



Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Ministerial Statement: Infrastructure

16 April 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Christopher Stalford (Deputy Chairperson)

Ms Martina Anderson

Ms Kellie Armstrong

Mr Roy Beggs

Mr Cathal Boylan

Mr Keith Buchanan

Mr Robbie Butler

Mr Gerry Carroll

Mr Pat Catney

Mr Mark Durkan

Ms Sinéad Ennis

Mr Paul Frew

Mr David Hilditch

Mr William Humphrey

Ms Liz Kimmens

Ms Nichola Mallon

Miss Michelle McIlveen

Mr Justin McNulty

Mr Andrew Muir

Mr Mike Nesbitt

Mr Matthew O'Toole

Ms Emma Sheerin

Miss Rachel Woods

Witnesses:

Mrs Katrina Godfrey

Department for Infrastructure

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Members are welcome to this meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response. Item 1 is the minutes of the previous meeting, which was held on the 15 April. Members are asked to note the minutes, which the Deputy Chairperson Mr Roy Beggs has agreed. Members should also note that the minutes of evidence from that meeting will be published later today in the Official Report and will be available on the Committee's web page.

Item 2 is a statement from the Minister for Infrastructure. The Speaker's Office received notification on 9 April that the Minister wished to make a statement to the Ad Hoc Committee at today's meeting. A copy of the statement that the Minister intends to deliver is included in members' packs. I welcome the Minister for Infrastructure to the Committee meeting. I also welcome Mrs Katrina Godfrey, permanent secretary of the Department for Infrastructure, who is accompanying the Minister today. I invite the

Minister to make her statement, which, as members know, should be heard without interruption. Following the statement, there will be an opportunity for members to ask questions.

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I am grateful for the opportunity to update the Ad Hoc Committee today.

This is not an easy time for any of us. It is an unimaginable time for all those families who have lost loved ones to COVID-19 and who are denied by the same virus the traditional way of saying goodbye, which we have known and drawn comfort from for generations. I begin today by sending my heartfelt condolences to every one of those families. I know that I speak for all of us in the Chamber when I say that we are with you and that you are in our prayers.

The challenges that we are facing due to coronavirus cannot be underestimated. The words "crisis", "emergency" and "pandemic" are now everyday language, but this is not everyday life. While we are dealing with the chaos, the pain and the suffering, we must also be strong and have hope that this extraordinarily difficult time will not last forever.

I am proud to stand here as a citizen of this place. Thanks to the efforts made and the leadership shown across our community, we have seen positive signs that our health service is coping and that social-distancing measures are working. We cannot be complacent, however. As my colleague the Minister of Health has continued to stress, we must — all of us — continue to play our part, because each of our individual actions will determine the future for our community. It is a huge responsibility, and one that I know that the people of Northern Ireland are prepared to bear.

I wish to update members on my actions to deliver on my responsibilities as your Minister for Infrastructure. I am clear that addressing the unique challenges presented by coronavirus requires us all to work together towards the common goals of protecting the health and well-being of our healthcare workers and citizens and, crucially, of saving lives.

I welcome the opportunity to provide an update to members on the ways in which my Department is contributing to the fightback against COVID-19. I will set out clearly for members how I am doing all that I can within my remit and powers, and also by working collaboratively to support Executive colleagues, especially the Minister of Health, in our collective endeavour to support our NHS and to save lives.

I am sure that members will agree that there are few services more critical to our health and well-being than the availability of clean drinking water and the ability to treat our waste water effectively. Throughout the crisis, Northern Ireland Water has worked tirelessly to ensure that those services continue. That has involved prioritising essential work and changing work practices to ensure that social-distancing rules are adhered to. I know that keeping staff and customers safe has been a key focus of Northern Ireland Water. Northern Ireland Water's front-line workers are undertaking essential maintenance and repair work to make sure that our water keeps flowing and our drains do not get blocked. I encourage the public to show them support. They deserve our respect and our thanks.

Northern Ireland Water is also doing what it can to support its customers. I am pleased to be able to announce that Northern Ireland Water will not implement the increase in tariffs planned for April and will hold off on this until October at the earliest. The company will also defer issuing bills until July at the earliest. This will create a short-term cash flow problem for Northern Ireland Water, but I am putting arrangements in place to resolve this within my current budget cover.

More concerning, however, is the very sudden loss of income from the non-domestic sector as a result of this crisis, which will not be recovered. This is creating a serious gap in Northern Ireland Water's operating budget that must be met. I have already raised this matter with the Minister of Finance and Executive colleagues and will continue to work with them to find a resolution that manages this risk, protecting this vital service and protecting our communities from COVID-19.

I turn now to the issue of connectivity. The need for connectivity at a time when we are separated has never been greater. Now, more than ever, it is so very important that we continue to manage and maintain our transport network. We must ensure that emergency services can be kept moving and that key workers, including healthcare staff, equipment and supplies can travel safely or be transported to where the need is greatest.

Our ports and airports, the key gateways into the North, are struggling during this crisis to maintain air and sea connectivity. The ban on non-essential travel, which is needed to fight this pandemic, means

that passenger numbers have plummeted. In addition, as non-essential businesses close, the downturn in manufacturing production has also had a significant impact on our hauliers and ferry operators. These sectors are interconnected. We rely on our ports, ferry companies, hauliers and airports to ensure that supply chains are maintained. If we fail to maintain resilience in those supply chains, it will impact each and every one of us, and it could impact our ability to restore our economy when the health emergency recedes.

I assure members that I am doing everything that I can to ensure that our ports, ferry companies, hauliers and airports receive the support that they need so that they can continue to provide the connectivity and the critical supply chains that we need, especially between here and GB.

As well as working on a cross-departmental basis, in particular with the Economy and Agriculture Ministers, I have been engaging with my counterparts in Wales and Scotland, with the result that we have been able to set out a clear and compelling and shared case to the Secretary of State for Transport for intervention to support supply chains. I am also continuing to engage with my counterpart in the South, as we need to maintain the critical supply of food and, in particular, oxygen through Dublin port.

As well as focusing on ferry links, we are very much focusing on the needs of our hauliers so that they can stay in operation and are able to maintain the supply of critical goods for us and ensure that essential trade from here to GB and from Dublin to the North can continue. As I have said several times, information sharing and cooperation across these islands is key in the fight against COVID-19.

In addition, members will be aware of changes that I have made to the requirements relating to drivers' hours to secure and maintain deliveries and movement of all important goods that people in our communities, in particular vulnerable people, need at this time. This temporary relaxation of the rules reflects the current exceptional circumstances that we find ourselves in, and it must only be used where necessary. I will continue to keep the position under constant review and will ensure that measures are taken to extend the relaxation further if required, while making sure that the balance is maintained between relaxation and road safety as we protect our community at this difficult time.

Our public transport network continues to play a key role in facilitating essential travel, including for many in our health and social care sector at this difficult time. It is for that reason that the public transport network continues to operate, albeit in a reduced capacity. Translink has introduced working practices to ensure that all staff who attend work can follow social-distancing guidelines. Gloves and hand sanitisers are being provided to all front-line staff and protective screens have been fitted to all buses in use. All staff carrying out cleaning duties are trained to follow a safe system of work, and I am assured that they are given the correct personal protective equipment (PPE).

As a small token of our appreciation for the life-saving work that our healthcare colleagues are delivering, I have introduced free public transport for health workers during the COVID-19 outbreak. Translink continues to engage with all the health and social care trusts by offering assistance for any transport-related services, including passenger transport or delivery services. This has been well received by all the trusts and is providing important support to our workers while they face unprecedented pressures.

In relation to ensuring connectivity across the region for key workers and goods, I have supported the Rathlin ferry operator and the local community on Rathlin to ensure that essential goods, services and support continues to be provided to the island.

Community transport operators have also been contributing to wider efforts to support the vulnerable. I have been heartened to see how community transport operators have transitioned their services to assist with the delivery of prepaid groceries, prescriptions, food parcels or fulfilling essential journeys, and I am pleased that, with the support of Minister Poots, I have been able to support them in doing that.

The outbreak of COVID-19 has caused significant challenges and changes to a wide range of businesses, and the taxi industry is no exception. The regulations introduced by the Health Minister allow taxis to continue to operate but they do so in a context where only essential travel is permitted, and I know that taxi drivers are facing real challenges. My announcement last week provides for the automatic renewal, without prior testing, of taxi vehicle licences that were due to expire during the current emergency. That will ensure that those vehicles can remain on the road during this period. It is a temporary measure to reflect the exceptionally challenging times of this current pandemic.

My officials are also working urgently with officials in the Department for Transport to find a quick solution to licences that require medical assessment. As soon as I am in a position to update members and affected drivers, I can reassure you that I will immediately do so.

At the same time, I have been encouraging other ministerial colleagues to respond to the needs of taxi drivers and operators with clear health and safety guidance on keeping drivers and customers safe, and to explore opportunities for the sector to repurpose its services to play a wider role in supporting those who are being shielded or who are vulnerable. I will continue to work with Ministers to ensure that we do all that we can as an Executive to assist taxi drivers, who are a key part of our transport network and should be supported at this time.

The need to avoid non-essential travel and maintain social distancing, in line with Government advice, has also made it necessary for me, and all other Ministers, to prioritise services and determine which departmental functions should be significantly reduced or stopped during this emergency period. In determining which services to prioritise, I have reflected the need to stop the spread of the virus and save lives and the need to support those working to keep us safe and keep our critical supply chains open and to protect livelihoods. A further consideration is to ensure that we keep a focus on the work needed to avoid unnecessary problems or difficulties that could divert the emergency services or disrupt necessary travel, while maintaining support for the most vulnerable in our communities.

In common with other Departments, my Department is ensuring that staff who can work from home are not required to be in the workplace. Where a job can be done from home, my senior team has made it clear that staff are expected to work from home, and I am pleased to report that that is happening.

We have also moved a number of our services online, including the DVA's driver licensing renewal service. There are, however, some services that people rely on and that simply cannot be delivered from home, including essential works on our transport, water and sewerage infrastructure. Where staff have to come into the workplace or onto a site to perform an essential role, all necessary steps are being taken to protect them. That includes ensuring that there is adequate social distancing and that appropriate personal protection equipment is made available and used in line with the relevant guidance.

In order to protect staff and to enable my Department to focus resources on responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, a number of departmental functions and services that could not be considered essential have been stopped or significantly reduced. I have suspended parking charges for DFI-operated on-street parking and parking enforcement, with a small team retained to respond to illegal parking that is unsafe or blocking access to or for emergency or essential services, and driver and vehicle testing for all but emergency or essential services has also been temporarily suspended. Reducing or stopping those services has meant that we can refocus some of our efforts to support our health trusts in the fight against COVID-19. I assure members, however, that I understand the inconvenience that that presents and that this situation is being kept under regular review in line with public health advice.

Turning to planning, I will highlight some of the steps that I have taken to ensure that our regional planning system continues to function effectively. Thus far, I have issued letters to councils urging a relaxed and positive approach to enforcement, specifically on essential deliveries and pubs, restaurants and cafes that are providing takeaway services during this emergency period.

My officials have also provided information and advice to all 11 councils on the ongoing operation of the planning system through this time. We in my Department will continue to play our part by progressing the statutory casework that we handle, including notified and called-in planning applications, and by discharging our responsibilities on councils' development plans.

I also hope shortly to bring forward a legislative amendment to the Assembly that, subject to Members' agreement, would temporarily remove the requirement to hold a public event as part of the pre-application community consultation for major planning applications. To support that, I propose to issue guidance for applicants and councils on appropriate replacement measures to ensure that public participation in the process is not compromised.

I am also aware that the operation of council planning committees has been impacted. My officials have moved quickly to approve amended schemes of delegation to reduce the number of applications that would be required to go before planning committees. They have also been liaising with officials in the Department for Communities who are working to prepare regulations concerning the meetings of councils that would, if agreed, enable committees to operate effectively during this time.

I assure members that, in planning and right across my Department's functions, we will continue to work closely with other jurisdictions, councils and planning stakeholders to explore the obstacles and the temporary solutions that are needed to get us through this period.

Throughout this period, I have maintained a focus not only on the responsibilities of my own Department, but on how it can make its skills and resources available to support others, particularly those in our health service. Through the use of DVA vehicle test centres in Belfast and Newtownards to date, I am proud to have been able to support the Health Minister in helping to rapidly increase testing to help save lives.

My Department has also provided storage space at depots in Dungannon and Craigavon for use as required by the Southern Health and Social Care Trust. That has freed up much-needed space in Craigavon Area Hospital and has provided a local, secure and accessible facility for the daily transfer of supplies. A further approach for storage space in the greater Belfast area has been received from our health service colleagues, and we will do whatever we possibly can to assist in meeting their needs. I have provided access to free parking at Crumlin Road Gaol for healthcare workers who are based at the Mater Hospital, and, from last Friday, I also opened up access to the site at the gaol for the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust to facilitate decontamination of ambulances and disposal of contaminated PPE material.

I want to put on record my appreciation to all the staff in my Department. From the beginning of this crisis, they have worked tirelessly to find solutions to the new challenges that this virus continually presents. We are all in this together and, in my Department, we will continue to do all that we can to support the work of Minister Swann and our healthcare heroes as they put their lives on the line to save ours.

In closing, there is no doubt that these are incredibly challenging times. Sadly, it is likely that, in the days ahead, it will get even more difficult. However, we must continue to work together and support each other to ensure that we continue to deliver for all of those who rely on our public services. Together we can get through this, and never before has the message been so clear to the people of Northern Ireland to stick together while staying apart. My message to everyone at home is that all of us can and must play our part. The advice is clear: stay at home to save lives. By looking out for each other, we will get through this, we will recover from it and we will be stronger as one community for it.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): I thank the Minister for her statement. There are a few housekeeping rules, members. I will allow around an hour for questions to the Minister. As this is a Committee meeting and not a plenary meeting of the Northern Ireland Assembly, it is appropriate for the Minister, if she wishes, to seek answers from the permanent secretary as well as providing answers herself. There are 21 members listed to ask a question. Therefore, it is very important that members ask a single, focused question that relates to the Minister's statement. The one exception that will be made is for the Chairperson of the Committee, whom I now call.

Miss McIlveen (Committee Chair - Committee for Infrastructure): I welcome the Minister's statement and congratulate her, the Department, Translink and Northern Ireland Water for stepping up and doing all that they can during this difficult time. I also want to place on record my condolences to the families who have lost loved ones and to pay tribute to the key workers who continue to serve our community.

In regard to the haulage sector, the Minister refers to connectivity and protecting critical supply chains. Is she satisfied that everything that can be done is being done to increase the maximum permitted authorised weights for vehicles, and, most importantly, is she working with others to provide the urgent financial support that hauliers require to ensure the continuity of our medical and food supplies?

I will turn to planning. I appreciate that the Minister has outlined some of the things that she plans to do. Does she intend to introduce measures to extend planning permissions that are approaching the expiry of the time limit for development, similar to the provisions in schedule 7(8) of the Coronavirus (Scotland) Act, which provides for permissions that are due to expire within six months to be automatically extended by 12 months?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Chair for her questions. In terms of the hauliers' situation, the member will be aware that we have brought forward a number of relaxations on enforcement of drivers' hours. We have also extended MOTs for lorries and relaxed rules around deliveries of stores to try to assist. The

one area that we are still exploring is the one that she highlighted about weight. We are actively considering that and working with the sector on it.

In terms of the package, the member is absolutely right. Our hauliers are critical in ensuring that we have a secure supply of food, medicines, PPE and other vital supplies. I have been in very regular contact with the Department for Transport in England. We have fed very closely into Northern Ireland's business case for a financial package for our ferry operators and hauliers, and we are hopeful that that is being actively considered by Treasury at the moment. We are hopeful that they will recognise the critical impact that it will have here. I assure the member that I will continue to make representations to Ministers in England and continue to work with my colleagues in Scotland and Wales and in the South, because the member may be aware that we are wholly reliant on Dublin port for our access to oxygen. While we are not in a position to know when a package will be announced, I am very hopeful that we will get there very soon. We have pressed on the Department for Transport and on Treasury that time is of the essence and that we need intervention urgently.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Minister for her statement and I welcome the measures that she has introduced to date. I want to take her back to the issue of taxis. She mentioned medical assessment, but there is also the issue of periodic training and the certificate of professional competence (CPC). Obviously, the taxi industry is very anxious at the minute because people are waiting to renew their licence. Will she give a commitment to resolve this matter as soon as possible and will she agree that the taxi industry needs a cash injection as well?

Ms Mallon: I thank the member for his question. As the member will know, we had to bring in new legislation to extend the PSV provisions. It took longer than I would have liked, but it was a much more complex issue than just issuing temporary exemption certificates (TECs).

The issue of medical assessments is presenting a particular problem because, rightly, our healthcare workers and GPs are very much focused on the fightback against COVID-19. I assure members that we are working urgently to try to find a solution to that problem. I recognise that it is a difficulty, and, if legislative change is required here, I will do it. I am very much focused on finding a solution.

The member asked about training. As he will know, 35 hours of training are required over a five-year period. A number of the trainers have developed online versions of the training and I encourage drivers to take that up. The member may also be aware that DVA made an announcement that it is content that no enforcement action will be taken against drivers whose CPC expires between 1 March 2020 and 30 September 2020. I also anticipate that that is likely to have to be reviewed again in due course given that so many elements of the training and licensing process have been impacted as a result of this crisis. I assure you on that front.

There is no doubt that the taxi industry has been hit hard by this. I have been working with Executive colleagues and we pushed the UK Government for a financial package for the self-employed, but there are flaws with that in terms of the time it takes to access it. I am also very cognisant of the fact that there are a number of drivers who cannot avail themselves of that. The Ministers who take the lead on financial support for those whose livelihoods have been hit are the Minister of Finance, the Minister for the Economy and the Minister for Communities. I assure members that I have been raising this issue with them. They are aware of it and are keen to explore the options.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her statement, for the leadership that she has shown throughout this very difficult period and for the many actions that her Department has taken. The fact that it has done so much is reflected in the length of her statement.

I will take the Minister back to taxis. Mr Boylan raised the issue. Taxi drivers have undoubtedly been hit hard by this crisis. There is an obvious lack of fares and, to many drivers, there also seems to be a lack of fairness. Taxis have always been a valuable service but now, in many instances, they are literally a lifeline. The Minister referred to her officials working with the Department for Communities, which I understand takes the lead on redeployment. She also quite rightly pointed out that the Department for the Economy has a role. Will the Minister provide us with an update on what work the Executive as a whole are doing to support the taxi industry at this time?

Ms Mallon: I thank the member for his question. I was conscious of the length of the statement and I assure the member that we had to take a number of action points out because officials in my Department have worked so hard. They have worked so hard with officials in DAERA, the Department of Finance, the Department for Communities and officials right across the Executive. On the issue of

taxis, yes, I am responsible for the regulatory side of things, and I laid out in the statement a number of actions that we have taken to resolve issues. There are still some other issues, and we are working to resolve those. The issue of financial assistance falls to Executive colleagues, and I know that they are looking at the matter. I have written to them, and they have responded. Collectively, the Executive, are very conscious of the financial difficulties facing the taxi industry.

I have always thought, from the beginning of the crisis, when we started to see the scale it, that the real solution for both the taxi industry and the most vulnerable in our society is around the repurposing of the taxi industry: redeployment so that they can deliver pre-paid groceries — we know that that is a problem for supermarkets — or medicines from community pharmacies and so forth. I still firmly believe that there are huge opportunities in that area, and I know that the Minister for Communities is exploring options with local government to see what we can do there. I have made the commitment that my officials are keen to work. There are no regulatory barriers to redeployment, so it is something that I will continue to work on with Executive colleagues and local government to try to progress.

Given the severity of the situation and the fact that taxis have been listed as an essential service under the regulations and that the public are being told not to engage in travel unless it is essential, the taxi industry, by its very nature, will have to adapt during this period. Be assured that I am doing what I can on the regulatory side but am also working proactively with ministerial colleagues who have responsibilities in other areas so that we can provide the support that the taxi industry needs and deserves at this really difficult time.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for her statement and for keeping the Assembly up to date on relevant issues. Minister, you referred in your statement to last week's decision to enable taxi vehicle licences to be renewed automatically without prior testing. Prior to that, MOTs were given extensions as a result of COVID-19 and, indeed, as a result of faulty lifts earlier in the year. Some of those MOT extensions are coming to an end. Can you assure those drivers that they, too, will be given renewals so that they can keep their vehicles on the road? That will apply to many key workers.

Ms Mallon: I can give the member that assurance. My Department has done considerable work to ensure that we are in a position where, if the need arises for further temporary exemption certificates to be issued to motorists, that will be the case. It is important to say that the trigger for that remains that the customer has to book the MOT appointment, which will automatically trigger the TEC, if a secondary TEC is required. I make the point that we have to encourage people to make that booking in the first place.

The member will know that, as a result of this crisis, the Department moved to issue temporary exemption certificates to four-year-old vehicles. That was not the case previously. The other outstanding issue concerned taxi drivers and the PSV, and we have now resolved that. We are conscious that, as time goes on, certain customers will have to see a further extension of their TEC, and we are putting all the necessary arrangements in place.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for her statement, and I echo the words of other members in passing condolences to those who have lost loved ones as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. The terrible human impact on everyone is something that we need to keep in our minds.

I really appreciate the update you have provided, Minister, in relation to logistics. That is a key issue. There are logistics companies in my constituency that have built up their business over many years and family generations and now face financial ruin, so it is really important that support is given, particularly by the Department for Transport. We look forward to an update on that, and I appreciate the work that you are doing on it.

My question is about Translink, and I declare for the record that I was previously an employee of Translink. It has been reported that Translink will potentially need £100 million to continue. The fares revenue of the company has plummeted and is now very low, although services are still operating. I am really grateful to the staff for continuing to operate those services, but the patronage has gone down. What are the plans in the short and medium terms to safeguard the future of Translink as a public transport operator in Northern Ireland?

Ms Mallon: I thank the member for raising that issue. It is very important. As you point out, Translink already had financial difficulties from having to dip into its reserves over a number of years. That has been profoundly escalated as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. We have seen a dramatic reduction of 90% to 95% in passengers across bus and rail that has brought with it a dramatic reduction in income.

You are absolutely right: the financial pressures and the hole that is emerging in Translink are deeply worrying.

Members will also know that the Finance Minister announced a COVID-19 budget. There was no allocation to DFI in that, but money has been held in the centre, and I have received assurances from the Finance Minister that money will be forthcoming in recognition of the very difficult financial situation that Translink finds itself in as a result of the pandemic. The fundamental question, though, for all of us in this is this: do we as an Executive and as an Assembly believe in having a publicly owned public transport network? That is the fundamental question that we will have to address, and it is recognition of the fact that our public transport network is essential at this moment in time in transporting our key workers and our healthcare workers to and from work. It will be essential in our economic recovery, and it is, of course, essential in the other global crisis that we all face: the climate emergency. I welcome the assurances from the Finance Minister that there will be further allocations in the COVID-19 budget, and I think that Translink is a compelling case for that. I believe that that is, rightly, recognised by all Executive colleagues.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for her statement. There is some great work going on in transportation and in infrastructure.

Minister, you pointed out in your statement the importance of various networks of connectivity and transport at this time. What guidance and discussions have there been for companies that would assist the roads section of the Department in maintaining the road network at this time, particularly on the essential road maintenance programme?

Ms Mallon: Our officials are in close contact with those who have contracts for that work. Obviously, we have responsibility for our staff, and we have been clear that, where work is not deemed to be essential, it should not take place. Where it is deemed to be essential and has to be on-site, social distancing guidance must be adhered to and PPE must be given to our staff because their safety is paramount. We are also working with contractors who can assure us that they can apply all that guidance and have those supports and protections for their workers. Others say that they are struggling and finding it difficult to do that, and we are working with them as closely as we can, because, above everything else, the safety of workers and of the public is absolutely paramount. There is nothing that comes before it.

Ms Anderson: I thank the Minister for her statement. I commend the front-line workers in your Department who are supplying us with clean, safe drinking water and making sure that the sewerage systems operate and those in Translink who transport the essential workers. I want to mark that down as well.

I was contacted a few weeks ago by workers who were concerned about PPE in relation to your Department, so I acknowledge what you have said today about ensuring that that is all now in place. Have you been in touch with the trade unions to make sure that those workers are comfortable and confident with the protections that are in place and feel reassured that, with the PPE that is now in place, the protection will continue into the future as we live through this awful pandemic?

Ms Mallon: I thank the member for her kind comments about our front-line staff. They are doing tremendous work. It might sound glib, but it is true that not all heroes wear capes, so I thank her for her recognition of that.

Yes, I have been engaging with the unions; in fact, I have a teleconference, I think, with NIPSA on Friday — you lose track of days in the middle of all this — to talk about these issues just to give reassurances. I want to add to the tribute that you paid to our front-line workers. I do not want to single out any group, because, in my Department, there are so many people doing tremendous work, but I think of our Translink workers, who are going out to their daily work to transport our essential key workers. Over and beyond that, they have redeployed their services across our health trusts so that they can transport staff to and from hospital sites. They are giving over car parking free to health workers who work in hospitals and have to stay in hotels at night. Members of Unite, the union for Translink workers, have been donating money out of their own pockets so that they can provide toiletries to our healthcare workers who have to stay overnight in hotels and other places. That feeds into a wider analysis and into a wider discussion that we should have as an Assembly about reorientating our understanding of the value that we place on our workers across society and re-evaluating the fact that the essential workers who are seeing us through the pandemic are often the lowest paid. When we get through this and as we are getting through this, there is a discussion that

we need to have as an Assembly about the types of public services that we want, the type of economy that we want and the type of society that we want.

Mr K Buchanan: The Minister referred in her statement to staff working from home etc. Are many people in your Department suffering from the virus or illness? Has homeworking been taken up?

Ms Mallon: I am not aware that we have. We have numbers who are self-isolating, and I will maybe pass your question over to the permanent secretary. We are seeing a very good uptake of homeworking. There are challenges around IT equipment — I do not think that any of us ever thought that we would be in this situation and in it so quickly — but we are trying to meet the challenges by trying to make sure that our staff at home have the essential IT equipment to do their job.

My view on this is simple: if you have to come to work but cannot carry out your work safely, the work should not be carried out until we can make sure that safety mechanisms and protections are in place. If you can work from home, we have to do absolutely everything that we can to ensure that you are able to work from home.

I will now pass over to the permanent secretary to speak about staffing figures.

Mrs Katrina Godfrey (Department for Infrastructure): To reassure the member, I can say that, like everybody else, we have staff in a number of categories. We have staff who are vulnerable and absolutely must stay at home. We have had, sadly, instances of staff who have been quite gravely ill and have been hospitalised, but the latest information is that they are making full and good recoveries. We have a fairly significant number of staff who are required to self-isolate because of symptoms in other family members. We are managing all of that. We are managing it with huge goodwill and support and with a commitment to public service from the 3,000 men and women who make up the Department. Like everybody else, we are finding new ways of working that, I suspect, we will not lose completely when we come out the other end of this.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for her statement. It was very good. I echo the comments made about all front-line workers. There is such a broad range of people among us out providing a key service.

I welcome the decision to defer water bills. The Minister will know that it is an issue that I have been raising. I am pleased to hear that, because it is important to support local businesses at a time when they are struggling, through no fault of their own, to make a lot of payments. It is good news. I just want to ask whether the deferment of water bills will also apply to those who have received a bill after COVID-19 started. If anyone has outstanding bills since the beginning of this, will theirs also be deferred?

Ms Mallon: May I check that and come back to the member to make sure that I give her an absolutely accurate answer?

Ms Kimmins: Thank you.

Mr Catney: I thank you, Minister, for your statement. I also pass on my condolences to all those who find themselves bereaved at this time because of COVID-19. It is a difficult time. There is not a chance for them to grieve properly. I thank the Minister for her kind words.

The Minister has done tremendous work, acting quickly and efficiently to deploy what resources her Department has to support citizens and industry. As well as the COVID-19 effort, in particular I welcome the offer of MOT centres for testing and as a site for ambulance cleansing. Can the Minister provide an update on what other resources have been made available and say whether Executive colleagues have taken on providing similar support to the Department of Health?

Ms Mallon: I thank the member for his question and for his kind words. In truth, I want to pay tribute to the Health staff and the staff in my Department who have worked so closely to ensure the transformation that we have seen of two of our MOT centres — Belfast and Newtownards — into much-needed COVID-19 testing centres. In fact, I was out this morning. I visited the Newtownards COVID testing centre with Minister Swann. It was amazing to see it in action; to see our front-line healthcare workers, who have been redeployed from other Departments, and the number of people who are going through. The MOT model and the COVID testing model are a perfect match for each

other. We are hopeful that others will come online. I have offered all of the MOT centres right across the North to the trusts because that is important if we are to rapidly increase testing.

All of us in the Executive recognise that this is primarily a health crisis. If we are to get through it, we absolutely have to work together. Our primary concern should be that we do everything that we can individually, within our Departments and across Departments, to support our healthcare workers. Also, we are mindful that it is an economic crisis and we are working together to ensure that we get through this by working and planning together to make sure that we recover from it in the best possible way that we can.

Mr Nesbitt: I begin by echoing the sentiments expressed by Mr Durkan in terms of the leadership being shown by the Minister, not just her actions. In fact, not just her words. The tone that she has deployed in her public comments has been very important: assured and reassuring.

My question is with regard to the impact on budget lines, because the whole Executive are now taking actions that were unplanned and probably unprecedented in their scale. Mr Muir mentioned a figure for Translink, which the Minister neither confirmed nor denied. It would be useful to know what the impact is and how you think that may play into the debate, which you mentioned will follow the crisis, about what sort of public transport system we want in the future.

Ms Mallon: I thank the member for his very kind words. There is no doubt that the financial impact of COVID-19 on the Department for Infrastructure is hugely significant. At present, we are looking at a potential figure of £178 million. As Mr Muir pointed out, Translink has gone public on this. We are talking of an impact of over £100 million on Translink.

At this moment in time, none of us know the certainty about the duration of this crisis. As a Department, we are working through modelling the financial impact on Northern Ireland Water. In my statement I touched on the dramatic loss in income there, in Translink and in DVA because of the measures that we have had to take. We also have to be mindful that this comes against a backdrop in which the Department for Infrastructure, for historical reasons that I do not think it is appropriate to go into right now, was already in a difficult financial position.

I will not dress it up; I will be honest about that. There are huge challenges across all Departments. The COVID-19 budget allocations have not all been fully met and my Department is the one that is waiting. It is really important that we work together and recognise the critical importance of our waste water infrastructure and a publicly owned transport network. We should not dress it up. We are facing huge financial challenges. While we welcome interventions that might come from the UK Government, and we are reassured that more will be coming, it will never be enough. We are going to have to reorientate how we look at and finance our public services, and that debate needs to take place.

Mr Frew: I agree with the Minister and I would welcome that debate on how our public utilities are factored in and how they could invest in the infrastructure.

I thank the Minister for last week stepping in on a constituent's case about an MOT. That was greatly appreciated by me and that constituent. However, such cases seem to be a trend because I received a number yesterday and today on the same issue: when people go to fulfil their test, the MOT centres are closed and those people are not getting any documentation, either before turning up or after, with regard to an exemption certificate. I also heard today that the email system may have crashed or jammed, which means that they cannot contact the MOT centres and the organisation behind them. Can the Minister shed some light on that and investigate it after this meeting?

Ms Mallon: Yes. The member raises an important issue. I am aware of it because of contact from members and also from contact with members of the public. That is why, at the weekend, I put up a post to explain the situation with TECs and to make it straightforward. It is a cumbersome process because of the lack of automation. It is difficult trying to communicate to people that they need to book a test for a centre that is closed to be able to get a temporary exemption certificate. Given the volume of work and the impact of social distancing and working from home on our staff, it is taking much longer than we would like for hard copies of certificates to reach people's homes. There is also a bit of a delay in updating the website to enable people to check their registration to see if a TEC has issued. I know that causes concern and that people are then afraid to drive. I assure members and members of the public that, if you book your MOT test, you will automatically be issued with a temporary exemption certificate in our system.

The email system has not crashed. I wrote the email address down because I suspected that some members might ask about this. It is dva.customerservices@infrastructure-ni.gov.uk. That is the central point of contact. We checked today before I came here and I am advised that there is no backlog in that email address. The member might be referring to the fact that, over the Easter weekend, the DVA website crashed. I became aware of that and we have asked Capita for a full explanation as to how that happened. It seemed to be resolved very quickly, but it caused confusion among members of the public. We are taking steps to make sure that we do everything we can to prevent that from happening again because, now more than ever, customers are reliant on communicating with us online.

Ms Ennis: I thank the Minister and the permanent secretary for being here today. I concur with the sentiments of colleagues across the Chamber about planning. Minister, your Department needs to issue guidance to councils on that issue sooner rather than later because it is a costly and stressful exercise and applicants need reassurance.

The measure on the relaxation of drivers' hours was taken to secure the supply lines, and I understand and appreciate the reasons for that. Our drivers are on the front line making sure that our shops are stocked and that we have access to supplies. Has the Minister been engaging with the drivers and their representatives? They are under a lot of pressure at this time. Can the Minister give us assurances that they are being supported to the best of her ability?

Ms Mallon: I thank the member. My chief planner has written to all councils and is engaging with them, but if a council feels that it is not getting sufficient support from the Department, please come to me with that information and we will look at it. There must be some breakdown in communication, because I know my planning team has been very active on that front.

On the issue of lorry drivers and so forth, yes, I have been engaging with the representative bodies. We had a very successful and productive teleconference in which they were able to discuss a number of issues. It has been a very productive working partnership. The industry and its representatives have been very quick in coming to us to identify difficulties and in coming forward with suggested solutions. They have also been working with my officials very positively and proactively to resolve issues. I want to put that on record.

For me, part of this experience is about learning, and it has reinforced to me the need to do government with people, to be informed by representatives and to have a more dynamic approach to finding solutions. Engagement with the representatives of the hauliers, with the industry and with lorry drivers has been very insightful for me, and we have made a lot of progress by taking that approach. I want to maintain that approach going forward.

Ms Armstrong: I thank the Minister. I love talking about infrastructure, so I am a happy girl today. I thank you and your team. A heck of a lot of hard work has been going on through your Department. People may not see that Infrastructure has a key role in this pandemic, but it absolutely does. I also take the opportunity to pay tribute to my former colleagues in community transport who, when the tough times come along, certainly come out and represent. To get back to my question: a bit like my colleague Mike Nesbitt MLA in Strangford, I am concerned about the future of your Department. While it is working extremely hard now, filling gaps and providing a vital service, I am very concerned that, often, Infrastructure is the poor relation when it comes to funding, and, although you have a huge budget, it tends to be last on the list when key moneys are being allocated. The last thing that I want to see is Northern Ireland Water failing to meet its standards. My colleague Mr Andrew Muir MLA asked about Translink. Translink is our one public transport provider. Unlike the rest of the UK, we have one public service provider. They do not cherry-pick.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Can I ask, Ms Armstrong, that you get to the question, please?

Ms Armstrong: Sorry. I will.

Northern Ireland Water is in the same boat. Both organisations need money, and we know that we have a Budget coming forward. What work will you be able to do to consult to maybe bring forward the integrated public transport strategy and the future of Northern Ireland Water so that neither fails?

Ms Mallon: I thank the member for her comments and her question. I will take the community transport operators first. I have been amazed and uplifted by the way in which the community transport sector has stepped up, has so quickly repurposed its services and is playing a critical role by

making sure that food and medicines are going to people who are shielding and who are vulnerable. It is true community spirit in action, and I would not expect anything less from community transport. I am genuinely very heartened by it.

I also welcome the member's comments about infrastructure. I have made those comments since I took up the portfolio. It is often seen as bricks and mortar, cement and roads. Infrastructure is actually about connecting each of us to critical services and to each other. It is the bedrock upon which you build a strong economy and a connected society and how you tackle the climate emergency.

I have tried, since I took up the portfolio, to communicate it in that way and to make people see, as I did when I took up the post, how it clearly impacts on every aspect of our daily lives. From the moment that you get up in the morning and turn on your water tap to how you get to and from school or work, to whether homes are built in your area and whether factories and other employment opportunities can be progressed, it all comes down to infrastructure. I have become very passionate about it, much more passionate than I was before, and I put my hand up to that because I now realise how critical it is to each of us and our future.

Like you, I share serious concerns about the financial situation facing my Department. I had serious financial concerns prior to COVID-19, and those have dramatically escalated as a result. The first thing that the Executive and the Assembly have to do is recognise and accept the value and importance of infrastructure and what it can do to transform lives, and then we need to work together to see how we finance that. That will require having difficult conversations, but I am up for having difficult conversations. It is something that I think and hope will not fall along party lines — maybe I am being too optimistic. There are difficult issues that we must grapple with because we are talking about the essential supply of clean drinking water, the effective treatment of waste water and other public services. These things go to the very heart of our society. So, it is a conversation that I want to have with my Executive colleagues and others, and I think that we can agree on an approach to it.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for her statement. I very much welcome the Minister's collaborative approach, working across government. I have no time for politicians playing politics with these issues at this time; it is simply unacceptable when people face such a threat.

The Minister referred to front-line staff. I equally commend front-line staff in the Department for Infrastructure. As she said, they deserve our respect. As regards potential threats and intimidation of staff, what steps have the Minister and her Department taken to protect those members of staff? Can I also ask, in relation to part of the question that my colleague from Strangford, the Chair of the Infrastructure Committee, asked earlier about planning, whether the Minister intends to introduce extended planning measures similar to those introduced in Scotland?

Ms Mallon: I thank the member. There is, sadly, a problem with our front-line essential workers being subjected to abuse from others who cannot understand why they are at work. It is something that I have discussed with others. I tried to be very public in saying that we need to value, to say "Thank you" to and to appreciate our front-line workers, and I know that Executive colleagues have been doing the same. It is very important that we reinforce the message that those who are out on our roads working are doing so because they are providing essential services to all of us, and I encourage all members to help in getting that message out there.

There is no excuse for intimidation. It should not be tolerated. When you think about the fact that these people are going out and are putting themselves at risk to keep essential services running for you and me, you see that it is even more deplorable. I have to say, however, in saying that, that it is at times like this that we can see the true face of our society, and while we have a small number who may be engaged in that type of behaviour, the vast majority of people have stepped up, are working to help each other and are working together to get through this.

I apologise to Miss McIlveen, because I omitted to answer her question, so thank you for giving me a second opportunity to do so. I am aware that this is an issue, and I am aware that legislation has been introduced in Scotland. It will require primary legislation here, so we are exploring that as an option. The difficulty is that if applicants have planning permission that is imminently going to expire, the legislative option is not going to be a solution for them. One route is renewal, and, granted, they have to pay a fee for that, but that has been significantly reduced to the new fee, and we have been engaging with councils to say that, if that is the case, they should please process applications as quickly as possible. The other route is the commencement of works, but, again, it is not a straightforward situation. There is case law about what will be accepted, so there is no straightforward

answer yet. However, to assure you, we are looking at a legislative option, but it just would not be a timely option, and that will not help the people who find themselves in this situation.

Ms Sheerin: I thank the Minister for her statement and echo the comments of colleagues across the Chamber in honouring the front-line workers and extending sympathies to anybody who has lost a loved one during or because of this crisis.

You would not know it today, but, for almost the entirety of this crisis, we have had a spate of good weather across the North, and that has meant that people who are furloughed or working from home have been taking the opportunity to exercise outdoors near their home. I know that the rural roads in my locality have never seen as many cyclists, walkers or runners, and, obviously, everybody is practising social distancing. Meanwhile, roads are seeing less car traffic, which leaves us in the situation where the few motorists who are still travelling might take the opportunity to speed in areas where they normally would not, which compromises road safety for all. Some measures that have been proposed to mitigate that risk include a temporary reduction of the speed limit as well as public awareness campaigns. In other countries, extra bike lanes have been put in place to allow increased space and safety for cyclists making essential journeys —.

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

Ms Sheerin: I am getting there. Is the Minister considering any initiatives to improve road safety and potentially alleviate the pressure on an already stretched health service during this coronavirus outbreak?

Ms Mallon: I thank the member for her question. The Department has engaged in communications strategy for a lot of this: road safety messages as well as social-distancing messages to those who are out walking and cycling. I have been giving consideration to changing speed limits, but we have to be mindful that we have to get to the other side of this, and I do not want to add further confusion to the situation, so, at present, we are very much focused on putting out and raising, as you say, public awareness on the issue. We will continue to do that. I will engage with the PSNI again after today to get a better understanding of the speeding problem and to see whether we can work more collaboratively on that as well.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Minister for giving us an update today. Like lots of people, I join her in paying tribute to the extraordinary effort and commitment made by people working in her Department who are out there every morning at the front line delivering services for us. She will probably agree that those people, like everybody else, will want to have access to testing for COVID-19. What conversations has she had with other Ministers, including the Health Minister, about the need to urgently scale up testing and contact tracing in Northern Ireland as part of not only managing the current peak but moving to the next stage of this crisis? In addition, has she had any conversations about the possibility of bringing in outside expertise to scale up contact tracing and testing?

Ms Mallon: I thank the member for his question. It is an important one. I am pleased to have received assurances from the Health Minister and the Chief Medical Officer on their commitment to scaling up testing and the testing regime in Northern Ireland. As I have outlined, I am very pleased that my Department is able to play its part by handing over its MOT centres to help rapidly increase testing.

I think that all of us recognise that it is very clear that the medical evidence and the facts lead us to the conclusion that we absolutely need to test, test, test and trace. It is very important that we follow the medical advice and are open to the learning that comes from it. I am happy to raise with the Minister of Health and my other Executive colleagues issues that the member has highlighted, but the overarching principle has to be that we follow the medical evidence. Nobody has anything to be threatened by or to fear from listening to a wide range of evidence, but it is also really important that we continue to work together. At this time, of all times, there is no justification for point-scoring or for a "them versus us" approach. I am committed to doing what I can with Executive colleagues and to doing all that I can in my Department to make sure that we play our part, particularly in ramping up testing.

Mr Butler: Thank you, Minister, for a very good brief. Thank you for your unstinting cooperation, especially with the Minister of Health. I am sure that he is deeply appreciative of it, as are all the people of Northern Ireland. That type of leadership promotes good community cohesion.

Minister, my question is about LGV licences. I know that I have asked you about this previously, and it is to do with medicals. It became apparent to me just this week that we have a real need to protect life, and you have said that keeping people safe is your number-one commitment. A lot of drivers who drive fire appliances and emergency vehicles have to undergo regular medical assessments, and they are perhaps going to fall foul of COVID-19 and all the fallout from it. I am just looking to see whether you have any update for us or whether you can make any commitment even to expedite and prioritise people who provide that service on the front line to attain their licence.

Ms Mallon: I can reassure the member that, while we are working to find a comprehensive solution to the medical assessment and licensing issue, priority is being given to those who require their licence for essential or emergency services. If members therefore know of drivers who, given the role that they play, require that service but are not able to get prioritised, please flag it up with me. Undoubtedly, our healthcare workers are under immense pressure, but I think that all of us recognise that we need to be doing everything that we can to ensure that we keep our essential and emergency services moving and available.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for her statement and for her answers thus far. I echo the sentiments of all in the Chamber by offering my condolences to those families who have sadly been bereaved by COVID-19 and by wishing well all those who are fighting the virus, as well as the healthcare workers who are helping them to recover from it. I pay tribute to you, Minister, for your rock-solid leadership in the throes of this crisis. Well done. I also pay tribute to your Department's front-line workers, in infrastructure, transport, water and waste water treatment. Those people are out rolling up their sleeves and steering the wheels that ensure that our society's machine can keep on turning.

I welcome your Department's announcement today on non-domestic water and waste water charges. That will be a very welcome relief for many in the business community. I ask the Minister to confirm that the measures will also be available to the farming community, which has also been very hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ms Mallon: I thank the member for his very kind words. Yes, it will apply to farmers.

Mr McNulty: Thank you.

Miss Woods: I, too, thank the Minister for her statement and for coming to the Chamber today. I also thank her for the great response time that I got on behalf of constituents. It is very much appreciated.

My question is about the possible allocation of road space during the pandemic. As we know, there has been a great reduction in the number of cars on the roads. Would the Minister be minded to look at implementing temporary cycle and pedestrian lanes for people to use, adhering to social-distancing rules, which would make it easier for people in urban and other areas to access safer areas for exercise, as other countries such as Mexico, the United States, Canada and EU cities Berlin and Budapest have done?

Ms Mallon: I thank the member for her kind words about the efficient response on constituency issues. It is important that we do not lose sight in the middle of this pandemic that we are there to serve our constituents, and I am very conscious of that and want to retain a focus on that.

I do see the merits in what the member suggests. I suppose the difficulty that we find ourselves in is that we are in the middle of a pandemic. There are pressures on our staff, and we are focusing all our efforts in responding to and planning for COVID-19. That does not mean that we do not recognise the importance of the issue that she raised. I spoke earlier about the need to reorientate and to do things differently after the crisis and not just to go back to the way it was. The issues that she has touched upon are the kind of issues that I want to be very proactive about and look at. We need to look at active travel; I committed to that before the crisis. We need to look at reshaping our space and our places so that they are people-centred.

So, it is something that I am looking at, but, in realistic terms, the ability to progress it at this time is limited in scope. However, it is something that I want to continue to progress when we get to the other side of this.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for her statement. I want to raise the Minister's response to pleas from the trade unions to extend free public transport to all essential workers. I think that she said that she had no plans to do this. The move to offer public transport to health and social care workers was the

right thing to do and widely accepted and praised, but I think that it is now imperative that it should be extended to those in the public sector and in retail, and those who are risking their health every day to ensure that we have food and other services. The Minister mentioned that many of those workers are low paid. They were disgracefully low paid before the crisis — now that their role has been elevated dramatically, it is clear that their pay is inadequate. It is evident for all to see.

Does the Minister have any plans to review the decision around extending free transport to all workers? She rightly paid tribute to Translink staff. Does she have any plans to review her decision around reduced daytime bus services to ensure that the drivers in particular are not unnecessarily behind the wheel for long periods of time?

Ms Mallon: On the issue of reduced services: yes, there will be further reductions in services while maintaining essential routes to make sure that our healthcare and essential workers can get to and from their places of work. We are doing a piece of analysis there, but there will be further reduction in services.

The member raises an issue that I have been grappling with, because I absolutely recognise and appreciate the role of essential workers. I am trying to weigh up the practicalities of rolling out that extension, because, for it to operate, it would mean offering free transport to everyone. It would be very difficult — it would actually be impossible — to be able to categorise workers. I am considering the unintended consequences of incentivising the use of public transport across Northern Ireland as the lockdown continues. People might want to avail themselves of public transport and, because it would be free, come out and use it unnecessarily.

I can assure the member that, in principle, it is something that I would be very supportive of, but, as a Minister, I have to think through the intended and unintended consequences of my actions. I am keeping the situation under review.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): I thank the Minister for her statement and the answers to the questions.

In accordance with precedence that was established at the first meeting of the Committee, we have around nine minutes left for questions. If members have any pressing questions that they wish to ask the Minister, they should rise in their place. If not, we can set the Minister free. No further questions? The answers were comprehensive, Minister, so congratulations.

That concludes questions on the statement. We will now have a brief suspension of 10 minutes prior to the statement from the Minister of Education. I remind members of the rules about social distancing. Please use the door nearest to you when exiting the Chamber. Thank you.