



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Ad Hoc Committee on  
the COVID-19 Response

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Ministerial Statement: Economy

7 May 2020

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response

### Ministerial Statement: Economy

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

Mr Roy Beggs (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr Jim Allister

Dr Caoimhe Archibald

Mr Cathal Boylan

Ms Paula Bradshaw

Mr Keith Buchanan

Mr Robbie Butler

Mr Gerry Carroll

Ms Linda Dillon

Mrs Diane Dodds

Mr Gordon Dunne

Mr Paul Frew

Mr Paul Givan

Ms Catherine Kelly

Mr Colin McGrath

Ms Sinead McLaughlin

Mr Gary Middleton

Mr Andrew Muir

Mr John O'Dowd

Mr Matthew O'Toole

Mr John Stewart

Mr Jim Wells

Miss Rachel Woods

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs):** Members are welcome to this meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 response.

Agenda item 1 is the minutes of proceedings of the previous meeting, which was held on 30 April. Members are asked to note the minutes, which Mr Stalford has agreed. Members should also note that the minutes of evidence from that meeting have been published in the Official Report, which is available on the Committee's web page.

Members, before we move on, I want to refer to the fact that we have just one ministerial statement today. On 30 April, the Minister of Justice informed the Speaker's Office that she wished to make a statement to the Committee at today's meeting. However, the Speaker's Office received notice from the Minister yesterday afternoon that she wished to defer making her statement until next week. As a result, the Speaker's Office notified all members yesterday that there will just be one Minister making a statement on this occasion.

Agenda item 2 is a statement from the Minister for the Economy. The Speaker received notification on 28 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 make is included in your pack at page 7.

I welcome the Minister for the Economy to this meeting of the Committee. Before she makes her statement, I want to remind members that, following it, there will be an opportunity for questions — not to make speeches. As has happened on previous occasions, members who ask sharp, focused questions will be afforded the opportunity to ask a supplementary question. However, if contributions are long-winded, I may have to move on. As we wish to afford every member the opportunity to ask questions, I also seek the cooperation of the Minister and ask her to endeavour to be succinct in her answers. I therefore intend to follow the same approach as previously. I invite the Minister to make her statement, which should be heard by members without interruption.

**Mr Allister:** On a point of order, Deputy Chairperson.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs):** Point of order, Mr Allister. I would highlight that this is not a meeting of the Assembly, during which normal points of order would be taken, but I will hear what you have to say.

**Mr Allister:** I am obliged. You said in your introduction that copies of the statement had been circulated. I can speak only for myself, but I understand that others are in the same position. I have certainly not received a copy of the statement, so I would like to know how and when it was distributed and why the process has failed.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs):** All the relevant papers for today's meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee were included in the electronic meeting pack, which would have been circulated to members and made available for them to access. If any member finds that that did not happen, I ask them to come back to the Speaker's Office and we will investigate further. I understand that it was circulated and made available electronically, and I hope that we can move on.

**Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy):** Thank you, colleagues, for the opportunity to address you once again on the critical issues for the economy, particularly as this crisis unfolds.

It is now two months since the dramatic but necessary changes to our way of life were first implemented. Sadly, what was once unimaginable is now the new reality. I took office just under four short months ago. Back then, I set out my ambition to introduce parental bereavement leave, grow the tourism sector, stimulate investment and job creation, and, importantly, direct more funding into skills for future generations. Yet, in what seemed like a heartbeat, the brutal impact of coronavirus on the health of the population and economy has transformed those priorities.

Make no mistake: the top priority is still the preservation of life. That will remain our primary focus until such times as the threat of COVID-19 has diminished sufficiently. Our next and necessary priority is to mitigate the impacts on the economy as best we can and do all that is in our power to aid recovery. We have lived through downturns, but this is different. The usual remedy of encouraging people to go out and spend money in order to boost the economy is not possible or, indeed, appropriate right now.

The Executive, like our counterparts in London, have acted swiftly and decisively. We have redirected resources to cushion the devastating early impacts, and will continue to do so. This week, my Department received Executive approval for £40 million to set up a hardship fund for microbusinesses. That will aid thousands of the smallest enterprises, as well as charities and social enterprises.

The financial grant schemes for business rates relief, bank lending scheme, job retention scheme, and support for the self-employed have been essential to prevent the economy from imploding. The painstakingly deliberate pace of developing Government policy has been replaced with immediate action in order to deliver the targeted assistance that protects as many incomes as possible. As of yesterday, over 19,000 payments of £10,000 have been issued to small businesses, totalling £190 million. We have received over 3000 applications for the recently opened £25,000 scheme, with over 800 payments already having been made.

Be in no doubt that we are truly in uncharted waters, and normal rules no longer apply. By effectively putting our economy into deep freeze, and allowing employers to retain staff by furloughing them, we have ushered many businesses away from failure. However, there is a direct link between the population's health and the health of the economy. The longer that people are away from the

workplace, the greater the impact will be on the economy. Crucially, however, that significant Government intervention will also assist recovery. Businesses can ramp up much more quickly when they retain their workforce and institutional knowledge.

We are prepared for the possibility that the economic recovery will not be as rapid as the decline. Government, both nationally and locally, will again need to support businesses across various sectors. However, I believe in Northern Ireland's business community. Many businesses faced the economic downturn in 2008 and emerged more efficient. Today, they are adapting once more by demonstrating agility and resilience in the face of adversity. They have stepped up to the challenge by doing what is necessary. Some companies have repurposed production lines in order to build ventilators, others are importing personal protective equipment (PPE) and others have found new ways to reach and support customers.

There is no such thing as a non-essential business in a modern economy. The importance of interconnected supply chains and support networks has demonstrated our reliance on those who produce and sell food, keep the lights on and keep freight moving. New business models are already beginning to emerge as a result of the disruption. Many companies have become more local and less global in the short to medium term.

Our daily work patterns are transforming. We have all become much more accustomed to working remotely, using technology to hold video conferences and conducting business without the need to travel. Many who are preparing to join the workforce are now learning from home. Further education colleges and universities are delivering support to students through virtual and remote learning. That is essential because a fully skilled workforce will form part of the foundation of recovery. This week, I announced that we have removed the 25% employer contribution to Skills Focus. That will allow furloughed staff to gain accredited qualifications and return to work upskilled.

Yesterday, my Department launched a pilot postgraduate course in software development with Queen's University, offering a fully funded part-time course for individuals whose careers have been impacted by COVID-19. My Department has also partnered with the Open University to provide online learning that is free for workers. While this year it is impossible for our further and higher education students to sit exams in a conventional way, it is good that arrangements are in place for them to receive their qualifications and move forward into the workplace or go on to further study. We will need their skills when the time comes.

The darkest days of this economic disaster are not at all behind us yet. We still need to help businesses survive and incomes must be protected, but we also need to start plotting a course to recovery. This week, the Executive announced that they would match-fund £562 million for city and growth deals and £55 million for the inclusive futures fund. We will also provide up to an additional £100 million for complementary projects in other areas outside the north-west. This is a crucial injection of funding for all regions of Northern Ireland. Under the four city and growth deals, my Department will play a central role in delivering this investment.

We will support important new projects in innovation, the digital economy, skills and tourism. Set alongside the UK investment, this raises the funding for the Belfast area to £700 million, while mid, south and west is £252 million. Funding for the north-west is £210 million and £72 million for Causeway coast and glens. Not only is this investment essential as we rebuild, it will continue to boost our economy over the next decade.

While I remain firmly focused on today, I am also looking at tomorrow. I am working closely with our business community, our hospitality sector and tourism industry to help them take the first steps to recovery. I have been in discussions with representatives of business about how we can get things moving again by supporting businesses that can work safely to get back to work. I am re-establishing the economic advisory group that was previously in place to advise my predecessors.

I want to ensure that we concentrate on rebuilding an economy that focuses on the areas where we are genuinely world-class, such as tourism, where the greatest opportunities for our young people lie. I have set up the tourism recovery steering group to bring the most influential figures in that sector together to begin the process of bringing their industry back to where it needs to be. Yesterday, I sat in on the first meeting of the tourism working group, established for the sector to identify the key issues that the steering group will need to address.

Yes, our focus is still on fighting the most immediate and severest impact of this crisis, but it is important that we also start to get the economy moving again and, gradually, see people safely return

to work. The truth is that we do not know for certain how long this disruption will last, but we simply cannot shut the economy down, for a significant period of time, without suffering catastrophic consequences.

We stand ready to facilitate a safe return to work when the time is right. This should not be viewed as a trade-off between people's health and the economy. The two are inextricably linked and it is important that the Government, business and the wider society recognises and accepts that. I will continue to support our economy through this period of adversity but I also pledge to do all that I can to restore its confidence. That is why we need to be decisive in our policy choices, adapt to the new global business environment quickly and focus on the sectors where Northern Ireland can genuinely be a world leader. **1.45 pm**

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs):** I thank the Minister for her statement. There will now be a period, lasting approximately an hour, of questions. I remind Members of what I said at the start of the meeting: they should not preface their question with a statement or a speech but be concise. There will be an opportunity to ask a supplementary question, and, provided Members cooperate, I will afford them that opportunity; otherwise, I may have to go on. Finally, I also encourage the Minister to give concise, focused answers to Members' questions.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy will, as normal, be given some additional latitude.

**Dr Archibald (Committee Chair - Committee for the Economy):** I thank the Minister for her statement and for the update. The announcement of the hardship fund this week was welcome. Businesses may have been hoping for more detail on the eligibility criteria, so they may be a bit disappointed.

I would like to reiterate some of the gaps in the schemes announced to date. The grant support has been really welcome, but we heard from the chambers of commerce yesterday, particularly hospitality and retail businesses that are above the net asset value (NAV) of £51,000 and have been unable to access support. Obviously, work is going on on further rate relief, but those businesses highlight the need for cash support right now.

Secondly, in a statement last week, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC) wrote to the First Ministers and to the Taoiseach about the need for all-Ireland cooperation and coordination in planning for the recovery. In her statement, the Minister mentioned the re-establishment of the Economic Advisory Group. Has she contacted Departments in the South about coordinating that work and potentially setting up an all-Ireland advisory group on recovery?

**Mrs Dodds:** I thank the Chairperson for her questions and for her cooperation in our work to support the economy. We have weekly conversations about the work of the Department and the support that the Committee can give in encouraging and in discussing the issues.

First, I am really pleased that we have secured a further £40 million from the Executive for the hardship fund. At the start of next week, I will set out the full criteria for the fund, which will be targeted at small businesses and microbusinesses, those that employ between one and nine people who are paid through a pay-as-you-earn (PAYE) scheme. It will be open to small businesses and microbusinesses, to social economy businesses and to charities that are trading institutions. I will set out the full detail next week. Currently, Invest NI is building the portal so that we can get it online as early as we can, because we anticipate significant demand. We have set some rules for it: if you have qualified for the £10k or the £25k grants, it would be inappropriate for you to be doubly funded while other businesses are not funded. Therefore, there are some rules concerning that issue. That will be out next week. I hope that it will be of benefit to small businesses, particularly to small, emerging businesses and start-ups, which have had a fairly difficult time, particularly those who started their business very recently.

As for gaps in the scheme, such schemes will never cover everybody. The business community is very wide and diverse and encompasses a huge section of businesses. We used the rates system, because we could easily identify businesses in the first instance. We extended the £10k scheme to include small derated businesses and are now working our way through the £25k scheme. As I promised the House, I have ensured that we pay businesses in the £25k scheme as quickly as we can verify their applications. We need to ensure that applications are verified and we pay businesses as

quickly as possible. From memory, I think that we have over 3,000 applications to the £25k scheme, and over 800 of those have been paid in the two weeks since the scheme launched.

In terms of businesses that fall through the gaps in current funding schemes, one way that we can support business is through the rates system. In Northern Ireland, the Executive have already approved three months' rate relief for everybody. In England, Scotland or Wales, rate relief for business is targeted only at businesses in tourism, leisure and hospitality. Therefore, we have ensured that more people in the first three months have benefited from rate relief. I have said in the Chamber before and say again that it is my personal view that extending the rate relief so that it matches other parts of the United Kingdom is incredibly important and will be useful. However, I also recognise the problem that the Finance Minister and the Executive have, in that we have a limited amount of money that has to be targeted.

I apologise, but I want to give full answers to these questions; they are on important issues that will come up again. This week, I had a conference call with the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the Finance Minister and Ulster University. They are working on how we might extend rate relief in Northern Ireland, and it is important work. The Finance Minister will bring a paper on that in due course.

In planning for recovery, I have tried to re-energise the Economic Advisory Group that is part of my Department and was there under all of my predecessors. We are looking at a range of people for that — no names; no one has been appointed — including people whom I met when I went to New York and Washington a few weeks ago. We are trying to establish a group to look not just at Northern Ireland businesses but at the wider global environment that Northern Ireland will be part of and has to compete in. We have our east coast economic advisory group, and we will try to bring it into that.

I am very happy to cooperate with our neighbours in the Republic of Ireland; that is not a problem for me. There are very well identified cross-border bodies for that sort of work.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs):** Does the Chair of the Committee wish to ask a brief supplementary question with a brief answer?

**Dr Archibald:** A brief supplementary, go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Minister, thank you very much for that comprehensive answer. I just want to pick up briefly on the point about microbusinesses that will be able to access funding. You mentioned that they needed to be businesses that pay through PAYE. I would just highlight, as you said about start-ups, that self-employed people who have started up in the last year are unable to access the income support scheme. Perhaps they could be looked at as part of the hardship fund.

**Mrs Dodds:** They can be, if they are paid through their business, but, if they are self-employed, that is an entirely different category. If they are paid through their business, yes.

**Mr Middleton:** I thank the Minister for her statement. She will be aware that the Economy Committee heard from four chambers of commerce yesterday. A number of issues were raised, but they were thankful for the support that has been provided. One key issue is the job retention scheme and the furloughing of staff. Will the Minister assure them that we will look at, maybe, tapering that scheme as we go forward? Some businesses will open sooner rather than later, and they need support to ensure that they can keep people on the scheme.

**Mrs Dodds:** The job retention scheme is a national scheme. It is a reserved matter, and it is run by the Chancellor. This week, however, I have had two conversations with Minister Zahawi and the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, Alok Sharma, and, in those conversations, I have highlighted to them the need to avoid that cliff edge as the job retention scheme comes to an end. We cannot and should not expect the Government to continue to intervene in the way that they currently are, but nor can we have the cliff edge and, therefore, the mass redundancies that that might bring if the job retention scheme is suddenly cut at a particular point.

I am comforted — I think that that is the word — by some of the Chancellor's words, which recognise the issue. Certainly, however, from the conversations that I have had with local companies, I think it would be difficult to have a stark cut-off date for that scheme. I will continue to work with the Government to do that and make those representations at the highest level.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs):** Again, I remind everyone that approximately 20 more members wish to ask questions and receive an answer. I will allow a quick supplementary, and I ask you, Minister, to give a quick answer.

**Mr Middleton:** Time is of the essence, and businesses are under severe pressure. Will she ensure that that situation is addressed as soon as possible with the UK Government?

**Mrs Dodds:** I will. As I said, it is part of an ongoing conversation that I am having. Perhaps, the House would like to know that, as a devolved Administration, we have had possibly unprecedented access to UK Government Ministers over the period of the crisis. Just yesterday, I spoke to, I think, four of them. Earlier in the week, we had a teleconference between many of the major business organisations and representatives in Northern Ireland, Mr Zahawi and the Northern Ireland Office, all reiterating those points.

**Ms McLaughlin:** I thank the Minister for her statement. She mentioned the importance of interconnected supply chains and support networks and talked about her focus on the future. Does her Department have more or fewer officials working on preparations for the ending of the transitional arrangements with the EU than it did, for example, six months ago? Will she assure the Assembly that her Department is fully prepared for the end of the transition period?

**Mrs Dodds:** I know that the member will understand that, over the last number of weeks, the Department has been incredibly focused on COVID-19 issues, on how we might preserve life and keep the economy in some shape of readiness for a return to work. A lot of my officials have been doing an enormous amount of work, and I want to publicly thank them for that. They have taken a lot of strain in relation to this issue. We continue to have a dedicated unit of officials who are working on EU exit matters. I was engaging with them on a number of issues this week, and we will continue to engage as this progresses.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs):** The member slipped two questions in there.

**Mr Stewart:** I thank the Minister for her statement. I especially welcome the hardship grant and look forward to the details of that.

Around 19,000 companies have received the £10,000 grant to date, which is great, but thousands remain to get it. Will the Minister confirm either that those companies will receive that money before the 20 May deadline or that the deadline will be cancelled so that they can get some clarity?

**Mrs Dodds:** 20 May is not a deadline to pay; it is simply a deadline to close the schemes. The scheme for the £10,000 and the £25,000 grants will close on 20 May, and I encourage all members to make it widely known in their constituency that the schemes are still available and will be open for companies to apply to them.

**Mr Stewart:** I appreciate that, but many of those businesses are finding it difficult to see whether their application has been submitted or is being progressed because there is no dedicated helpline. Will the Minister look at the opportunity for an appeal mechanism for companies that have been turned down? On the back of the portal being launched last week, quite a lot of companies have been unable to avail themselves of the scheme. Even though they seem to meet all the criteria, they have been told that they are ineligible and have no right of reply.

**Mrs Dodds:** I certainly will. It is not a scheme to exclude people; it is a scheme to include people. I want as many as possible. My stats tell me that just over 19,000 grants of £10,000 have been paid out, out of just over 21,000 applications.

**Mr Muir:** I thank the Minister for her statement. One of my concerns about the economic crisis that we are enduring is the impact on young people. Young people were hit very hard as a result of the last crisis in 2008 and onwards, and now they are being hit hard here. We see projections of very high levels of unemployment. What engagement has the Minister had with stakeholders on that issue? Is she considering designing a specific intervention package such as the Future Jobs Fund?

**Mrs Dodds:** Thank you for that very important question. It is hugely important that we are mindful that many of the people who were most impacted by the economic crisis following 2008, 2009 were young

people who could not get employment, young graduates who could not get appropriate levels of employment and so on. That is absolutely at the top of my agenda.

I am in regular contact with our two universities and all the further education colleges; in fact, I was at the Southern Regional College's Lurgan campus this week, looking at how young people and staff are making visors and really helping out and being very proactive in doing so in the health emergency. I have made provision for them through the payment of their education maintenance allowances (EMA) and training allowances etc. We have continued to pay training providers for young people who are not in the colleges because we want to make sure that they are still in place and are able to continue to train and provide for young people.

I have spoken to and taken calls from university student representatives. I have proposed a further extension of the student hardship fund. That paper, again, awaits further consideration from the Executive.

Training is really important at this time. One of our companies has just completed an online academy for the financial services sector. I continuously promote work that will help us to upskill people — young, not so young and everybody else — and get them back into work after this time. This week, we were exploring more online academies for young people to try to make sure that they have the right skills to get back into the workplace at the right time.

**Mr Muir:** I thank the Minister for her detailed response. It is important that a package is put together, similar to that put together in 2008-09 for young people.

Is the Minister prepared to explore the lifting of the cap for Northern Ireland students? We have already seen forecasts that the number of international students will drop. There is a likelihood that students from Northern Ireland will want to study locally. Can we consider how to support our universities on that?

**Mrs Dodds:** That is another really important issue. In Northern Ireland, we have two universities that we can be very proud of. Just last weekend, the universities package came out from the Minister and the Secretary of State nationally. As I said in my press statement, I have some reservations about that package. There are admissions criteria that are possibly not that advantageous to universities in Northern Ireland.

We need to ensure that our universities have really good access to research funding, so that we can provide the good, qualitative research that not only enhances university and academic life but drives our economy. Many companies come to Northern Ireland because of that, so I have been doing work around that. Members will be interested to know that I had a long conversation with Minister Donelan and Minister Solloway yesterday, who have education responsibilities, around how Northern Ireland can be part of all of those research funds and, in particular, have access to research funding, going forward.

I have had conversations with both universities around admissions and around the importance of international students in bringing them much-needed financial resources, so that has been on our agenda as well. The lifting of the cap is a huge issue for Northern Ireland, and we would need to look at it in the context of an overall strategic review of university funding and university places. I see it not as a short-term issue but as a much longer-term issue in the strategic review.

**Mr Dunne:** I thank the Minister for her efforts to date in supporting the local economy through this terrible crisis. In relation to grant funding — something that, I think, a lot of members have been very active on recently — the issue that comes up regularly is support for multiple sites or multiple units of locally owned businesses in Northern Ireland. Can we get some indication of the possibility of extending the £10,000 grant or the £25,000 grant to support multiple units? I understand that, in Scotland, there is an incremental scheme, going first of all on full payment and then —

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs):** The Member has asked his question. He may get a supplementary.

**Mr Dunne:** — second —

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs):** Minister.

**Mr Dunne:** — and also in England.

**Mrs Dodds:** Of course, I am very alive to the issue of one business having multiple sites, but the decision was taken by the Executive, in order to get money to as many businesses as possible, that it would be one grant per business, as opposed to one grant per outlet. However, it is, of course, an issue that, should further funding become available, we can always consider.

**Mr Dunne:** Following on in relation to the grants and the grant that was announced last week, can we get some further clarification of the £10,000 grant that is for sub-rented properties? There seems to be a lot of difficulty for people in getting access to it, because the criteria are too complex. The NAV limit is, I believe, less than £1,590, which is not much good to most people out there. I ask that that be reviewed if possible, please.

**Mrs Dodds:** I can write to the member specifically on that issue. He is right that it is a more complex issue. Last week, we put an additional page on the portal so that businesses that rent their properties from a landlord could access the funding much more easily, as opposed to the landlord in any way getting the £10,000. It is about trying to get money to real businesses in real time and as promptly as possible.

**Ms Dillon:** I thank the Minister for her statement. I was wondering if she could confirm whether the £10,000 grant scheme could be extended to engineering and manufacturing firms that currently do not qualify because of their NAV.

**Mrs Dodds:** The £10,000 grant scheme has been extended to businesses that currently benefit from industrial derating, so, in a way, there has been a major extension of the scheme. We think that that brings about 2,500 to 3,000 more businesses into the scheme, so it has already been extended. I have no hesitation in saying that we have already done work to identify other cohorts of businesses that could benefit from support, were more money to become available, but it will be around the amount of money that the Executive make available for the project.

As we speak, around £410 million for that type of support has been brought forward. While the scheme has been very valuable to businesses, we must look at what businesses will need in order to recover and at the support that we will need to help the economy recover and get businesses back on their feet. My conversations at the tourism steering group meeting yesterday would indicate that there is a lot of work to be done on that.

**Ms Dillon:** I appreciate the fact that the scheme was extended to manufacturing businesses that qualify for industrial derating. That has certainly been helpful to me in my constituency of Mid Ulster. However, I ask that the Minister look at extending the scheme to businesses that are small in nature but have a larger NAV due to the nature of their business. There is a large engineering industry in Mid Ulster in particular. We have the largest number of VAT-registered businesses outside Belfast city. Those are indigenous businesses. They are not going anywhere. They are not global companies or foreign direct investment but businesses that grew during times that were very difficult, so —

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs):** The member has asked her question.

**Ms Dillon:** — we need that west of the Bann.

**Mrs Dodds:** Those are businesses that probably fall into the £15,000 to £51,000 category. Yes, we have done work to identify those businesses, and, if money were to become available, they would potentially come under a second tier of the hardship fund that we could bring forward relatively easily.

**Mr K Buchanan:** I thank the Minister for her statement. My question relates to tourism, on which you spoke briefly. Can you give us an update on what support you will give the industry across Northern Ireland?

**Mrs Dodds:** It is really hard to quantify the impact of COVID-19 on the tourism industry. I keep saying this, and I sometimes have to remind myself: just a few short weeks ago, I was in New York and Washington DC talking to tour operators. We were talking about expanding our tourism offering and expanding the Northern Ireland tourism market in North America. Today, we have no connecting flights anywhere on the island to that destination. The impact of people not coming to Northern Ireland

from the Far East for particular reasons, be it 'Game of Thrones' or whatever, has been devastating. Our cruise industry through Belfast harbour has been devastated as well.

At home, many small local businesses have been equally devastated. Many of those businesses in the tourism sector will therefore have been able to avail themselves of the £10,000 grant. The £25,000 grant is specifically directed at the tourism sector, so, no matter what element of the tourism sector you are part of, if your NAV falls within the aforementioned limits, you can apply for that grant, because it is specifically directed at you. I know that some of the work that the Finance Minister has been doing on rates extension applies specifically to the tourism industry. If we are to get real and meaningful help to some of the bigger operators who have large investments in tourism in Northern Ireland, that is one of the ways in which we can do so.

We also have set up a tourism steering group. That is quite a wide-ranging body, encompassing a lot of the tourism and hospitality industry. Yesterday, I chaired the first of its small working group meetings. It will be run for us by Tourism NI, with John McGrillen, its chief executive, taking it forward. It will identify the supports that will be needed for us to take tourism back to where it needs to be. It is time to rebuild it. Tourism is a hugely important industry for Northern Ireland. It provides 65,000 jobs, and, last year, it brought £1 billion into the economy.

**Mr Beggs:** I call Keith Buchanan for a supplementary. We need concise questions and answers.

**Mr K Buchanan:** There are not many caravan parks in mid-Ulster, as I am sure you are aware, but there are some around the north coast that fall outside the rateable value of £51,000 and, therefore, get no support. Has the Minister been in communication with that caravanning sector about it getting additional support based on the fact that their rateable value is above £51,000?

**Mrs Dodds:** I have had numerous conversations with some of the owners. Caravan parks are, essentially, private businesses, and they will fall into that tourism and hospitality sector, so, if there is further targeted rates relief, they will fall into that as well.

**Mr Boylan:** I thank the Minister for the statement. On the matter of some businesses reopening and a phased return to work, will the Minister issue sector-specific guidance to businesses that are client-facing such as dentists, hairdressers and the taxi industry so that, when they return, they can operate safely?

**Mrs Dodds:** I thank the member for a very pertinent and topical question. Over the past two weeks, I and my Department have been working with the BEIS Department in London on working-safer plans so that, when the restrictions are lifted and we are ready to return, there will be plans in place for various sectors in that working-safer environment. Of course, as they are published nationally, we will bring those back to Northern Ireland and look at them in the context in which we operate here. So, yes, it is very, very much on my mind, and it is something that my Department's officials have been working on. It is work that we continue to do in preparation for restarting, rebooting and recovering this economy.

**Mr Boylan:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Following on from some of the things that she said in her statement, we welcome all the grants and all the support, but the taxi industry is one of the industries that has been crying out for support. It feels that it is being hit hard. Is there anything in the hardship fund or other grants that the Minister can outline today that would support the taxi industry?

**Mrs Dodds:** Thank you. Yes, I recognise that. It is very difficult for industries such as taxiing in the current environment. If employees work for a small company and are paid through a PAYE scheme, the hardship grant will be applicable to them and they will be able to apply for it. However, each one will have to be assessed against the criteria to see whether they are eligible or not.

**Mr O'Toole:** Thanks to the Minister for coming and giving us an update today. I appreciate everything that she said about the road to recovery and the importance of engaging with business in various sectors for that recovery. She specifically mentioned the durability of supply chains, and she specifically mentioned hauliers. In her engagement with various business groups, have any of them indicated to her that they would prefer the UK to crash out of the transition period without a deal over an extension to that transition period?

**Mrs Dodds:** My conversation with hauliers at this particular time, for the member's information, has been consistently around the need to ensure safe supply chains for Northern Ireland to secure vital supplies of food and medicine and other supply chain imperatives. That has been my most recent conversation.

This week and, in fact, tomorrow, I will again be discussing with the Department for Transport in London a package for hauliers. We have been successful in doing a lot of work on trying to stabilise airports and airlines. We have worked quite hard around the ferries issue, and the outstanding bit of the jigsaw puzzle is the issue around hauliers. I assure the member that, at this time, the fact that they are operating at a huge loss is uppermost in their minds.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs):** I remind members that this is the COVID-19 Ad Hoc Committee.

**Mr Butler:** Minister, thank you for your words today and for your efforts and those of your Department and, indeed, the entire Executive in trying to help local businesses. You stated that businesses have adapted once more, demonstrating agility and resilience in the face of adversity. They have stepped up to the challenge by doing what is necessary. We are now four to five weeks post-application for financial assistance to businesses. Can the Minister outline any thoughts or actions that her Department has had in adapting and demonstrating that same agility to refine and improve the processing system, to make it much more informative and live and to give real-time information to the many thousands of businesses that have not yet received financial assistance?

**Mrs Dodds:** I thank the member for his question, and I also thank the House in general for the support that is forthcoming. These are difficult days and many of my officials have been working very hard on these issues.

Many of the schemes have been implemented very quickly. The essence of our mission was to get money to businesses as quickly as we could. We may not have been as informative as we could have been — I accept that — and perhaps we can remedy that. It would be useful to share with members some of the stats around where we are with the economy, so that they will know the steep path that we need to climb to economic recovery, and that is hugely important.

The Northern Ireland Business Info website has a wealth of information on all of the help that is available. Invest NI has been tasked with making sure that that is up-to-date, and it has also been conducting webinars with businesses encountering difficulties to explain the various schemes and to try and get them up and running. I have been absolutely clear and upfront with the House about the number of grants applied for and paid, the dates when those grants will end, and how we go forward.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs):** I call Robbie Butler for a brief supplementary.

**Mr Butler:** Thank you, Minister, and thank you for saying that you would take a look at that. What plans have you made to support those companies with a Net Annual Value (NAV) of over £50,000, or more than 15 employees, that at this point have been excluded from all government assistance?

**Mrs Dodds:** Again, and as I have said to the House many times, I think that for many of those large companies, extending rates relief, particularly in the tourism and hospitality sector, But of course those companies have also benefited from the national job retention scheme, where many of them will have workers furloughed. Some of our statistics show that many companies have 70% to 80% of their workforce furloughed through those schemes.

Yesterday, I spoke to some of our leading banking institutions and I asked them how some of the loan schemes from Government were going. The original coronavirus business interruption loan scheme (CBILS) had quite significant difficulties, but I am assured that, given the modifications that were made by the Chancellor, much more money is going back out into the business community very quickly. One of the banking institutions that I talked to yesterday, had received, since Monday, 1,100 applications for the bounce back loan, the loan for small and medium-sized enterprises. Of those, 600 were approved by Wednesday and, of course, they are 100% guaranteed by Government, with no interest for a year. Many of our businesses are benefiting in different ways.

**Mr Givan:** Thank you Minister for coming to the Assembly today. In terms of the planning for restarting the economy and businesses knowing when they can start to engage again in their activity, some businesses that are allowed to do so by the regulations are already reopening. Does the Minister

agree that we need to provide information, as soon as possible, to business owners to facilitate that decision-making processes?

**Mrs Dodds:** Yes, is the short answer. If I am permitted a longer answer, yes of course we do. As I have already referenced, I have been working with BEIS in London around safer work spaces. In Northern Ireland we are a little bit ahead of the curve, and we already have some guidance from the engagement forum chaired by the Labour Relations Agency, which brings together trade unions and businesses to set out good, practical advice and guidance on how to work safely.

The Health and Safety Executive and the Public Health Agency have also continued to work with businesses to advise them and enable them to get back to work and to work safely, particularly within the social distancing guidelines. It is worth using this platform to say to those to employers who are going back to work that it is imperative that the workplace is safe and that social-distancing guidelines are met and kept.

**Mr Givan:** Thank you, Minister, for that response. You indicated that the financial scheme is being administered through the rate system, and I appreciate and understand why that was the case at the start, which was to allow people to get money out. But there are businesses that are falling through the cracks because that scheme is being used. Can the Minister assure those businesses that there will be support for them when they are identified as legitimate businesses that are operating in Northern Ireland?

**Mrs Dodds:** I of course want to support legitimate businesses operating in Northern Ireland. That is a fundamental for me. As I said before, there are many and varied businesses in the Northern Ireland business community. We used the rates scheme because identifying those businesses and getting money out to them etc was easier. We have extended those schemes in certain ways, and next week we will launch a hardship scheme as well. My Department is continuously working to identify other cohorts of businesses, but, as you will realise, we live in an environment where we have a limited number of financial resources, and I will continue to make the case to the Executive for continued support for many of those businesses.

**Ms C Kelly:** Does the Minister agree that her Department must prioritise rural broadband improvements in order to ensure that workers can work from home in these unprecedented times?

**Mrs Dodds:** I am absolutely passionate about ensuring that broadband is brought up to speed in Northern Ireland. Just a few weeks ago, we got confirmation that another tranche of the confidence and supply money would be made available to the Executive to use for Project Stratum. The good news is that we now have two bids in for that project. I have no part in this, obviously, but those bids will be assessed, and if there is someone who is suitable, we hope that we will award a contract in the reasonably near future — certainly, by September we will get to contract-award point. It will then take some time for assessments and for it to go out to delivery on the ground. This is a very important project for Northern Ireland.

One of the things that COVID-19 has taught us is that we will, potentially, do business differently to how we have done it before. Many of us, even old technophobes like me, have become proficient in Zoom and Microsoft Teams and all sorts of things that we never thought we would use. We will not do business in the same way again. Connectivity will be key.

**Ms C Kelly:** I thank the Minister for her answer. She will be aware of the campaign advocating for an all-Ireland right to connectivity. That campaign calls on internet providers to open up all hotspots cost free and to waive the prohibitive charges for households that are unable to access a decent broadband connection. Will the Minister support that campaign?

**Mrs Dodds:** I do not have the details of that particular campaign, but it, clearly, is out there and is very well known. I will write to the member shortly outlining all the different schemes that we have to try to improve rural broadband connectivity in the medium to short term. I will write with details of all those schemes — it is quite an impressive list.

**Ms Bradshaw:** Thank you Minister for coming to the Chamber. I declare an interest at the outset as my husband stood down from Northern Ireland Screen's board in the last year. I note that today, the chief executive has issued a statement that set out the impact on that sector in stark terms. What will your Department do to support them now and in the future?

**Mrs Dodds:** I have had conversations with the chair and chief executive of Northern Ireland Screen. They recently put proposals to the Department for some re-profiling of their budget in order to go out and help some of the independent people who work in the sector and others to help young people with digital improvements that they can make to their skills. We are working with Northern Ireland Screen. That is where their latest proposal is, and we will look on that favourably.

The TV and film industry brings an enormous amount to Northern Ireland not just in money into the economy but in international renown. Many of us have followed the series that have been made in Northern Ireland. I want to see that capacity preserved, and I want to see Northern Ireland, once again, producing really quality programmes for us all to enjoy.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs):** I call Paula Bradshaw for a supplementary.

**Ms Bradshaw:** No, thank you. I am satisfied with the answer.

**Mr Frew:** I thank the Minister for coming to the Committee to give that statement. The Minister stated that it is important to "keep the lights on". Will the Minister provide an update on the troubling news in Northern Ireland Electricity Networks that they are in negotiations with staff and unions to put them onto a four-day week with a 20% reduction in pay? Will the Minister also give an update on the ongoing troublesome issue with the System Operator for Northern Ireland (SONI) and its governance and independence?

**Mrs Dodds:** I thank the member for his continued interest in those issues. You are right around the issue of a reduction to a four-day week. In Northern Ireland, the current amount of electricity that we use is reduced by about 20% because manufacturing is not operating at its usual level. That is a difficulty and may well prove a difficulty, as the member knows because of his interest in the area, for the price of electricity as we go forward. That is something for us all to be very concerned about.

Of course, I am concerned about any reduction in workers' salaries, wages or terms and conditions of employment. I understand that this is still a matter of negotiation with the unions, and it is something that I do not want to be specific about.

I have been monitoring the SONI issue very closely. I want to see an independent system in Northern Ireland. I continue to liaise with the Utility Regulator in that and in the work that she is doing. It is something that I will keep a consistent eye on and something that is important to the governance of the energy market, going forward.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs):** The Member has asked his two questions. I call John O'Dowd.

**Mr O'Dowd:** There is an important section of our society that is missing from your statement, Minister: students and the support for them, moving forward. I note from comments by your officials at last week's Committee for the Economy meeting that you are re-profiling your business plan. You noted at the start of your statement that things had not gone the way you would have hoped, so are there savings to be identified in your Department. If there are, will you direct some of them towards the student hardship fund?

**Mrs Dodds:** I thank the member for his continued interest in the issue. As I outlined to our colleague, I have been taking a strong interest in the issues of students, not just their education but their welfare while they are at university. As with all Departments, we will look to where we can make savings, to what we can re-profile and to how we can make the best of where we are. That is in terms of continuing mitigations but also in support and recovery mode. That work is ongoing and will come to fruition with the June monitoring round, which is not that far off. However, in the meantime, I thought that it was prudent that I alert Executive colleagues to the issue. I have sent a paper to the Executive that outlines that, if we had another £2.5 million, that would double the support that we give to the student hardship fund and would bring us into line with Scotland and other parts of the United Kingdom. So far, that bid has not been successful, but I assure the member that I will continue to press it.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I welcome the fact that the matter is still on the Minister's radar and, hopefully, will be dealt with. In relation to another matter in the Minister's statement — the Economic Advisory Group — will the Minister commit to placing a member of the trade union movement on that group? Representatives of workers will be as important as any other voice in rejuvenating our economy.

**Mrs Dodds:** I absolutely agree that we always need to work with our social partners and trade unions in our community. As yet, the Economic Advisory Group has not been formed. I do not have a list of members for it at this minute in time. However, my vision for it is a group of people who are world leaders in their sector and can tell us how to drive those sectors forward. We have a world-leading, cutting-edge cybersecurity sector in Northern Ireland. I want the advice, guidance and so on from people who can really drive those sectors forward. They will make the difference in providing not just more jobs but better jobs for Northern Ireland, which will keep young graduates in work and keep our economy turning over. That is my vision for it, but I do not want it to be just Northern Ireland-specific; I want it to look at the more global pattern. That is why, when I was in the States in March, we re-established the east coast advisory council, which is made up of key businessmen who are part of the Northern Ireland diaspora. They have done well in the United States and are keen to help economic development at home. That is my vision for the Economic Advisory Group. I want us to use its expertise and help us build the leading-edge businesses that will drive the economy forward. That will feed into some important work that we have to do before the end of the mandate to provide a good economic strategy to drive the Northern Ireland economy for the future.

**Mr McGrath:** Many self-employed businesspeople will have furloughed their staff and paid their bills, but, because there is no business, they are not getting an income themselves. Can the Minister detail any conversations that she has had with London to get assurances that that scheme will pay out soon? Those people have gone for weeks and weeks without any money, and they are desperate.

**Mrs Dodds:** That is something that I bring up regularly in my conversations with BEIS Ministers and, indeed, in some wider telephone calls with the Chancellor. There is a particular issue that some of those people have been at the back end of the queue. In fairness, we have to admit that the job retention scheme is an absolutely massive undertaking for HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC). Some firms who applied to it have told me that they literally had the money in their bank account six days later, which is an absolutely phenomenal achievement. I now understand that HMRC is writing out to self-employed people who are eligible for the scheme and that it is well under way. Be assured that it is something that I am cognisant of and will continue to make representation about.

**Mr McGrath:** Given the destructive impact of COVID-19 on those businesses, does the Minister agree that it will place an impossible burden on them if we crash out of the EU with no deal?

**Mrs Dodds:** Most businesses in Northern Ireland are fearful for the future. They worry about the impact of COVID-19 and about where the market will be as they try to re-establish and recover, and that goes for all sectors of the economy. At this moment in time, there are ongoing negotiations with the European Union. My understanding is that, last week, the Specialised Committee met and discussed some of the issues that were particular to Northern Ireland and those negotiations are ongoing. It is way too premature to talk of anything else.

**Miss Woods:** I thank the Minister for coming here to make a statement. I note that you have stated that the top priority is still the protection of life. In light of that, can the Minister provide any clarity on what is deemed by the Executive to be a priority sector for the purposes of construction, as stated on the list of priority business sectors that was published by the Department for the Economy on 20 April?

**Mrs Dodds:** It is very simple. The most important thing that the Executive have tried to do is to save life and protect people from the impact of COVID-19. It has been devastating, and there are many families in Northern Ireland who have felt the pain of COVID-19. I am clear that, whatever the sector, if that sector is working, if that firm is working, employers have a duty to employees to maintain a safe working environment. We have published advice on the website about that safe working environment. If there are still questions from employers about what that looks like, the Public Health Agency and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) will absolutely engage with those employers in order to make sure that they have a safe working environment. That is an absolute imperative. It is worth noting that many of our employers, particularly in the food industry, have gone to enormous lengths and a lot of expense to ensure that they have provided a safe working environment not just in physical measures but in reorientating shifts, clock-ons and canteen arrangements in their factory et cetera. That will become the new normal. It will be things that we will have to do for a significant time to come, and we all need to be cognisant of that.

**Miss Woods:** Can the Minister clarify how the construction industry is supposed to adequately socially distance while working on a building site? If that cannot be achieved, where possible, or to the best of their ability, as it is in the guidance, can the Minister confirm that it means that workers should not be there, given the health risks?

**Mrs Dodds:** As I have said to the Member, the guidance is there to help people understand what they must do. There will be more specific guidance that can be obtained by contacting the Health and Safety Executive, and all employers should attend to that.

**Mr Allister:** The Minister in her statement said:

*"we need to be decisive in our policy choices".*

When will we see that decisiveness in the reopening of our economy? She said that our economy was in the "deep freeze": is it not the case that, if we go on as we are much longer, everything in the freezer will be lost?

**Mrs Dodds:** I, of course, share the Member's concern for the economy. I have done everything I can to get help out to businesses with the funds that have been available to me. There will be £410 million in support funds available for businesses. An enormous amount of work has gone into cooperating with national Government over the job retention schemes, the self-employed schemes and the loan schemes that are available to support businesses. All of those schemes have been done with a speed of intervention that is, probably, unheard-of for government sources. However, it is absolutely imperative that we are led by the science and the medical experts who tell us about the need to save life in Northern Ireland. I am keen to see the economy restart. I have already said that, where people can work safely within the guidelines and regulations, they should do so. I will continue my work of preparation for rebooting and recovering the economy.

**Mr Allister:** Does the Minister accept that, as and when, hopefully sooner rather than later, we reopen the economy, that must be in tandem with reopening our schools, so as to provide for working parents?

**Mrs Dodds:** I accept that the reopening of schools has an impact on parents' availability for the economy. Again, we must be led by what is best for the health of people in Northern Ireland. The Executive and the Education Minister will take the view on when schools should open.

**Mr Carroll:** The Minister is aware, no doubt, that Queen's University reports potential losses of up to £80 million, and Ulster University (UU) up to £64 million, over three years. At the Economy Committee last week, the vice chancellors of both Queen's and UU forecast a significant loss of income for their institutions as a result of the coronavirus crisis. Will the Minister confirm that a tuition fee increase will not be an option considered to plug this gap?

**Mrs Dodds:** As I indicated in response to an earlier question, on the lifting of the cap on student numbers, any of those issues will be part of a much wider and more long-term review of how higher education is funded in Northern Ireland. I am on record as saying that I do not believe students should be first in line to be targeted in order to provide funding for universities. Those are long-term issues that we will take forward.

However, in the short-term, I had significant conversations, yesterday, with the Minister in London responsible for universities, research and innovation, and with the universities themselves, as to the need for a stabilisation package, potentially later this year, as they see how things work out.

**Mr Carroll:** I thank the Minister for her reply. I agree with her that we need to take a longer-term view but, in my view, that is one that should not punish or penalise students. She said in a previous answer that the Government cannot intervene in the way that it has done. In relation to this crisis, we need more Government intervention, especially around education and universities.

Does the Minister agree with me that students should not be penalised, especially as they have gone over and beyond, and have been very cooperative, in abiding by the social-distancing measures? They should not be punished in the future by having barriers placed in front of them with regard to higher education, including higher tuition fees.

**Mrs Dodds:** I have said this to the member before. I was the first in my family to go to university, and I am absolutely keen that we dismantle barriers to further and higher education provision. Education opens doors and breaks down barriers. I am keen that all members of our society benefit from it.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs):** I ask any member present who has not asked a question and wishes to do so, to rise from their chair?

**Mr Wells:** Will the Minister join with me in congratulating the staff of HMRC, who have been able to pay the salaries of over five million people within a week of the applications being lodged, and to express the thanks of many of my constituents and businesses for that? I ask her to contact her colleagues in the Treasury to ensure that the self-employed scheme is as effectively administered as the employed scheme.

**Mrs Dodds:** I thank the member for his request. I will of course pass on that message. As I said before today, it is quite phenomenal that so many have been paid. On the first day of the scheme, I think that they received 68,000 applications. Many of the Northern Ireland firms who have applied for the scheme report to me that they were paid within six days of inputting their details into the portal. That is quite a phenomenal achievement, as well as a phenomenal intervention in the economy. I look forward to the self-employed scheme being rolled out in a similar and efficient manner. I will, of course, pass on the member's acknowledgement.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs):** I call Jim Wells for a supplementary question, if he wishes to ask one.

**Mr Wells:** The honourable Member will realise that the £10,000 grant scheme was effectively administered by Land and Property Services. I pay public tribute to Tony Loughran who was the link officer between MLAs and the Department of Finance in this case. Will the Minister consider appointing someone of similar status to liaise with MLAs when dealing with the £25,000 scheme?

**Mrs Dodds:** I have had a number of enquiries in relation to the £25,000 scheme. Officials in my Department will always be happy to liaise with members directly on the issue.

**The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beggs):** I thank members and the Minister for their cooperation. That concludes questions to the Minister on this occasion.

Item 3 on the agenda is the time, date and place of our next meeting. We have received confirmation from the Justice Minister that she wishes to make her deferred statement to the Ad Hoc Committee at a meeting to be held on Thursday 14 May. Unless otherwise notified about an earlier meeting, that will be the next time that the Ad Hoc Committee will sit. Written notification confirming the time will be issued to members in due course in the usual way.

I remind members that, in the meantime, a plenary sitting of the Assembly is scheduled to take place on Tuesday 12 May and that Ministers may continue to make oral statements to the Assembly on sitting days. As you will be aware, there does not need to be considerable notice for that, so please watch out as there may be some important statements being made.

That concludes today's meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee.