



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Ministerial Update:
Mrs Diane Dodds MLA,
Minister for the Economy

17 June 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for the Economy

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Dr Caoimhe Archibald (Chairperson)
Ms Sinead McLaughlin (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Gordon Dunne
Mr Gary Middleton
Mr John O'Dowd
Mr John Stewart
Ms Claire Sugden

Witnesses:

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| Mrs Dodds | Minister for the Economy |
| Mr Diarmuid McLean | Department for the Economy |

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): I welcome the Minister for the Economy, Mrs Diane Dodds, and Mr Diarmuid McLean from the Department for the Economy, who are here to give us a ministerial briefing on the impact of COVID-19 and an update on city deals. I invite the Minister and Diarmuid to make their statements, and we will then open up the meeting to Committee members.

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): Thank you very much for the opportunity to come back to the Committee. The COVID-19 pandemic and the need for lockdown has impacted on our lives in ways in which we could not possibly have imagined a few short months ago. Although the focus has rightly been on protecting the health of all our citizens, the lockdown has created an economic crisis of eye-watering magnitude. Businesses in all sectors have been severely affected by the strict lockdown measures, and many are desperately working simply to survive. We have already seen redundancies in aerospace and aviation, and we know that other jobs will be lost.

The quarterly employment survey figures that were released yesterday cover a period that predates COVID-19-related restrictions and therefore does not take into account the full impact that the virus has had on employment, although we can see a significant increase, of almost 10%, in the claimant count for May 2020, bringing it to its highest point since 2013. That is the harsh reality of the virus's impact on the economy. Running alongside those difficulties and hardships, however, we have also witnessed the resilience of many businesses. They have risen to the challenge and have adapted and changed to fit in with the new normal. They introduced social-distancing measures, increased cleaning and modified in other ways to ensure that they could remain open. Others planned for the time when they would be permitted to reopen and have worked extremely hard to ensure that the safety of their staff and customers is at the core of all that they do.

It is that grit and resolve, so characteristic of the business community, that we will harness as we plan for the future. In reacting to the crisis, my Department's immediate focus was on shielding and

protecting as many local businesses as possible from the worst impacts of the sudden reduction in demand for goods and services and the cash-flow difficulties that that created. We made £410 million available to fund three unconventional grant schemes, and well over £300 million of that has already been distributed. That is on top of the non-domestic rates holiday that was provided by the Department of Finance. My Department reacted quickly to revise completely its 2020-21 business plan, of which you have a copy. It clearly and carefully outlines how the Department is responding to the crisis and how it plans to do so throughout the year, as we move from the react phases through to the recovery and rebuild phases.

In addition, I have published my medium-term strategic economic recovery plan, which covers the next 12 to 18 months. Titled 'Rebuilding a Stronger Economy', it sets out a framework for delivering higher-paying jobs, a highly skilled workforce and a more regionally balanced economy. To assist me in that task, I announced earlier today the membership of the Economic Advisory Group (EAG), which will be chaired by Ellvena Graham. I look forward to working closely with the group. I know that its combined business and economic experience will be extremely valuable to me as we plan ahead. I hope that the group will help us to identify global market opportunities and ensure that we understand the best sectors on which to focus. I want to build on our world-class reputation in areas such as cybersecurity, fintech and digital start-ups. The advisory group will also support the development of a strategy and associated economic policy interventions that will be aimed at the longer-term reshaping of the economy.

We want to support businesses through this difficult period and drive the growth of high-value sectors. We need to seize opportunities. I have already taken the first tentative practical steps to refocus my Department's budget on recovery and rebuilding. This week, I approved the reallocation of £30 million from within my Department's budget to address emerging COVID-19 pressures. It will be spent on addressing pressures on skills and education and on initiatives to help businesses that are vulnerable but viable. Furthermore, on Monday, I was delighted to be able to announce earlier dates, agreed by the Executive, for the reopening of key sectors of the tourism and hospitality industry. Those dates are conditional on controlling the rate of COVID-19 transmission and on social-distancing measures, which will remain in place.

Setting those dates is an important step on the road to recovery and enables the industry to plan ahead. I know that the innovation and strength that I have witnessed in the tourism and hospitality industry is replicated across the whole business community, but it is important that I emphasise that the work of the Department is not limited to managing through the pandemic, fundamental though that is. The annual business plan outlines many critical matters that we continue to take forward in tandem. We are working to prepare for EU exit. We continue to work on the city deals programmes and on Project Stratum and are taking forward essential work on our skills and energy strategies. The output from those will be equally important in helping to rebuild the Northern Ireland economy.

I pay tribute to my departmental staff, who have been at the forefront of reacting to the crisis and who will play an important role in shaping and redirecting the rebuild phase. They have worked day and night during lockdown to respond to the needs of the economy, the Executive and MLAs. At times, they do not get the recognition that they deserve, so I want to do so now publicly.

Finally, Chair, things will be different in the future for all of us, but, working together, we can rebuild, adapt and innovate to ensure that Northern Ireland's economic future is bright. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): Are you covering city deals?

Mrs Dodds: Yes. Go ahead, Diarmuid. Of course. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Diarmuid McLean (Department for the Economy): Thank you, Chair. The Committee received the briefing paper, so I will not go through it in any great depth. I will merely highlight the fact that the Department is only one of the Departments involved in delivering city deals across Northern Ireland. DFE is the accountable Department for innovation, digital, tourism and employability skills in the city deals. It is estimated that capital expenditure on the projects across the deals will be in the order of £800 million over the next 10 years.

Departmental officials, together with Invest NI and Tourism NI staff have, over the past 18 months, been working closely with the councils on the Belfast regional city deal, as well as on the Derry and Strabane deal. We have been looking to help them and inform their work on developing strategic outline cases in the case of the Derry and Strabane deal and help them take forward their work on

outline business cases (OBCs) for the innovation projects. Belfast's is the most advanced of the city deals, with heads of terms having been signed on 26 March 2019. The heads of terms reference leveraging investment of up to £1 billion. Of that, £350 million will come from Treasury and £350 million from the Executive, with the remainder coming from councils, project promoters and private-sector investment.

The Belfast deal is made up of 22 integrated projects that are intended to deliver 20,000 new and better jobs and an increase of £470 million gross value added (GVA) to the economy. The projects cover a number of pillars: innovation; digital; tourism; regeneration; infrastructure; and employability. A brief summary of the projects is included in the pack. We have received draft OBCs for four of the innovation projects from the Belfast deal, and those have been shared with the Department for review. A draft OBC for the final project, the Screen and Media Innovation Lab (SMIL) project, is anticipated in July.

We have provided feedback on the first three, which are the Institute for Research Excellence in Advanced Clinical Healthcare (i-REACH), the Advanced Manufacturing Innovation Centre (AMIC) and the Global Innovation Institute (GII) projects. That feedback will be taken on board as they move to finalise their OBCs later this year. When the OBCs come to the Department, we will consider, in conjunction with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) in London, the technical and financial viability of the projects as part of the assessment of the city deal projects.

That is a brief overview of where we are at. We received, on 22 May, the strategic outline cases for the two innovation projects from the Derry and Strabane city deal. We will look at them and then give our comments and feedback. We have had meetings with officials over the past six to 12 months, where we have been kept informed of progress as it has been made.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): Thank you very much, both of you, for the update. We all recognise the very significant challenges that our economy faces locally from COVID-19 and the continuation of the Brexit negotiations, and how all of that will work out over the next few weeks, after which we will get a better idea of where we are going over the next few months.

It is really important to plan now for the recovery. We have seen significant interventions to support businesses, and I am sure that we will come back to that in a moment. This morning, I had a brief look at the recovery plan that was published last night. Now, as we try to help businesses to prepare for Brexit and the implementation of the protocol, the re-establishment of the Economic Advisory Group is important and welcome in guiding that recovery planning. I looked at its membership. Perhaps, an opportunity was missed to include representatives from the trade unions. I was quite surprised that there was no trade union representative on the panel. It would have been useful to involve representatives from the community and voluntary and social enterprise sectors as well. Also, if we are looking towards a greener recovery, there should be voices from that sector as well. Do you have any intention of looking at widening the membership or involving additional people in certain aspects of the advisory group?

Mrs Dodds: I am really glad that we have published our short- to medium-term economic strategy paper. It focuses on two aspects, one of which is the more immediate and fundamental question of how we recover from the COVID-19 crisis, the lockdown and the pressures that have been placed on businesses and, indeed, families right across Northern Ireland. In the past week, we have seen those pressures reflected in the announcements of redundancies in the aerospace industry. They reflect global and national trends. We have seen the outworkings here in Northern Ireland. Therefore, it is important that we get that aspect of our work out.

We are also looking to the longer term of the Northern Ireland economy. I am absolutely determined to use my time as the Economy Minister in this mandate to set an economic strategy, a pathway forward, for the Northern Ireland economy that will help to build the Northern Ireland that we want to see. We want a bright economic future for young people, where businesses and communities can thrive. Therefore, we have reformed the Economic Advisory Group, which comprises people who are leaders in their field. They are there to identify global market opportunities as well as opportunities across Northern Ireland. We will always focus on our core industries and our core values. Therefore, we will continue to focus on industries that are already excellent, like tourism and agri-food, where we need to rebuild and recover.

The Economic Advisory Group was set up to try to look at future emerging trends; where global opportunities are; how Northern Ireland can tap into those global opportunities; and how we can respond quickly. Of course, as we emerge globally from the COVID-19 pandemic, the region or

country that has a developed plan to respond quickly will get the best of the opportunities as they emerge. That is the rationale for the Economic Advisory Group. It is really important that we set trends. We have asked people who are leaders in their field to be involved. Northern Ireland is already world class in many of those areas. We want to know how we can continue to seize opportunities in the areas where we are world class and develop and seize opportunities in other areas. That is the rationale.

Of course, we and the members of the EAG will always look at such issues as entrepreneurship, social enterprise and regional economic balance. We will continue to look at those core, fundamental values, but we also want to look at emerging global opportunities. I see this as an exciting opportunity to work together with businesses and communities, as our partners, as we develop an economic strategy for the long-term future of Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): We all recognise the need to look towards those opportunities as we rebuild. However, I feel that there was an opportunity to have new voices and sectors represented in the planning for that.

We face unprecedented circumstances, and, over the past while, we have seen the collapse of global supply chains. Therefore, the focus on our indigenous businesses as part of our recovery plan is important, as referenced in some of the plans and papers that we have seen. As we plan for the recovery, we should take advantage of the interconnectedness that exists across the island and plan on an all-island basis. There are opportunities there, and they need to be more strongly reflected in our recovery plan.

I move now to Brexit planning. A couple of weeks ago, we saw the report from the Brexit group here in the North. I have concerns about the planning that has taken place so far and the interaction that there has been, particularly with the British Government, and with the Executive, on what Brexit means for businesses. What work is the Department doing to engage with businesses and to help them to plan? We have seen the budgetary allocations. Are there plans to put funds directly into support for businesses to plan for Brexit?

Mrs Dodds: There is a lot there for me to respond to, but I know that you will come back to me if I miss something. This is a short- to medium-term plan for the Northern Ireland economy. The Northern Ireland economy, like every other economy across the world, does not exist on to itself and will always have to take account of what is happening in other economies and regions across the British Isles. That is an important factor, and it is one that all of us are aware of.

Our plan is for the Northern Ireland economy. It is about how we will revitalise, re-energise, renew and reimagine the Northern Ireland economy, how we will support our core and traditional industries and how we will look to new and exciting markets and opportunities. That is what the plan is about and where I am firmly fixing our future.

We, of course, are continuing to look at the issues around Brexit. On the economy, the single biggest thing that we need to ensure is that we have unfettered access to our most important market. I have said this many, many times over the past number of years, but it is a fact: we sell more in GB than we do in ROI, the rest of Europe and the rest of the world put together. Unfettered access is, therefore, the single biggest issue that we have to deal with within the protocol for the Northern Ireland economy. That is vital. All the other issues are important, but the most important is ensuring that we have that unfettered access. That is where my focus has been in conversations with the national Government and across the Executive.

I am not sure whether we want to go down the rabbit hole of a lot of the issues around Brexit planning, but I will mention a few that are important. I have been in contact with the Department for International Trade because we need to ensure that Northern Ireland, operating within the confines of the protocol, will be able to access the important trade deals that the UK Government are negotiating, and that Northern Ireland should do so on the same basis as every other part of the United Kingdom's internal markets. That is a vital part of our work with the Department for International Trade. This morning, I commented on the ambitions for the trade deal with New Zealand and Australia. Our agri-food sector will be put under considerable pressure by that particular trade deal. We need to protect our core industries and ensure that they are not open to unfair competition from goods imported from across the world. So, we have really important work to do on international trade.

A section of our work that is equally as important is being prepared legislatively for Brexit at the end of the year. Whatever our views on Brexit, we will leave the European Union at the end of the year. My

focus is on ensuring that we are ready to do that in a legislative sense, and I hope to work with you to achieve that focus.

I am trying to bring forward work on the mutual recognition of qualifications. It is really important that we get that through. Our legislative preparedness will be a mixture of tapping into some of the work that is done at Westminster and primary legislation that we will need to pass here in Northern Ireland. So, for things like the mutual recognition of qualifications, my view is that we can tap easily into the Westminster route and get involved with the statutory instrument (SI), but, so far, that has been difficult to get to the Executive. I urge members of this Committee to work with their party to ensure that that is on the Executive table. All the professional bodies agree with our course of action. Indeed, across the political spectrum, there is widespread agreement with it. That will put an important building block in place for people to work across the common travel area, for example. I think that we should go ahead and use the Westminster route, the SIs, to get that on the statute book.

Significant legislation will also be required for the single electricity market etc, and I hope to work constructively with the Committee to ensure that we are ready, legislatively, for the end of the year.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): We have opened the Brexit can. The new infrastructure and the type of checks that will be required will mean a significant increase in the number of customs officials required. Is the Department doing work on that, such as providing the opportunity for skilling those types of professionals?

We are not entirely clear on what all those checks and tariffs will look like. There are concerns from the likes of the retail sector and reports that some are considering pulling out of the North because of the uncertainty or the possible additional requirements in engaging with the sectors and with the British Government. Are we trying to resolve those issues?

Mrs Dodds: My view, which I have reiterated over many years, is that we are part of the United Kingdom, and, therefore, our access to and from that market should be unfettered, to use a common phrase. I have said that throughout the Brexit debate and before we had the withdrawal agreement. My view has always been to protect our biggest market — the rest of the United Kingdom. I regret that that has not always been the focus and that other markets that were not as important were prioritised on the political level. However, we are where we are, and it is my job to ensure that our consumers are not restricted, in their choice or by the price of the goods and the commodities that they require, and that our manufacturing sector has access to its most important market. Around two thirds — to round it up — of everything that we sell goes to market in GB. Similarly, for our high street and for our manufacturing chain, the same goes from GB to NI. Therefore, it is really important that we understand that checks will be difficult for businesses and that they should be kept to a minimum.

I remember some time ago when I was sitting in Michel Barnier's office in the Berlaymont — long ago now it seems, not that long ago but it seems a long time ago — and he said, "But we can keep these to a minimum. These need to be light touch". Now it seems that the European Union might have a slightly different and more legalistic view of that. I think that it behoves all of us to ensure that both sides in this debate, at national Government and European level, understand the impact on the Northern Ireland economy should they insist on all these things.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): I think that that is a fair point about the impact on the economy. As you say, both sides of that political negotiation really need to live up to the commitments, and I think that there are trust issues in respect of the British Government fully implementing the protocol as was agreed, so we encourage them to live up to their commitments in all of that.

I am going to bring in some other members now, just to get through some questions.

Mr Middleton: Thank you, Minister and Diarmuid, for coming along today. Again, I will put on record our thanks for the work that is being done. I think that it has, in some ways, been a very productive couple of weeks in getting the economy back up and running, particularly the hospitality and retail sectors. I have spoken to them, and they have been very public in acknowledging that they welcome the clarity and support that has been given by you, Minister. I think that it is important that we recognise that as a Committee.

With regard to the Economic Advisory Group, there has obviously been a lot of commentary. It has only been announced and, as usual, social media gets quite excited over these things. We should be excited, because I think that there is an opportunity for this particular group to focus on the trends. We

know that the countries that will be successful are those that adapt to the challenges and changes. I think that those people who think that this is a missed opportunity are missing the point, because this group is not about doing things the way that they have always been done. This group is about bringing together world leaders and global players. It has to be commended that we have got some of those people to come onto this group, given their schedules and their expertise. I think that it is very welcome, and I look forward to hearing from them. The crux of my first question is around how you see that group operating and reporting and how you see them being able to bring their information forward so that we can make sure that we can secure the position that we already have in being world leaders in and around the fintech and cybersecurity areas.

Mrs Dodds: Thank you for the question. First, it is absolutely excellent to see retail open. I was at my local high street in Banbridge on Friday and there were queues outside some shops. Many of the retailers had gone to extraordinary lengths to ensure that people would feel confident and safe and that their employees were in the same space. I am delighted to see retail open, and I urge people to go out and support local businesses — that is very important — but to do so safely and be respectful of others who are in the same space. It is absolutely important that we continue to be aware that the virus is still with us and that we need to ensure that people are safe and respectful of others.

It is also good that we got a date from the Executive on Monday past for the reopening of hospitality. I do not need to tell you how important that is for the viability of the tourism and hospitality sectors. I have been working with them for quite some time through the tourism steering group, and they are preparing well for that particular event. We brought the reopening of caravan sites forward, recognising that they are self-contained and that that might be an easier task for people to prepare for.

It is important to advise the Committee that we have been working to the national UK guidance around the reopening of tourism and hospitality. The tourism steering group has been looking at that guidance to see how it can be made Northern Ireland-friendly. For example, we may have some by-laws that differ slightly, so we need to ensure that the guidance is fit for purpose in Northern Ireland. As well as that, sectoral bodies in the tourism industry have been bringing forward their own guidance. Hospitality Ulster, for example, has put out quite extensive guidance. The industry is absolutely aware that the safe return of customers and business is of the utmost importance.

I will finish on that point, because I am sure that there will be other questions on tourism and hospitality. I will say that my view on the issue around social distancing — the 2 metres versus 1 metre question — is probably very well known. Our industry will survive and, as someone put it to me, it will have a fighting chance if we can go to the World Health Organization's recommended 1 metre for social distancing as opposed to 2 metres. However, that, of course, has to be in line with the medical and scientific evidence of the transmission of the virus in Northern Ireland. We will always seek the guidance of the Chief Medical Officer in making any changes. I know that the Executive are on that page as well. These are important steps forward for the Northern Ireland economy this week and in the weeks to come.

I see the Economic Advisory Group as an exciting and important opportunity to identify global markets and look at where we are already world class. I have said to the Committee before that, even in the darkest hour of lockdown, I took a call with the chief executive of Cygilant in Boston, who is bringing 65 cybersecurity jobs to Northern Ireland because he recognises the skills and expertise that are already in Northern Ireland and he knows how we can develop those aspects of our economy. In March, but for COVID, we were to go out to sign a mutual understanding with the state of Maryland to develop cybersecurity. We are already world class; it is about how we build on that and build on artificial intelligence.

When I was up at Magee, I saw some of the really exciting and brilliant opportunities that are being developed there. The CEO of Cygilant said not only that we were world class and had the skills, but that we had great cooperation between the universities and industry. Those exciting new opportunities are really important for us as we try to reimagine the next economic strategy and the economy for Northern Ireland. It is about developing the world-class things that we do, using players who live amongst us — who are from us and of us — to develop our economy and our connections further.

The Economic Advisory Group will, of course, report to me as Minister, and I intend to engage with it completely. I see it as a collaboration so that we can have a two-way conversation. Knowing some of the figures in the group as I do, I am sure that that may well be a robust conversation and a challenge. That is an important element of the work that we will do for the economy.

Mr Middleton: Thanks, Minister, for that. I look forward to following the progress. I know some of the individuals involved as well, and I know that they will be challenging, but the best interests of all of Northern Ireland will be at the forefront.

Diarmuid, I will bring you in on the action. This is around the city deals stuff. We know that, as we move forward, the city deals are going to play an even greater role in the economy. I appreciate that the Department for the Economy does not have the full remit of all the city deals, but it has the significant part: £800 million of the capital expenditure falls within the Department for the Economy. I appreciate that some of the city deals are further forward than others, but, at this initial stage, can you point out any potential risks or problems that may come down the line from some of the projects? Apologies; I do not want to come across as being vague, but we know that, from a media perspective, there are people who will point to a project and say, "Why is this project not moving on quicker than that one?", and vice versa. Can you foresee any initial risks?

Mr McLean: When we were working with the Belfast regional city deal and developing the heads of terms, we recognised that the technical areas that they were bringing forward were the areas where Northern Ireland has strengths, and they lined up with the capability, the economic strategy and the trajectory of where we were going. We recognise that it is a significant challenge. However, to have such investment in our innovation and our digital infrastructure is quite an opportunity, and we have never had something of this scale before, so we need to make the most of the opportunity. One of our challenges is getting the strategic fit for Northern Ireland across the deals and ensuring that we do not replicate me-toos in each region. Particularly at the moment, we have work ongoing on two projects with the two universities around advanced manufacturing, which we know will be in at least three of the city deals. We want to ensure that whatever we put in place serves the whole of industry in Northern Ireland, not just one region. That is one of the challenges that we are facing.

Obviously, the projects are large-scale in capital, but there is no resource funding coming with them, so it will be critical to look at the business plans for each of those projects to ensure that they will be sustainable and viable in the longer term. The last thing that we want to do is build large new buildings and put in a lot of expensive equipment, but not have sufficient resources for the staffing and the highly qualified people that will be required to take forward the projects in those centres.

Particularly during the current crisis, there is a degree of uncertainty about the level of investment that will be committed to some of the projects from private investors. We recognise that we will need to tie some of those things down as we develop from OBC to full business case over the next 12 months or so. We have been challenging the promoters in relation to the projected income streams and how those line up. The first cut that we have seen at the four innovation projects from Belfast would actually require some £24 million from the Department in resource funding over the next 10 years just to keep them going. We need to look at how that could be managed within the Department's innovation and technology funding over that period. Those are some of the challenges that we are facing.

We are continuing to meet representatives from the two universities to try to get alignment, particularly on the innovation project. The tourism projects are a bit further behind. They are still at conception stage, and there is a lot of work still to be done. Obviously, due to the crisis, a lot of the projections will have to be reworked according to the recovery plan and the length of Northern Ireland's tourism sector's recovery plan.

Mr Middleton: I have one final point while we are on the subject. Today, Ulster University has indicated potential problems with its finances, staffing costs, and all that. The university's name is printed all over the city deal projects. Have there been any initial conversations with the university or indication from it that it will have difficulty with its ability to contribute? As far as I am concerned, the Executive are doing their bit to ensure that things are moving along. We cannot have a situation where the Executive or Ministers get the blame for problems that are very much outside their control.

Mr McLean: At present, those projects are at OBC stage, so they are very much based on the longer-term plan. We are probably three, four or five years out from the start of some of those projects being built. We cannot have a situation where all those projects arrive at building stage at the same time. They will be phased in over a number of years so that there is time to plan through. Obviously, we will look at each project and work with the promoters, be that Ulster University, Queen's University, or whoever, on their financial stability and what they can contribute at that particular time.

You also have to bear in mind that universities do a lot of speculative research funding into the likes of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and the European Union. Therefore, they are continually tapping into different funding streams. At different points in time, there may be peaks and troughs in their funding. However, as I am sure the Minister will confirm, the Department will look closely at Ulster University's financial situation before any commitment is made.

Mrs Dodds: Just to follow up on that point: we do not need to rehearse Ulster University's difficulties; I think that they are probably fairly well known in the Committee. City deals, however, are an exciting new development. They are an opportunity to invest in Northern Ireland and its economy. They are an opportunity in the medium to long term. We are not pretending, in any shape or form, that they answer our immediate problems. However, they are a medium- to long-term investment in the economy. As each of them comes along, we will look at its value for money and return for the community etc and how it fits in with our economic strategy of boosting our goal of more, better-paid jobs and a more productive economy.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): I will just pick up briefly on Gary's points, because I think that the growth deals will be very important to recovery planning across the whole of the North and to tackling regional imbalance. Will there be overarching governance or management of the projects in order to develop the coordination that you mentioned and to ensure complementarity? You mentioned that certain projects will involve advanced manufacturing, for example, and how that will support the region. In my area of Causeway Coast and Glens, you would, perhaps, look at tourism, the green energy potential and those types of things. Is that being managed in a joined-up way?

Mr McLean: Certainly, from the Department's perspective, we are looking at those issues. Obviously, from the Executive's perspective, annex A of the paper sets out the governance arrangements that will be put in place. There will be a Northern Ireland city and growth deals delivery board, with senior responsible owner (SRO) representatives from each of the Departments to ensure that we are joined up in delivering for the Executive.

With regard to the specific actions that are under the Department's control, we are looking to ensure that there will be complementarity. For example, with regard to advanced manufacturing, we have asked Digital Catapult UK to undertake a review of the proposals that we have to date and to look at their complementarity, as opposed to looking at them individually, to ensure that, together, they would provide an effective solution for Northern Ireland. On artificial intelligence, we have asked Digital Catapult NI to work with the two universities to come forward with an artificial intelligence strategy or overarching plan for Northern Ireland. That will build on the work that we did last year. We got the Turing Institute to do an analysis of the artificial intelligence capabilities in Queen's and Ulster University. It highlighted that, individually, they probably did not rank in the top 10 in the UK, but, taken together, the capability of the two universities put them as one of the leading areas for artificial intelligence in the UK. That is the message that we have to look at from an economic development perspective. It is the capability of Northern Ireland as a whole not one institution over another. How do we harness the capabilities across the region to best support the development of industry and to create high-value jobs for our people? How do we harness that and turn it into a business opportunity? It is essential to get those linkages into industry.

Industry in Northern Ireland will not say, "I am going to go to this one and not that one". It will not support three projects in three regions. It will want to support a concept that helps it to deliver what it wants in a way that helps it to move forward and develop. So, to a certain extent, on location, it would be agnostic. What it does not want to see is replication across Northern Ireland.

Ms McLaughlin: Thank you very much, Minister, for your briefing, and thank you, Diarmuid. I welcome your comments about the business community in Northern Ireland showing grit and resolve. It certainly has, and we all know that first-hand. These have been very trying times for businesses, and a lot of people have stepped up, which is great.

I welcome the Economic Advisory Group; you have great people on it. However, a couple of sectors are missing. I know that you have a tourism advisory body as well, but tourism is not in it, yet it is one of our key areas of growth. The other is life and health sciences, which is our high potential growth area. I am a bit concerned that that is missing, as well as the green economy, because everything has to be driven through that. That is an observation.

In relation to the terms of reference for the Economic Advisory Group, at the heart of it all has to be economic and social recovery on a subregional basis. Unfortunately, it is not a one-size-fits-all

situation in Northern Ireland. We have a lot of inequalities in many areas, and we have to give that remit to the Economic Advisory Group that subregional balance is vital in its terms of reference.

The voice of business must be at the heart of our recovery. In your workings out of the various schemes and what you have been doing so far, you recognise that very well. Some of the bodies that you have got together have been really productive, and thank you for that.

There is one other aspect. A large number of manufacturing groups — SMEs — have fallen out of everything. I know that there is a lot of underspend of grants in some areas. We need to save what we have. We can concentrate on developing our business community and attracting FDI, but we have to save what we have, and that is our SMEs, particularly in manufacturing. I am concerned about mid-Ulster export companies, as they have fallen through everything. It is important for growth and recovery. Have you given any thought to any of that?

Mrs Dodds: First, just to tackle the issue of tourism, if anyone has seen the work that we have been doing in the Department over the last number of weeks, they will understand how important we think tourism is to the Northern Ireland economy and to Northern Ireland families and the important jobs that it provides. Tourism, because it is so core and so important, has its own recovery steering group. Once we get past the reopening issues, it will bring forward its recovery plan. I intend for that group to stay in place. Tourism and hospitality will have that sectoral voice within the Department for the remainder of the mandate. That is an important signal for the industry. I chair the group and have chaired every meeting. That is an important commitment from me, and it reflects the importance of tourism and hospitality. I will maintain that commitment because the sector has been dealt a devastating blow by COVID-19, and we will need to work very hard to bring that all back together again.

You asked about recovery, and I go back to Diarmuid's particular responsibility. There is a significant budget to bring forward tourism projects within the city and growth deals. I look forward to those being developed because they will sustain tourism in the long term.

I remember talking to Tourism Ireland many years ago. It talked about having to provide product for tourists to come and see and about tourism experiences. The investment that will come from the city and growth deals will be very important for local tourism in, for example, developing the Gobbins path or some of the other really important and absolutely wonderful tourism attractions in Northern Ireland. Tourism is core and central to what we are doing. In particular, never forget the 65,000 jobs that we need to protect and the businesses that we need to grow. It is very important.

You asked about subregional balance and the Economic Advisory Group. This group is about the global era. It is about looking out at global opportunities. It is about saying, "We are already world class in this. How can we develop it?". However, it is also about asking, "What new opportunities are out there? What new global trends can we bring to Northern Ireland and develop?". It is about developing all sorts of different areas of the economy, and all those areas will benefit through that. Social enterprise will benefit. Entrepreneurship will benefit. These people are, by their very nature, entrepreneurial. They are looking for more opportunities to bring to Northern Ireland. In doing so, we will, of course, benefit the whole regional economy.

I have already committed to a balanced regional economy, and that is important for Northern Ireland. As we look to achieve that, it is important that we also look at skills and the investment in skills in local economies. I am determined that we bring forward a skills strategy for Northern Ireland that will invest in communities, in young people and in people throughout their working life. That is an important element of getting regional balance in the economy.

I want us to look not just at skills. A layer within that is really important to me, which is that it includes opportunity for all. I see education and skills as really important in developing opportunity for communities where there have been many and difficult problems. In your city and right across Northern Ireland, we have seen the outworking of those problems. If we are to build a stable, prosperous Northern Ireland, we have to ensure that our young people have education and opportunity, and, in this era, building their skills opportunities is really important. You asked about grants for the SME manufacturing groups. Just before I came here, I was looking at the figures for the sectors in which most people were furloughed. There is no doubt that the vast majority were working in the manufacturing sector. That points to a vulnerability for those jobs in the short term, so it is really important to work with and try to protect the manufacturing sector. Of course, when we talk about them falling through the cracks — that great phrase that we have — we need to remember that every one of those companies has been able to engage with the national furlough scheme, which is, I think,

unprecedented and has protected jobs in those companies. Each company has been able to avail itself of rates relief for the period that was suitable for it. There has been significant input into those companies.

We are developing a paper that will go to the Executive. It will identify the amount of underspend in the grant schemes, the different sectors and areas that have made representations to us and where people feel that money has not been made available to them. It will be for the Executive to take a decision on how that goes forward. I hope that that will be brought to the Executive, probably at the start of next week, in line with the June monitoring papers.

Ms McLaughlin: I want to make one quick observation about the June monitoring round. When the Committee met on Monday, I welcomed the profiling of the enhanced apprenticeship programme. Will you outline a bit more of your thinking about the numbers who may be able to avail themselves of that? Will there be monetary support for businesses to make sure that they are a cog in that wheel? It is OK to give money to the further education colleges and even to higher education and the universities for apprenticeship programmes. However, if we do not marry the apprenticeships to businesses, the programme will not work. Businesses are the vital cog, and they are so vulnerable at the moment. There is the potential for job losses, and it will be very hard for them to pick up the new apprenticeship programme unless they are supported financially.

Mrs Dodds: Analysis of the statistics relating to people who have joined the unemployment register indicates that the most vulnerable are young people, those on part-time contracts etc and women. They are the ones who have been hit hardest and most immediately by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important to recognise — I often reflect on this statistic — that, in April, the same number of people were added to the register as were removed over the six years that we reduced unemployment. That shows the depth of difficulty very starkly. Six years of labour market progress disappeared when those people were added to the register in April. As you can see, that trend has continued, and we have seen the impact of the global difficulties in aerospace and their outworking on companies in Northern Ireland.

We are in a difficult space. However, in our budget review, in which we looked at some of those pressures, we identified, quite rightly, I think, that they will particularly impact on young apprentices and on firms that might take on apprentices. We are developing the scheme, and, as our thinking on it becomes clearer, we will, of course, share it with the Committee. That is important, but I want the Committee to be absolutely clear that it is at the forefront of my mind that we support not just young people but the businesses that are needed to maintain apprenticeships.

It is an aside, but it is important to say that it was really good to visit Portadown's further education college this week, where some young people were doing adaptive assessments so that they can complete their vocational qualification. One of the young people — this relates to your point, Sinead — whom I spoke to said that, if he had been unable to complete the assessment and had failed to take that further step towards his vocational qualification, he would have lost his job with the firm that he was working for. Therefore, it is really important that we get those young people into college and allow them to complete their vocational qualifications so that they can step on in their career pathway.

Ms McLaughlin: I totally agree.

Mrs Dodds: Have I forgotten anything else?

Ms McLaughlin: No, that is fine. Thank you very much.

Mr McLean: I will follow up on your point on the EAG. It was never the intention that it would cover all sectors, but I will point out that the Department's MATRIX panel — the science and technology panel — covers a wide range of technology areas and informs our policies in those areas. That is chaired by Dr Rob Grundy, who will be on the EAG, and he has a health and life sciences background. He is working with the university and Invest NI on setting up a health and life sciences representative group in Northern Ireland.

Ms McLaughlin: Is that a dedicated group?

Mr McLean: The Health Innovation Research Alliance Northern Ireland (HIRANI) has a proposal to set up a group that will look at internationally marketing the health and life sciences capabilities of Northern Ireland.

Ms McLaughlin: Excellent, well done.

Mrs Dodds: In the European Parliament, I was able to bring together all those companies from Northern Ireland that were invested in the connected health sphere. They are doing some absolutely astounding work here, and we want to build on that.

Mr Stewart: Thank you, Minister, for your information so far. It has been really enlightening. First, I want to touch on the city deal. In my constituency, Carrickfergus is set, from a regeneration point of view, to benefit significantly from the city deal, and we look forward to seeing that rolled out. Gary referred to concerns among local representatives about the potential for delays, but, hopefully, we will see that come to fruition very soon.

Like you, Minister, I welcome the appointment of the EAG. We congratulate Ms Graham on her role as chair. There are some very high profile and significant people on that group, and we all wish them the very best. If they succeed, Northern Ireland succeeds, and I think that that is the key. These are unprecedented times — it has become a cliché — and we have to do whatever we can to try to grow the Northern Ireland economy and to stave off the worst of the impact of COVID-19.

You talked about the EAG looking at global trends. One significant global trend is growing the social economy, and you touched on that. I would like to see a representative from Social Enterprise NI on the group, as the Chair and Deputy Chair mentioned. The Scandinavian countries and Canada have made social enterprise a cornerstone of their economy. With the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012, we have the opportunity to change the way that we do things, and that could be filtered in. You say that the EAG will look at it, but there is no bigger advocate for a sector than somebody who is engrossed and embedded in that sector. It could only add to the significance of the group and the role that it plays. Perhaps we could have a look at that.

We have heard the startling unemployment figures. My fear is that they can only grow as the furlough scheme starts to drop off and businesses start to see what their bottom lines really are. You touched on those who are most impacted — women and young people — and there is now a fear that our young people will become the forgotten generation. In a survey by the Northern Ireland Youth Forum, which was referred to by 'Good Morning Ulster' this morning, 20% of young people said that unemployment was a massive issue. You touched on some of what we can do for young people, but will you talk me through the creative solutions that you have to support them?

Many who are losing their job are in the hospitality industry, and they fear that there will be nothing for them in the short term and even the medium term. They hear talk about the schemes that are going forward, but they want to hear about creative solutions now. We used to have a scheme in Northern Ireland called Action for Community Employment, which was very beneficial. It may be that it was never perfect, but something along those lines might help young people. The fear is that they could become the forgotten generation. I will stop there, Minister.

Mrs Dodds: I have already touched on social enterprise. Social enterprise is an incredibly important sector of the economy, not just because it is a growing sector, but because it takes people who were far from the labour market and helps them to be part of it. For that reason, we will always be supportive of trying to ensure that our social economy sector has a bright future. As I said, the EAG is not about one sector; it is about getting world-class people who are part of our community in Northern Ireland to look at world-class global trends and see how they can be imported into Northern Ireland or how those opportunities can be grasped. If Northern Ireland, as a region, prepares early and well, we will be able to grab those opportunities quickly and enhance our ability to make our economy prosper. That is important, and I look forward to working with you on it. If our economy prospers, families prosper. That is an important element of everything that we do.

You are right about young people. Young people were the hardest hit and suffered gravely from lack of economic opportunity in the previous recession. That is why I have tried to support young people through the way in which I have reorganised the Department's budget and any easements that we could make. Some of the support that we have reorganised is for the immediate future. It is about trying to provide access to IT for those young people who do not have such access and promoting opportunity for all young people.

As I said to Sinead, one of the areas that I want us to develop is apprenticeships, as they are a useful and versatile tool that should be used in developing the local economy. Leaving aside young people for a moment, I would like to see apprenticeships being made available at all stages of life. I was perturbed by what I saw in a recent constituency case. A young lad who had been in the army came home and wanted to get an apprenticeship, but, at 28 or 29, he was too old to get an apprenticeship. I do not want to see that situation pertain in Northern Ireland any longer. It does not matter where they come from or who they are, it is important that they have the opportunity to upskill and retrain at any stage of life. I would like us to develop and use that apprenticeship tool.

I would also like to see more investment in our Training for Success programmes, as they take young people who, at times, found education a difficult experience and who need help to get into the labour market and to see a pathway. If we are to build a stable future for Northern Ireland and our communities, we must do more of that. We were getting on to that pathway in some of my early work in the Department, before the distraction of COVID-19. I am determined that we open up opportunities for young people who, otherwise, will fall prey to evil men and women in their communities. That is important for all of us.

We are starting to build that programme on how we intervene and help young people throughout their lives and on how we help people to change, reskill and adapt in other parts of their lives.

Mr Stewart: Chair, I will come back on one point. You will all think that I have become obsessed with the health and beauty industry over the past few weeks, because I have not stopped talking about it. *[Laughter.]* I do not have a fixation with fake tan, as you can tell from my milk-bottle skin. One of the sectors that is key to the employment of young women, young people generally, and young entrepreneurs, who perhaps decided to give up other careers to open a salon, is the health and beauty sector, whether barbers, hairdressers or tanning studios. The sector is vital to our local economy and high street and provides flexible employment. I wrote to you about that last week. They are crying out for information on when they can get back to business as usual. We await an announcement tomorrow, but I fear that it might not even give the clarity that they need. Is there anything that we can do for that sector?

I will throw in driving instructors as well, because they are key to young people getting qualifications to get on the road. There are some industries where 2 metres will never work, and we either accept that we are going to have to get back and just suck it up and try to manage it and let responsible companies do as much as they can to protect people or not. We need to give them guidance and clarity. I implore you, as the Minister here today on behalf of the Executive, to give us that as quickly as possible, even if it is just guidance about what they need to do when that date comes, because I really fear for that sector and for those employed — or currently not employed — in it.

Mrs Dodds: I have a few things to say about that sector, because it is really important. I talked earlier about young people going back into our colleges to do their assessments so that they can keep on working towards their career goals. Two of the sectors that are really important to further education are the general health and beauty and childcare sectors. I have said that, as the economy opens up, each sector can get back to college to progress its qualifications. So, for me, in Economy and having skills policy responsibilities, it is really important from that point of view, which is not something that anybody thinks about.

In general, most people will acknowledge that I have been pretty vocal about the need to reopen the economy, because the longer that we are in lockdown, the more difficult that it is for sectors and individual businesses to recover. I have said it many times, but it is worth repeating: each month of shutdown is akin to a large recession, so it is really important to get the economy reopened. I will add the caveat that everything must be done safely.

I agree with you: we will have to learn to live with the virus and to work knowing that the virus is there. Therefore, the most important thing is the work safe, stay safe slogan. We need to ensure that we are respectful of each other in the environment that we are in and that employers have appropriate measures in place to ensure that their workforce is safe as it goes about daily life. So, I agree with you. I think that it is important that we look at it.

On the 2-metre/1-metre issue, I was at Queen's last week, where I had a really engaging conversation with a professor of virology. We were talking about the 2-metre/1-metre debate, and he said that, for example, if you were outside at 1 metre, that is not as difficult as being inside at 1 metre. Sometimes, it is the distance plus the mitigating measures that you put in place. It is about good air circulation, good hand hygiene and how many people might be in your business at any one time. It is about how

you will operate. We will all have to learn different operating models as we go forward, remembering that, until we get a vaccine or a cure, we will have to learn to work with it.

What we do not want is for businesses to forge ahead and have to take a step backwards. That would be an incredibly frustrating and devastating blow to businesses and communities across Northern Ireland that have sacrificed a lot of their personal liberties to help us in a difficult situation. So, I am in agreement with you.

The general point that you make about reopening is very important, and I know that the Executive are looking at how we can take a more overarching, holistic view of how the different sectors open and operate and the advice that we will give them. There will be more conversation about that on Thursday at the Executive.

Mr Stewart: That sector is ready and waiting to step up to whatever the requirements may be.

Mrs Dodds: Trust me, John: this Minister is ready and waiting to step up. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Stewart: Can we expect some sort of announcement tomorrow?

Mrs Dodds: I will not speculate on what the Executive will do. I know that conversations are taking place on all those areas. There are other areas that are waiting to find out how they can open up. Today, at 12.00 noon, there will be the first meeting of the Churches' working group. As a person to whom faith is really important, it is important to me that we find a way back for people of faith and churches to meet in communities.

Mr Stewart: Absolutely.

Mrs Dodds: Therefore, a lot of work is going on across all Departments to work out how things will go forward.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): I am conscious of time and that there are three more members who would like to ask questions.

Mrs Dodds: Sorry.

Mr Stewart: Sorry.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): Try to be as succinct as you can.

Mr Dunne: Thanks, Chair. Thanks, Minister. Most of the points have been well covered. We welcome the experienced team that you have set up in the Economic Advisory Group. You have a good, broad range of people, a number of whom we know. They will have a lot to offer. I recognise that we have a long way to go. Recently, we have seen towns and villages open up, but things are slow. There is a lack of confidence in business and the public. We have a long way to go to recovery.

Another issue is FE colleges. You have covered it very well. We had a good discussion with FE colleges, and we all recognise the great work that they do. There has been significant investment in FE colleges, many of which have new buildings. They employ many people. Excellent work is being done at the South Eastern Regional College in North Down. I look forward to bringing you down there some time to meet the new principal, Ken Webb. He is very engaging. You would be very welcome. The apprenticeship levy was mentioned. That levy has to be paid by many businesses and, I understand, the public sector as well. That issue needs to be addressed. I just want to make you aware of that.

My main point is one that I have gone on about previously: air connectivity and getting our airports up and running. I know that you have done work on that, as it is so important for business travel and for tourism. So many people fly in and out of airports here, as you well know, Minister, having been in Europe and so on. The airports are very important to the viability of businesses. Public servants use them regularly to fly in and out for day trips or for a couple of days. We need to get them up and running and support them as much as we possibly can. They are vital if we are to get tourism back on track. We appreciate that tourism will be very limited in 2020. However, much more needs to be done to support the airports and do what we can to help.

My last point is about the job losses at Bombardier. We appreciate the work that is being done there. The points have been well made. There is real risk from lack of production. Production will be limited in, say, the next year because the demand is not there in much of the manufacturing sector. As a result, jobs will be lost. We need to do all that we can. We need to encourage Invest NI to do more and change its role. Obviously, Invest NI supports business and has always had an emphasis on export, and we are all for that. However, it now needs to change its role and direction to support struggling businesses — those that will have to diversify and look at research and development and other ways of working. Perhaps a bit more emphasis on the work of Invest NI would be profitable.

Mrs Dodds: First, of course, the apprenticeship levy is a national scheme that we cannot simply deal with on our own. Direction on it would come from national Government. However, I think that you understand and will work with me in trying to extend the opportunities of apprenticeships for young people in Northern Ireland: apprenticeships at all levels and in all sectors. I am very keen to extend higher-level apprenticeships, as, I know, are many of our premier companies. They offer real opportunities for young people who may not want to go the university route but who will have very high levels of qualifications as they work their way through.

It is saddening to see the job losses at Bombardier and, indeed, Thompson Aero Seating in my constituency. These are reflective of a global crisis in the aerospace and airline industry. I said at the Ad Hoc Committee last week that Boeing and Airbus have announced a 40% reduction in their orders in the industry. That will have a knock-on effect on those very big companies, but I still worry very much about the smaller companies that supply our larger companies. They are vulnerable in that supply chain. This is an important role for Invest NI. All those large companies are client companies of Invest, and I have asked them to come together and to bring in some of those smaller supply chain manufacturers to look at what we can do in Northern Ireland, but, most importantly, what we can ask of national Government around the aerospace industry.

I have a weekly call with the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Minister, Mr Zahawi, on that issue, and, just two weeks ago, we had a dedicated call with Bombardier not about the redundancies but on the wider issues for the company and the aerospace industry in general, and we will continue to do that. These are our flagship companies. They are very important for Northern Ireland's economy and for high-skilled, well-paid jobs here. So, it is very important that we do that.

Invest NI probably has a broader role than most people recognise, but it has been busy providing information and keeping in contact with companies, and we will work with it to ensure that we have a successful Northern Ireland economy.

Mr Dunne: OK, Minister. On the airports?

Mrs Dodds: Sorry, I knew that I had forgotten something. Connectivity is key, without a shadow of a doubt. We need to ensure that we have it, and most people recognise that we have done a lot of work on it. The public service obligation, public supported route with Aer Lingus between here and London was successful in supporting a route that was very vulnerable during the darker days of lockdown. We are beginning to see that opening up and more flights operating. On Monday morning, I was delighted to be at the International Airport when it opened up its connectivity flights to the rest of the UK. Flights are going to Liverpool, Manchester and Gatwick, and, on Tuesday, it had its first flight to Faro. It is key that we continue to support connectivity not just for tourism but for business and families.

Mr O'Dowd: Since 2007, I have sat and listened to DUP Economy Ministers set out an economic strategy, and, over those years, it has changed little, but, at the very centre of it, perhaps unsurprisingly, you have extolled the virtues of our relationship with Britain and the virtues of trading with Britain. Of course, there are virtues there, and I am not complaining about that, but I have a concern when the sole focus of that economic strategy is our relationship with Britain, whether you agree with that politically or not. The sole strategy has been, at times, "Follow Britain" or "Our focus is on Britain for trade and economy activity" at the expense of the benefits of working on an all-island basis and on the North/South relationship. We are in danger of repeating that.

Looking at the figures for our economy, we see that we have some of the lowest wages on these islands; we have the lowest standard of living of many regions on these islands; we have the lowest economic activity compared to some regions on these islands; we have the lowest health outcomes compared to many regions on these islands. That suggests to me that the strategy to date has failed, so why repeat it? Does the Minister not think that repeating the same strategy over and over again,

particularly in the light of COVID-19, will fail workers, their families and, in due course, the economy? Do we not need a change of thinking?

Mrs Dodds: I will not indulge the political point, but I advise the member, very clearly, that our single biggest market, the market where we sell the most to and the market that we buy the most from, is the rest of the United Kingdom. It is fundamental to our economic activity. Our connection with that market is fundamental to businesses, jobs and families in Northern Ireland. It is the fifth largest economy in the world. It is our internal market, and therefore it is fundamental to everything that we do. I make no apology for saying that, as we continue to see the outworkings of the negotiation with the European Union and the implementation of the protocol, unfettered access to that really important market is fundamental to the Northern Ireland economy.

John, I think that you also miss the wider point that I have been making today, which is worth repeating. Our vision is of a Northern Ireland that can compete globally and invest in specific sectors. It is a vision of a Northern Ireland that can build on the expertise and world-class work that we already do so that we can be globally competitive in those sectors. That is also important.

Finally on this point, as Economy Minister, I, of course, connect with my counterparts across the British Isles, in tourism and in various other sectors. When the new Government are established in the Republic of Ireland, I will connect with my counterparts there as well so that we can continue to ensure that we prosper and grow as a region.

Mr O'Dowd: We will, no doubt, return to the previous subject many times in the future, but I want a quick point of clarification on your response to Sinead's question on the underspend in business support. You said that you will bring a paper to the Executive. Will that include a recommendation to support businesses that have not yet received support and a recommendation to support small traders? Will you make those specific recommendations to the Executive?

Mrs Dodds: As I have said on many occasions, I will bring a comprehensive paper to the Executive. The Executive will have a discussion and decide what should happen with that underspend and where it should be divested. I will work with Executive colleagues to ensure that it is delivered in the way that the Executive have indicated.

Mr O'Dowd: The Executive will be led by you and your recommendations, so it is key that you make those recommendations.

Mrs Dodds: The Executive will always take a view, John.

Ms Sugden: I will follow on from a lot of what John Stewart said about things reopening. The announcements that you made on Monday were very much welcomed, particularly in my constituency, where tourism is the focus of the local economy. Every time we make a new announcement, it gives rise to many questions about the variances and to a lot of confusion. I expect that most MLAs around this table have, when connecting with their constituents, been getting queries subsequent to Monday's announcements.

We are almost at a phase of trying to decide when the rest of businesses and services can reopen. I suppose that you, as an Executive, make those decisions on the basis of medical evidence. You probably consider the types of businesses where contact might increase the transfer of the virus. Airborne water droplets are another factor in determining why some cannot open before others. That is where the queries are coming from for me. I know that some of those areas may fall into other Ministers' remits, but insofar as they are businesses in themselves, I am going to give you a list. *[Laughter.]* I do not necessarily expect a response on each of them, but I just want to give you my views on that and represent the views of constituents who have come to me. Dentists and opticians are quite concerned, because whilst they seem to go into the sphere of Health, they are, in most cases, private business organisations. Indeed, the subsidies that they receive from the Department of Health will not even touch the PPE that they will need in order to operate again. There is a business consideration for them that I would like you to take a view on.

Personal trainers and sports coaches are telling me that if they compare themselves to some of the other businesses that have been able to open, they could put 2-metre distancing in place or 1 metre, if that is what it becomes. They could work outside, but they just need an affirmation from a Minister or the Executive to say that they can open. Coach operators are another example. Is there any consideration for indoor soft-play areas?

I am also hearing from bookmakers. I do not understand why they have not been able to open. A number of people made the interesting point that if they are not able to carry out an activity in a physical space, they are seeking to do it online and it is causing them to do that more often than not. I wonder whether there is a consideration there as regards their reopening so that we do not give rise to other issues.

We are hearing that the number of weddings that could be conducted outdoors could be increased. It is a huge industry, not just for people who are getting married but for all the different vendors across Northern Ireland. If we are starting to open up and enable businesses to get back to work, these are almost the last types of groups to consider.

I really wanted to show you something: shall we do this as a flow diagram? *[Laughter.]* If you can operate with your consumers on a 2-metre basis, you could open. That takes us to the next level: do you have aerosols in enclosed spaces and that type of thing? It is just so that we can give people clarity. I am frustrated that we get good announcements, and then all these people come to me asking, "Does this apply to me?". It is about giving reassurance.

We talked about city deals. That leads me on to the growth deals as well and where the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council fits into that. Previously, an official told the Committee that Causeway Coast and Glens seems not to be as far on as other regions in Northern Ireland. As an elected rep, I would be keen to know how we can support it.

My final point — I will perhaps go into this more when we have people presenting to us — is that we were due to have a presentation about adults with learning disabilities and how we can support them to get back to work. Again, I appreciate that that probably extends into the Health Minister's remit. I am getting a lot of contact from parents about their dependants, saying that they are in difficulty in the lockdown and that they are keen to understand when they can get back to work. I know that being in employment is important for those individuals. That is what I have to say, in a nutshell. *[Laughter.]*

Mrs Dodds: That is quite a list. *[Laughter.]* I will take the first bit and group it together, because that is important. You are right: we have taken our first tentative steps towards opening up the economy. We have made significant progress: retail is operating, and hospitality and tourism will be able to operate in a limited way. That is an important first step in getting them on the road to recovery.

As I said in answer to an earlier question, it is time to look at the sectors that are specifically mentioned in the regulations to see how they can be opened up safely. That will require a holistic view from the Executive. Many of those businesses, as you say, do not come under my policy remit, but sometimes, tangentially, they become part of it. We want to see how we can bring clarity and structure to that as a whole. We will have a discussion on Thursday to see how it fits in with the Executive's recovery plan. It is important to get to that.

Before I ask Diarmuid to talk about the city deals, I will just say a little bit about adults with learning disabilities.

It is massively important to get education back on track. It will do an enormous disservice to young people if we continue where we are. I am a teacher by trade. My background and everything about me indicate that it is crucial, but it is ever more important for people with learning disabilities, particularly adults. It is about trying to get those training centres opened successfully and safely and trying to give some hope and, perhaps, a little bit of a break to those people who are caring 24/7 and have been doing so for a long time. You hit on one of the areas of lockdown that has caused so much disturbance and stress to families. It is important to try to get that done as quickly as we can.

Mr McLean: I will speak briefly about the Causeway Coast and Glens growth deal. We have not had active engagement with that council. You have to bear in mind that the city deals are being owned, designed, developed and driven by councils. That is the model that they are operating on; they are not being driven from the centre. We will come in and support and work with them when they have their package together. The mid and south-west councils had their growth strategy work done previously, and it is on that basis that they are looking at the areas they want to focus their growth deal on. I assume that the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council is doing a similar piece of work internally by looking at its growth strategy for the area and the areas where it has strengths and capabilities. When it has completed its thinking at council level, it will engage with the relevant Departments, be that ourselves for tourism, innovation and digital, or DFC on regeneration. We need

to give it the space to come forward with its thinking and focus for its deal, and then we will row in and work with it when it has a clear path going forward, rather than trying to dictate a path to it now.

Ms Sugden: I understand that. Are there any concerns that it is not progressing it as quickly as appropriate and that it will miss the opportunities that are there, or do you feel that it is still working through the space? Will there come a point when we will need to intervene and encourage it to try to get this over the line so that we can *[Inaudible.]*?

Mr McLean: I cannot answer the question. I do not know where it is in the process internally. We have not proactively sought information from it.

Ms Sugden: Is that something that you could do?

Mr McLean: If it invites us, we will certainly go to talk to it. The mid and south-west reached out to us. We were down with them and met the chief executives of the councils involved when they were starting off their thinking. They asked us to give them our experience of what happened in the previous two deals. They took that on board when they started to look at what they were going to do. They are aware of what is happening in the other two deals. Equally, if Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council wants to interact with us on what we have been doing on the other deals, we will be happy to do that.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): Thank you very much. I know that we have kept you late again, so apologies for that. Thank you for taking the time to talk to us. I am sure that we will have you back as soon as we can. *[Laughter.]*

Mrs Dodds: Thank you very much, folks.