



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Ad Hoc Committee on the
COVID-19 Response

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Ministerial Statement: The Executive Office

7 April 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Christopher Stalford (Deputy Chairperson)
Dr Steve Aiken
Mr Jim Allister
Ms Martina Anderson
Ms Kellie Armstrong
Ms Clare Bailey
Mrs Rosemary Barton
Mr John Blair
Mr Keith Buchanan
Mr Robbie Butler
Mr Gerry Carroll
Mr Pat Catney
Mr Alan Chambers
Mr Gordon Dunne
Mrs Arlene Foster
Mr Colm Gildernew
Mr Paul Givan
Mr Harry Harvey
Mr Declan Kearney
Mr Declan McAleer
Mr Colin McGrath
Mr Gary Middleton
Mr Mike Nesbitt
Mr John O'Dowd
Mrs Michelle O'Neill
Mr Matthew O'Toole
Mr Pat Sheehan
Ms Claire Sugden

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): On Tuesday 31 March 2020, the Assembly resolved, as provided for in Standing Order 53(1), to appoint an Ad Hoc Committee to receive oral statements from Ministers on matters relating to COVID-19 and the response and to question Ministers on such statements. Members are very welcome to this, the first meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee.

The Committee will receive two statements today: a joint statement from the First Minister and deputy First Minister; and then a statement from the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. Before I invite the First Minister and deputy First Minister to give their statement, it would be helpful if I clarified some procedural issues relating to the operation of this Committee. Members will have

received a letter from the Speaker a short time ago to make clear that he is following advice to remain at home due to his medical history. Mr Speaker has therefore sent his apologies for not being here today as he had originally intended, and I am sure all members send him their best wishes.

I also apologise to members for the delay in getting their electronic packs to them. We had received the statement from the First Minister and deputy First Minister in time, but, regrettably, we were still waiting for the statement from the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. There have since been server issues with getting the packs issued to members, and, as a result, we have had to email copies of the packs to members.

The motion agreed by the Assembly provided that:

"The Committee may not meet on days when the Assembly is sitting. The procedures of the Committee shall otherwise be such as the Chairperson may determine." — [Official Report (Hansard), 31 March 2020, p8, col 2].

The Speaker, as Chairperson of the Committee, wrote to all members last week to provide guidance on the procedures of the Committee. A copy of that correspondence has been included in members' electronic packs at page 4. The guidance has also been published as an all-party notice on the Assembly's website and sent to all members. I do not intend to reiterate now everything that was in that guidance; however, I think it would be worthwhile for me to clarify a few points.

The central reason for the creation of the Ad Hoc Committee was to create a more flexible means for Ministers to give statements to the Assembly on days when there is no plenary session. The Ad Hoc Committee shall be convened only if a Minister wishes to make a statement on a non-sitting day. Obviously, we will require a reasonable period to give members notice and ensure that the necessary arrangements and staffing structures are in place. However, as this mechanism has been developed as an agile means of responding to a fast-moving situation, I know that there may be times when it is necessary to convene the Committee at short notice. The Ad Hoc Committee has come about following the Speaker's discussions with the junior Ministers on behalf of the Executive. The Assembly has taken significant steps to ease pressure on Departments at this difficult time, including the suspension of Question Time and the discouragement of Assembly questions for written answer. However, the scrutiny role of the Assembly remains vital. The Ad Hoc Committee provides the Assembly with additional flexibility through which it can exercise that scrutiny during this public health crisis. The Speaker has emphasised that it was important that the Executive take a coordinated approach to ensure that all Ministers — all Ministers — use the Ad Hoc Committee to provide regular updates to members on the Executive's response to COVID-19 and to take questions.

I think it is even more important, given the public announcements by Ministers that we are likely to be approaching the peak of the pandemic, that such work is undertaken. The Speaker had, therefore, made clear to the Executive that he expected to be required to convene meetings of the Ad Hoc Committee in the short time ahead. I am pleased that the Executive have responded to this and that, in addition to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister and the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs being here today, the Speaker's Office has received indicative approaches from the Education Minister and the Communities Minister about coming to the next meeting of this Committee.

I should remind members that the Committee can only receive statements from Ministers on matters related to COVID-19, and the response thereto. The Committee can conduct no business other than to receive these statements and to question Ministers on them. Consequently, members should not seek to raise points of order in this Committee about matters that should instead be considered at plenary sittings or other Committee meetings. I want this Committee to remain entirely focused on the important business of the statements being brought before it by Ministers. If members have other issues that they wish to raise, this Committee is not the place to do it.

Before we move on, I want to mention the layout of the Chamber for these Committee meetings. Included in your packs is a seating plan for the Ad Hoc Committee meetings. This layout reflects the fact that these are Committee meetings rather than plenary sittings. Ministers will, therefore, deliver their statements from lecterns on the Floor in front of the Table, rather than from their usual position on the Benches. An advantage to this approach is that, even with two Ministers giving statements, there is still room for a further 22 members to be seated in the Chamber in a manner that upholds the social distancing requirements.

I remind members that, as per the guidance issued by the Speaker last week, it is for parties to manage attendance at this Committee in line with the seating arrangements and thus ensure appropriate social distancing. Let us move on.

Agenda item 2 is a statement from the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. The Speaker received notification on 3 April that the Ministers wished to make a statement to the Ad Hoc Committee at today's meeting. A copy of the statement that they intend to make is included in the members' pack. I welcome the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to the first meeting of the Committee. I invite them to use the lecterns to give their joint statement, which should be heard by members without interruption. Following the statement, there will be an opportunity to ask questions.

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): Thank you very much, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I join with you in sending best wishes to the Speaker at this time as he self-isolates at home.

I am grateful for the opportunity to update the Ad Hoc Committee today. I recognise the critical role that the Assembly must play in responding to this crisis, and I am grateful to you, Principal Deputy Speaker, and the Assembly, for the flexibility that you have shown in helping to accommodate the Executive at this time. It is important that we all work together to respond to the huge challenges that we face. All in the House, I know, will wish to join with me today in sending best wishes to the Prime Minister for a speedy recovery.

It is the intention of the Executive to keep the Assembly informed of our response to COVID-19. The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs will make a statement later today. The Minister of Education and the Minister for Communities will give statements to this Committee over the next few days, and the other Executive Ministers will also come before the Committee on a regular basis.

Before I update members on the Executive's work, I would like to thank all our healthcare workers for their courage, their compassion, their commitment and their diligence in caring for all of us during these very difficult times. We are extremely grateful for the work of all our doctors and nurses, and everyone working in the health service from the laundry to the laboratory. I will also take this opportunity to thank all the workers in other sectors who are making sure that there is still food on our tables, that the lights are on, there is clean water in our taps, our bins are being collected and our key workers can get to and from their work, amongst many other essential tasks.

The thoughts and prayers of all of us across the Assembly, of course, will be with the families and loved ones of the deceased. As of 11.15 am on Tuesday 7 April, testing has indicated that the total number of confirmed cases is 1,255. Our modelling indicates that the peak of the first wave of the epidemic is expected between 6 and 20 April 2020. Our key messages to the public are, therefore, more important than ever and remain the same: please stay at home as much as possible; observe social distancing in public; and, where a member of a household starts to show symptoms of COVID-19, self-isolate for 14 days.

We know that the majority of people are taking those measures seriously and doing all that they can to protect the NHS and help save lives. We ask that all of that continues, and I want people to do the right thing this coming weekend and, indeed, over the Easter period. We recognise that Easter is a time when many families normally come together, but it is essential that everyone continues to follow the social distancing instructions as they did over Mother's Day. That will help to protect those who are most vulnerable in our society as well as those who are working so hard to look after our health.

As an Executive, we are continuing to do all that we can to work in a joined-up manner to respond to the crisis. We have been working from home and meeting virtually to ensure that we respect the rules on social distancing. We are engaging with our counterparts in London and Dublin to ensure that every avenue is pursued in protecting our people, and we are also engaging further afield. The deputy First Minister and I have had discussions with the Chinese consul general, Madam Zhang Meifang, on securing more equipment to support healthcare staff and share medical expertise.

As an Executive, we have developed collective strategic priorities focused on looking after, first, the health and well-being of all our citizens; secondly, our economic well-being, both in the immediate and short term and the medium to long term; and, thirdly, the well-being of our community and society. We are keeping our priorities under constant review so that we can react quickly as the situation develops.

In relation to our health and well-being, the concerns about PPE are being treated extremely seriously by this Executive. The first batch of a fresh order from the NHS was delivered to Northern Ireland on Monday 6 April, comprising some 5.5 million items in total. That includes over 1.3 million aprons and

over 300,000 FFP3 respirator masks. The remainder is expected in the coming days. The extra 5.5 million items of PPE for Northern Ireland is very welcome news for our front-line staff. However, we know that we need to replenish and increase the stock that we hold given the expected level of demand in the coming weeks.

Efforts to source more PPE are continuing, and that is a constant focus of our Executive meetings. The Minister of Health is actively working with the Minister of Finance to pursue all feasible supply routes, both international and local, and it is, of course, a global challenge.

Updated UK-wide NHS guidance on PPE use was issued last week. That guidance will inform PPE use across our system and help us to prioritise distribution. I trust that that updated guidance, together with securing greater quantities of PPE for Northern Ireland, will play a part in allaying some concerns.

We recognise that other sectors are also facing PPE challenges, and we have been considering their needs in our Executive meetings and in our procurement efforts. I assure the Assembly that there is no lack of urgency in this matter. We are doing everything we can to the best of our ability to get the right PPE to those who need it at the right time.

I can also assure the Assembly that we are working equally as urgently on the important matter of testing. I am pleased to note that testing for healthcare workers has now commenced at the SSE Arena. The Public Health Agency is involved in that testing initiative, with input from health and social care trust colleagues. That complements work undertaken by trusts to scale up their own testing capabilities. We will continue to expand the testing of healthcare staff as quickly as possible. We fully understand the frustration at the fact that more staff have not yet been tested in the healthcare sector and across other sectors. We understand that people are concerned about potentially, unknowingly, passing on the virus to their loved ones or those whom they are looking after, and we appreciate that people with COVID-like symptoms are frustrated at having to self-isolate while their colleagues are under pressure, when the results of a test may have allowed them to go back to work. However, I assure you that the difficulties in scaling up testing are not due to a lack of effort or will. There are significant challenges, including laboratory and staffing capacity and the unprecedented levels of global demand for testing reagents and swabs.

Testing and PPE are two of the challenges that the Executive are working tirelessly to resolve, and, at the same time, we are facing multiple challenges across all Departments. The Minister for the Economy has been working with the COVID-19 engagement forum to consider important social distancing guidance for our businesses. The Minister has also been working closely with the Minister of Finance to pay out grants to small businesses that are eligible for the small business rate relief scheme. As of yesterday, 13,187 grants had been paid and 1,603 other applications were being validated. That will provide some much needed cash flow to businesses. I urge anyone who thinks that their business is entitled to the payment, but has not received it, to use the online portal to register their details.

Working closely with Executive colleagues, the Minister for Infrastructure has made public transport free for all health and social care workers during the outbreak. That is a small gesture that will help to make things a little easier for those who are on the front line in caring for us all during this pandemic.

As we continue to support those who have been affected financially by the crisis, the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs has announced a substantial support package for our fishing industry to help the fleet to survive this difficult period. The Minister has also been considering the impact on the environment and has established a COVID-19 waste group to provide support, guidance and regulatory direction to the waste sector that is providing us with essential services during this time.

The Minister of Justice has been working closely with colleagues in the Police Service to ensure that they are able to continue to do their jobs.

The deputy First Minister will provide a further update on some of those issues.

Mrs O'Neill (The deputy First Minister): As Arlene has done, I send our best wishes to the Ceann Comhairle and wish him the very best in the time ahead.

We are grateful for the opportunity to update members on our response to the coronavirus pandemic. As we all know, we are in the midst of the biggest challenge of our lifetime. It is causing loss of life and great hardship to many people throughout our society, across this island and across the world.

The number of individuals who have been tested for the virus is 9,158, and the number of laboratory-confirmed tests is 1,255. Those figures relate predominately to patients admitted to an HSE trust acute hospital, so will be an underestimate, but, as the testing strategy is rolled out, it will change to include those with the virus who are also tested in the community, of which we want more, including our front-line healthcare workers.

Sadly, I can report that, as of 11.15 this morning, there have been 73 COVID-19-related deaths. On behalf of us all in the Assembly, I extend our sincere condolences to the families, friends and neighbours of those who have lost loved ones. Seventy-three families find themselves in the most heartbreaking of situations and, to compound their loss and grief, they have to deal with the fact that they are not able to bury their loved ones in the way in which they would, traditionally. Those who have passed on are not mere numbers: they are grandparents, parents, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, the lives of whom are lost but, as a society, we will remember them and never forget.

To our nurses, doctors, healthcare workers in our hospitals and in the homes: the virtue of loving care for the sick and the vulnerable is remarkable and we are so, so thankful for all that you do. Each of us knows someone from our family or community who works in the health service. We want them to know that we take huge pride in their professionalism, selflessness and courage, and we salute their fortitude and dignity in combating what is a deadly virus. I was struck last night, as I am sure many others were, to see one of the news channels report the plight of paramedics. I believe that the lady's name was Tina-Marie. She was giving an assurance to families, and she said, "If we take your loved one out of your home, we can assure you that we will love them like our own". I think that that says it all about the care that our healthcare workers are providing to those whom we love.

I have spoken to many front-line healthcare workers. You have said that you are frightened. You have said that you are worried about being able to do your job safely. You have said that you are worried for your families. We want to say very clearly that we see you, that we hear you and that we are working night and day to make sure that you get the protection that you deserve. We can assure you that good progress is definitely being made in securing more PPE, and this remains a top priority for the Executive.

We want to assure the public that the Executive are working tirelessly in our response to this pandemic. Our top priority has always been and always will be to save lives. Be in no doubt that, while the five parties in our Coalition Government have a diversity of views, there is unity of purpose. No political difference of emphasis will interfere with the greater good of saving lives. This Assembly is a devolved Administration, so we have the ability to adopt a regional approach that responds to our local circumstances. We have two jurisdictions on this island, but we are one island, and it makes sense that we have a common action to combat this deadly virus. The COVID-19 pandemic does not respect borders, so there must be a common approach to action in both jurisdictions on the island. I am glad, therefore, that a formal memorandum of understanding has been devised by the Health Ministers and the CMOs to focus our North/South cooperation, and I believe that it has just been signed off in the past hour. Ministers across the island will meet in North/South format also on Thursday, again to discuss our approach to combat COVID-19.

The Executive have announced significant measures and interventions to help to stop the spread of COVID-19. Those have included everything from school closures and the closing of non-essential businesses and services to the introduction of regulatory powers and an enforcement regime to get people to stay at home. All social events are now banned, and public gatherings of two or more people, excluding households and for essential work-related purposes, are prohibited. The Executive secured a budget totalling £912 million to secure the Executive response to COVID-19. That has been used to resource our health service and provide substantial economic and social support packages to workers, households, the vulnerable and the business community. It has been used to help to give peace of mind, relief and support to everyone's well-being at this very difficult and challenging time.

This week is when the surge in the spread of cases will occur, and our plea is for people to live by the law, to stay at home, stop the spread and flatten the curve. That is all about protecting our lives and our families' well-being. This weekend is Easter, and I know that it is not going to be easy, especially with the weather being brighter, but people must continue to stay at home. People must listen and understand that this virus is spreading and is killing people. However, we all can do something about this. You must only go out of your home to shop for basic necessities, but only once a day at the most; to take exercise, and, again, no more than once a day, and that should be done alone or with your household, not in groups; for medical reasons, for yourself or if providing care for support for a vulnerable person; and to travel to essential work if that work is absolutely necessary and cannot be done from home.

There is evidence that a lot of people are listening. Road and rail traffic on key routes has fallen significantly, and this is encouraging, but we cannot let this slip, especially as we head into Easter weekend. I would also like to make a special appeal to our young people. I know how difficult it is to not be able to see your friends or take part in your normal activities. However, what you are doing is saving lives. I would like to record also our thanks to all the principals and the teachers who are going above and beyond in coming up with creative ways to help our children to continue to learn at this time and also for helping our key workers in providing care for their children.

Arrangements have also been put in place to provide payment for 51,000 families, covering 93,000 children who would normally receive free school meals. The speedy implementation of this policy demonstrates the commitment of the Executive to looking after those in our community who are vulnerable at this difficult time. The Minister for Communities and her Department have been working hard to put in place measures to support and enable the voluntary and community sector as it seeks to mobilise and coordinate its response to the emergency. In recent days, Minister Hargey announced a £10 million scheme to deliver food parcels to 10,400 homes, and that will begin this week. Those who have been advised to stay at home because of underlying health conditions will be the beneficiaries. The Minister has also set up a Freephone community helpline and she will make a statement in the House this week to update Members on those efforts.

As the situation continues to unfold, our other Executive colleagues will appear before this Committee to provide detailed updates on their activities. We are working with leaders across the entire public sector, including local government and the emergency services, as well the private sector and community leaders. This is going to take a whole-society approach. We are taking a smart, proactive and deliberate approach to resilience, which is about saving lives, livelihoods and people's well-being.

Like everywhere else, the Executive have a very big challenge ahead to reduce the risk to our people and to save lives, and we cannot do it alone. We have high expectations of ourselves and the public that we serve to play our part in the weeks and months ahead to help to protect people's health and well-being for the benefit of today's and future generations. The protection of the lives and welfare of everyone on this island is paramount and no effort will be spared in that regard. We will definitely leave nobody behind.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): I thank the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for making their statement. I will now invite members to ask the Ministers questions. I will allow a period of around an hour for that. It is my intention to allow all members to ask a question. However, that depends on members being focused and succinct in their questions. As is the case with questions on a ministerial statement at a plenary sitting, members should ask only one question, which should relate directly to the Ministers' statement. If members ask multiple questions, they should not be surprised or disappointed if the Ministers choose to answer only one of them. The only exception in this meeting that I will make is in the case of the Chair of the relevant Statutory Committee, Mr McGrath, who will be allowed some latitude to ask maybe two. *[Laughter.]* My munificence knows no limits.

I remind members that they must not preface their question with a speech. That is a matter of courtesy and respect towards other members, particularly those from the smaller parties who are further down the speaking list. Finally, if a member asks a short, focused question, I may allow that member a supplementary if required. If there is additional time left at the end, I may also allow some further questions.

Mr McGrath: I will try my best to stick to that list of rules. I join in the remarks of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister and extend best wishes to the Speaker and the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, and their families at this time. It must be a very worrying time for them, and we extend those thoughts.

First Minister and deputy First Minister, this is a defining time for our community, which is looking to you for leadership and direction. However, if we see a repeat of last week's briefing against each other, scrambling to get decisions issued by the party before the Ministry, or attempts to "orange and green" or "them and us" the coronavirus pandemic, people out there and many in here will not forgive you. You have a job to do and we need to see that being done, because that saves people's lives.

We will praise you and thank you for many of your responses to the crisis, but there is one issue that I want to focus on because some members of the public think that it is not going too well, and that is the issue of PPE. We are told that you are getting it right and that you are getting swathes of PPE from China, but the bottom line is that it is not going to the people who need it most. We are fast-tracking

students and we are bringing retired medics back to the front line, but we are not preparing them for the dangers. Placing them at the front line without the necessary PPE is an unforgivable act.

I have to ask about yesterday's consignment of five million pieces, which, we understand, was for a hospital setting. The questions that I have focus on the front-line community services, our domiciliary carers in the community, our community care sector and our nursing and residential homes. Does the Executive care about the staff there, and their safety? I want to give an example that I heard yesterday, of key community health staff who were forced to come into a shared office. They could have worked from home, but they were asked to come in and work in their office. There were about 25 of them in that office: social workers, district nurses and others. They had little to zero PPE because, apparently, they were told that they do not need it. Thirteen of those 25 individuals are now self-isolating because they have symptoms of coronavirus.

First Minister and deputy First Minister, I do not want any polished or prepared answer from your pack. I want you to tell me whether you can look them in the eye and say that you have done everything you can for them. Do you value those staff and their contributions so much that you send them out to work afraid and scared, because they do not have the correct PPE? What is your message today to our community nurses and healthcare staff?

Mrs Foster: I will go first, and I am sure that Michelle will want to add her perspective.

Colin, you ask a clear question, whether we and our Executive colleagues care about our domiciliary care workers. My goodness, what a question to ask. We spend every single day caring about our domiciliary care workers, healthcare workers, police officers and prison officers. That is why we put such an emphasis — such an emphasis — on personal protection equipment. At every Executive meeting, of which there are now three a week, most of it is spent talking about personal protection equipment. That is because we, and all the other members, have heard from constituents and people such as you have mentioned, that they are frightened and concerned that they do not have the appropriate level of personal protection equipment.

We have been working very hard on that with the Minister of Health. As a result, you saw the PPE come in yesterday and that is only the start. You rightly indicated that that was identified for hospital settings. As I understand it, that will be distributed to the trusts and the trusts will filter it down to everyone else in their remit, which includes the independent sector and domiciliary care workers.

Some concern has been expressed that, when it gets to trust level, it is not distributed further, to the people who need it. We heard that clearly, about certain wards in certain hospitals, and care homes, not having the appropriate PPE. The matter has been raised with the Minister of Health, and he told us yesterday that he is putting in an audit team to look at how the trusts distribute it. There is no point in having a central store of personal protection equipment if it is not getting out to the people who need it.

We recognise that, but yesterday was an important step. To have that delivery from the UK Government and the National Health Service was important. Until then, people were concerned. At the Executive, we had a briefing on Friday about what we had in our stores at the time, so we knew what we had in reserve and that it would have to be replenished. We were pleased to see that come in, early on Monday morning, and there is more to come from the UK Government.

Local suppliers are also stepping up to the plate. We are very pleased to see that. They are offering their services, and we should be very proud of the number of people who have heard the call and come forward, both in their own areas and regionally in Northern Ireland.

Mrs O'Neill: I concur. Of course we value each and every one of those who work on the front line right now. We need them more than ever. After all this, we will have a conversation about the type of society that we value and the type of society that values those people who we depend on so much.

Domiciliary care workers are probably the lowest paid workforce. They are predominantly female and are already faced by very challenging circumstances because of cuts across the health service. These are the people that we now rely on. They need to have confidence that they can go to work, do their job and feel safe, for themselves, their families and the people that they care for.

People should be assured that it is the Executive's priority to make sure that we get every piece of PPE that we can get our hands on, and get it out to those who need it. The disparity has been where we have the stock, but that is not what people see on the ground. It is not what our health care workers experience and tell us. That is not just in the community setting; that is also in the hospital

setting. We are all probably fielding questions from healthcare workers who have that real, lived experience.

We have put a lot of focus on that in the Executive, and we have had considerable in-depth conversation on it all. I welcome the fact that the Health Minister is now looking at how to actually make sure that, whenever we have a large delivery of PPE and a health trust says that it has sufficient stock, that is the reality on the ground for staff. The fact that a mechanism will be put in place to look at that is a welcome development in the right direction. That should give some assurance to staff that that is where that is moving.

We are chasing all different avenues for PPE; from the British Government and from China, obviously, because that is the other area where we are trying to establish a supply chain, and also from local companies. I cannot remember the exact figure, but I think that more than 100 companies have come forward and said that they are prepared to repurpose what they do. Orders have been placed across a whole range of companies that provide a whole range of things that we need, not only PPE but other things.

Based on the recent modelling, it looks as though we will potentially face a second surge, and, if that is the case and we have another peak, we need to prepare for that now and for what is coming down the line. Our local companies will be really important in that preparation as well. The staff on the ground who are working for all of us — for our families, for our loved ones, for our communities, for our people — need to know that we are doing everything that we can to get them what they need, and that is our determination.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Before I call the next person to ask a question, I remind members that Mr McGrath got a bit of leeway. The era of indulgence is now over, because there are 19 members on the speaking list who want to get to ask a question.

Mr Givan: I welcome this engagement, the accountability that the Executive Office is giving and the work that the Assembly has done to set this up. I also thank the First Minister for the very assured way in which she has gone about her business — the calm way — but recognising the seriousness of what needs to be done and ensuring that a collective approach is taken, with her, as First Minister, giving leadership in the Executive and publicly. I put on record my appreciation for the way that you, First Minister, have carried out that business.

There is collaboration across the Executive and more widely into industry and academia, the North/South connection and collaboration east-west. Will the First Minister elaborate on how that collaboration seeks to provide the solutions to the many problems that we have to deal with in the face of this difficulty?

Mrs Foster: When you come to a time of crisis, there are always some people who really do step up to the mark, and we have seen that right across the community since this terrible virus has taken hold. We have seen it in the number of volunteers who have come forward to the NHS; former nurses and doctors volunteering to come back into what is — I think, we all recognise — a frightening prospect for them. You will know, Paul, that one of our colleagues, Kathryn Owen, has come back into nursing. She was an auxiliary nurse and has come back in again. That is a really brave thing to do, and I really do commend everyone who has done that. As well as that, of course, the Minister for Communities has set up a Volunteer Now portal and people can register there to volunteer in other ways.

As well as that, we have seen a great collaboration between industry, academia and people wanting to come to us in government to say, "How can we help?". A consortium that includes Queen's, Ulster University, C-TRIC in Londonderry and AFBI is looking at how to scale up diagnostic testing, for example. Radox and Deloitte are looking at a UK-wide initiative on staff testing. The SSE Arena is part of that UK-wide staff testing, and it is really good to see that.

The deputy First Minister mentioned that there is now a memorandum of understanding between the Chief Medical Officers in the Republic of Ireland and here in Northern Ireland. Again, that is about sharing information and looking at modelling and how we can model. What is really important is to look at the data that we are gaining from industry and from colleagues in the Republic of Ireland, in Great Britain and, indeed, here in Northern Ireland across all our Departments. At the moment — this is a very interesting point that I am not sure that members will be aware of — all our Departments are gathering data and putting it into our central hub in the civil contingencies group, and then that is informing how we move forward. All of that data analytics is very important now. We are in the age of

technology, so we are using that. We are looking at our own modelling, and we were very pleased when the Minister of Health brought forward the modelling for Northern Ireland recently. The deputy First Minister and I had Professor Ian Young with us at a press conference just last Friday, and he was able to tell us how that modelling works. It is happening all the time, and it will be revisited, so they will look at the live data and say, "Well, how is that changing what is happening in Northern Ireland?". There is a lot of work going on behind the scenes that does not get talked about very much in the public domain, and I understand, going back to the last question, why PPE is such a critical issue, but there is so much other work going on behind the scenes that informs everything that is happening at the moment.

Mrs O'Neill: Just to add to that, the people who are stepping up to the mark are the amazing healthcare staff, and that is why it is so important that we support them now as best as we possibly can by chasing down every bit of protection that we possibly can and that we get them the testing that they deserve. This is about not only their own health and giving them assurances but trying to keep our healthcare staff in work as we work our way through this crisis. We all can attest to brilliant examples of community development, where people have stepped up to the mark right across our communities to support those who are most vulnerable.

In terms of leadership in this crisis, Arlene, the First Minister, and I sit every morning in a civil contingencies group meeting. That brings together all the Departments, all our emergency responders and local government, and it is about how we work collectively to provide leadership through this crisis. It is where things are escalated that need to be escalated. It is where we are informed of all the modelling work and of all the statistics that are being gathered, particularly on how the measures that have been implemented are impacting on, for example, the levels of traffic coming down and the number of people who are actually going out. All these things are going to keep informing the decisions that we take, because as we move through the next weeks and months — this could go on, as the Chief Medical Officer said, for some time, albeit in different phases — we have to be informed by the best statistics on the right measures to take, when to take them and how we implement them. That is an ongoing and very valuable piece of work.

Mr McAleer: Are the Ministers satisfied that the public information campaign is being heeded and leading to a reduction in the day-to-day contact between people, hence reducing the spread of COVID-19?

Mrs O'Neill: We brought forward a very informative public information campaign. I hope that people see that. It is very clear and concise in the message that we are trying to put out. It is on TV and radio, it is in newspapers, it uses social media and it is driving home the message about staying home and washing your hands. I think that it has been fairly effective. A lot of the information that we are getting back certainly suggests that it has been.

Again I will use this platform to say this: this weekend is Easter, but it is not a holiday time like any other, and people need to please listen to that advice. We know that the PSNI, for example, are out and about asking people why they are on the roads and are making sure that they are not out if they do not need to be. That needs to continue over the weekend. My plea to the public is: keep doing what you are doing. This is us fighting to save people's lives, and we all need to play our part in that.

Mrs Foster: I think we were heartened — I will go back to the data again, if you will forgive me — by the fact that, when data came in from Translink to say that the number of journeys had fallen significantly during the first week, it was clear that the regulations had had an impact on rail and bus travel. I think that the roads were a lot quieter. I agree with the deputy First Minister that it is critical that we do not lapse back on that, because I think that some people are taking the attitude, "Well, we have done two weeks at home, so surely that is enough". It is not enough, and even though this is Easter weekend and a time when we would normally be enjoying the outdoors, be with family or celebrating, it is really, really important that, actually, people need to stay at home and not be out and about. That is really important for us. I just really put a plea out that they do not lapse back on that, and I hope that our information campaign, which now has gone live, as the Deputy First Minister said, has an impact and points out that we all have to do it to get through it. That is true: we all have to do it.

Dr Aiken: I thank the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for their comments. May I, on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, pass on our regards to the Speaker and wish the British Prime Minister — our Prime Minister — Boris Johnson, a very swift recovery? I also note the number of deaths we have had today, and we again pass on our condolences, as we do for everyone in the House in this position.

I have a specific question for the deputy First Minister, and it is to do with last week, when she talked about PPE. She was talking specifically about the Health Minister on Thursday evening, and she refused to give her full-hearted support to him. Bearing in mind that, in the House last week, the Finance Minister informed us that not only was PPE on its way through a joint order with the Irish Republic but it was due to arrive shortly in significant quantities. It now transpires that not only was an order not made, but there were no details of the order and no details of timing. What I would like to hear, deputy First Minister, is whether you have any faith and confidence in your Finance Minister, who, at best, misrepresented the House, and do you have faith and confidence in the Health Minister, who has done an absolutely sterling job with the rest of the Northern Ireland health service and all the health workers to deal with the crisis? Over to you, deputy First Minister.

Mrs O'Neill: First, I have confidence that everybody in the Executive is doing everything that they can to save lives. The number-one priority here is about saving lives. As I have said in the past, I believe that, if there is a difference in emphasis, that is what we should say. That does not mean that we do not have unity of purpose. That does not mean that we are not trying to do everything that we can to make sure that we protect lives and do the very best by people in what are the most unprecedented of circumstances, such as none of us have been through before.

I encourage the member to keep faith. We will continue to work together. The Finance Minister has said clearly on the record and will continue to say — I believe that he will come to your Committee because you have asked him to come on Wednesday — that he will not apologise for trying to get PPE. Let us just continue to do everything that we can to go down our three routes of supply and make sure we get whatever we can from the British Government, make sure we get our supplies from China where we can and make sure we work with our local suppliers.

We all need to work together, but, because we are a five-party coalition, we must have the space to say things whenever we think that things are slow. I have confidence in the Executive. I have confidence in the fact that, over the last number of days and even the last week, we have made progress. We have made progress on testing. We have made progress on PPE. That is what the public want to hear. We need to get these things right as best we can in the most challenging of circumstances.

Ms Armstrong: I will start by expressing, on behalf of the Alliance Party, our sincere condolences to those who have lost their life to this terrible pandemic. Our thoughts, of course, are with the Speaker, the Prime Minister and all those families, including mine, who have not been able to attend funerals. It is a devastating time.

One thing that has come forward is the fact that our Executive are working hard. I take the opportunity — you will probably not hear it too often from me — to say, "Thank you", to both the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and all the Ministers. We face a crisis, and, thank goodness, we are back and able to work forward through it. This morning, I was part of a discussion with ComRes about the state of the UK during the pandemic and the effect that it has not only on businesses but on individuals. One thing that has become clear is that people need peace of mind. The deputy First Minister has mentioned that already today.

In order to get that peace of mind, there are certain things that I will ask you. It is a slight list, but it is all tied in together and it is just for clarity. For example, do we know if the financial assistance for childcare provision has been agreed yet? Has that come through the Executive? We know that we are depending on the detail of the Budget Act for the welfare mitigations to be paid: when will we see that welfare mitigation legislation coming through? The £25,000 business grant is something that our businesses desperately need. I have to make a clear call out for constituencies like mine that are holiday places. I have caravan parks where people are trying to get round the legislation by claiming that that is their permanent place of residence. It is bringing tourists to areas where we definitely do not need them. Any other time, we would say, "Tourists, please come to the Ards peninsula", but now I say, "Please stay at home because you are putting at risk very vulnerable older people in villages and coastal areas". Can you give us any further clarification on those points?

I will not get an opportunity to say this again, so I wish you both a very happy Easter, and I hope that we will all be back to the Chamber together as 90 again.

Mrs Foster: I thank the member for her comments, and "Happy Easter" to her too and, indeed, to the whole House.

On the specific issues, I understand that a paper will come to the Executive on financial assistance for childcare. As I said, the Executive are sitting three times a week now, so it is hard to keep track of all the papers that are coming, but I understand that there is a paper coming on that very soon. The welfare mitigation paper is at the Executive. It is still undergoing discussion but is still rolling out over the period through the Budget Act. I referenced the £10,000 payment, which is going very well, and that was because we had the data in Land and Property Services (LPS), as the member will know. I understand from the Economy Minister that she hopes to have a process in place for the £25,000 grant by the end of this week. She is working hard with the Finance Minister to get that actioned. I recognise that it is one thing to announce support packages; it is quite another to get the money out. We have all heard from individual businesspeople about the fact that they have cash flow difficulties at the moment. I recognise that, and I have urged the banks to work with them and not to look for fully developed business plans in order for them to access funding. That is important. We are also aware that there is a gap. Some people have not been captured by some of the schemes, and, again, we hear all of that and are trying to process how we can help those people. Lastly, people should be in caravan parks only if that is their main residence. They should not designate it themselves. We have seen the difficulties that, unfortunately, the Chief Medical Officer in Scotland got into in relation to going to a second home. People should not be travelling to their second home or their caravan. I know that it is difficult. I know that the normal thing at Easter time is to go to your caravan or to your second home, but, frankly, our priority is saving lives, and I ask them to consider other people and to stay away at this time.

Mrs O'Neill: I will briefly add to that. First, I did not know that you had lost someone, so condolences to you and your family at this time.

We will ask the Minister for Communities to give a definitive update on the question that you asked about welfare mitigations. To add to what the First Minister has said, we are examining the possibility of extending business support to businesses that have an NAV of under £15,000. That has been an issue, particularly for small businesses that have been left out of the current category. We are conscious of the fact, while the schemes that have been brought forward are welcome, some people have been left out. We are making the case to Treasury around those things in a joined-up Executive way.

Mr Dunne: I, too, thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for the commitment and leadership that they have shown. It is important in a time of crisis that we all work together with a united, strong voice for all the people. We all recognise the good work of local businesses, as has already been mentioned, but, unfortunately, the small business manufacturing sector has not been recognised. Those who are in receipt of industrial derating at the moment do not seem to be included, so I stress the need for funding to be put in place for that group. We all recognise the great work that industry has done in diversifying, stepping up to the plate and restructuring their business to meet the demands of the crisis.

Mrs Foster: That is precisely one of the groups that, we feel, has not been covered. I think that some of them felt that they were covered under the small business scheme for the £10,000 and then realised that, because we were using the small business rate relief as the passport, if you like, to the £10,000, they missed out because they were beneficiaries of industrial derating. That is something that the Minister for the Economy has opened up with the Minister of Finance, and we are trying to find a way forward on that. It is critical that we find a way forward on that, because there are many people whom it would benefit.

We are the beneficiary of, I think, £912 million from Westminster in relation to the virus, but we also benefit from the UK-wide schemes, which do not impact on our block grant. If we can do something on a UK-wide basis, it will not impact on the money that we hold here; it comes from Treasury. We are trying to encourage Treasury to look at some of those gaps as well. However, I assure you that the industrial derating issue is being looked at.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Before the deputy First Minister rises or, maybe, does not rise, I remind you that it is up to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to decide whether they both want to have a go at a question. If they both answer, it makes it more difficult to get to the end of the list.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an bheirt Airí as ucht a ráitis agus as ucht a gcuid freagraí. Thank you very much, and thanks to both Ministers for their statements and answers thus far. The recent modelling that was produced by the

Chief Scientific Adviser, Professor Young, indicated that the health service had a realistic prospect of dealing with this initial period between now and 20 April, particularly if people adhere to the social distancing and self-isolation measures. It still assumes hospital admissions of up to 500 people a week. Are sufficient resources being given to the health service to enable it to provide personnel, beds, ventilators and so on?

Mrs O'Neill: I will take that question and say, "Yes". It has been useful to delve into the modelling that has been done. We are doing our own modelling now, and we are looking at that. We will have an update on that over the next number of days. That is what determines what we do next, when we do it and why we take the measures that we have to take. We have to keep reminding ourselves that we are asking people to take extreme measures. It is not easy, and it is not the norm for people to stay apart from their families. We have to keep reviewing whether we are doing the right things at the right times. That modelling work is really important. We know that they will look at what things look like in the North and at the North/South position and the modelling that has been used there, because the disease knows no barriers. It is important that we watch those things on an ongoing basis.

You asked about resource and about whether the Health Department had enough money. Money is not the issue. We have said that we will find whatever is required. One of the first things that the Finance Minister said to all Departments in one of our early Executive meetings was that they should throw the rule book out the window. These are not normal times. We, as an Executive, cannot behave as normal, and our Departments should not behave as normal. That was warmly received and has enabled us to respond in an agile and fast manner to the issues that are presented to us. Finances are not the issue. There are a lot of issues with regard to capability in the health service, such as what we can do and when we can do it, and those are the things that need to be invested in.

You also asked about personnel. The response to the call for healthcare staff to come back into the workforce across every discipline has been absolutely incredible. I cannot remember the latest figure, but I think there were 14,000 when we were last updated — maybe that was yesterday. That shows the support that there is out there. While people are afraid and have, perhaps, stepped out of the profession or retired, the fact that all those people are coming back in the midst of the most challenging of circumstances shows the kind of society we have. People want to play their part. It is very positive that we have so many people coming forward.

Resource should not be the issue. We have to find the money for whatever we need, be that PPE, ventilators or whatever equipment is required.

Mr Middleton: I thank the First Minister, deputy First Minister and all Ministers for the work that they are doing at this difficult time. I, too, welcome the work with local businesses and communities and what they are doing to rally round and produce PPE and hand sanitiser. Will the First Minister and deputy First Minister confirm, from working with the UK Government at the national level, that the Government are fully aware of the need, specifically for Northern Ireland, not only for PPE but for ventilators and other equipment?

Mrs Foster: I thank the member for his question. You are absolutely right about our local producers. It is not just PPE, scrubs and everything that is necessary. Some of our local distillers are making hand sanitisers instead of making gin. It has been quite incredible and really quite heartening to see the way in which people have repurposed their businesses over the past number of weeks.

On the question of our input into Westminster, there is a ministerial implementation group that takes place every day, which our Ministers are involved in, depending on the subject matter. Today, the issue was around freight and transport and food supply, and, as I understand it, the junior Ministers are usually there all of the time, and the Economy Minister, the Infrastructure Minister and, I think, the Agriculture Minister were on that call as well. There is very much a good flow of information between ourselves and Westminster, and, therefore, I would say a very good understanding. I have to say that last week in terms of PPE, both the Secretary of State for Health and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland were very helpful in making sure that that PPE was delivered on time. We do thank them for the work that they are doing on our behalf.

Mr Gildernew: Thank you to both Ministers for your answers and presentations. I do welcome the delivery yesterday of upwards of 5 million items of PPE. I know that it has been discussed here already, but I would like to recognise that the First Minister acknowledged that that needs to be replenished on an ongoing basis. Therefore, I welcome the signing of the memorandum of understanding, which opens up further channels and also potential sharing of resources. Specifically,

can you outline what mechanisms are in place to ensure that the PPE that has arrived is delivered to front-line staff on an ongoing basis as and when they need it?

Mrs O'Neill: I welcome the member back into action, having been out of action for 14 days. The point that is hard for us all to fathom is the fact that we have this PPE but that is not the reality for staff on the ground. That is where that falls down. I welcome the fact that yesterday, as part of our discussions around PPE, the Health Minister said, after I had suggested using RQIA as a way to go and investigate, he thinks that it is best to bring in an independent assessor. That would be an individual or a group of individuals who can assess what the reality is on the ground for staff and have an engagement with staff. I think that that should go some way to give an assurance that staff know who they can talk to and know where they can go to when they are not getting the protection that they feel that they need. I think that that will be a significant development in giving the staff the assurance that they need.

Mr O'Toole: I associate myself with all of the other members who have paid tribute to our front-line staff. What can you say except we are all humbled and grateful beyond words for the sacrifices and dedication that they are showing on our behalf? There is really not much more you can say other than to thank them.

Both of you have talked about the importance of data and Northern Ireland-specific data and also about sharing data that is useful from GB and from the rest of Ireland. While we are rightly now focused on the next few weeks, making sure that people stay at home and making sure that our healthcare staff have the maximum support in dealing with this first wave, it is not irresponsible to think about how we will exit from the current arrangements and then how we manage what the deputy First Minister has already said will be a second surge. We hope that that is lower than the first, but there will be a second surge. Part of that, surely, will be through extensive contact tracing and testing. Has thought been given to the very specific circumstances that exist in Northern Ireland?

Both of you will have probably come from your constituencies west of the Bann and noticed that we are a much, much more rural place than GB. What specific thought and modelling is going into how that mass contact tracing and testing can be delivered in Northern Ireland in a way that helps us to remove ourselves from the current restrictions and then manages the next surge?

Mrs O'Neill: You are absolutely right. We all note that there has been progress on testing and we know that the best evidence across the world is that that is where we need to be, but it is not just about testing by itself. It is about testing, tracing and isolating, and those three things are key component parts of being successful. The Executive have received a testing strategy, which will be populated with the numbers that we wish to see.

The opening of the SSE Arena as a testing centre over the weekend was a positive step in the right direction, but people who live west of the Bann are not going to travel to Belfast to get their test. We need to have a facility closer to home for those people. I welcome the fact that other areas are being explored, and that we now have MOT centres being used as potential venues. That gives us plenty of opportunities across the North to provide two or three testing centres.

The key to our success in all of this has to be following the best evidence. The best evidence is that we must take not just extreme measures, but alongside that we must test, isolate and trace. There has certainly been a lot of progress over recent days on those things, but we now need to quickly move to a point — and we are working on this — where, when we say that we are rapidly scaling up testing we ask: what do those numbers look like and who are we going to reach? Some of the work that is being done is around how to increase testing for healthcare workers and how to widen that out to other people on the front line, including everyone from emergency responders in the health service to the PSNI and people who work in the prisons. Work is being done on how we can work our way through that.

The issue of testing in community care and residential homes has been raised quite often. That all needs to be part and parcel of the roll-out plan, but I am certainly content that progress has been made on those things. We are moving towards a position where the best evidence says we should be.

Mr Nesbitt: My question is about the Health Minister. I have worked with Robin Swann since we campaigned to get elected to the Assembly in 2011. I could say that I would trust him with my children's lives but actually, I am trusting him with my children's lives. So, I would like the two Ministers

to tell me whether they agree that any public attack on his motivation, his integrity or his ability is not only unwelcome but is just wrong.

The deputy First Minister quoted Tina Marie, the paramedic, who said:

"if we take your loved one out of your home, we can assure you we will love them like one of our own."

Is that not the spirit that the public want to see emanating from this Chamber? Loving each other might be a bit of a stretch, but for God's sake, we need to show each other respect.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mrs Foster: I say to the member that I have nothing but respect for his colleague. I work very closely with him, and I think that he would say that I have been incredibly supportive of him because I know the incredible job that he has. I do not know whether the member will recall it, but before the Westminster election, I was asked a question about the Health Minister, whoever that would be. I said that I did not care who the Health Minister would be in the next Executive and that I would support them.

At that time, there were incredible pressures when healthcare workers were on strike and there were issues around the crisis in our health service. Little did we think at that particular time that we would be dealing with a global pandemic coming to Northern Ireland. I will, of course, continue to support Robin in the very difficult job that he does. We have said to him in the Executive that this is not just a crisis for health but a crisis for the whole of society in Northern Ireland and, therefore, it is a crisis for the whole Executive. We very much recognise that and he continues to do a very good job under pressure that no one should have to face.

Let me take the opportunity again to completely condemn the vile sectarian attack that was directed at him and his family on Friday. When I saw the details of that, I have to say, I was outraged. Let us be honest, I have seen many a threat in my time, but it was completely wrong and has to be condemned in the strongest possible way. He does, of course, have my support.

Mrs O'Neill: May I also put on record, as I did at the Executive meeting, that the abusive commentary that Robin and his family received was disgusting and uncalled for. The PSNI are, rightly, involved in dealing with that. No Minister, going about their job, deserves to have that kind of attack levelled at them. As I said to Robin directly, I wholeheartedly condemn that attack.

We are committed to working together. We have unity of purpose in trying to save lives. That is the Executive's number-one priority. This is not about individuals, and it never has been. It is about the issues and differences in emphasis. As a five-party Executive, we will have differences in approach. I am on record as saying that we need to do more testing and more in terms of PPE — the reality of what was experienced on the ground was not what was being expressed. I call those things out, but that does not mean that we cannot work together.

I will continue to work with Robin through this crisis because, I tell you, we all need each other more than anything. We need to work our way through this, in the best possible way we can, to support people. The number-one priority, the only priority, is saving lives. That is all our focus, all our effort. I have confidence that all our Ministers are working together to bring us through this crisis.

We will come through this, and then we will have a lot of work to do to build society again. A lot of families will be left without their loved ones, and we will have a lot of building to do. We will have to work together through this and on the other side of it.

Mr Harvey: I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for all that they are doing at this difficult time. It is much appreciated. How would the First Minister and deputy First Minister say the public are responding to the requirements for social distancing? Are they content with the response?

Mrs Foster: I know something that the deputy First Minister may not. Mr Harvey's daughter has been recently called up to become a nurse. She is in her final year of nursing, and she is going to take up her place early. We want to remember her and all her colleagues as they go into front-line nursing. Please take her our best wishes.

As I have said, initially the social distancing message was taken on board. I am sure that I am not alone in receiving messages from people who complained that so-and-so was not social distancing, and asked what we could do to make sure that that happened. There was quite a bit of that.

However, I register a little concern that there may have been a slipping back because, as time goes on, people think that we are coming through this. The appeal I make today is that people should, please, please continue to social distance and stay at home. It is so important that we get through this wave of this terrible disease, protect as many as we can in the National Health Service and push down the peak of deaths. That is what we want to do: make sure we have the lowest number of deaths possible.

Ms Anderson: I thank the Ministers for their statement. You made reference to the number of tests that have been done. The PHA surveillance report shows that less than 10,000 people have been tested. The SSE Arena and C-TRIC in Derry were mentioned as places where carers in residential care homes who have symptoms may be tested. Unfortunately, vulnerable residents who have symptoms in those homes have not yet been tested.

Do the Ministers agree that, as a policy, that we need community testing, in order to ensure that there is contact tracing to detect who has COVID-19, so that we can trace who has it, and then isolate them? That is in order to flatten the peak, stop the spread and enable front-line workers who want to return to work, but who are isolating and may not know whether they have COVID-19, to actually return. Test, trace and isolate, as you mentioned, but we need it as a policy. People are crying out for community testing, as you know yourselves. Across the North people demand that we take that forward.

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, that is my position. Work has been done on rapidly ramping up the scale of testing. Our statement talks about moving towards that position, and that is where we need to be. You can look at examples around the world of how this has been done successfully.

Many people want to play their part. All the sporting codes are asking, "What can we do?", "Can we help?" and "Is there anything we can do?" There have been so many offers from people.

We will be dealing with this for probably the next year. It is important that, for the next two weeks, the focus is completely on the surge and how we respond. We have to get to the point where we are doing the full testing, isolating and tracing, because it will take us considerable time to come out the other side of this.

Care homes are an area of particular concern. Again, when you look at examples, you see some tragic examples around the world of care homes and clusters and what that has meant, with large numbers of older people dying. We need to send out a clear message that we value everybody in society and that we will do everything that we can to make sure that we protect all people, including those in nursing homes who need our help now more than ever. I put on record the fact that I have heard stories of a number of nursing homes where the staff have moved in to protect the patients, and I think that that is such a heroic effort and a contribution to society that is second to none. People are so good as to do that.

We have to get the testing out onto the ground, with the maximum number of people tested, the isolating and the tracing done, as a matter of priority.

Mrs Foster: If I may, I will add to that. We have talked about our elderly people, and it is so important to say how valuable they are to our society, but, recently, I have been contacted by people who are concerned about the do-not-resuscitate issue. They feel pressurised into their family signing that. I have to say that that is wrong. That is wrong and should not be happening. I note that some of the charities for elderly people have raised that as an issue. It is certainly not something that our Executive would condone at all. If there are circumstances where it is happening, I think that we should hear about it, because it is not the sort of thing that we would condone.

Mr Blair: As the First Minister and deputy First Minister will know, sadly, the need for an abortion is often itself an emergency for a woman. That need does not stop in a pandemic, but the means of travelling to access abortion care in GB have disappeared. That has been well-documented. What are the Executive doing as part of their COVID-19 response to address that healthcare deficit?

Mrs Foster: As the member knows, there is not unanimity at the Executive on abortion, and nor will there be, I think, for quite some time, if ever. Therefore, a paper has come from the Department of Health. The Attorney General has raised some issues about that. Those issues have to be looked at before we can come to a determination in relation to the issue.

Mrs O'Neill: This is about compassionate care. This is about helping women who find themselves in very difficult circumstances. This is about the Executive delivering on a commitment that has already been made. Westminster has made the regulations. This is the law. It must be implemented. I look forward to further conversation at the Executive about how it will be put in place. As we stand here today, women are being failed in this crisis.

Mr McGuigan: I thank the joint First Ministers for coming before us today and making the statement and for all the work that they and their Executive colleagues are doing to see us through this crisis.

Early in the crisis, we saw panic-buying. As my family's designated shopper, sometimes when I am shopping late in the evening, I have witnessed that some shelves are maybe not stocked as fully as they should be. Will the Ministers explain what the Executive are doing to ensure that our shelves are full and that the supply chain keeps flowing and our supermarkets are full?

Mrs O'Neill: I note that numerous people are growing beards in this pandemic. I note the member's own.

We have been clear, from the outset, to say to people, "Please, do not panic-buy, because you leave other people at a disadvantage when you do that". Sterling work has been done on trying to secure the supply chains and making sure that everything is running across. We are working with retail, the hauliers and everybody else to make sure that the supply chains are in place. We are working with the ports, the ferry operators and everybody to make sure that we keep the food supply chains going. I am confident that, whilst you might not always have the same choices that you had, you will certainly have a supply of food, so people should not be panicking. Not everybody can go in and bulk-buy. Some people live week by week and their income dictates that. That means that it is really challenging and very worrying for people: you are dealing with the crisis in itself, but then you are panicking that you cannot get your children the food that they eat, for example. I encourage the public again to please understand that supply chains are continually reviewed. We are continually working our way through that to make sure we have adequate supply. We are not going to have a shortage of food. Choice might perhaps be limited sometimes, but that is all right. We are in a crisis; these are not normal times.

Mr Catney: I also pass on my condolences to those families who have lost loved ones. We here in Northern Ireland and in Ireland know the importance of a wake and how it can bring great comfort to the families. May I also say, as a back note, that I am sure that we as an Assembly will find in the future an appropriate way of coming together so that we can help those families through that grieving process? That is something that we all can reflect on in the future.

I also put on record my thanks to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister and all our Executive during this time of crisis, and I support whatever they can do and will do whatever I possibly can. I say that on behalf of all those in Lagan Valley.

Given that the World Health Organization has said that COVID-19 can be caught from a person showing only mild symptoms, I am sure that both of you would agree with me — this is more an acknowledgement than anything else — that the domiciliary care workers, the porters, other hospital staff and care workers should maintain the recommended safe distances required under such circumstances. The current guidance on PPE exposes those critical workers, who travel from one vulnerable person to another, to the risk of infection.

Mrs Foster: Thank you, Pat, and I will just say to you that it is typical of you to seek to comfort people at a time when they are losing loved ones. It is a very difficult time for people. We all know that we go to the house of neighbours, friends and families whenever they lose a loved one. At the moment, people are dying alone, never mind families not having the comfort of a wake. It is a hugely difficult time for everyone. The grieving process is being very badly interrupted, and we will have to deal with that in the future and how we help people to get through all that.

Just for information, the deputy First Minister and I have been talking to mental health professionals about what happens and how we can support people, because for many there will be mental health issues, not least for our front-line staff, who will have to see things that they probably never want to

see. How do we deal with that? I think it was Mr Newton who talked in the Chamber about a lot of our front-line workers perhaps having post-traumatic stress disorder, so how are we going to assist them? We have already started to look at that in the Executive, and I just wanted to make sure that people were aware of that.

In terms of your question, obviously we want people to respect the social distancing rule and to make sure that they are aware of the PPE guidelines. There are new guidelines out across the United Kingdom. They have been confirmed by the World Health Organization on how PPE should be distributed and worn, so I hope that that new guidance will again reassure people, regardless of what level of PPE they require.

Mr O'Dowd: In relation to the member's previous comments, it is worth noting that everyone who dies alone as a result of this virus caught it off another person. You do not want to be the person who passes it on either directly or indirectly, and that is why the messaging that has been coming from the joint First Ministers is so important. People need to isolate. They need to respect social distancing, and, as has been said in the Chamber time and time again today, this weekend is not a bank holiday any more; it is about saving people's lives.

Quite rightly, the Executive's first priority is saving lives, but, in tandem with that, they have also established a strategic forum of business, retail and trade unions to look at how they work together to protect workers, businesses and the future of the business sector. Could the First Minister and deputy First Minister update us on how that forum is working?

Mrs O'Neill: The forum has met on a number of occasions. It meets again tomorrow. Obviously, it is crucially important that you bring together all the various elements. Therefore, it has representatives from each of the business organisations, the trade union movement, the Labour Relations Agency, the Chief Executives' Forum, the Health and Safety Executive and the Public Health Agency. All the relevant people are working together, and the forum is going to meet again tomorrow. One of the things that they are working on is the essential workers list and who are the essential workers, because that clarity is vitally important.

The other area the forum is working on is safety in the workplace, and there is going to be some guidance brought forward. We expect that, over the next number of days, there will be a body of work brought forward, probably by the Economy Minister, to give more clarity. The forum has certainly been focused on the whole area of who is the essential worker and how the essential worker is protected in the workplace.

Ms Bailey: First, I want to congratulate Grainne Close and Shannon Sickles, and also Christopher and Henry Flanagan-Kane, the first two same-sex couples in the UK to enter into a civil partnership. It was their bravery and tenacity in fighting through a judicial review, at great personal expense, to overturn our ban on same-sex marriage, that led to a ruling this morning in their favour for our courts where we are, yet again, being told that personal and religious beliefs are no grounds for discrimination —

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): The member is out of order. I am going to ask the member to resume her seat.

Ms Bailey: — and that the legal ban is unjustified and discriminated —.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): I am asking the member to resume her seat.

Ms Bailey: I am going to ask a question.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Can you, please, resume your seat for just one second.

At the start, I said that questions should be related to the statement made by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. There will be other occasions, I am sure, where these issues can be discussed in the House. Will you please direct your comments to the statement by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister?

Ms Bailey: Thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker. Apologies. This House also knows that the law on abortion has also changed. I note the earlier comments and questions from our colleague as well.

Given that it was the Attorney General who led the legal team that lost the case I just referred to, can I ask the Ministers if they can give us any reassurance that they will be seeking wider legal opinion immediately, given that on many occasions the Attorney General has stated his own personal opposition to women being allowed to access abortion in Northern Ireland?

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): One moment, First Minister. Given that no part of either of those questions related to the content of the statement given by the First Minister or the deputy First Minister, you are under no obligation to respond. If you wish to, you may.

Mrs Foster: I hope the member is not calling into question the advice which the Attorney General is giving to the Executive, in his capacity as the legal adviser to the Executive, because that would be a very serious charge for a member of this House to make. The Attorney General has a role to play, and he has sent in serious concerns. I say to the member: I am standing here today trying to save lives. That is what I am focused on: saving lives. I hope that everybody else is as well.

Mrs O'Neill: I say to the member that we need to have a society that is compassionate and provides compassionate healthcare to everybody, including women who find themselves in very difficult circumstances. Legislation has been brought forward in Westminster, because this Assembly did not deliver the legislation that was required. The Health Minister now has an obligation to put that in place. I am quite sure that there are a number of representative groups out there that will legally challenge if the Department does not do what it needs to do to bring those regulations into place.

Mr Allister: I wholeheartedly endorse what the First Minister said about best wishes to our Prime Minister at this critical time for his personal health. We trust he will be returned to full health and strength. I also endorse what she just said about how critical it is at this time to be saving lives, not facilitating the termination of life — that needs to be said.

The First Minister, I suspect, will have observed, and certainly it has not been lost on me, and I am sure not lost on any thinking citizen of Northern Ireland, how beneficial it has been to be able to draw down, and be part of, the largesse of the United Kingdom at this critical time. It is good to be part of a nation with deep pockets such as those of the United Kingdom. I do not doubt for one moment that the First Minister is striving to do her absolute best at this critical time. It is a matter of regret, I suspect to her, though she will not say it, but certainly to me that, at the same time, necessary actions have been undermined by her partner in Government, Sinn Féin, which seems to be more interested in grandstanding than in governing, whose members are more interested in carping than in delivery and never cease to take political advantage of any crisis and get to the point of calling out the Health Minister. Maybe those who think that it is appropriate in Government to call out the Health Minister should think differently and get out, because opposition is when you call out not within Government.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Will the member get to the question, please?

Mr Allister: Yes. I have had to wait a long time, so it is coming, Mr Chairman.

On that theme of dysfunctionality in the Executive, a question pertaining to the many companies in Northern Ireland that are still in the dark about their entitlement to be open and that can practise safe distancing is whether or not such companies can be open. Have the Executive yet got agreed advice for them? We have had the vilification of Ulster Carpets from the deputy First Minister. Can we have united guidance as to whether such companies are entitled to be open? I know that we have the forum, but I know that it is a talking shop. It has been talking for 10 days. Is there a resolution —

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Mr Allister, please resume your seat.

Mr Allister: — on the issue? It is the sort of thing that people need an answer on.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): This has happened twice. I am starting to regret making sure that the smaller parties get in all the time. I think they got your question.

Mrs Foster: Retail businesses and businesses like that are closed. He will have seen those listed in the regulations. There are those businesses that are, of course, essential because they are in the supply chain to health or in the food supply. Those are essential. Then there are those that he mentioned, which are businesses that are still able to function and have an order book and are keeping people employed. Those people must ensure that there is a safe working environment and

that people are social distancing, and, if they cannot socially distance, that they are staggering the number of people on the floor or making sure that they limit the number of people in their canteens. There are a number of things that can be gone through. The Health and Safety Executive very helpfully put out a press release to that effect two Fridays ago.

There are companies that can continue to operate as long as they make sure that they are looking after the safety of their workers, which, the member will agree, is paramount at this particular time.

Mrs O'Neill: I will say to the member that the only advantage that I seek is the advantage of the healthcare workers who need PPE and testing. I have also said that the Executive's number one priority is saving lives. Sin é. That is it. It is about saving lives. That is what we are trying to do here. I think that the member should remind himself of that on a continual basis.

Mr Carroll: The First Minister said that 5.5 million items of PPE have been secured. How long is that expected to last? She also said that the Minister of Finance is to pursue all feasible supply routes, both international and local. Can she shed some light on why requisitioning the production of PPE testing kits and ventilators is not being considered by the Executive so that they can guarantee that demand is met?

The deputy First Minister rightly said that our top priority is saving lives, but, when doctors have repeatedly called for an ECMO machine, without which they estimate they will lose tens of lives, why are the Executive not pushing for that? Why have they decided not to push for that against medical advice? According to her figures, 0.4% of the population have been tested so far. Do you not accept that that is shockingly low? We have no idea of the scale of this crisis because of the lack of testing.

Finally, you said that non-essential businesses should be closed, but, every day, workers contact me to tell me that their bosses are demanding business as usual. What plans do the Executive have to begin shutting down those workplaces or fining such employers?

Mrs Foster: The member comes from a different political philosophy to me, but talk of requisitioning private companies must jar with the greater number of people in the House. We will work in partnership with our private sector companies, of which I am incredibly proud. When I hear that Radox is providing testing kits for the whole of the United Kingdom, I am incredibly proud that an Antrim company is providing that right across the United Kingdom. Therefore, he is wrong about that. People have stepped up to the mark. They are offering their services in a very real and meaningful way, and they will continue to do so.

I will write to the member with the information on PPE, but there are varying limits. We have more than 300,000 FFP3 masks. It was very pleasing to see that number of masks coming in, because they were needed in Northern Ireland. I think that the supply that we have received will last for four weeks. Aprons last for a longer period. I am happy to come back to the member in writing on the times involved. I have already said on the record that we will need to replenish our supply, and I have already said that we will look internationally and locally to make sure that that happens.

Mrs O'Neill: My party colleagues Pat Sheehan and Colm Gildernew, as Chair of the Health Committee, raised the issue of the ECMO ventilator and tabled a question to the Health Minister. It is important that we try to get the right things delivered in this period, and we are continuing to do that. It is one of the issues that we can raise with the Executive tomorrow when we are having this conversation with the Minister. Members should be assured that we are discussing and trying to bring about a resolution on PPE, testing, ventilators, hand sanitisers — whatever we need now; you name it. Progress has been made over recent days and last week, and we need to continue to see that progress developed and built upon.

The member mentioned testing. It is not a secret: we have said that we want to see community testing. That is what is required to bring us through the crisis successfully. I welcome the fact that there has been progress. There is still a way to go, but my job — our job as political leaders in this crisis — is to make sure that we deliver on the things that we know we need. Testing is one of those things.

Ms Sugden: I wish to come back to the support for businesses. The small business rate relief scheme was a crude vehicle on which to support small businesses, and the Executive are now beginning to realise that. I am pleased that they are pursuing options to try to support businesses, such as small manufacturing businesses. Another area, which I am sure they are aware of, relates to businesses

that would be entitled to the scheme under the small business rate relief if their rental space was re-rated. Is there an opportunity, through Land and Property Services, for businesses that exist in properties where, perhaps, rents are being paid for more than one business to get their own portion of that premises re-rated so that they would be eligible for this scheme?

I also want to talk about the supports being administered by the UK Government. I appreciate that the Executive will be limited in what they can do with those, but my point is that the unlikelihood of that money coming in within three months will, unfortunately, mean that businesses will have to fold because they will not have that cash flow. I impress on the First Minister and deputy First Minister the need to use whatever influence they have on local banks to try to support businesses, because right now, they are not supporting them. Recently, Danske put out a statement in which it said it was removing interest rates from overdrafts for personal customers, so there is form. That is what we need for any sort of credit that the businesses have currently, not just the credit that they seek, because a lot of businesses are telling me that they do not want to take on more financial burden, because they do not know if they are going to come out at the end of this. That needs to be looked at now, rather than in three months when we will review this again.

Mrs Foster: Those are issues that I have heard before. Her issue about businesses in a building and not paying rates is one that I have raised. She should write to the Economy Minister to raise that issue again, and to the Finance Minister because he is in charge of rating and everything that goes with that. The whole idea was that it was to go to the business, not the landlord, so I think that it is critical that it goes to the business and not the landlord. Really, the landlord should be passing the benefit on to the business, but we all know that that may not happen. I think that it would be useful if she did write to the Economy Minister about that.

I have to say that I am disappointed to hear the member's experience of banking. That is not what the banks are telling Ministers. They are saying that they want to be flexible and that they want to work with customers and what have you. Sometimes the experience does not exactly fit, so, again, if she has a specific instance, it would be helpful if she wrote to the Economy Minister on that as well.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): That concludes questions on the statement. We shall now have a brief suspension for five minutes to allow for a change of Ministers and a change of members. This meeting will resume in five minutes.