



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Economic Impact of COVID-19:
Mrs Diane Dodds MLA,
Minister for the Economy

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We currently have the help and support of the Chancellor's job retention scheme, which is important in supporting workers and businesses at a time when the economy is in an unprecedented state. Committee colleagues, we need to consider how that job retention scheme continues. The Chancellor has extended it for another month, to the end of June, but our analysis is that, if it were not to end in a graduated way, redundancies could be announced. The Committee can aid the work and the lobbying of the Department to ensure that the scheme has more life than is currently set out and that, as the economy starts to recover, we send the message to central government that we will need continuous support.

The Minister for Communities and I — many of you asked me about this in the Chamber — have now ensured that workers are not disadvantaged when it comes to statutory payments. If you are furloughed and have gone off on maternity leave, your maternity entitlement will be calculated on your full salary, not your furloughed salary, to ensure that you are not disadvantaged by circumstances that are completely outside your control.

Businesses need a voice, and we need to ensure that we all work — not only my Department but the Assembly and across the community — to convey the message that manufacturing, tourism, construction, aviation and haulage are important aspects of our economy that will need support as we go forward.

I am pleased to report to the Committee that we have significant engagement with central government. Every Thursday at 1.00 pm, I have a call that is chaired by the Chancellor and includes all of the devolved regions, as well as the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Secretary of State for Transport, all of whom run huge departmental policy areas in Westminster. They are listening to the voice of Governments throughout the devolved regions. That has been very helpful, because, through that, we in the Executive, collectively and individually, have been able to work on packages and support measures that are national, but have particular reference to Northern Ireland. There is one for ferries, we have been working on an airport package, and we are still working on a package to support the haulage industry. All of that work continues every week. My officials have been in touch with the Department for Transport daily, including weekends, in order to get some of the work completed. An enormous amount of work has been done on that.

The work of the engagement forum is particularly important. A list of priority sectors has been published, as has the safety guidance. Those are useful tools for businesses, going forward. At the start of the shutdown period, we had significant issues in the workplace, but those have lessened significantly over time. That is due to the work of businesses, employers, workers, the trade unions, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and the Public Health Agency (PHA). That work was brought together by the forum, and I commend it for stepping in and working for the public good at a very difficult time.

An industry that has been hugely impacted, beyond almost any other, is tourism. It has suffered enormously. Last week, we announced a new steering group that will aid and guide our work in recovering the tourism industry. We have a small working group that is chaired by John McGrillen, and I will chair its first meeting next week. It may be too soon to ease the restrictions, as the Health Minister has said, but we need a plan, and we need to be working on it. I will work with representatives of the tourism industry to ensure that we have a plan and that we are able to input into that at every level. That group will also include representatives from councils — the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) — because, of course, councils have a huge input into tourism in their area.

On the issue of skills, last week, I set out to the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) some instructions on qualifications. Where we can get a calculated result, we should do so, and provision should be made for those who need a more practical assessment to get their result. That is work in progress. I checked with officials yesterday and had a long conversation with them, and, after the guidance that was issued to them last week, they hope that we will quickly bring this to a conclusion.

We are also working with our local universities, and I understand that you will hear from them in the next session of the Committee. Many of you will know that our universities have stepped up to the plate enormously in supporting local students. They have cancelled accommodation contracts and continue to provide online assessments and work. The Department has ensured that the third tranche of the student loan will be paid. All of our financial commitments to those students will continue, as with every other commitment that we have made to students in further education.

There is still an issue with university admissions. About six weeks ago, a number of universities in England and Wales started to make unconditional offers on the basis that they were worried about how they would go forward, maybe losing international students and losing funding. They sought to compensate for that by putting out unconditional offers, pressurising our students to make decisions that might not be right for them at a difficult and unsettling time. The Universities Minister, with the agreement of the universities, has instituted a moratorium on that activity. We need a plan for the way forward because the moratorium is due to be lifted on 4 May. The Minister seeks a UK-wide position, but our position is that we need to protect our universities and the young people from Northern Ireland who will go to them. That is work in progress. I will have a further conversation with the Universities Minister and the universities later this afternoon.

I will leave it there. I probably have not covered every element. I want to come back to the Committee to talk specifically about recovery.

Sorry, I should have added that the Department is bringing back to life the Economic Advisory Group that existed under Arlene Foster and then Simon Hamilton pre the stalling of devolution. We will talk to you about its membership. I would like it to include people who are leaders in their field, people who know how to run the tech sector and leaders of industry who can give advice on how we bring the economy back together, how we plan for the future and how, by the end of this period, we have an economic strategy that will help Northern Ireland to progress. It will be about jobs, families and prosperity.

Those are the two elements that we need to talk about, and the Committee could work with us on that. We will also need to talk about tourism, and, once the working group is set up, we will revert to that.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): Thank you very much, Minister. I will offer some personal reflections. The public health impact has been devastating, but the economic impact is huge. The significant funds made available to support workers, families and businesses have been very welcome, but I think that we will all agree that more is needed. It is important that we make it clear that none of us can fathom a return to austerity on the back of this as a price for the investment that has been made and funds that have been made available. Many businesses and companies have had to rely on government support to get them through this period, and we could look at how, in the future, they can pay their way. We need to tighten up some of the tax loopholes, for example. The companies that have substantially benefited from this period, by seeing their shares and profits soar, also need to pay their way. I have, for example, proposed a windfall tax for those companies to make sure that that money is directed back in to funding our vital public services.

You highlighted the broader economic recovery that we need to talk about, and that is something that we all will want to feed into in future. We need to value the essential workers whom we have seen stepping up to the plate in recent weeks. We need to invest in our public services, which uphold workers' rights and, very importantly, help our businesses to recover and support all those workers and families. I welcome the economic advisory group and welcome the opportunity to discuss further its membership and representation.

I know that members will have an awful lot of questions about the support that has been made available. I will pick up on some of those who have not yet been covered by the support. We heard last week from Social Enterprise NI. It is an organisation that I have discussed with you on a number of occasions. It is very important that we recognise the contribution of businesses and the importance of the work that they do concerning some of the vulnerable people whom they support and the impact that they have on communities. It is important that we work out how they access the grant schemes. Will you give some information on that?

The hardship scheme is being developed. Can you expand a wee bit on where it will be directed? Many people have missed out on the grants to date: those who have no premises and self-employed people, particularly the self-employed who started their business in the last year and who are missing out on the self-employed support. We have also heard — you reflected this — that tourism and hospitality businesses have been the most severely impacted; they were the first to be impacted and will probably be the last to be able to return to work. There are those above the £51,000 net asset value (NAV) who can access the grant scheme. However, they also face ongoing costs and are in dire straits. If they are not covered by the hardship scheme — if it is not directed towards those businesses — will further support be made available or directed towards such businesses?

I will stop there, but I have another couple of questions.

Mrs Dodds: I am trying to follow them. First and foremost, I remind the Committee that taxation is a reserved matter.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): Absolutely.

Mrs Dodds: It is not a matter for the Committee, the Department for the Economy or even the Northern Ireland Assembly. I advise political parties that want to take up taxation issues to do so through their representatives in the House of Commons.

We started the grants a number of weeks ago by trying to figure out how we could get money to companies as quickly as possible. The £10k scheme followed roughly the schemes in the rest of the United Kingdom and issued money; we based ours on eligibility for small business rates relief. That has been very successful; it has got a lot of money out to companies quite quickly, and we extended it to include the very small manufacturing companies that benefit from industrial derating. The £25k hardship scheme is slightly more difficult to work through. It is open for applications. Significant numbers of applications came in in the first few days, but we now have 2,700 applications. That is for businesses with a rateable value of up to £51,000. Obviously, as you say, a number of people simply do not fit into any of those categories, and businesses have fallen through the cracks.

One of the things that we can and should be doing that will help some of those companies significantly is to extend the period of rate relief. That is my opinion; it is not the opinion of the Executive yet, but it is being discussed. In Northern Ireland, we gave three months' rate relief, but we did it slightly differently from the rest of the United Kingdom in that we applied it to everyone, so all businesses got rate relief. That meant that 60% of the businesses that received that rate relief here would not have received it had they been in England, Scotland or Wales. Significant work was done to ensure that all businesses got an immediate boost of three months' rate relief. However, when I look at how we can support businesses efficiently and directly, it is my view that that can be done through further rate relief. I know that the Finance Minister is working with Ulster University on a scheme that would allow us to consider how we could target further business rate relief.

If you have a NAV of above £51,000, nothing has been particularly targeted at you. Yet those businesses include some of our most valuable tourism assets, and they will need support to get through this period.

That is my view and the view that I have put to colleagues. It is one of the areas that we can help with most.

You are quite right. Colleagues will know that I have a weekly call with the Chair of the Committee to discuss issues that are pertinent to the Committee, and we have discussed a further hardship scheme at length. We are drafting that hardship scheme, and I hope that it will come out the other end very shortly. With it, we are looking at small businesses and microbusinesses. If you are a small B and B, because you do not qualify for any of the rate schemes, there is nothing for you. It will be targeted at small and microbusinesses, and we hope to get it through the system very quickly. It is in its final stages.

It worth putting on record with the Committee a public word of thanks to my officials, who have worked extremely hard in difficult and disruptive circumstances to get that through. All Departments have experienced that to a very large degree, but it is probably more evident since we have been doing the grant work. That small businesses hardship scheme will come out very soon.

We continue to talk to the Minister of Finance and the Minister for Communities and, of course, my officials about how we can direct help to social enterprises. It was my understanding that a significant amount of money had come via Barnett consequential for charities and that sector. There will be a conversation this week about how that is to be done. Make no mistake: social enterprises are an important part of our economy; they are businesses that reinvest their profits in local communities and support different kinds of projects. They are an important, valuable and vibrant part of our economy that we need to support.

Have I forgotten anything?

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): I do not think so. Some social enterprises are businesses and should be able to access the grant schemes available. If something needs to be worked out about how their NAV can be used to direct that support, officials need to do that. I know that Social Enterprise

made proposals about how that could be done, and I urge that that be taken on board, aside from the work that is being done on charities.

I want to pick up on a couple of other points before I pass to members. Another thing that we have discussed at length is support for students. In the debate on the Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill yesterday, the need to put in place hardship support for students was highlighted. The Committee and I would like to see happen.

The consultation on the RHI tariff review was published yesterday evening. The Buglass — the "hardship" — report has been made available. As part of NDNA, there was a commitment to close the RHI scheme. How will those things be taken forward? Might it not have been an idea to do the tariff review along with the other items, such as the potential to close and how that might be managed?

Mrs Dodds: OK. In relation to support for students, as we have discussed on a number of occasions, I have sent a paper to the Executive and to the Department of Finance asking for specific support for students. We have a mechanism through the universities, which have very well-developed systems for supporting students who find themselves in financial difficulties or who, for one reason or another, find it difficult to access higher education. We have made that proposal and a bid for money for that, which would mean a doubling of the current hardship fund for students. That is with the Department of Finance and the Executive, and my understanding is that there will be a conversation on allocations reasonably soon. I urge colleagues to support that, because it is worthy and something that we must continue to do. That is already in the system.

I want to say two things about the RHI consultation, without wanting to pre-empt it. I said that I would conduct that business on behalf of the Executive in an open, transparent manner and that I will publish what I have. I have done that. I have also said — it will be a guiding principle as we take the issue forward — that we need to be fair to those who engaged in the scheme in good faith and to taxpayers, who are funding the scheme. Openness, transparency and fairness to those involved will be the guiding principles as we deal with the issue.

Two reports came to me that arose from the Westminster Select Committee consideration of the issue last year. The Cornwall report, which is about the tariff review, recommended an uplift of the tariff review. Everybody should have a copy of that report or, if not, you can get it online very easily. I have also published the report that was written by Andrew Buglass on the hardship that was caused by the scheme. I did that to keep my promise to be open and transparent and to make sure that the information is in the public domain.

I decided to go ahead with the tariff review because work is ongoing to decide options on whether and how the scheme could close in response to the NDNA commitments. That work is complex. It takes into account a number of significant legal issues and is not likely to conclude for some time. Therefore, I thought that it would be unfair to participants in the scheme if we were not to go ahead with a tariff review and an uplift in a tariff review that had been evidenced to me by an independent report. It is now out for consultation. I welcome all views on the issue. We will formalise the responses to the consultation as soon as the period has closed. That is my rationale for doing it, and that is where we are. I hope to bring — I will alert the Executive to this very shortly — a number of options papers to the Executive in the near future, but, while we are doing that, I think that it is unfair if we have independent evidence on this issue and do not act on it. That is my reasoning for it.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): I will ask a quick follow-up question. What is the time frame for bringing forward all those proposals?

Mrs Dodds: The consultation is out for four weeks, and it will then be reported on. It will go to the Executive for their view because, obviously, this is something that the Executive will decide upon. It is contentious and cross-cutting, and, therefore, it will be for the Executive to take a view. If the view is to uplift the tariff, that will require primary legislation.

That is the time frame. I hope to bring some papers to the Executive on other options by mid May, but they will be outlines and will take into account the legal complexities of the issues.

Ms Sugden: Good morning, Minister. I acknowledge some of the Chair's comments on further support. Very slowly, I am getting the message from constituents that they are very grateful for the initial small business rate relief scheme of £10,000 but are finding that the money is moving very quickly. They acknowledge that they will need further support, particularly in the areas that are unlikely

to open as quickly as other businesses after the lockdown. I support your personal call for an extension to rate relief for up to a year, and I hope that your colleagues in the Executive will also support that. Do you envisage any further support for those businesses that are finding that the £10,000 is not stretching to where it needs to in order to enable them to save their business?

I also have a question about the hardship fund. You acknowledged that it is just for small businesses, but I have a concern that quite large businesses are ineligible for some of the schemes and will fold if no support comes through.

Mrs Dodds: I agree with you, Claire. Good morning. I hope that you are keeping well. I was talking to businesses from your constituency this morning, as I was starting my day, about some of these issues, and we discussed a number of issues, including how businesses come out of this period and how they go into recovery. All those businesses are people who have families and loved ones, are impacted by COVID-19 just as much as everybody else and are conscious that this is, first and foremost, a health issue and that we must be really careful to ensure that whatever we do does not impact or cause further spikes in the number of deaths or lead to the health issues that we have encountered. They are acutely aware of that.

Some of these business are asking about further supports, but one of them made the very clear point — this is really important — that, as we come out of a furloughing period and try to recover the economy step by small step by small step, the supports that are in place nationally, which are absolutely massive and are crucial to businesses, must not be stopped abruptly. That is one of the issues that everybody recognised as being very important.

The other national scheme that was announced this week, which is significant for many of our small businesses here, is the small loan scheme for SMEs. That loan is for up to £50,000, which is 100% guaranteed for a year by the Government. That will be a significant help to small businesses and SMEs in Northern Ireland, which are, after all, the backbone of our economy.

The hardship fund is what it says it is: a hardship fund for small businesses and microbusinesses. Some of those businesses are finding it very difficult; they have not been able to access any support whatsoever. The rate scheme is not applicable to them, and we need to get that out as quickly as possible. As I said, one of the major ways whereby we can offer support to businesses is through extending rate relief. Those are all important.

We then need to discuss how, locally, we can produce recovery measures. That is where I am looking to the strategic recovery group to recommend the sectoral supports that we will need as we go forward.

Ms Sugden: Thank you, Minister. I appreciate that.

Mr Middleton: Thanks for coming today, Minister. There is a lot of talk about recovery, and it is important that we talk about that at this stage, given that many sectors are starting to look at reopening. Some have already reopened, and, as long as they adhere to the safety guidelines that were published, we need to support those businesses in doing that and not allow them to be demonised.

Taking a slightly different tack, in your introduction you mentioned packages for airports. In Londonderry in my constituency, the airport is key for not only the tourism industry but businesses. I assume that you know this, but when can we expect such a package, given that airports are struggling, hundreds of jobs are on the line and we need to see those routes saved and protected?

Mrs Dodds: Thank you. That is a very valuable question on an area that our Department, along with other Departments, has been doing a lot of work on. First, I want to say a bit of a word on connectivity. We in Northern Ireland have suffered greatly through the pandemic because of the loss of connectivity to our main market in GB. That has been very regrettable. I often say — I need to remind myself of this sometimes — that, at the beginning of March, I was sitting in New York with representatives of airlines talking about further direct flights to Northern Ireland. Folks, that was only a few weeks ago, and it feels as though everything has changed utterly in that very short period. Connectivity, whether to further afield or within the United Kingdom, is massively important. It is our biggest market, and we need to maintain it.

This has been really difficult for airlines. For example, Belfast City Airport now has one direct flight to Heathrow per day. Belfast International Airport has no direct flights — they have ceased — but it is

operating its freight division and is working to ensure that crucial supplies are brought into Northern Ireland efficiently from GB. We thank it for continuing that operation. The City of Derry Airport has also suffered hugely through this, but we continue and will continue — I can tell you that — to support the public service obligation (PSO) route at that airport.

We have been working with the Department for Transport on the issue. Significant work has been done on it, and I hope that there will be an announcement on these issues fairly soon.

Mr O'Dowd: Minister, thank you for your presentation. Hopefully, we will be able to have you with us for a bit longer in the near future.

I want to return to the student hardship fund. I note from your comments to the Chair that you will present or have presented a paper to the Executive for discussion and, hopefully, for support. Has your Department identified any savings that can be added to the pot for the student hardship fund?

Mrs Dodds: Thank you for the question. Yes, I have prepared a paper that has gone to the Executive. If the Executive adopt that paper, it will ensure that there are significant extra funds for student hardship. Although, if students are listening, I can say that the third semester student hardship fund is live and available and students can avail themselves of it as we speak. My Department has sent the paper to the Executive and will continue to make the case at the Executive that it is worthy of support. The Department has already identified savings and is thus able to redirect funding to support students who are doing PhDs and those who are doing further research. Significant money has been allocated for them, and we will ask for Executive support for the wider student hardship fund.

Ms McLaughlin: Thank you very much, Minister, for your summary of the various schemes. One of the schemes that I am particularly concerned about, and for which money has yet to be released, is the self-employment income support scheme. A lot of anomalies have already been identified with the scheme, and I fear that those who are last on the list to get support will fall well short of receiving it. The scheme does not really reflect some of the self-employment situations in Northern Ireland. For example, people can be on PAYE but also be self-employed. People are getting dividends or investing profits back into their company, but the scheme does not recognise that. My concern is that a lot of people who find themselves at the end of the process of support will be very badly affected. I would like you to consider that and perhaps try to fix the scheme before it goes live. It is happening throughout the whole of the UK. People will come face to face with those difficulties.

As others have said, we have to look to the future. We have to look at how we have responded to businesses that are in financial difficulties, but we also have to look at how we renew, move forward and recover. One aspect that is vexing me at the minute — it is vexing most people in the city that I come from — is getting sign-off for the medical school. We need that sign-off to be done within the next 30 days or we will lose the opportunity. The General Medical Council needs sign-off for us to proceed. We also need to ensure that the three Departments involved, which are the Department of Finance, the Department of Health and the Department for the Economy, sign off on the medical school in unison. That is really important. The Department of Health has the business case, but, once it signs off on it, the situation with the medical school will be like that of the medical school at Queen's: your Department will be leading on it. What are your thoughts on that?

Finally, has your Department done any modelling on the impact of COVID-19 on the economy? Have you put on top of that the modelling for Brexit in the event of no deal or a hard border down the Irish Sea? If the two crises combine, what will that do to the economy? Are you consulting external experts to find out? As a Committee, we need to know what the next crisis will be and how soon we will meet it. Does your Department have the capacity to deal with two major economic crises at the same time? That is it.

Mrs Dodds: That is a lot, Sinead. *[Laughter.]* However, let us go. The self-employment scheme is a national scheme. As with all schemes that are thought about and then enacted very quickly, once you delve into the self-employment scheme, the limited policy development behind it starts to show up the scheme's flaws. I have been passing information back to London about some of the issues that small limited companies are facing, such as the length of time that it is taking to get the scheme for the self-employed out and into the process. As I said, it is a national scheme, and we continue to work with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) in London. My call at 11.00 am is with Minister Zahawi from that Department, and those are the issues that we continue to raise with him. They are important and impactful on people's lives. I understand that.

Your question about city deals and Magee leads me on to being able to give you a little bit of an update on the city deals. The four city/growth deals are at various stages of development. No one of them is in the same space. The heads of terms for the Belfast region city deal were signed on 19 March, and it is now in a business-case development phase. That will continue for some time. We have seen some outline business cases, but nothing will be developed to full business case for a period.

The city deal for the north-west is still being worked on, and we hope that the heads of terms for that will be signed perhaps in May or June this year. Significant work is being done on the city deal for the north-west, and we continue to work on it. The mid-south-west growth deal covers mid-Ulster, Fermanagh and my area of upper Bann. A new regional strategy was launched, and some projects are being developed, but it is in its very early stages. That is a very interesting one. A lot of work has been done, and some of the stuff has come organically from local communities. The Causeway coast and glens deal has made limited progress, but we will continue to work with the council there to make sure that it is progressed. The deals are all at various stages of development, and that is where we are at with them.

With city deals generally, we must ensure that the projects that come forward are financially sustainable and that they reflect some regional balance so that we do not get similar innovation projects in every part of Northern Ireland. We need some regional balance. The city/growth deals are very important. They must represent value for money and be sustainable in themselves.

As Minister, I am absolutely committed to city deals. They will be an important regeneration and recovery tool as we go forward, and the elements of them that deal with innovation, tourism and the digital economy will be important for our economy. Those are the elements that I have responsibility for that will be particularly impactful on local communities. They will help us, and we need to incorporate them into our long-term economic strategy.

We continue to support Magee in every way that we can. The Department of Health has workforce responsibility and policy responsibility for bringing forward the specifics on Magee, particularly for the medical school. The Department of Health does that for Queen's University and its medical school. It has policy responsibility for doing so. We will take on responsibility once the issues are dealt with and funding has been identified for the medical school.

Ms McLaughlin: Thank you. I —.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): Sorry, but John Stewart needs in.

Ms McLaughlin: Sorry, but I did not get my Brexit question answered. I did not really get the medical school question answered either, and the issues with it are time-finite.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): The Minister needs to be away for 11.00 am, and a couple of other members have questions, but we can deal with it quickly.

Mrs Dodds: I will answer quickly. There are lots of Brexit issues going around. It has not gone away. COVID-19 has not chased it off the scene. There will be a meeting of the specialist Committee on the issues tomorrow. Plenty of work is still going on in the Department on Brexit, and, of course, what happens with Brexit is also up to our national Government. They take the strategic decisions. We will continue to work in the best interests of Northern Ireland, making sure that Northern Ireland's interests are represented in all areas. I know that the First Minister and, perhaps, the deputy First Minister had a call with Michael Gove recently about how we are continuing with that work. Those are strategic decisions, however, for the national Government, with input from Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): Thank you. We will hopefully get the Minister back for further questions in the very near future.

Ms McLaughlin: I have a list of questions as long as my arm that need answers to them very quickly. Maybe there should be a dedicated helpline that we, as elected representatives, can use to ask those questions and get answers quickly, because this is not satisfactory in any shape, form or fashion for a scrutiny body.

Mrs Dodds: Can I respond to that? I hold a weekly call with the Chair of the Committee during which any issue can be discussed. Nothing is off the table, and everything that the Chair wants to be discussed is discussed. I think that the Chair would accept and acknowledge that. They are open and transparent discussions. I am happy to hear about anything that the Committee wants to raise through the Chair in those discussions or to come back to the Committee and discuss issues with it.

Mr Stewart: I know that time is precious, so I will try to be brief, Minister. I want to echo some of the points that you made, especially about social enterprises. There will be a great deal of frustration among the sector today that there was not an announcement that will cover it. Social enterprises have been excluded from all support to date and may be looking to something like the Welsh economic resilience fund that I raised with you previously in the Chamber, Minister, which offers grants and support to social enterprises, as well as to a wide range of businesses, big and small. It would have been great if we could have heard something more like that today.

I am encouraged to hear about the support for businesses that are missing out. However, it concerns me how subjective the term "assesses hardship" can be and how one person can assess hardship. It will be interesting to see the criteria for that and whether there will be an appeals mechanism for businesses that do not get support on their first application.

As you will be aware, one of the sectors that have missed out has been sports clubs. There is a great deal of fear among football, cricket, rugby, hockey, GAA clubs: the list goes on. They have slipped through the net massively. Many of them do not qualify for small business rate relief, because they qualify for sports and recreation rate relief, and many are not big enough to qualify for the £25,000 grant. It is likely to be the last sector to come back, because, as you will probably remember, Dominic Raab said last week that recreational sport is unlikely to return this year. Sports clubs are in a sector that is a massive employer. Sport provides huge social benefits for mental health in local areas, yet clubs are getting nothing and could well collapse. Is there anything that can be done to prop the sector up? As I said, I am interested in hearing about the other support mechanisms, especially for social enterprises. Thanks, Minister.

Mrs Dodds: I have covered social enterprises, so I will not go back over them.

Mr Stewart: OK. Thank you.

Mrs Dodds: The issue of sports clubs is very important. We fought very hard to get leisure included in the £25,000 grant scheme, and doing that will have significantly benefited a significant number of sports clubs, of whatever type. Whether the £10,000 scheme is extended to include those clubs that benefit from that particular aspect of relief will be an Executive decision based on the finances that are available at the time.

I work with a number of very valuable sports clubs. They are not just sports clubs. They are absolutely integrated into their community and are part and parcel of it. I recognise their value. Once we get further down the line of recognising how much of the allocation will be used from the £10,000 and £25,000 grant schemes, we intend to carry out a mop-up exercise to see which sectors have missed out and where we need to go next. We are just a little bit off doing that at this time.

Mr Dunne: Minister, thanks for all your efforts. I endorse what John said about sports clubs. Leisure providers are in there as well, by which I mean family entertainment centres and so on. They employ a lot of staff.

We have talked about football clubs and golf clubs before. About 50% of golf clubs qualify, but the other 50% do not. A bit like what John said, I would argue that we may have got them into the £25,000 grant scheme but that that scheme's criteria are not right for them. The scheme was not initially designed for leisure, but leisure was brought into it. It therefore does not fit in there, so we need to look at the specific criteria for sports clubs and other activities.

I have one other point, but I will be brief. I welcome the fact that small manufacturing businesses that benefit from industrial derating were brought in under the £10,000 grant scheme, but we need to move them up to the £25,000 grant. For a lot of small manufacturing businesses, whether they are eligible is based on NAV at the minute. They do not fit, so a lot of them are missing out. We need to look seriously at that and at trying to include more businesses that are in the real world, such as those involved in manufacturing, engineering and printing. To date, they have received little or no support, so I would appreciate a review of the criteria to be met to access the £25,000 grant.

Mrs Dodds: I will address those issues very quickly, as I do not want to miss my call. Leisure's inclusion in the £25,000 grant scheme was hard-fought and hard-won by my Department. Many of the clubs that you specifically talk about, Gordon, are not in the £25,000 scheme because their rateable value is beyond the scope of the scheme. I go back to my original point that rate relief is one of the biggest ways in which we can impact on those areas very quickly. That is very important.

There is, of course, an argument to include all small manufacturing businesses that fall within the £15,000 and £51,000 rateable value. Those businesses were included in the Finance Minister's rate relief package, whereas those in England, Scotland and Wales were not. Therefore, manufacturing got it initially. Is it enough? Probably not, and there is probably more to be done. I have some sympathy with the cause, but all of this will come down to the finance that is available and the decisions that are taken about that finance.

I keep saying this, but it is worth saying again: we are living in unprecedented times. Things have happened, and the economy has had to react in a way in which we have never seen before, not even in times of great national distress. All countries are suffering huge impacts on their economy. We need to take the right steps to recover the economy when the time is right: when it is the right decision from a health perspective and when the situation with the virus is right. I look forward to working with you to ensure that we do that; that we continue to work to make sure that businesses flourish in Northern Ireland; and that we are focused on jobs and families, because that is what is important.

Mr Dunne: Hear, hear. Thanks, Minister.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): Thank you very much for your time.

Mrs Dodds: I am sorry, but I have to go.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): I put on record the Committee's thanks to the departmental officials who have been working behind the scenes on the various schemes.

Mr Stalford: I will write to the Minister with the one question that I wanted to ask but did not get to. Thanks to the members who had to ask five or six questions and deliver speeches, which consumed all the time. Thanks for that.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): We will ask the Minister to come back soon. You can ask the first question that day, Christopher.

Mrs Dodds: Take care, folks. Stay safe.