their home or on their road is repaired. It gets that signal across. I welcome something happening on that soon. I appreciate we are moving into the lighter nights, but people still get up early and work late.

I have a final question. We discussed this briefly last week. If there is a local issue and I want to meet my engineer, as I call it, in mid-Ulster, or someone else's colleague, apparently, that request goes right up to you, Minister: is that correct?

Ms Mallon: No. Basically, because we have not had Ministers in post for three years, systems and processes have had to adapt, but now Ministers are back in post. Actually, it was the permanent secretary, and she can speak for it. I reassure members that there was a memo from the permanent secretary to say, "Look, we have to have processes in place". I want to make sure elected Members can access officials. I also want to be made aware if there are issues of real concern to Members and communities so I can do what I can to address them.

I understand that, because of the process of taking time out to bring me up to speed on issues, a small number of meetings that had been arranged between elected representatives and officials were cancelled. My understanding is that all those meetings have been rescheduled. If they have not been, I encourage Members to let me know.

Mr K Buchanan: Do those requests go over your desk, Katrina?

Mrs Godfrey: No. The system we have is that there is no change in officials meeting with elected representatives. That is really important. I have asked for two things, and the Minister has alluded to one of them. One of them — you will all appreciate the reasons for it — is that proper records are kept of discussions, meetings and agreements. That is really important. It is interesting: we are a Department that was created in May 2016. We have operated for about eight months with Ministers; we have operated for about three years without Ministers. Actually, as a Department, we are learning how to come together under the direction and control of a new Minister, because we have had only a very short time with that. Therefore, proper records are critical.

Secondly, I have asked officials to make sure that they report on the key topics, key issues and key resolutions from those meetings. It is important, as the Minister says, to make sure that she is aware of the things concerning elected representatives. It is also important for another reason. Things may seem to be local, individual issues, but, if they are happening in three, four, five or six localities, they may point to a bigger issue, to a more strategic issue or to something that may need a more systematic approach from the centre of the Department, the Minister and the senior management team and me.

Those are two changes that have been put in place: robust and proper records and a report-back mechanism so the Minister is always aware of the issues that concern you and your constituents.

Mr K Buchanan: OK. Thank you.

Mr Hilditch: Minister, over the last year or so we have heard about the great success of the Glider, which is on the east-west axis. There is potential it will be extended north/south of the city. From a more parochial point of view for you, is the Antrim Road or the York Road the preferred option in north Belfast?

Ms Mallon: I have said that I want proposals on the viability of routes, and I want to take an evidence-based approach. Then, when we have options, I will go out to consultation, and I will encourage people to respond. I am not coming at this with a closed mind. I see two potential routes in north Belfast that are being touted — the Shore Road and the Antrim Road — and I can see merits in both. However, I want to base any decision that I take on the evidence that we have, making sure that communities, residents and traders are consulted. That is one of the lessons that we should learn from

the first Glider project. We need to do more to consult people, listen to them and involve them in the process. That is what I very much want to do in the second stage of the Glider project.

Mr Hilditch: We have not touched on cycling. There are many cycling issues, and a more joined-up approach by the Department is needed to achieve the completion of appropriate cycling provision. Will you talk about that?

Ms Mallon: I have looked at the cycling strategy to see what we can do there. Are you a member of the cycling all-party group (APG)?

Mr Hilditch: I am.

Ms Mallon: Are you? I spoke to the chair of that APG, Chris Lyttle, and said that I wanted to have a positive engagement with it. I hope to meet you and meet stakeholders, but there is a lot more that we could do on cycling. For me, it is another area that does not require huge sums of money, but you can make a big difference with that investment.

Mr Boylan: My thunder has been stolen. That was the only point that I wanted to make. The Glider has been a success, and we went to see the hydrogen bus last week. We have talked about the Glider, and you are to meet Translink about phase 2.

I listened to members talking about road safety. We have a large network of rural roads, and, unfortunately, rural people depend on single vehicles because of the transport network. We need to tackle that as part of the overall strategy, if we are serious about addressing climate issues and everything else. We have a big challenge ahead of us.

Ms Mallon: I meant to reference that point when I was answering a previous question, because you are absolutely right: there is a tension in all of these things between the urban and the rural. The urban lends itself, in many ways, to a more progressive approach because it has a more connected public transport network, with greenways and so forth. I am not forgetting about rural issues. I understand that the speed of change might be a bit different, but we need to do what we can.

I am also conscious of our rural roads. There was a capital allocation of £75 million for roads, and £10 million of that went to the road recovery fund. That was specifically for rural roads, and I can see the benefits of that. I want to make sure that that is maintained when I start to look at my new budget, as well as what I can do with that money.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): There will, no doubt, be further discussions on many of these issues, particularly the duplication of transport providers, community transport and the lack of routes around some of our rural towns and villages. We may want to revisit that. At one stage, there was an integrated transport pilot project in the Dungannon area. Is there any further information on that or on whether that might be looked at again?

Ms Mallon: On community transport?

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Just in relation to the Dungannon pilot.

Mrs Godfrey: If I recall correctly, Chair, the pilot looked at the scope to integrate between health, education and Translink. It threw up challenges — I remember this from my education days — around some of the simple practicalities such as bus sharing, which becomes difficult when everyone wants to use buses for different purposes at exactly the same time of day. Certainly, we can update the Committee on that, but my understanding is that the reality was that the integration of health, education and Translink turned out to be much more challenging at the logistics end than it first appeared, when it seemed a sensible proposition.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): OK. I want to turn to what the Committee might expect legislation-wise from the Department. Are you in a position to give us an idea of what we might be looking at in the next couple of months and up to the summer recess?

Ms Mallon: I will write to you detailing that. We are trying to see what it is legislatively possible to introduce, looking at the time slots and so forth. E-bikes will be one area. I am keen to look at drink-driving and drug-driving, but the impediment to the speed of progress that I want to make on those is

the testing equipment — the breathalysing equipment. That is one of the issues that I want to raise with the Chief Constable, and we are engaging with the Home Office to see whether we can move that forward.

If you are OK with it, I will write to the Committee detailing my ambitions for legislation. We can then work with the Committee on the timetabling.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): OK. Thank you. No other members have any questions at this stage. Thank you very much for your time this morning. We will see you in the near future.

Ms Mallon: Thank you.

Mrs Godfrey: Thank you, Chair and members.