



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Ad Hoc Committee on the
COVID-19 Response

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Ministerial Statement: Justice

14 May 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response

Ministerial Statement: Justice

14 May 2020

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Christopher Stalford (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr Jim Allister

Dr Caoimhe Archibald

Mr Doug Beattie

Mr John Blair

Mr Thomas Buchanan

Mr Robbie Butler

Mrs Pam Cameron

Mr Gerry Carroll

Mr Alan Chambers

Ms Linda Dillon

Mr Gordon Dunne

Mr Paul Frew

Mr Paul Givan

Ms Catherine Kelly

Mrs Naomi Long

Mr Daniel McCrossan

Mr Justin McNulty

Mr Andrew Muir

Mr John O'Dowd

Mr Matthew O'Toole

Mr Pat Sheehan

Mr Jim Wells

Miss Rachel Woods

Witnesses:

Mr Peter May

Department of Justice

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): I welcome members to this meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response.

Agenda item 1 is the minutes of the previous meeting, which was held on 7 May. Members are asked to note the minutes of proceedings, which Mr Beggs 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.

Agenda item 2 is a statement from the Minister of Justice. The Speaker received notification on 11 May that the Minister wished to make a statement to the Ad Hoc Committee at today's meeting. A

copy of the statement that the Minister intends to deliver is included in your pack at page 7. I welcome Mrs Naomi Long, the Minister of Justice, to this meeting of the Committee. I also welcome Mr Peter May, the permanent secretary in the Department of Justice, who accompanies the Minister today.

Before the Minister makes her statement, I remind members that, following it, there will be an opportunity to ask questions, not to make speeches. Members who ask short, sharp, focused questions will be invited to ask a supplementary question if they wish to do so. Members who engage in lengthy preambles may find that they will not get to put a question or, at least, a supplementary. That approach has been taken at the Ad Hoc Committee over recent weeks and has generally worked well. Therefore, I intend to continue that approach today. However, it is important that I get cooperation from members, and I will, of course, ask the Minister to give succinct answers as well.

I invite the Minister to make her statement, which should be heard by members without interruption.

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I believe that I was the first Minister to take general questions from the Assembly on COVID-19, back in March. Since then, I have engaged with Members on a range of other business, including the Second Reading of the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill, and so I very much welcome the opportunity to return to the Chamber today specifically to update members on my Department's ongoing response to the pandemic.

It has been 10 weeks since the first case of COVID-19 was identified here, and we are now in week 8 of lockdown. It would be difficult to overstate how much life has changed for all of us in that time. For some of us, that has been a change to our working patterns and social lives; for others, the change has been more permanent and profound. My thoughts are particularly with all those who have lost loved ones at this time, whether through COVID-19 or otherwise. It is never easy to lose someone we love, but even the small comforts that we can usually draw from those final moments in their company, the sense of love and support from being borne up by family and friends in our grief and the ability to pay a tribute to them with those who knew them have been denied to many families in these unprecedented circumstances. I know that, as a community, we will want to find a way to pay our respects and to acknowledge our loss when this is over.

I will come on to the work of my Department shortly, but I would first like to take the opportunity to acknowledge that lockdown is not easy. Being apart from our family, our friends and our support networks, especially at a time of crisis, is unnatural for us. It is not something that would be mandated by government except in the most extreme circumstances — such as the biggest public health emergency in living memory — and it is not something that we should sustain for any longer than is absolutely necessary. It is a measure that has been taken to save lives, but I also recognise that, in the process, it has turned many lives upside down. The economic challenge that we now face is real, but just as real is the challenge to rebuild our relationships, our families and our communities as we move forward. I hope that the Executive's planned way forward for easing lockdown, which was published on Tuesday of this week, goes some way not only to illustrate that there is light at the end of the tunnel but to reassure people that the sacrifices that we have made to date, though challenging and difficult, have slowed the spread of the virus and saved lives.

I pay tribute to everyone in the health service and all the key workers across our community who are on the front line, caring for our sick and vulnerable, working to keep our communities clean and safe, securing our critical infrastructure and ensuring that we have food in our cupboards. We owe a huge debt of gratitude to everyone who is playing their part to keep people safe and healthy throughout the pandemic.

I am enormously proud of the staff in my Department, who have been working hard to protect and sustain vital public services in such challenging circumstances. My focus and that of my Department have been on ensuring that key services are maintained, that staff and those in our care are protected and that public safety is preserved. The Department was quick to organise its response, and, within days of the World Health Organization declaring COVID-19 a global pandemic, we had stood up both our departmental operations centre and our business continuity arrangements. Both have worked well in providing evidence and analysis to support quick and clear decision-making and in identifying issues that require escalation to the Executive Office or the civil contingencies group.

The Department has also played a key role in the Executive's strategy for dealing with COVID-19. We have two work streams in the strategy. The first is ensuring the continued safety of custodial environments. Achieving that has taken a significant effort by a large number of people. I pay tribute to all staff in the Prison Service and in the Youth Justice Agency. A range of infection control measures

has been put in place in custodial environments, including precautionary isolation for new committals, of which there were 198 in the month of April, and the availability of personal protective equipment (PPE) for staff. New committals are now being tested for COVID-19 as part of the committal process.

The reduction of footfall in prisons through the suspension of visits and the introduction of virtual visits have helped, as has the temporary release of prisoners. So far, approximately 142 prisoners due for release over the next three months have been released under the scheme. Notwithstanding those releases, however, our prison population remains at almost 1,400. Taken together, the measures have meant that only one prisoner in our care has tested positive for COVID-19, and it is important to note that that individual tested positive in the community before their committal to custody. Six prison officers have tested positive for COVID-19; five were tested more than four weeks ago, and one tested positive earlier this week. Our thoughts are with them and their families as they continue their recovery.

Our second work stream in the Executive strategy is to make arrangements to respect the dignity of the deceased. That has involved two main actions for the Department. The first was to establish additional mortuary capacity through the development of a temporary resting place at Kinnegar, which, as I have said previously, is something that I could never have anticipated having to plan for in my political career. Staff in my Department, as well as partners and contractors, worked extremely hard to develop the site in a very short time. It was handed over from contractors at the end of April. It is an excellent facility but one that, I hope, we never need to use. Should it ever be needed, the PSNI has agreed to lead on its day-to-day operations. I am grateful to the Chief Constable for his willingness to undertake that role. The second action was to ensure that funeral directors had enough personal protection equipment. Despite some initial difficulties, that situation is improving, and sufficient PPE is now available for them.

While the work on prisons and on the temporary resting place is significant, it would be very remiss of me not to mention the excellent work that has taken place more widely. Staff throughout the Department have risen to the challenges and have quickly reorganised and found new ways of ensuring that key services continue to operate. A good example is the Courts and Tribunals Service, where business has been concentrated in five venues and is delivered in a range of creative ways, making the best use of IT and rota systems to ensure social distancing. That has meant that the volume of court business has reduced, and that has had an impact on the legal profession. In response, last week I introduced the interim payment scheme to provide earlier payment of legal aid fees due to solicitors and barristers. That is intended to protect their cash flow and to help to ensure that there is a viable legal aid supplier base at the end of the pandemic in order to safeguard access to justice.

I am really pleased that, as well as continuing to deliver key public services, staff have been able to continue delivering on a number of other priorities, such as the domestic abuse Bill. The Bill and the need for such legislation have been brought into stark relief in recent days. Whilst many of us see home as a safe place, for those affected by domestic abuse or violence it is often the place where they are most vulnerable to their abuser. Those already at risk have found themselves cut off from their normal support networks. In those circumstances, the vulnerability and risk of harm is even greater. Information from police indicates an increase in the reporting of incidents during the COVID-19 lockdown of almost 10%. Calls to the 24-hour domestic and sexual abuse helpline for the most recent week were around 35% higher when compared with the average weekly calls level during February. In addition to bringing forward the Bill, my Department and our partners are taking more immediate action to address the issue and to ensure that support is available and key needs are met. Some of those measures require a multi-agency operational response. That is being led by the PSNI, which, along with statutory and voluntary sector partners, meets on a weekly basis to co-ordinate action. As part of that, PSNI is engaging with 1,200 of the highest-risk victims. A dedicated team is also contacting lower- and medium-risk victims who are reporting abuse and providing them with signposting to key services and support. Greater public awareness is also important, and I have relaunched the 'See the Signs' media campaign, promoting available support routes for victims as well as encouraging police reporting. It is running on TV, radio and social media until 20 May and complements the police's 'Behind Closed Doors' social media campaign, which launched at the beginning of the lockdown period.

There has been much in the local and national media on the issues of PPE and testing. We have had a clear focus from the beginning on ensuring that our front-line staff are adequately protected. The Prison Service has worked hard to secure PPE, and sufficient supplies continue to be available. We monitor stocks across front-line areas of the Department, as well as in the PSNI, very regularly, and

sufficient supply is there. Testing has been available for front-line staff who need it from 7 April, and testing capacity has since been ramped up further. That is very welcome.

I also pay tribute to the PSNI, who have played a key role in policing the coronavirus restriction regulations brought forward by the Health Minister to limit the community transmission of COVID-19. As I said previously, I believe fundamentally in personal freedom, but I also believe in personal responsibility. If people will not take responsibility for their actions, they must be held responsible, and I am grateful to the PSNI for their key role in those difficult circumstances.

We are not yet out of the woods, and, therefore, we need to proceed with caution and care. The "Stay at home" message remains in place for us at this point. Nonetheless, as the First Minister and the deputy First Minister announced on Tuesday, it is right that we think ahead and plan for the next stage in a careful and considered way. Like others, my Department has started work on recovery planning. Our aim will be to manage a gradual return to more normal levels of operation, while making sure that we retain some of the positive ways of working that have been introduced in response to the current situation. Our recovery plan will take into account public health advice and the need to deliver important public services in the best way that we can. I am grateful to the Department's staff and all our partners for the positive contribution that they have made in helping to keep Northern Ireland safe and for the delivery of important public services during these most unusual and unprecedented times.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): I thank the Minister for her statement. Before I invite members to ask their questions, I must say that this is the first time that Ms Linda Dillon has been in the Chamber since the outrageous threats were made against her person. On behalf of the whole House, I want to say that we condemn those responsible and stand in solidarity with you.

I will allow a period of around an hour for questions. I remind members of what I said at the start of the meeting, which is that they should not preface their question with a speech or a statement. There will be an opportunity for supplementary questions, but that will be dependent on members abiding by those conditions.

Mr Givan (Committee Chair - Committee for Justice): At the outset, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I associate myself with your condemnation of the threats that have been issued against the Deputy Chair of the Justice Committee and, indeed, two other members of the Committee — Doug Beattie and Patsy McGlone — and Steve Aiken, another Member of the House. I condemn that threat utterly and say to those members that they have my support in carrying out their role. Similarly, I condemn the threats that were made against journalists, and I give my support to the important work that they do in carrying out their job.

I associate myself with the Minister's remarks in paying tribute to those in her Department and all of the agencies involved in the criminal justice system for the ongoing work that they are carrying out in their response to COVID-19. I am pleased that the Minister came to the House today. We suggested that she bring the statement to the Ad Hoc Committee after we called her to appear before the Justice Committee. I was disappointed that it was deferred from last week and that the Justice Committee was not advised of that deferral. Nevertheless, the Minister is here now.

In her statement, the Minister referred to "lockdown" on numerous occasions. So far, approximately 142 prisoners have been released, and a number of those had to be returned to prison for various breaches. Will the Minister advise us on whether that number has gone up, whether there is any intention to release more prisoners, or whether, given the improving situation in the Prison Service, prisoners who have been temporarily released might be returned to prison to fulfil their custodial sentence?

Mrs Long: I thank the Chairman of the Justice Committee for his comments. To clarify, my statement was postponed from last week to facilitate a statement from the First Minister and deputy First Minister, which, then, did not take place. It was postponed as a courtesy to them because they intended to make a statement to the House.

Under the terms of the early release scheme, 142 individuals have been released. Eight individuals were subsequently arrested, charged and returned to custody. It is worth noting that, during that period, a number of those individuals had not committed additional offences but had simply varied from the terms and conditions of the curfew that was attached to their release. The majority of prisoners who were released have now seen out their sentence and their time served, and so they will not be recalled at this time. However, those who were recalled will go through the normal process. If

they were caught doing something potentially illegal and there were any alleged offences, they will go through the courts in the normal way. Obviously, it would not be appropriate for me to prejudge the outcome of the court process.

As to whether further release will be needed, we do not have an improving situation as regards attendance at work in the Prison Service. At the moment, the situation is fairly static. That is not because large numbers of people are self-isolating due to symptoms but is reflective of the fact that many of the officers are unable to attend work due to their own vulnerabilities. Some are shielding or living with those who are shielding and so are unable to return to work. Testing, therefore, will have some impact on return-to-work capability but not, perhaps, as much as people would have hoped to reduce the overall numbers of people who cannot attend work on a regular basis.

As I have said before, we will have to consider in due course what options are still available to us to maintain a good ratio between prison officers and those who are committed to our care. It is worth bearing in mind that, during this period, there have been significant committals to the prison system, so it should not be assumed that numbers are dropping due to release when we have significant committals, either on remand or as a result of cases passing through the courts. So, we need to take all of that in the round and make those judgements at the appropriate time.

Mr Givan: The police will play a critical role in the various steps for moving forward that have been outlined by the Executive. What assurances can the Justice Minister give us that, in the policing of these regulations — as they will need to be amended going forward — all the decision-making processes will be quality assured so that we do not have a repetition of what happened at the start of the process, when the police needed to introduce a system to check that penalties that were issued were appropriately carried out?

I agree with the Minister on this issue: social responsibility and personal responsibility is where the focus needs to be. Policing and regulating ourselves out of this crisis will not be the most successful way. It is about all of us, individually and collectively, acting with social responsibility.

Mrs Long: I want to unpack a number of things in that question. First of all, I do not accept the Chairman's characterisation of the police's response, in the initial phases or since, in the way that he has presented it. Secondly, it is an operational matter for the police to decide how they choose to undertake their responsibilities in respect of the regulations, and it is not my responsibility, as Justice Minister, to oversee the operational decisions, nor, indeed, is it the role of the House to do so. It is a matter for the Policing Board to scrutinise the choices and decisions of the Chief Constable and his senior team.

Finally, as in all things, with great freedom comes great responsibility. As we increase the level of freedom for people to return to their normal lives, they will also have to assume more and more responsibility for their individual choices. It is hugely important that the road map set out by Executive this week did not simply set out a series of things that people could do but it set out a rationale on which people could start to apply, in their own circumstances, how to judge the safety, or otherwise, of the choices that they are making. There will, of course, still be a role for enforcement but it is also worth recognising that enforcement is the fourth "E", not the first "E" that the police use when they are dealing with these regulations. As other bodies and sectors come into play, as we move forward, other agencies will also have to take responsibility with engaging, educating, encouraging and, indeed, enforcement, whether that be in the workplace, other sectors or, on some occasions, fall to the police to continue to fulfil that role.

Ms Dillon (Committee Deputy Chair - Committee for Justice): I thank the Principal Deputy Speaker for his kind comments at the beginning of the session. I would also like to show solidarity with the other members who were threatened and, as outlined by the Chair, the journalists who were initially threatened. Everybody should be able to go about their daily work. You do not have to agree with everything that we think, say or do, but we are entitled to think, say and do it, as is everyone, without fear of intimidation. I appreciate the comments and support from across the House. Thank you.

I thank the Minister for her statement. The Department's briefing paper on the legal aid COVID-19 interim payment scheme outlined that there would be no additional costs associated and that it would be dealt with and administered from within the existing legal aid budget. We understand the reasons why you need it; I support those reasons and the Committee supported them because we want people to have access to justice. It is extremely important that all those things are kept in place, just like all other businesses. At the other end of this, we want to see that justice can still be served and that

people can still get access to it. However, we have since learned, from the Department of Finance's breakdown, that there is £0.9 million additional cost for that scheme. Can the Minister provide some detail on the discrepancy in the information that was provided to the Committee?

Mrs Long: Firstly, can I add my condemnation to that which has already been expressed in the Chamber for the absolutely disgraceful intimidation that you and other members, including Doug Beattie, Patsy McGlone and, indeed, one of my colleagues, have been subjected to. It is completely unacceptable but it shows the desperation of those who not only want to silence the press and its scrutiny but want to silence politicians who are willing to stand up for the freedom of the press. It is a sign of that desperation and it is an appalling situation that anyone thinks, in this day and age, that there is any acceptable level of threat or violence.

On legal aid, we did not say, in fairness, that it would not cost anything more, because we cannot make that prediction. We said that there was some risk attached. For example, if someone has to change their legal counsel on the way through a case, there was, obviously, a risk that some of those payments would have been made and that there may be a need to recoup or rebalance that. There will always be a little bit of uncertainty in any of these schemes but we tried to operate a scheme that fell within the original budget, in that legal aid payments are being made early, as opposed to additional. So, in order to aid cashflow, people are being paid for work that they would have been doing and will be doing in the future, as opposed to being granted money in addition to the legal aid payments that they would have received. As you will appreciate, legal aid is also unpredictable because it is demand-led, as opposed to us being able to dictate where the legal aid payments will come from.

If it is helpful, I am happy to ask the permanent secretary to home in on the differential with the Department of Finance figures. On the overall package, however, we do not see its becoming a burden on the Executive's Budget in the longer term.

Mr Peter May (Department of Justice): Thank you, Minister. The legal aid interim payment scheme is paying only for work that has already been done by solicitors and barristers. As the Minister indicated, we had to identify what the total potential risk would be in the event that some of those firms or individuals no longer continued to trade, even despite the interim payment scheme. I have not seen the specific piece of paper to which the member referred, but I think that the £0.9 million was a maximum figure. We would anticipate its being significantly less than that in practice. That would be the only additional potential cost, because it could be that, as a solicitor or barrister ceases to trade, somebody might bring in another representative and, then, have to rerun some aspects of the case that way.

Ms Dillon: Thank you. In relation to access to justice, it has been reported to me by some of the separated prisoners and their legal representatives that there are issues with them getting access to their legal representatives. Many of those issues relate to not having the same access to virtual contact in the separated regime than in the main prison. What is being done or can be done about that? Ronnie Armour has highlighted that the Prison Service would like virtual contact to remain in place going forward. If it does remain, it is important that it is in place right across the prison regime.

Mrs Long: Continued access to people's legal representatives is absolutely essential. I must say that I was not aware that there was a particular issue with respect to the separated regime. It has not been raised with me before today. As it has been raised with me, I will raise it with Ronnie Armour and ask him for more information. You will appreciate that virtual visiting and contact requires people to move around the prison, and there are limitations on how much people can do that safely at this particular time due to the need to control the viral spread. In order to keep people safe, we have to strike a balance. I was not aware of there being a specific issue, nor of its having been raised. I must say that other issues that were raised have been resolved very quickly. I will endeavour to get back to you as quickly as possible with an answer and, hopefully, also with a solution.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): The Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson of the Justice Committee got a bit of leeway. We are 13 minutes into the meeting, and four questions have been answered. Seventeen other members wish to ask questions. That means that we have 34 questions to go, and we have got around one hour. I would like there to be pointed questions and pointed answers. We are about to get a wonderful example of that from Mr Daniel McCrossan. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McCrossan: I am always singled out. Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I want to join you and colleagues to condemn the threats that have been made against colleagues in the Chamber.

There is no place for such threats in society. I know that it will strengthen the resolve of the House and parties to work together to eradicate such threats from society.

I welcome the Minister's statement and her actions to date, especially to bring forward the important and long-overdue Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill to protect many people in society. She mentioned the PSNI's actions during lockdown and the pressures that exist. Can she comment on the recent news reports that allege that PSNI officers in Strabane and Derry were absent from their posts and missed their shifts? Can she outline whether a full and impartial investigation is under way on the matter?

Mrs Long: On the second question, I can confirm that a full investigation is under way. On that basis, I cannot comment further because it would be wrong for me to prejudge the outcome of that investigation, which has been commissioned by the Chief Constable.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Minister for her answer. I know that she will appreciate the seriousness of the allegations, which are now on public record and will concern many people. Can she assure the House that the investigation will be impartial and thorough, and will give clear conclusions on those matters and whether, in the absence of PSNI officers in the community, no one was left wanting when it came to tackling the issues that they might have faced throughout that period of absence?

Mrs Long: There are assurances that I can give. I can give the assurance that I know from my discussion with the Chief Constable that he takes the matter seriously. I therefore imagine that he as much as anyone else will want to see it properly investigated and dealt with thoroughly. The nature of the investigation, how it proceeds and its outcome are all really a matter for the Chief Constable and will, no doubt, be looked into further by the Policing Board, which is the appropriate scrutiny mechanism for such issues.

Mr Beattie: I thank the Minister for her detailed statement. I join her in showing huge appreciation for the Prison Service, which, in many cases, has been forgotten about during the crisis. That we have had only one prisoner and only six staff test positive for COVID-19 is testimony to its dedication and its work.

I will extrapolate from the figure, if I may. One prisoner has tested positive, but how many prisoners have been tested for COVID-19? Six staff have tested positive, but how many of our staff in total have been tested for COVID-19? Even a percentage will do if we do not have a figure.

Mrs Long: We started testing staff only in April, as a result of discussions that I had with the Health Minister, who helped us to bring it forward. I am not able to give you the numbers; I do not have access to them at the moment. Testing is done on the basis of the advice that comes from the Department of Health, which is that anyone who has symptoms ought to go and be tested, and that advice will be applied in exactly the same way in a prison population as it is applied in the population outside. Therefore, any prison officers who are symptomatic or concerned about their health or are concerned that they or their family may have been exposed to the virus are now able to access checking. Anyone who is symptomatic is, as you know, placed in isolation in order to ensure that, if people show signs that may suggest COVID-19 such as a temperature or another symptom, they are not in the main prison population and are therefore not putting others at risk. Those Prison Service units are properly serviced, with staff in full PPE, ensuring that they are not further exposed to the virus when working in that environment.

Mr Beattie: Minister, you will understand where I am coming from. Prisons are a micro-society in many ways. They are enclosed, but they are not isolated. There is still a lot of footfall and movement within a prison. To give us a real understanding of how the disease is moving through our prisons and our Prison Service, it is important to understand what the percentage is of people being tested.

I am being lobbied an awful lot at the moment about the training courses that are going on in the prisons. They have continued. The participants in one course have now been sent home, because one of the trainees has tested positive for COVID-19, and the course has been stopped. I do not know about the second course. It would be interesting to find out where we are at with it. Staff at Hydebank Wood, where the course —

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Question.

Mr Beattie: — was taking place, are concerned that they have mixed with individuals who have it and have now been sent home. Can you give us any assurance about how we are dealing with that?

Mrs Long: I can certainly assure you that we did not take lightly the decision to continue with training officers. However, if we are to ensure that there is a constant flow of officers into the system, as there is a constant flow of officers out of the system due to retirement and other things, we have to continue to train new officers to be able to deploy them in our prisons. Otherwise, we would have a much more significant problem with the ratio of officers to those in our care.

On the matter of the trainee who has contracted COVID-19, the normal procedures have been put in place. Those who were close to that individual have been offered the option of being tested. The procedures are therefore in place, as recommended by the Department of Health. Remember: it is not for me as Justice Minister to decide what the appropriate level of testing is; it is a matter for the Health Minister to advise the Department on how to test prisoners and prison officers in the system.

To ensure that our custodial environments are maintained safely, we introduced, as you know, restricted, house-based regimes and proportionate social distancing measures. We restricted movement in access. You mentioned that it is not a closed system, but although it is not an entirely closed system, it is much more closed than it was before the pandemic. We have shielded older and vulnerable prisoners. We have isolated anyone who is symptomatic, and we have 14-day isolation for all new committals. We reduced doubling up, stopped face-to-face visits from 23 March and we also suspended temporary release and working in the community schemes.

We have the early release scheme, as you already know. We have closed learning and skills units. We have increased allowances to try to support prisoners' television access and telephone credits, in order to assist them with their occupation during the day. We have increased cleaning and the use of PPE in line with WHO and Public Health Agency guidance. We are testing symptomatic prisoners and staff, and their family members, in line with the defined criteria provided by the Department of Health.

We are doing all that we can. I have to say, it is a tribute to how effective prison management has been that we can count on two hands the number of people who have tested positive within the system, whether that be those who are working or those who are resident. When you contrast that to other residential settings, I think we have done a pretty good job. That is not to be complacent, because there could be an outbreak within the prison system at any time, and we are absolutely alert to that.

Mr Blair: I start by associating myself and my party with the condemnation, as stated, of those despicable threats against politicians and journalists. We say to all those at the receiving end of those threats that we stand with you.

As a member of the Policing Board, I am aware that PSNI enforcement of the coronavirus regulations is not the responsibility of the Minister. She recognises the operational independence of the Chief Constable. Does the Minister agree that we need to see individual responsibility and common sense in relation to the regulations and, crucially, in addition to that, consistent messaging from all Departments and Ministers?

Mrs Long: I thank my colleague for his question, and I absolutely agree that we cannot expect the police to police our living rooms, back gardens and aspects of our private lives. We have to take responsibility for our own health, for that of those around us and also for the spread of this disease in the community. As I said earlier, as we get more and more freedom to move, go to work and do all the things that we want, we are going to have to take more responsibility for making those difficult choices. Therefore, it is important that, as an Executive, we present people with clear, concise and easily understood information and guidance and consistent advice, so that people feel confident in the decisions they take.

This has been an unsettling time. People are frightened about the risk to themselves and their families. They desire to go back to work and spend time with their friends, but they are fearful about the impact that might have on their health and that of those around them. We need to give people confidence and assurance so that they feel able to make informed decisions about their behaviour, in a way that will not jeopardise the progress we have made.

Mr Blair: Following on from the impacts of coronavirus, the Minister will be aware that my constituent, Fiona Jamieson, and her daughter, Ciara Hindman, bravely went public about the impacts of stalking. I have made reference to that before. Can we have reassurance that the introduction of legislation on stalking has not been adversely impacted by COVID-19?

Mrs Long: I was fortunate enough to meet both Fiona and Ciara before this pandemic and to talk with them about their experiences, not only with respect to stalking, but also the response of the various parts of the justice system. That further informed my commitment to bring forward stalking legislation in the autumn.

Obviously, all Departments are under pressure in juggling the various responsibilities that they have, both in terms of the pandemic and their wider responsibilities. As you are aware, we were able to make good progress with respect to the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill, which is now with the Committee for its attention. We have now moved to drafting the legislation that we hope to bring forward on stalking, along the same timeline that we had originally intended.

I hope that we will be able to continue with that piece of work and, with the Committee's permission and cooperation, be able to introduce it in the autumn.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for her statement. Does she recognise the need for a review in relation to attendance at funerals? My understanding is that the public are confused about whether standing out and paying respects in the street, obviously while adhering to social-distancing regulations, is a reasonable thing to do. We need clarification on that. I also understand that nowhere in the legislation is the number 10 specified in relation to attendance at graveyards. Perhaps we can get some further clarification on those issues, which are highly sensitive and emotive. In Northern Ireland, thankfully, people have respect for the dead.

Mrs Long: First and foremost, I have to say that I think I recognised in my opening remarks that it has been an incredibly difficult period for those who have lost a loved one, whether through COVID-19 or any other disease, to not be able to draw on the support of family and friends at the time, to have to grieve in isolation and to not be able to give people a proper send-off, for want of a better way of putting it. It is very difficult, and particularly so in a community where our form of grieving tends to be very much a communal and community-led one, not just about immediate family but about friends and the extended community, the church community and our other connections. It is very difficult. Unfortunately, however, I cannot provide you with guidance, because ultimately the regulations, and the clarification of those regulations, falls to the Department of Health. You would need to raise with the Health Minister what changes to the regulations, if any, would be required.

However, the road map set out by the Executive earlier this week gave some indication of, for example, the size and scale of outdoor gatherings that we might be able to reach at different stages in this process. We have also given some indication of indoor gatherings — all, obviously, contingent on appropriate social distancing. In the interim, the message remains as it was, which is to try to abide by the advice given and to bear in mind the importance of protecting the living as well as respecting the dead.

Mr Dunne: Thank you, Minister. As was mentioned earlier, a common-sense approach is important. My final point is in relation to the crematorium. I am sure you are very aware of the issue. Again, it is a highly sensitive issue that no member of the public is allowed into the chapel. Perhaps that issue needs to be reviewed urgently, Minister. I think that small numbers would be reasonable.

Mrs Long: Again, this is really a matter for Belfast City Council, which operates the crematorium, but I do have some insight to the rationale behind the current process, so I am happy, whilst not speaking on the council's behalf, to give you some indication of why the limitations are there; I think it is an issue area that is poorly understood.

We have a very small staff in the crematorium, and there is only one crematorium facility in Northern Ireland. Given the risk of excess deaths and the possibility that they would have come under significant pressure, and also the risk to the staff who work in the crematorium from exposure to COVID-19 — some of the staff are shielding or have family who shield — there was a concern at the outset that the crematorium's operations could be compromised were people to attend the crematorium and have contact with the staff. Potentially, the staff might not then be able to operate the crematorium. The risk, of course, is that, with very small numbers, it also takes a significant time to train someone to operate a crematorium — that can take upwards of a year.

So, there was an issue about trying to ensure that we had the right capacity to deal with cremations as and when required. That was similar to the concerns about protecting cemetery staff, because they tend to operate on quite a small staff. I think that, as we move out of this phase, that will obviously be

open for review, but that is the background to it. I do not think that, in any sense, shape or form, people were unaware of how difficult it would be. I do know people who attended the crematorium and found it incredibly distressing to be turned back at the gate while their loved one made their last journey alone. That is difficult for people, but there was a clear logic behind why it had to be done. I hope that we will not be in that situation in perpetuity.

Ms C Kelly: Thank you, Minister, for your statement. You have stated previously that you would cooperate with the Minister for Communities and other Executive colleagues to put additional measures in place to support victims of domestic abuse during COVID-19. Can you outline specifically what work has been done to ensure adequate provision of emergency accommodation for victims who need it?

Mrs Long: I thank the member for her question. It would not be appropriate for me to comment on emergency accommodation because that falls entirely within the remit of the Department for Communities. However, we have met the Minister for Communities, we have met the First Minister and deputy First Minister and I have supported a number of bids from the Department for Communities for additional funding that is needed in order that accommodation can be provided.

It is also important that accommodation is sustained beyond the immediate crisis, so, for example, there were opportunities through closed guest houses and closed hotels to provide temporary accommodation — but only on a very temporary basis. The important thing for us was finding continuity of supply so that, when people move away from a domestic abuse or violent situation, they find themselves with appropriate accommodation.

On the work that we have been able to do, the police are monitoring high-risk victims and providing them with the signposting necessary so that they can access key services and support. The helpline that we are jointly involved with funding with the Department for Communities has a range of measures in place to deal with the increase in calls that it is receiving at this time and also its ability to pass them on.

The police lead the multi-agency operational response in the voluntary and community sector, so accommodation is a particular focus for them. They have been working with the Department for Communities because some increased accommodation has been secured. The other area of work that has started is with the Department for Infrastructure. Minister Mallon and I met yesterday to discuss the possibility of extending emergency transport to those who need to leave a situation using our public transport network.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): You do not have to ask a supplementary question. Would you like to ask one?

Ms C Kelly: I have just a short one.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): That is grand.

Ms C Kelly: Minister, I take on board what you have said, but are any particular measures being put in place for victims in rural areas like west Tyrone, where emergency accommodation is in very short supply and a lot of people might live miles and miles from neighbours and friends? Can you outline whether there are any measures in relation to that?

Mrs Long: Obviously, there are particular issues with rurality and how people can access services. Those stand regardless of the pandemic, but they are exacerbated, I guess, by the fact that people are limited in their ability to move and to access other services in their local community. It is a valid reason, and it was included in the original regulations, to leave your property and to travel for purposes of fleeing domestic abuse or violence. It is also a valid reason for people to leave their home and go to work in the context of providing advice and guidance or working in a hostel, for example, for those who are subject to domestic abuse.

The Minister for Communities is the person who is best placed on the detail on accommodation. I am not directly involved in that, though I do support the Department for Communities in funding the helpline that signposts people to that accommodation once they contact it. We have also looked very carefully at this time, when people may be at home with their abuser, to ensure that other methods other than simply a phone call, such as online chat and email, are available so that people can reach out without having to speak out, because that is not always possible in the confined space of somebody's home where the abuser is present.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Before I call the next member, I have a housekeeping announcement. The statement from the Minister of Health has been issued in the tabled pack and should be accessible from your devices.

All members so far have availed themselves of the opportunity to ask a supplementary question, but it is not necessary to use them. I call Dr Caoimhe Archibald, and this is no pressure for her not to ask a supplementary question.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Minister for her statement today. Minister, a number of constituents have expressed concerns about not being able to access the family court for care arrangements for children. Obviously, there is guidance in place about that, but can the Minister clarify whether she has been lobbied on this issue specifically? What work is being done to ensure social services, family, statutory and voluntary agencies involved in the process know and understand the guidance?

Mrs Long: On access to family courts, as you know the Lord Chief Justice has put in place particular arrangements so that those who need access, for example to change contact arrangements, are able to do so. It is not a simple situation — it is a very stressful one.

Where parental relationships are good and flexibility is shown, you will find that locally agreed arrangements are not open to objection. There is a recognition, for example, that normal contact can continue. If there is shared custody, there is no reason why the child cannot move between parents, and that has all been clarified.

Where there is a pre-existing issue with the relationship between the parents, it becomes much more fraught and difficult. It is primarily because of the use of, for example, contact centres in many of those cases, which is an issue for the Department of Health, which manages family policy and the contact centres. However, where contact arrangements need to be revised, it is possible for that to be done through the court, either through an administrative procedure, where people are willing to agree, or through the legal representatives of the parents.

The bottom line for everyone involved in the system is that the needs and safety of the child are put first. That is always the intention within the family court system and has not changed, though the mechanism of accessing justice has obviously altered during the pandemic.

Mr O'Toole: I will try and be uncharacteristically brief in my questions. I thank the Minister for giving us this update. She correctly said in her remarks that with choice comes responsibility. She is correct to say that about how people approach things as we move through the easing of restrictions. She also said that a lot of police management is an operational matter for the Chief Constable: that is true. However, will she agree, and will she work with him, on a programme of public communication that sets out what the police is doing? A lot of people think the police have been very good at managing the situation since March. They have been judicious, restrained and there has been community buy-in. As much for the police as for anyone else, it is really important that they clearly communicate what they can and cannot do.

Mrs Long: First, I agree and want to thank you as that is reflective of how most people see the police's handling of what is an unprecedented situation. They are policing public health regulations as opposed to public order issues, and that is a rather strange space for the police to find themselves in. However, bluntly, clarity about what people can and cannot do has to come from us as leaders. The role of the police is only to guide people to ensure that they continue to comply with what the Executive have asked.

As we move through the five different stages, it will become less feasible for the police to have an enforcement role and, indeed, less appropriate for them to have that role. People will have to assume more responsibility themselves. However, it is important that, at each stage, the Executive set out very clearly what it is we require of people and what guidance and advice we can offer them. That includes the support and the guidance of the police, because a lot of their work has been about engaging, educating and encouraging, not just enforcement.

Mr O'Toole: Has the Minister had discussions with colleagues on the other side of the border? I know an Garda Síochána and the PSNI are working relatively well together, but there has been an outstanding issue about whether the guards are able to enforce regulations in the Republic. I am not sure precisely what the position is here for residents from the South. It may be that enforcement is less

of an issue, but certainly in managing information and people being on the same page, clearly we will very soon, hopefully, have a position where NI residents may go into Donegal. We may even have people coming from the South to shop in the Newry Sainsbury's again. How is the Minister managing this and discussing it with her counterparts?

Mrs Long: There has been a shared understanding and cooperation between an Garda Síochána and the Police Service of Northern Ireland over recent weeks; there has been good engagement. I have also engaged with the Justice and Equality Minister to discuss shared approaches to the bank holiday weekends, for example, which are always testing periods. The message has been clear: if your essential journeys take you across the border, that is fine; there is no problem. You can cross the border as you always did if you live in a border community and your essential journey takes you across the border. If you live in Strabane and your essential journey takes you to Lifford, that is not a problem. We need to be realistic that that is the case and that no one is trying to stop that happening.

However, if you are on a jaunt for a day out and you think that you can get away with it by going across the border, you will find yourself being turned back by one of the two police services on the island, and that is appropriate. It is about respecting the fact that, as we have contact with different people, and as we move from place to place and from community to community, we increase the risk of carrying the virus with us and spreading it to places where it has not been. We have to approach that with sensitivity, particularly in some of our smaller rural seaside communities who feel under considerable pressure if they get an influx of townies who want to make off for the weekend, buy everything in the shops, put the local services under pressure and, potentially, bring COVID-19 into the village with them. That is how it is going to be perceived. There has to be sensitivity and respect in how that is managed as we move forward.

Mr Chambers: Minister, I concur with the tribute that you paid to the PSNI in your statement. The police had a particularly difficult task at the commencement of the new regulations, especially having to deal with very close scrutiny from some sections of the media. Early concerns were flagged up to me around a lack of PPE for police officers, but I acknowledge that that has been, largely, sorted out. Is the Minister aware of any advice that is in place to maximise social distancing in police vehicles that are deployed in routine patrols, or if that is possible?

Mrs Long: It is incredibly difficult to maximise social distancing in any vehicle, but the Chief Constable has been looking carefully at how people are deployed in order to minimise impact on them. For instance, COVID-19 cars were deployed in each area at the beginning of the outbreak so that if someone was at risk, they could deploy a car with full PPE to deal with the situation as opposed to having every officer equipped. As you will appreciate, whilst PPE provides important protection, it is uncomfortable for those who have to wear it. It is not something that people can wear constantly when driving around, and they cannot do their jobs effectively if they are wearing it all of the time. There are limitations on that.

One of the things that we need to recognise at this time is that full social distancing is not possible, and has not been possible, in all spheres of life. It is the same in prisons. Those of you who have been in prisons, as visitors or otherwise, will be familiar with the constrained environment that we are dealing with; they are quite small areas. Therefore, again, you try to socially distance in a way that is proportionate to the environment that you are in. That is one of the reasons why I pay tribute to those who work on the front line. There are people who, day in, day out, put themselves and their health at risk, albeit a managed risk, in order to enable us to go about relatively normal lives, even in the case of lockdown. We should be very grateful to them for that.

The member mentioned the scrutiny that the police get from the media. After full investigation by the PSNI, I am assured that some of the original stories that emerged in the media do not bear scrutiny to reality. There also has to be a degree of caution on our part that, sometimes, things that happen in other places suddenly seem to transpose themselves into our situation, and the police are held accountable for things that people have done elsewhere rather than here, perhaps. I am confident that the Chief Constable is making every possible effort to keep officers safe and that there is a constant review of PPE and good supplies of it. We are not going to be complacent about it; we will need it for a long time to come.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): "As visitors or otherwise": if elected politics fails, the diplomatic service definitely beckons for the Minister.

Mr T Buchanan: I thank the Minister for her statement. In closing, you paid tribute to the PSNI who are playing a key role in policing the virus restriction regulations. Since the lockdown, you will be aware of three republican funerals that took place where hundreds of people gathered, blatantly flouting the law and placing other people's lives at risk. As Justice Minister, what is your assessment of the PSNI's response to those incidents?

Mrs Long: Again, I have to say that those are operational matters for the Chief Constable. However, I am aware that, as often happens when large crowds gather, whether it be a public order or, indeed, a public health situation, the police sought to gather evidence on any offences that may have been committed and have continued with their investigations, and I believe that files have been passed to the Public Prosecution Service. It would, therefore, be inappropriate for me to comment on individual cases.

However, a number of members have referred to how difficult it is when someone dies and we are not there and able to have a funeral and to say our last farewell in the way that we would wish, and a lot of families have sacrificed that in order to protect the community around them. They have foregone the right to be able to gather and pay their respects because they believe that protecting their community is important. It compounds their pain when others flout the law in the way that they do and so publicly. It is harmful to anyone to see some behave in a way that is completely contradictory to the way that others have been willing to behave.

I pay tribute to those who have stuck by the regulations, despite how painful it is, for their generosity and graciousness. We owe them a debt of gratitude, too, for curtailing the spread. Those who ignore the regulations are not only being reckless with their own health and the health of those around them, but they are almost definitely ensuring that, by behaving in such a reckless manner, there will be future funerals that they will need to attend. They need to desist and take seriously the advice that has been given about large gatherings.

Mr T Buchanan: I thank the Minister for her response. As Justice Minister, have you had any discussions with the Chief Constable around those particular matters?

Mrs Long: With respect to the operational management of such gatherings, it would not be appropriate for me to engage with the Chief Constable, but, in my weekly stocktake with the Chief Constable throughout this, I have sought his advice, guidance and insight into how those are going to be managed.

It is also worth saying that, where there are large funerals anticipated, the police have proactively engaged with communities and talked to families. Many of those families, on reflection, have sought to reduce the number of people attending and comply with the regulations. Again, it is about engaging and encouraging people to think that, where there may be a risk of harm, they will behave appropriately. However, it is ultimately how it is policed. I think that we all recognise that it would not really do anyone's reputation any good for the police to be seen going in to disrupt a funeral. I think that people would find that difficult, but it is appropriate and proportionate that they collect information about offences and seek to prosecute people if appropriate afterwards.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stafford): Before I call the next member, I should advise that nine more members have indicated that they wish to speak. If I were applying the rules strictly and this were going to last an hour, there would be 12 minutes remaining. That means that people further down the list would not get in. I will do my best to ensure that everyone gets to ask a question, but it is not my intention to keep the Minister here for an hour and a half. I do not think that would be fair. So, can we please focus?

Mr O'Dowd: In regard to the previous question, I think that if Mr Buchanan were being honest with himself and reflecting, he would realise that large funerals have not only taken place among the republican community. In fact, if he were honest with himself, he could think of one very close.

I want to return to the domestic abuse issue. The Minister referred to the increasing calls to the helpline and to the police, which we have to accept is a grave underestimation of the abuse that is going on in society. There is much talk of the economic recovery and the health recovery. Will the Minister outline whether any discussions are taking place in her Department as to how we can help those who suffer domestic abuse at any time — and, certainly, during this period — to recover in the future?

Mrs Long: I thank the member for his question. I also think that it is right to say that there have been gatherings, and not only funerals, in a number of places, and it is right to reflect that all those gatherings, for whatever purpose, are reckless.

On how we recover the justice system, there are a number of things. First and foremost, the support that we offer people during the pandemic will matter. The quality of the advice, support and guidance that we are able to give them at this time, and the ability of people to leave the family home in cases where there is domestic abuse or violence, is hugely important, but we would also expect that there will be a lag in the reporting of this. We know, for example, that often the first signs of domestic or, indeed, sexual violence in the home come when people are at school and changes in behaviour are noted. Many young people are not in that environment now and are not therefore subject to the kind of supervision that they would normally have. I think that we may see a rise in the reporting of quite serious incidents, going forward.

We have to balance that against the fact that we also have some quite significant and serious cases that were in the system. We know, for example, that sexual crime takes a very long time to reach the stage where it enters the courts. That has now been lengthened even further, and yet the attrition rate of witnesses is huge. There are massive challenges. Through the Criminal Justice Board and working with the Lord Chief Justice, the courts system and others, we are seeking to prioritise those cases, in order that there is a proper plan to move out from this. Leadership on that element through the prosecution of offences will come from the Lord Chief Justice and his staff, but his engagement with other members of the legal profession, the Department and so on has been absolutely critical in planning a way forward.

I do not want to announce anything on behalf of another Minister, but I think that discussions on additional resources for the support and guidance that may be available for those who are more vulnerable at this time are ongoing. More about that will become clear when today's Executive meeting finally concludes.

Mr Muir: The consequences of COVID-19 have put a real strain on public finances. Is the Minister content that sufficient resources have been allocated to her Department and to the justice delivery partners?

Mrs Long: At this stage, all of us are aware of the dual challenge. There will be things that we had anticipated that we would do that we will now not be able to do. There will be other things that we have to do that we did not anticipate having to do. So we will have to balance the finances across both those challenges.

COVID-19, by and large, has been dealt with by the Department of Finance as a separate item to the normal budgeting process, but we have now been asked to engage, along with other Ministers, on a review of our budgets to see where savings could be made and to identify money that will not be spent in this year. It is hugely important that we do not return money to Treasury at a time when we have ongoing pressures within Departments. That is happening right across the Executive, and, when that comes to fruition, we will have much clearer picture of the allocation of resources.

At this point, of course there are pressures within the Department, and we have been very open with the Committee and the Department of Finance about those. Not all of those will crystallise in this year, so I think that it would be inappropriate for us to make requests to the Department of Finance for those at this time. However, where we have required additional resource and have been able to provide a clear case for that, the Department of Finance has responded appropriately.

Mr Muir: Some of that additional resource was provided for the temporary resting place in Kinnegar in my constituency. We obviously hope that that will not be required, but plans were being developed by the council — I will declare that I was previously a member of Ards and North Down Borough Council — to develop a master plan for that area. Will the Minister outline the future intentions for that facility?

Mrs Long: At this stage, no decision has been made about the temporary resting place, but as you will be aware, the site came to the Department as a result of a request for military aid, so it was essentially given to us by the MOD. We will consider options as to whether the facility can be stood down after the crisis or whether it will be retained and how that will be managed. At the moment, we hope that it will not be used, but we are not out of the pandemic yet, so we have to remain in a state of readiness. The police have agreed that if it needs to be stepped up to be used during the pandemic, they are happy and content to continue to run it. On the longer-term approach, it would be too early to

speculate as to how the Executive might want to take that forward, but, as a regional facility for emergency situations, it is probably second to none on these islands.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for her statement. I also want to ask her about domestic and sexual violence. The statement referred to a 10% increase in reports to the PSNI and a 35% increase, in the most recent week, in calls to the 24-hour domestic and sexual violence helpline. Will the Minister detail what additional support her Department will provide to third-sector organisations, such as Hourglass, Women's Aid and the Men's Advisory Project, given their inability to fundraise in their normal or traditional ways? How will their services be assured to be there when they are most needed — when the victims are effectively released and then able to seek the help that they require?

Mrs Long: I thank the member for the question. There has been a slight increase in the reporting of incidents during COVID-19 to the police, but there has been a much more dramatic increase in the number of calls. We need to consider what those calls might entail. For some, it will be seeking advice and guidance on behalf of someone who they are concerned about, rather than as a report of an individual offence or something that has happened, so we need to balance that out. We will not really see the full picture of that for some time. However, by looking to other countries that have been in the lockdown situation, we know that domestic violence has increased. We saw the evidence of that in some of the most violent incidents that have been reported and brought to the attention of the police.

On how we support those organisations, as you know, the Department has a specific role around justice. We jointly fund the helpline and we have ensured that it is able to have the support necessary to be able to continue to train additional staff and so on. The mainstay of its support around advice and counselling, for example, comes from the Department of Health and the other part of its funding around the helpline and its wider remit comes from the Department for Communities.

It is a very complex picture, and I realise, as I stand here, that, most of the time, I stand up and say, "I can answer part of that question, but there are three or four other Ministers involved", which is probably quite frustrating. The reality is that it is a complex landscape, particularly around family law, family justice and domestic abuse, but, on the positive side, it shows that there is good cross-departmental working. That is despite the fact that what we see in the press is very often quite to the contrary on how we are working together and how our relationships are reported. One of the positives that I have seen in this work is the ability of people from all the different party political backgrounds to pull together on the issue.

Mr Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis. Thank you to the Minister for her statement. The statement tells us that 142 prisoners have been released as part of the temporary release scheme. That scheme was set-up on a three-month rolling basis, which means that more prisoners should be due for release next month. Will the Minister tell us whether, in the light of the Executive's exit strategy and the possible easing of restrictions, any changes will be made to the scheme?

Mrs Long: It is my intention to review that again at the end of the month, as I did at the end of last month. That is first of all to judge whether there is a need to continue with the release of prisoners. The decision will have to be balanced, as I said, very carefully, considering, for example, the number of prison officers who are available and the number of prisoners in the system, including new committals. It will need to ensure that a safe balance is maintained in the prison system. It is not something on which I could give a yes or no answer because it will depend on a number of factors that will not become apparent until the point of the review. The scheme has operated successfully. We took swift and decisive action at the beginning, and that has helped us not just to maintain the level of people's health and well-being but to improve morale in the Prison Service and the prisoner population. Things like overcrowding and the lack of a routine regime have an impact on people's mental health and well-being. Being able to reduce the prison population to a point where we can reintroduce some elements of regime to the prison is really important in taking care of people and supporting them in their rehabilitation through the system.

Mr Sheehan: By coincidence, at the Health Committee this morning, we heard Professor Martin McKee, formerly of this parish, talk about institutional amplifiers. That discussion was in the context of what is happening in care homes, but he mentioned that prisons could also be institutional amplifiers. Minister, have you satisfied yourself of the adequacy of preparedness and contingency plans in the event of a serious outbreak of COVID-19 in prisons?

Mrs Long: Yes, I have. I would not want to sound complacent in that regard, because, realistically, when people live at close quarters in densely populated residential settings and a virus enters such a setting, it is incredibly difficult to control. However, I am confident in the measures that have been taken thus far, in that they have protected us. The only prisoner to test positive for COVID-19 was tested before committal. We have not seen anyone in the system, for example, have to be removed because they were seriously ill and required treatment, which indicates that the work done on isolation, deep cleaning and how we have managed the movement of people through the system has been effective in containment, ensuring that COVID-19 has not entered the system and that, where there is risk of entry, that is managed in the proper way. We cannot overstate the risk in those situations, but I am confident that the Prison Service has done all in its power. Whether that is sufficient for members or not, more importantly, the fact that the Prisoner Ombudsman and Criminal Justice Inspection have visited the prisons and satisfied themselves that they are content with how they are operating during this period should reassure those in our care and their families, who may be worried about their health and well-being.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): The Minister has now been here for almost five minutes over the hour. I will allow this to run until 2.55 pm, because I see that, outside the Chamber, the Health Minister is waiting to make his statement. I am sorry, folks, but it is what it is.

Mr McNulty: I join fellow members in condemning the threats to my fellow County Armagh native, Miss Linda Dillon. Threats and intimidation from —

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Mr McNulty, no preambles — questions, please.

Mr McNulty: Threats and intimidation were wrong in the past, and they are wrong now.

I thank the Minister for her statement and applaud her for her work in bringing forward legislation to tackle domestic abuse. I also welcome the clarification given to Matthew O'Toole on border communities.

The Minister is responsible for policing and the PSNI. Her statement refers to the key role of policing the coronavirus restrictions regulations.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Mr McNulty, spit it out.

Mr McNulty: It is coming. The Minister will be aware of the debate in many of our local authorities about the reopening of recycling centres, which are vital to maintaining public health and discouraging the now all-too-common practice of fly-tipping. To date, four local authorities have asked that they be allowed to reopen their centres, and more will follow in the coming days. However, they are waiting to hear from the Minister, the PSNI and the Executive. Can the Minister provide much-needed clarity? Is a trip to the recycling centre to dispose of waste an essential journey? Will it be policed as such?

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): OK. The Minister has your question.

Mrs Long: It is not for me to provide that clarity. Guidance to councils is a matter for the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, and enforcement is a matter for the police.

Mr Butler: The Minister will be well aware that, before COVID, probably the biggest epidemic in prisons was in mental health. The South Eastern Trust provides that care. Is the Minister satisfied that that issue is not being amplified by the COVID threat?

Mrs Long: Mental health is a massive issue. Some 35% of those who come into the prison system have pre-existing mental health conditions, and, in many cases, caring for those people in the system is a huge challenge. We continue to have support from the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust that enables us to care for those who are most vulnerable. We also have a range of helplines available, and, particularly during this period, we have introduced things like virtual visiting so that we can maintain people's mental health and well-being through contact with other people.

It is a complex area, but the support is there. One of the reasons that it was so important to reduce the prison population was so that those who are at particular risk can have the proper supervision that is required when their lives may be at risk or in danger.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for coming here today. She noted that testing has been available for front-line staff who need it from 7 April. Will she confirm whom she means by "front-line staff"? Is it anybody in the DOJ family or just those in the Prison Service?

Mrs Long: The date of 7 April in the statement referred to those who are on the front line — for example, in the Prison Service or the Police Service — being able to access that testing. Testing for others in front-line roles, such as those in the Civil Service who are in such a role, is being considered, I think, for roll-out by the Executive.

Mr Allister: Minister, in due course there will be inquests arising from COVID deaths, particularly of health service workers. Can I ask for an assurance that the outrageous direction given by the Chief Coroner in England that coroners should not allow investigations of the quantity or quality of PPE provision and that those matters should not be dealt with in inquests will not apply here? Our system is different, so, as far as it is within your power, will you give an assurance that no such restriction will be placed on our inquests?

Mrs Long: I cannot give you a full assurance on that, because, as you said, I have a limited scope. However, I believe that the purpose of an inquest is to determine the cause of death. What happens beyond that with investigations of negligence, whether criminal negligence or otherwise, is a more complex matter than the determination of the cause of death.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for her statement. It was obviously very concerning to hear the reports about the increase in domestic violence —.

Mr Wells: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

Mr Carroll: I was asking a question.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Mr Wells, strictly speaking, this is a Committee meeting rather than a plenary session, so I am not certain that points of order are appropriate, but I will hear your point. You will get to ask your question, Mr Carroll.

Mr Carroll: Thank you.

Mr Wells: As Mr Carroll was making an important point, a member walked in front of him. That is extremely off-putting and rude. Will you rule that that is not acceptable?

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): Yes, I will. That is not acceptable. The member is right: members should not walk in front of other members when they are speaking. Mr Wells is right, and the rules are clear on that.

Mr Carroll: Thank you. In fairness, I did not notice that, to be completely frank. I was asking my question.

Getting back to my question, it was obviously very concerning to hear reports of the increase in domestic violence and the increase in the number of calls to the 24-hour abuse helpline. Figures are on the rise, but they may not show the full picture, as people may not report incidents out of fear. Has the Department done any work on the feasibility of taking control of empty hotel rooms in this period to support those for whom home is the most dangerous place to be? Belgium and other countries have introduced similar measures. Has any work been commissioned by her Department on that?

Mrs Long: To be clear, it would not be for the Department of Justice to do that, but a number of those issues have been explored in discussions with the Department for Communities.

The wider challenge with that is in ensuring that there is a sustainable way forward for accommodation. If we put people up in temporary accommodation, there is obviously a time limit to that. We need to ensure that there is a flow of permanent accommodation that people can move to afterwards. I stress again and think it important that I do so that it should not always be those who are subjected to domestic abuse and violence who have to leave the home. It should not be for them to be disrupted in their way of life. There are legal measures in place that people can take to ensure that the abuser is removed from the home. For example, the Department for Communities and the Housing Executive do very good work in creating a sanctuary in the home so that people can remain in their

home safely, in their community and with their support networks. That is really vital work that needs to be done, and it is a sustainable way of ensuring that families are not broken up from the people around them because of one abusive person who then manages to inherit the family home.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Stalford): I thank the Minister for coming to the Committee and for making the statement and answering questions. I apologise to people further down the list, particularly my friend from Newry and Armagh, if he thought I was a bit brusque with him, but it is really important that, where you have a Government of five parties, Miss Woods, Mr Allister and Mr Carroll get to ask their questions. I hope that members will forgive me if they thought that I went a bit hard on them.

That concludes questions on the statement. We shall now have a brief suspension of about 10 minutes prior to the statement from the Minister of Health. I remind all members about the importance of maintaining social distancing when leaving the Chamber. The meeting will resume in 10 minutes. Thank you.