



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

COVID-19 Response and Economic
Recovery: Mrs Diane Dodds MLA, Minister
for the Economy

23 September 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

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

Witnesses:

Mrs Dodds	Minister for the Economy
Mr Mike Brennan	Department for the Economy
Mr Shane Murphy	Department for the Economy

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): I welcome the Minister, Diane Dodds; the permanent secretary, Mike Brennan; and the head of analytical services, Shane Murphy. I will hand over to you, Minister, to make an opening statement, after which we will ask some questions.

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): Thank you, Chair, as always. I thank the Committee for giving me the opportunity to update it on what the Department and I are doing to rebuild the Northern Ireland economy. It has been said many times that this is a rapidly evolving landscape. Even this week, we have seen decisions taken in London, Cardiff, Edinburgh and here at Stormont that will have an impact on the economy and that will, once again, change where and what government interventions will be required to help the economy.

Last night, the First Minister made it clear in her comments that the new restrictions applied to the home and that business, hospitality and the economy should continue to function. Let me be equally clear this morning: the Northern Ireland economy cannot afford another lockdown. The small shoots of recovery that we see would be destroyed. The fear alone of another lockdown would remove any lingering hopes that businesses have of economic recovery. This is costing jobs and impacting on families.

The Committee will be well aware of the vital recovery work that has been ongoing for some time and that we engage in that work in parallel with protecting people's health and responding to the restrictions agreed at the Executive. It is a huge challenge for government and for business. Just as business owners, workers, college staff, students and others have adapted and revised their plans, so must we all. That is why I launched my economic recovery plan in June, and the 'Rebuilding A

Stronger Economy' document is the template for the short- to medium-term recovery and interventions in the Northern Ireland economy. It was adopted by the Executive as part of their recovery strategy. Taking account of the new world that we live in, it sets out how we build a more competitive, more inclusive and greener economy. To use the buzzwords, we have also been agile and nimble in delivering strategic and targeted interventions to help with the economy. We have not needed a strategy to get on with delivering help, and I will address some of those interventions in a few minutes.

I understand the role that the Committee has in examining the interventions and in highlighting areas and sectors that are in need of ongoing support. I know that the Committee will also have been listening to economists, business leaders and trade unionists about the types of interventions that make the greatest impact. There will be challenges as well as opportunities going forward. I want to work with the Committee to ensure that we grasp those opportunities. We are in the business of supporting the core industries in the economy — manufacturing, agri-food and tourism — but we must also concentrate on areas where, we know, Northern Ireland can do well. That includes the high-growth areas of advanced manufacturing, life and health sciences, digital and clean energy. I was a little alarmed to hear a previous comment that, because we were doing well in the digital economy space, we should divert our attentions elsewhere. The reality is that the digital and tech sector underpins virtually every other sector in the economy, so investing in the digital economy is an investment in the whole economy. We are global leaders in cybersecurity, and to stay there we must continue to invest in skills in that area.

I have submitted 32 bids to the Department of Finance to deliver a wide-ranging and comprehensive programme of interventions to rebuild our economy. Those bids are strategically aligned to our plan, published in June, and have been identified in collaboration with business leaders, economists and the Economic Advisory Group, who have all played a key role in advising on the interventions and on other issues such as labour market prospects, our skills agenda and wider policy development. As we plan for a future that is hopefully free from COVID-19, we must also determine how best to live and work with the virus while it is here. I have been at the forefront of trying to get the economy open again, albeit in a way that is safe and sensible, and the best help that the Government can provide to businesses is to let them trade. I agree with the Deputy Chair of the Committee, who said at the weekend that the economy cannot afford another lockdown. We all understand the economic impact of the last one.

To date we have spent £408 million on 20 separate initiatives in response to the impact of COVID. That includes rapidly introducing business grants that have helped over 30,000 businesses to survive the lockdown and beyond. The tourism recovery steering group that I established is leading on the planning and preparations for the regrowth of that sector. Through that group we have delivered a number of key priorities, such as reopening the sector safely, providing operational guidelines, creating an industry charter mark and targeting marketing activity to stimulate business. A draft tourism recovery action plan is also in development to support that important sector.

Many businesses across our economy are back to being busy or are trading well, and they sit as exemplars of how to operate during these difficult times by diversifying, collaborating and innovating whilst protecting employees and customers. Some have even been able to announce jobs in recent months. During the most difficult of times, it is worth reminding ourselves that almost 1,000 new jobs have been announced since April, and I know that there are more to come. For other businesses, recovery will be a longer process. My Department and I will remain by their side to provide whatever support and advice we can. We have already identified a range of measures to help vulnerable but viable businesses, with funding of around £25 million secured for 2020-21. I have also asked Invest NI to develop schemes to support business and economic recovery, and I announced the first two earlier this month. The digital selling capability grant is aimed at helping retail and wholesale businesses to grow their business online. The new £5 million COVID-19 equity investment fund will also provide access to finance for innovative SMEs to support growth. The delivery of new broadband infrastructure under Project Stratum will play a vital role in rebuilding our regional economy as we emerge from the COVID crisis.

Our greatest asset and the key to a sustainable recovery is Northern Ireland's people, which is why I have prioritised skills development. Our strong skills base has already attracted jobs and investment to Northern Ireland, and I want to build on that. That is why I have invested over £20 million in an apprenticeship recovery package. I want to encourage employers to bring the 4,500 apprentices back from furlough and support them through to completion. Up to £3,700 is available per apprentice to encourage return and retention. I have also allocated £12.5 million to support employers to create apprenticeship opportunities. Employers will receive £3,000 for each new opportunity created.

Thousands of students are back to classes at our further education colleges and other training providers, where they are taking part in blended learning with a mix of online and in-person teaching. That reopening is so important for the mental health of our young people, as well as ensuring that they keep their education and training on track. Building the skills among the workforce of the future is essential.

I introduced many measures to support the Northern Ireland economy through the most difficult of times. As well as help from the Northern Ireland Executive, there was support available from the UK Government to assist businesses, including the furlough and self-employment support schemes. The ending of those two schemes is, I believe, premature, and I am firm in my belief that they must be extended to support jobs in our local economy. I have again written to the Chancellor of the Exchequer asking him to extend those schemes. That is of particular importance for sectors that may take longer to recover — for example, aerospace, retail, hospitality, leisure, tourism and the arts. Government announcements over recent days will, I believe, compound the challenges for those sectors. Extending the furlough scheme or a variant of the same would not just be important for those sectors but would probably also provide us in government here with more room to manoeuvre with our local policies, through which we would all aim to help key, viable businesses through to the other side of the crisis.

Would I like to be able to do more? Of course. I totally understand the frustration of businesses that have found it difficult to secure financial support. I have met representatives from ExcludedNI and fully understand their situation. My primary aim from the beginning has been to support as many businesses as practical, supplementing the key national schemes that, due to their sheer size, are the bedrock of this recovery phase. The business support grant schemes were administered on behalf of the Executive. Unspent funding had to be returned to the Department of Finance for reallocation, as it was ring-fenced by the Executive. I had no discretion to spend it elsewhere. I continue to push for more financial support to be made available to those still in need, including for the newly self-employed, small businesses and, indeed, the manufacturing sector.

We must also be strategic in how we deliver support. We must be able to justify interventions and demonstrate how that support will make an impact. We are all being lobbied by various sectors, groups and individuals, and none of this is easy. Difficult decisions will have to be taken. I have provided a detailed options paper to the Executive that identifies the support gaps. That builds on the economic recovery paper that I published in June.

While dealing with the impact of the pandemic, businesses are, of course, doing their best to prepare for the onset of the protocol and the outcome of the negotiations. It is important to note that they can also avail themselves of a wide range of support available from Invest NI and InterTradeIreland. While we await further clarity on some issues, there are things that businesses can do now to ensure that they are ready to face the challenges and the opportunities from 1 January.

These are tough times, probably the toughest times that many of our business owners have ever faced. We know that it will be some time before economic activity is back to the level that it was at before the pandemic descended. We will continue to support businesses, the economy, jobs and families.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): Thank you very much, Minister, for that update. The Committee has also written to the Chancellor on the self-employed income support scheme and the furlough scheme, asking for both to be extended. As you referenced, we heard from economists last week about the importance of that and how those supports need to be developed to support people in training for future jobs while keeping that connection with their current employer. That is an important consideration.

I will pick up on a number of issues. We would like to discuss an awful lot with you this morning, but we want to get as many members in as possible. I will start with the recovery bids. Do you have an indication of when those are likely to be considered by the Executive? Are you hoping that those will be considered tomorrow?

Mrs Dodds: Sorry to cut across you; my apologies. I first submitted those bids in July. We are still waiting for them. We have had version 1 and version 2 responses, but the process is ongoing. It is really important that we get to the end of that process as quickly as possible for two reasons. The economy absolutely needs the interventions that those bids represent. We have put in almost £90 million of bids: that is what the 32 bids represent. They are strategically aligned with the document that we published in June, which the Executive have adopted. They cover all aspects of the economy from

the digital sector to skills issues and to tourism and hospitality, areas that, after yesterday, will require particular attention.

I want to see those bids through, not only because the economy needs them but because they are in-year spends that have to be spent by the end of the year. As you and I know, spending profitably and wisely takes time, and we need to be able to do that.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): When officials were with us a couple of weeks ago, they said that additional information was asked for on those bids. When I consider the economic recovery strategy in the medium term, it strikes me that there is a lack of clear objectives and actions that can be linked directly to the bids. We put that to the officials, who said that they would come back with a written briefing on how the bids would align with the economic strategy. It would be useful for us to get that; I do not think that we have received it.

The Committee Clerk: We have not had it yet, Chair, but it is in process.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): Last week, the Finance Minister expressed his frustration that the allocation of bids was not discussed at the Executive meeting, because he also wants to progress the allocations. We all want those interventions to get out as quickly as possible, so I hope that that will move forward this week.

Students returning to universities and colleges have been the focus of much discussion over the past week. The universities have had plans in place over the summer months for a return to campus, and, at this point, some of those plans may have to be revised. Has advice been forthcoming from the Department to the universities, and has there been engagement with the students' unions about the return to campus? There is a role for the Health Minister, so has there been a cross-departmental focus?

Mrs Dodds: My Department is in touch with the universities — Queen's and Ulster University — almost daily. As you know, a group meeting has been set up across Departments on antisocial behaviour and how the universities can help to ensure that students behave responsibly. My Department is part of that group. However, universities are autonomous institutions, and they set their own guidelines and rules. They have a fairly rigorous set of guidelines around life on campus and what people should do, including guidelines on one-way systems, lectures etc.

In relation to the Holylands, I understand that Queen's, in particular, is working with the PSNI, Belfast City Council and the students' union on the campus community pledge and sanctions for those who have not behaved well. I am concerned about the sanctions. In anticipation of today's meeting, I asked for a breakdown of those sanctions and how things were going. On Friday 18 September, Queen's issued a statement to all students advising that, should the university receive notification of a COVID breach from the PSNI, students would receive a precautionary suspension with immediate effect for up to 14 days. As of 22 September — yesterday — the university had issued 27 precautionary suspensions. I am concerned about that. Many of us have been at university, and we loved life there. Those sanctions could have significant repercussions for students, particularly in professional subjects where they may trigger fitness-to-practise issues. I appeal to the students, should they hear about what we are doing here this morning, to obey the rules, to look after one another, to be aware of the precautions that they need to take around the pandemic and not to engage in antisocial behaviour. It might seem like fun now, but it could have dreadful health consequences for those whom they love and for their later life. I issue that as a stark warning to students. I will support the universities in taking action to ensure that, first, people are safe and, secondly, students know that there are rules that have to be obeyed.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): The student leadership has also been vocal in expressing those very strong messages.

Mrs Dodds: Yes.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): The sanctions that are being imposed are severe. They are not undertaken lightly, and they are not supported lightly. This is a public health emergency, and we all appeal for sensible heads.

Mrs Dodds: Let us be honest: the vast and overwhelming bulk of students will be responsible. They are there to study and to progress their lives and careers, and they will be responsible. We are talking about a small minority, and we should not forget that the vast bulk of young people are absolutely fine and will be respectful of one another, the rules on campus and their neighbours, wherever they live.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): It is important to emphasise that it is a small minority.

Minister, I want to pick up on the Internal Market Bill and the Department's role in engaging on it and on the broader issues of the protocol implementation through the negotiations.

Mrs Dodds: As you know, the Internal Market Bill is going through Committee in Parliament. I have forgotten exactly which part of the Committee stage it is at. In the Department, we are looking at the Bill. We have asked for legal opinion on its devolution aspects, which I have not yet received. As soon as we receive them, we will discuss the issue with Executive colleagues and come to a conclusion.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): In relation to the future free trade agreements and access to both the UK and EU markets, has there been progress on the EU agreement?

Mrs Dodds: I wish that I had direct contact with David Frost or Michel Barnier so that I could answer that question for you in a meaningful way. Let us be absolutely clear: the best outcome for the economy of Northern Ireland is to come to a negotiated free trade agreement that would get us into the zero tariff realm and allow us to trade effectively.

Access to our main market in GB is absolutely vital to Northern Ireland, and that is where the operation of the protocol, from where I see it, puts Northern Ireland at a disadvantage. Over 50% of everything that we make or sell goes to market in Great Britain. It is absolutely and utterly vital that we have that unfettered access to our main market. It is equally important that we have complete freedom of trade within the UK internal market, and that includes GB to NI checks. About two thirds of everything that we need for the high street or manufacturing process comes from GB. It is essential that we have the freedom to operate within the UK's internal market.

If ever I needed a practical demonstration of that, I got it a couple of weeks ago when I visited a company near Magherafelt that was expanding because its business was growing hugely in the GB market. That created an additional 130 jobs in the area. If ever we needed absolute certainty that we need to be able to trade, both NI to GB and GB to NI, with freedom within the internal market, a visit to that company to see how well its top-class products were doing, confirms it. Its expansion in the GB market adds 130 manufacturing jobs in Northern Ireland, at a time when those are scarce and difficult to come by.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): We all agree about the importance of the British market, but we also have to look at the quantum of exports that goes to the South, to the EU and to the rest of the world through EU trade agreements. More goods and services now go into what is called the export market. For me, it is also critical that we see a free trade agreement with the EU, and there needs to be a very strong message on that. Any additional issues that are created by the progress of the Internal Market Bill cause huge difficulties for all of us who want a really good outcome for businesses right across the board, regardless of where they trade.

I will pick up on one final point, which is included in the annual report. It is maybe a question for Mike as much as for you, Minister. A figure is quoted for small business grants, and there is a qualification on the Department's accounts. It is the figure of £13.5 million in ineligible payments, which, as I understand it, is an extrapolated figure. There is another figure from Land and Property Services (LPS) of, I think, £3.5 million. Do those equate, or what is the issue there?

Mr Mike Brennan (Department for the Economy): Chair, the issue there is that the £13.5 million that was quoted in the Audit Office report is an estimate that was based on a sampling exercise that it conducted on the total grants that were paid out. That is being checked. As we and LPS work through the actual grants that are paid out and start to explore those that are deemed to be in error, that figure will change. My understanding is that the figure of £3.5 million refers to issues that were identified in the LPS element of it.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): Thank you. I know that we all anticipated that there would be errors in the process as it was a very blunt instrument by which to administer grants. Is that more than you expected with regard to ineligibility?

Mr Brennan: Think about it in the context of some £340 million of grants having been paid out. The Audit Office refers to potential errors in the realm of £13.5 million. From recollection, the National Audit Office (NAO) looked at the Treasury/HMRC scheme and identified potential errors in the order of £3.5 billion, which equated to around 10%. Our figures would seem to be considerably lower.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): Can we bring Sinead into the spotlight, please?

Ms McLaughlin: Good morning, Minister. Thank you very much for your briefing, once again, this morning. Last week, we had a very sober briefing from two economists, Richard Ramsey and Paul Mac Flynn. At this stage, we know about the impact that COVID-19 is having on our economy and will have in the coming weeks and months. Lots of businesses have been excluded from support, such as many small firms and self-employed people who do not have a long trading history. Minister, what do you do to help those excluded firms specifically? What conversations are you having with the Treasury in London about a replacement furlough scheme? It may not be the same as the current furlough scheme. It could be a job protection scheme. We could look at wage subsidies. We could look at reducing National Insurance contributions and employers' insurance, for example, and further job creation schemes in relation to the public service. Can you give me an idea of the conversations that are taking place with Treasury now so that we can reassure those businesses that face a cliff edge in few weeks' time?

Mrs Dodds: Thank you, Sinead. I refer to your comments on Sunday. I absolutely agree with you that the Northern Ireland economy cannot afford to have another lockdown. It would be devastating for businesses in Northern Ireland and would have a further impact on jobs and families here. I just want to say that there are many things that we — the Committee, the Department and I, as Minister — can work on together, agree on and push forward for the Northern Ireland economy. It is very important to say that.

You are well aware — I have reiterated it for a considerable period — that I believe that the impact of ending both the furlough scheme and the self-employed scheme in October will be quite significant for the economy. Consider the potential double whammy. There is some chatter on the wires of a "circuit breaker" for everyone at the end of October. Those two things together would be really quite devastating for us. This week, I have again written in that respect to the Chancellor to re-emphasise that, with additional restrictions on our lives, the ending of those schemes would be important.

Just let me go on for a little bit, because it is important to say this: I have also been clear that the tail of recovery for some sectors in the economy will be much longer and much greater than for others. Virtually on a weekly basis, I speak to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), which is the Department for the Economy's reporting Department in Whitehall. I speak to it about further support for tourism and for our aerospace companies, which are in a very difficult situation at the moment, and I think that their recovery will take some considerable time. You will have heard the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, along with the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales, call for the creation of a UK task force to provide national interventions for the aerospace industry. It is important that the Committee and everyone else keep up the pressure at that level to ensure that we have that very specific intervention in an industry that provides around 10,000 well-paid and very highly skilled jobs for Northern Ireland. Those jobs are in significant difficulty. Like you, I support the extension of the furlough scheme, and I think that, in certain sectors, whether it is blanket furlough or a more targeted furlough, a shorter recovery time will be almost impossible if we do not have that help for jobs and firms in Northern Ireland. That is a really important issue.

On the matter of those who may feel that they are not being supported at the moment, you are all aware that I provided the Executive with a paper in June. I think that it was discussed around the middle or end of June at the Executive. The paper was on those different groupings that, so far, had not received support. The Executive revised it and looked at the issue again during the summer, and, on 13 August, I raised the paper again at an Executive meeting, asking for consideration of those particular issues. Of course, I also respect the will and the wishes of the Assembly Chamber, and I have asked my officials to look at some of the issues with the particular schemes. Indeed, they have been with their counterparts in Wales and Scotland. In due course, I will also bring those considerations to the Executive.

These are therefore things that are ongoing and important for us all. It does weigh heavily on our mind that the Northern Ireland economy is in a perilous situation at this time and that the situation has very gravely impacted on the prospects and livelihoods of individuals and families. None of us, including me and the Department, is not cognisant of that fact.

I think that I may have answered all your points, Sinead. If I have not, I am sure that you will come back to me.

Ms McLaughlin: Thank you, Minister, for that. There may be a little bit of hope at the end for some of those businesses that have been left out.

As I said last week, we talk a lot about recovery, but businesses are not really in recovery at the moment. They are in survival mode and are only clinging on by their fingernails. I know that you have produced a paper with short-term and medium-term supports for businesses, but we really need to think of the long term. If we are to revive our economy after COVID, we need long-term planning, and I just do not see that. That is not a criticism just of the Department for the Economy but of the entire Executive, because we have not got a priority Programme for Government in the Executive. Last week, we heard very strongly from economists about the long-term deficits that we have here and the challenges that we have had in Northern Ireland for decades but have not tackled. Examples of that are our lack of a skills strategy and our skills deficits, as well as the many people who leave school with no qualifications and the impact that that has on our productivity, going forward. We also have infrastructure deficits and water deficits. You may say that that is a different Department, but we require an all-Department Programme for Government to overcome some of the really deep challenges in our economy. You know, Minister, so I do not need to tell you that we have difficulties with our productivity and so on. We need to take a long-term view. Although we welcome the recovery plan, it is not adequate. It is not going to do it. It is not going to take Northern Ireland out of the depths of unemployment that we have here. We need to be more ambitious and need to think of big-picture stuff to tackle that.

Before I finish, I absolutely beseech you, Minister, to oppose the Internal Market Bill. It is bad and will destroy devolution in this country. It is a power grab, and the Scottish and Welsh Governments have rejected it. I ask you to reject it on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland.

Mrs Dodds: I will resist answering the last bit, Sinead. I did not come to the Economy Committee to make party political points, so I will resist answering that one. If you really want a debate on it, I can do that at any stage.

I agree with you that we need to look at the bigger picture. The Department's strategy has been to restart the economy, to try to rebuild in the short to medium term and then to renew the economy. Those are the three things that we have been trying to do. We have largely restarted our economy in, I think, a safe and reasonably sensible way. That has posed huge challenges for businesses, not least the money that many of them have spent to put in place social-distancing measures etc. I pay tribute to those businesses. They have worked hard to get up and running.

The rebuilding of the economy is an ongoing process. As you say, at times it has to vary, in the light of the changing circumstances. The renewing of the economy is the big picture, however. In that regard, my Department is currently working on a new energy strategy and a new skills strategy for Northern Ireland. Since 2012, there has been a deficit in the amount of funding that has gone to skills in Northern Ireland. I would welcome the Committee's help in highlighting that deficit and ask for it to work with me to ensure that we recover that deficit and build better for the skills infrastructure of Northern Ireland.

When I talk to people who are coming to invest in Northern Ireland, they tell me that one of the reasons that they want to do so is because of our skills base. I want that skills base not just to be at degree or higher apprenticeship level but to reach every part of the community. That is an incredibly important thing, not just for the economy but for peace and prosperity in Northern Ireland. It is hugely important.

We are also working on an economic strategy. Again, I welcome input from the Committee and encourage members to submit their ideas to the Department so that we can discuss, debate and decide what is really good for the Northern Ireland economy and how we can take that forward. I am up for the challenge. I hope that the Committee is up for it. I want partnership working with the Committee to ensure that we get an economic strategy for the future that will be good for the next 100 years of Northern Ireland.

Mr Brennan: I will add to the Minister's comments and pick up on the Deputy Chair's observations about the medium- to long-term importance. We have bids in for £87 million worth of interventions for the remaining months of this financial year. Many of those bids have tails into the next financial year,

and we have no guarantee that they will be met. Indeed, we have no Budget set at all for the coming years, which makes it incredibly difficult to make detailed allocations on things such as skills, energy or business support beyond 1 April next year. As the Minister says, the plan that we have in front of us is really about recovery and revitalisation. It is about keeping businesses alive. The economic strategy is a longer-term vision, so it is really a two-phased approach. Important to setting the definition of that second phase is the outcome of the comprehensive spending review and having budgets that can determine what interventions we can take forward.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): Thanks, Mike. Minister, we will take on board your comments about —.

Mrs Dodds: May I give the Committee some encouragement? It is really important. I was looking at this last night. We can say with absolute certainty that 80% to 85% of the participants in the assured skills academies are now in full-time employment. Those are the kinds of flexible interventions in the skills area that are welcomed by employers and by companies coming into Northern Ireland. We have done a number of those courses since March, one of which was in the fintech sector, and 23 out of 24 young people on that skills academy course, which was delivered remotely, are now in employment. Those are the kinds of things that we should be encouraged by. I am ambitious for skills in Northern Ireland and want to reach all our young people. You are quite right, Sinead, when you say that too many young people leave school without qualifications. We want to look at that and rectify it, and we want to make sure that they have skills that take them into the future.

Mr Dunne: Thanks, Minister and officials, for coming this morning. We again put on record our thanks for all your work and your diligence right from the start. We all got heavily involved early on this year. A lot of work and effort has been put into supporting businesses, large and small, and we all recognise the need to continue to do that during the ongoing crisis. You have already covered the issue and said that you intend to look at additional support, where possible, for businesses right across the spectrum.

Do you agree, Minister, that it is important that there be clear, consistent messages coming through on the economy and health? The two issues are very much interrelated. We heard the First Minister talk last night about the "big push". Can you reassure us that the Executive are united — some members here seem to forget that it is a five-party Executive — and that there is strong support on the Executive to deal with, first, the health issue and, secondly, the economy? It is important that a clear, consistent message go out.

The economy is moving. Christmas is coming upon us. I trust that Christmas will happen. We want to make sure that Christmas happens for the high streets in our towns, villages and cities. It is harvest time for them, and we need to ensure that there is confidence among the public that the place to which they are going is safe so that they are encouraged to shop locally. That is vital, and we want it to continue. I know that a lot of work has been done with the councils and other agencies, but we want assurance that that work will continue.

I know that you have put in a lot of effort on tourism. We were at a hotel last week in my constituency and saw the efforts being made there, but we need to continue to encourage staycations. People still want breaks, and we want to make sure that there is confidence in the sector and that the places that people go to are clean, hygienic and working to high standards. That must continue and be promoted.

Are there any strong indicators that, amid all the difficulties, there is still an interest in foreign direct investment (FDI) coming to Northern Ireland? Finally, I want to ask about manufacturing, which I have gone on about for some time. In my constituency of North Down, businesses have been repurposing themselves and looking at alternative markets. That is where Invest NI needs to come in. We appreciate the work that has been done. We saw the evidence last week and heard the positive feedback. Things have moved on, however. We need Invest NI to look more at supporting existing businesses. We do not want to be waking up in the morning hearing a bad news story about people losing jobs and negativity about the Government, in which we are all included, having done little or nothing to support them. Your feedback on those issues would be appreciated.

Mrs Dodds: OK. That is quite a list. I will start with health and the economy. I have never seen this as being an issue of health versus the economy. We need to tackle both issues. We are in exceptional circumstances: circumstances never experienced before. We need to work together to ensure that we are dealing with the virus and the pandemic but also trying to keep our economy running and functioning. I reiterate this because it is such an important message today: we cannot afford another lockdown. It would be disastrous for the Northern Ireland economy, and for those firms and that hotel

that we visited in your constituency last week and those businesses that I will be out and about visiting in other constituencies this week. It is absolutely vital that we keep the economy functioning. Although we hear a lot about health, the economic message is equally important. I keep emphasising that at the Executive, because it is a hugely important message.

It is equally important that those businesses that have opened up ensure that both employees and customers are safe in their working environment. That is a duty on the businesses. I have been to many businesses over the past number of weeks, and I have been absolutely impressed by the level of work and effort that has gone into making sure that people are safe. This virus can go anywhere and travel anywhere, and it is very difficult to deal with. It is equally difficult for businesses that are trying to keep people safe while keeping the economy open. We acknowledge the difficulties in that, but it is their legal duty to make sure that people are safe.

I accept the point about the high street. It is an issue that is largely taken forward by the Department for Communities, and I know that the Minister there has been very proactive in dealing with it. The First Minister and the deputy First Minister have established the High Streets Task Force. I acknowledge that some areas of Northern Ireland, such as the city centre in Belfast and larger town centres, have been particularly adversely impacted on by the work-from-home message. You are right that, coming up to Christmas, we all need to look at the kinds of measures that we need to put in place to try to encourage people to get out and about on the high street and support our local shops.

That having been said, although Belfast city centre and other city centres have experienced extreme difficulties because of the work-from-home message, smaller towns have seen an upturn in their high streets. I was recently up in Cookstown and visited the local Chambers of Commerce in Cookstown and Magherafelt. We spent way longer there than I intended to. We had a hugely interesting conversation with local retailers, some of whom had an online presence. Their online presence is not to replace their high street presence. That is not their intention. Their online presence sustains their high street presence. One retailer in that group who had two shops in different towns in the area, said that 30% to 35% of his business was now conducted online. He was still maintaining his shops. They were his window dressing and the things that he did. Those shops were important to him and his family—they had had them for generations—but that was how he was sustaining his business, particularly during lockdown. I asked Invest NI about that, and that is why we looked at the digital capability grant. So far, that is a relatively small grant with a total pot of around £1 million, and it has a stipulation that a business must have 10 employees or more. Applications for that grant are due to close on, I think, 6 October, or certainly in the first week of October. Do not quote me on that or hang me out if it is not 6 October; it is the first week of October. I will watch that scheme very carefully to see whether I can make further interventions for our high street and retailers to help to make them sustainable. It is not about encouraging them to go off the high street but to make their businesses sustainable. That was an idea that first came to me from my local chamber of commerce in Portadown. I would like to see us trying to roll out more of that type of intervention to help with business sustainability.

Your point about tourism is apt, Gordon, because I will address the Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance's annual general meeting just after we finish here. Tourism has had a torrid time. I will take tourism and hospitality as a broad sector. For months, businesses were unable to open, and they have had a hugely difficult time. For some elements of the industry, the summer was reasonable, and many people were encouraged to go on staycations. I stayed in self-catering accommodation up on the north coast a couple of times. Accommodation, at times over the summer, was quite difficult to find. Having said that, a lack of big conferences or larger events for hotels, hospitality and so on over the autumn and winter months will make that a critical time, and we need to see sustainability for the sector. That is why a significant proportion of the bids that I have made are for tourism and for creating demand for the sector or supporting it in various ways. It would not be proper to go through them individually, but that is part of it. I would like to see those supports coming out. I do not want them to come out too late and miss the autumn season for the sector. We have submitted significant bids for the tourism and hospitality sector.

On FDI, I am encouraged that, despite all the global difficulties that the virus has given us, plenty of firms still want to talk to us, invest in Northern Ireland and create job opportunities. I look forward to making some positive announcements on that and to getting back out and travelling again, particularly to North America, to support the efforts of our Invest NI offices there and to help to talk to companies about the place that Northern Ireland is to come to and to invest, live and work in.

I recently talked to the managing director of a company from North America that has invested in Belfast. He was delighted by the level of work, skills, commitment and productivity of his workforce in

Belfast, and he is a wonderful ambassador for Northern Ireland. As Northern Ireland enters its centenary year, I would like to think that we could do something to highlight the skills here and the place that Northern Ireland is to invest in.

On manufacturing repurposing — I promise that I will finish with this, folks — and Invest NI — I will try to put them together — I was delighted to go to Denroy with you last week, Gordon, to see how a company has reinvented some of the things that it does to meet the challenges of the situation that we find ourselves in. It is, of course, working with Invest NI. It was also good to go to Priory Press Packaging. Sometimes we talk about Invest NI only in relation to foreign direct investment, but Priory talked about Invest NI with regard to the future direction of their businesses, the courses that they undertook and the challenges around that. It was really interesting to hear, at first hand from businesses, how those things had worked for them. I will leave it there.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): We have half an hour left. We will try and get everybody in.

Mr Dickson: Minister, thank you for joining us this morning and for the broad topic of how you and the Department are tackling the issue of COVID recovery from an economic perspective. The Department for the Economy is sometimes described as the "Department of Everything" because you have such a broad remit.

Mrs Dodds: Absolutely.

Mr Dickson: I will ask a number of questions and will put them all out at once. They cover a broad range of those areas of responsibility.

First, have you asked the permanent secretary to reflect on what were described as fairly offensive remarks that he made the last time he was at the Committee about small businesses, small business enterprises and, particularly, those that were excluded? Perhaps not only you but he might want to reflect on those comments that offended many people in the business community across Northern Ireland.

Secondly, Minister, I ask you to reflect on something. During the summer, you made a very clear statement about encouraging people to return to city offices and for civil servants to return. Given that the message of the Northern Ireland Executive has never changed, which is, "If you can work at home, you should work at home" — that was very forcibly reemphasised yesterday — have you reflected on your view, and do you now agree that if people can work at home, that is exactly where they should be?

Turning to the broader issue of the economy, a number of years ago — prior to your becoming Minister — your Department and the Executive sought to encourage exploration for petroleum and gas, through either petroleum licenses or fracking across Northern Ireland. Given the current circumstances and the urgent need to develop a green economy in Northern Ireland, will the Department now set its face against petroleum and carbon extraction processes? Will you confirm your support for the continuation of a fracking ban in Northern Ireland? What we should be doing is developing a green alternative economy to that.

Turning to the specific issue of job losses, the Committee received a briefing a number of weeks ago with regard to the very important tourism take in Northern Ireland and the amazing visitor centre at HMS Caroline. There are concerning reports that jobs are going to be lost there as a result of a number of issues, not least the number of visitors to the city, but also internal issues with the delivery of the HMS Caroline tourism promotion in Belfast. Can you give an update on what the Department is doing around that?

Minister, you referred to the value of the Charter Mark, and certainly it comes up on my social media feed regularly. However, feedback that I received from some visitors to the north coast this weekend was that restaurants and other places that were displaying the Charter Mark were not really any different from other places; indeed, one large restaurant on the north coast seemed to be particularly poor on staff wearing masks or face shields. Yet, you can go to small cafes and shops in other places and people are very particular. They do not have the Charter Mark, but those that subscribe to the Charter Mark perhaps seem to think that they can get away with more.

Very briefly, turning to two final questions. What activity are you undertaking with the Minister for Communities with regard to the Kickstart programme? Not only have we had a substantial time lag

since the Chancellor announced the Kickstart programme for the rest of the United Kingdom, but it seems that it has disappeared down a black hole in Northern Ireland. It requires your cooperation with another Minister. Minister, thank you very much for the opportunity. I am sorry that that was such a broad range of questions.

I have a final question. Have you made a bid to the Executive to attempt to draw down funds to include the excluded?

Mrs Dodds: That is quite a list.

Mr Dickson: It is.

Mr Middleton: There goes the half hour.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): If you could be brief in your responses, Minister, because I want to let other members in, as I am sure that they have questions too.

Mrs Dodds: I will allow Mike to reflect on his own comments, so that is a start.

Mr Brennan: Good.

Mrs Dodds: I am pretty sure that no one intended to cause offence about any of those things. I am not immune to these issues because I run the Department. I know people who have had very difficult circumstances to deal with.

Mr Dickson: Thank you. I appreciate the acknowledgement.

Mrs Dodds: No one is immune to this. We all feel this situation, but, at times, we have to work with what we have. I will allow that to be reflected on as well.

You raised my issues about working from home. I wrote to the head of the Civil Service. That is well known. It was publicised and leaked to the local papers.

Mr Dickson: Not by us.

Mrs Dodds: I have no idea, but anyway. I believe that, in many instances, being in the workplace is better for firms, individuals and the local economy of that area. It was re-emphasised last night that those who can work from home should do so. I have never gone against the health advice, and I respect that advice. However, I have talked to many firms across Northern Ireland and in Belfast about the workplace and returning to the office. Many of them report that they have employees who would like to go back to the office. They miss the social aspect of work, and they feel that it would be better for their mental health and well-being if they went back into the collective and collaborative atmosphere of the office. Many businesses are facilitating that return for those reasons.

In many cases, businesses that employ young people, for example, are also reporting that training and on-site learning are much more difficult from a remote location. Many young people feel that they are not able to progress, and they are not surrounded by the learning experience that work should be for them at that time. If businesses are to progress and to keep people coming through, they need to bring people back into the office. I am not going to go on about it, but there are reasons to go back into the office, and there are reasons, such as the on-site activities that I mentioned, why businesses require people to go back into the office.

That said, many of the large companies, particularly those in the digital sector, in Northern Ireland report increased productivity and have worked from home very well. In fact, we are using the resilience of the Northern Ireland economy and the Northern Ireland workforce to talk to businesses from outside Northern Ireland. I hope that addresses that issue. It is not simple; all these things are rarely black or white.

Where fracking and the green economy are concerned, the Committee knows that there are applications for licences. We have commissioned research into the impacts and so on, and nothing will be considered or done until that research is delivered and there is any kind of clear pathway forward on either the negative or the positive side. I am inclined to support your view on fracking, so

we will look at this. However, we will look at it in the round. Of course, it is cross-cutting and contentious. Any decisions on anything of this nature will be made collectively by the Executive.

I do not intend to go into a huge amount of detail on HMS Caroline, and Mike may want to come in on it very quickly. I will talk about just two aspects of it, because I know that you all had a private briefing on the financial issues on HMS Caroline, and I think that it would be wrong for me to go through that in a public session. However, I want to address potential job losses at HMS Caroline. Fourteen full-time equivalent staff are employed on HMS Caroline, and all but two of those staff are on the job retention scheme. Of course, we know that that scheme will expire on 31 October. Some weeks ago, I signed off on the proposal that we would cover any salaries for those staff until the end of the closure period. When the ship reopens, we want the staff to be in place. To simply cover the salaries is a much more sensible option, and it is a much more cost-effective option for us. That is where that lies. The staff have my commitment that there will be funding to cover the staff and those jobs and that, from my point of view, there will be no need for any redundancies on HMS Caroline. I encourage the National Museum of the Royal Navy (NMRN) to come to a speedy conclusion on this with the Department so that we can ensure that the staff are there and are able to be there when the ship reopens next year.

On promotion, we all know that visitor attractions become viable only when they have sufficient numbers of visitors who are actually going to them, buying the ticket and seeing the attraction. That has been a consistent problem for HMS Caroline over the last number of years. I hope that we will get an operator's agreement that will look at all those issues in the round and take forward the HMS Caroline project so that the ship can remain in Belfast, remain open and, most importantly, remain viable and not be a cost to the taxpayer.

That is what I have to say about HMS Caroline, and if there are any other briefings that you want on it, Stewart, I will be really happy to provide them.

Mr Dickson: Thank you.

Mr Murphy: Minister, do you mind if I say something on HMS Caroline?

Mrs Dodds: Yes, of course.

Mr Shane Murphy (Department for the Economy): I am no expert in this area, but, as I understand it, this is, in effect, a very large museum piece. There are lots of public-benefit reasons for having museums that are over and above their being visitor attractions. We do not build museums to attract out-of-state visitors. There is a certain public benefit in maintaining things of historic value for the future, and operating them as a visitor attraction is a means of helping to pay for and maintain them without the same recourse to the public purse. It is important to remember that these things are not just visitor attractions but are in some way linked to history and museums and so forth. That has a different public-policy benefit, but it is just that it is one that is trying to be covered by the income from visitors.

Mrs Dodds: I think that that is a really important thing for us all to remember. It is important for heritage and culture. We are where we are. We are working through the issues, and I want to get it sorted out as quickly as possible.

I was really quite keen on the We're Good to Go Charter Mark because I felt that it might give people confidence about going out into the hospitality sector. If you are telling me that it is not working, I will investigate that and speak to Tourism NI, which runs the scheme, about it. There is not much point in having it if it is not appropriately applied. That is the bottom line.

I absolutely agree with you about the Kickstart scheme. I think that it would make an important contribution for young people in Northern Ireland. One of the aspects of this Department that I enjoy the most is talking to and working with young people, trying to figure out pathways and guidance on ways forward. I am absolutely committed to that. I agree with you. I understand from the Finance Minister that they are trying to find out whether there are any Barnett consequentials from the Kickstart announcement. I have also spoken in person to the Communities Minister to offer her the cooperation of my Department. Kickstart is really an employment scheme, as opposed to a training scheme which would be this Department's responsibility. If the Communities Minister, for example, wants to have a bespoke scheme for Northern Ireland, which would provide just more than six months' employment, I would be keen, happy and willing to work together to make sure that it happens.

Mr Dickson: The frustration, Minister, is that it exists in the rest of the United Kingdom but does not exist here at the moment.

Mrs Dodds: I understand that.

Mr Dickson: While, yes, you can always add value to a scheme, the reality is that my inbox is filling up with provider-type organisations that are very keen to deliver this and are totally frustrated by not being able to.

Mrs Dodds: I understand from Carál, to be absolutely fair, that she is doing the scoping out for the scheme. Sometimes, when schemes are announced at a UK level all of a sudden, we need a few weeks to make sure that it is proper. I have spoken to her in person, and I understand from her that her officials are doing the scoping out for the scheme and that it is there.

Mr Murphy: Just to back that up, our skills team is working closely with the folks in DFC. I have been at some of those meetings where they have given a briefing of how they think the Kickstart scheme might pan out. Obviously, I do not want to go into any of the detail because, in due course, I imagine that will be unveiled by the Executive's Communities Minister.

Mr Dickson: About 99% of it, surely, just transfers across from what is happening in the rest of the UK. Why were you not following what was happening up to the announcement?

Mr O'Dowd: I am sorry, Chair, but the Minister's time is limited. I think that, in fairness, Stewart has had a fair crack of the whip.

Mrs Dodds: OK. That is fine.

Mr Middleton: I am conscious that there is now seven minutes left. I joked, earlier, about 30 minutes being gone, but there are nearly 30 minutes gone.

Minister, you have obviously highlighted that the priority is to avoid another lockdown. I completely agree with that, and the onus is on all of us to ensure that it does not happen.

You spoke about the 32 bids that are currently with the Finance Minister. You indicated that there are pressures to ensure that that money is spent before the end of the financial year. Beyond that, these are vital interventions that we need to restart our economy and secure a lot of the jobs and the presence that we already have. Could you indicate the timescale, Minister? Is anything in particular at risk, if a decision is not taken as soon as possible?

Mrs Dodds: Yes, absolutely. The bids are around assistance to business, skills and youth training, tourism, energy, research and development, further support for tourism and support for the creative industries. These are areas where there are extreme difficulties in the economy. The money is an in-year bid. When these are announced, the Department will work up the scheme and get it up and running and out to the appropriate areas. That is why it is really important to get the bids and the whole thing through as quickly as possible. I stress that that is an important part of what we are doing.

It is important to say, to be fair, again, that we got the money for the apprenticeship recovery schemes ahead of the other bids. I stressed to the Finance Minister that, at a time when young people were making their choices, when they got their results etc, firms and young people needed to know that apprenticeships were available to them. Therefore, we got that money ahead of the other bids. In bids for skills and training, we are looking, for example, to have all-age apprenticeships. I really believe that we should be able to retrain and restart at any stage of our lives. I have done it often enough myself, and I believe that that opportunity should be there. We have all-age apprenticeships for the higher-level apprenticeship, and I want to make sure that it is available to young people and older folk coming out. It seemed a little strange to me that one lad, who came out of the army at the age of 27 or 28, was told that he was too old to be an apprentice. That seemed utterly wrong. We want to look at that.

As Mike said, some of the bids will have financial implications in further years. For example, to support our apprentices right through to the end of their apprenticeship, we will need that money in further years. I would welcome the support of the Committee for that because these are really important for young people, and they are important as we try to get through a very difficult period.

Mr Middleton: Thank you for that. I will not take up any more time, except to say that it is important that Committee supports that. Unfortunately we are not getting to delve into a lot of these issues because we have spent so much time dealing with political platitudes, to be perfectly honest. I think that we do need to start to drill down and to address these key areas, but thank you for that. I think we will pick up on that at a later date.

Mr O'Dowd: Minister, I get the impression that you are not in tune with the Executive's message, which was delivered yesterday by the Health Minister and by the First and deputy First Ministers, around the restrictions that have been introduced. Your view seems to be that the economy has to run, no matter what, and that the restrictions are damaging the economy. Am I wrong?

Mrs Dodds: John, one of the things that you will find, all through this, is that I have never contravened or run against the health message that the professionals like Michael McBride have given. They are people who have spent their entire lives trying to keep the public safe. I am simply doing my job and saying that, if there were to be a total lockdown, then the difficulties for businesses would be absolutely enormous. I did not hear anything different on that from the First Minister last night. Indeed, I did not hear anything different on that from the deputy First Minister last night. I think that they are all cognisant of the fact that restrictions on business or further lockdowns would be absolutely devastating for the Northern Ireland economy.

I am not out of tune with anybody, I am simply doing my job of warning that we are in very difficult and serious circumstances. However, the opportunity is there, and I think that, again, Arlene and Michelle indicated that last night. The opportunity is there for us to reverse where we are and to take the action that we need to take to make sure that business can operate into the future in the way that it should.

Mr O'Dowd: Do you agree with me that there is also a responsibility on certain sections of business, particularly shops that do not enforce the wearing of face masks and businesses that have allowed social distancing to become lax and to lapse, to ensure that we do not go into lockdown and to enforce the measures that are in place?

Finally, you mentioned the high street task force, which was announced on 7 August, but why has it not met?

Mrs Dodds: First of all, the high street task force is an initiative by TEO and the First and deputy First Ministers, so, if you want to, you should address that query to them. I think that it is a critical piece of work, and I have already indicated my fears for the high street and small businesses, whether it is through working from home or whatever. I have also indicated some of the things that I think we, in the Department for the Economy, can do to help sustainability.

You asked a really important question around retail and social distancing. It is important to have social distancing in our retail outlets, but it is equally difficult to ask retailers to take on an enforcement issue that would be very difficult for them. I appeal to folk — anyone who happens to pick up this conversation — that we really need to remember the rules: hand hygiene, social distancing and wear the face mask. That way we will keep ourselves safe, others safe and businesses operating.

Mr O'Dowd: It is difficult for businesses, but, if I were to walk into a shop while smoking, I would be asked to put the cigarette out, and, if I were to walk into a shop with a dog other than a guide dog, I would be asked to leave. We have to get into the mindset that, if you are breaking public health regulations, you have to be asked not to do it.

Mrs Dodds: To be fair, I think that, on the enforcement of guidelines, there is a difficulty in expecting retailers to do the enforcement, but we can do it collectively. We can do it ourselves. We do not need to get into that position.

Mr Stewart: Minister, I will be quick because we are almost out of time. As one of the last members to speak, I am pushed for time, as I appreciate that you are going in five minutes.

You rightly point out in the 'Rebuilding a Stronger Economy' document, which is a short- and medium-term strategy for rebuilding the economy post COVID, the need for programmes and interventions to rebuild the economy, and we have heard of the 32 bids to date that your Department, through you, has submitted to the Executive for approval. Some of those, like I say, are short-term strategies involving skills and apprenticeships. They are all welcome, but surely you will agree that economic recovery begins with keeping what we have. Roughly 90% of the backbone of the Northern Ireland

economy is micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, and it is easier and more cost-effective to keep those going than to fund programmes to get new businesses started. How is that not integral to economic recovery? Therefore, if the 32 bids identified by you and your Department have been submitted to the Executive for economic recovery, how is it not the remit of you and your Department to identify a bid to support businesses that are currently trading, have not been able to access support and, therefore, cannot get their hands on that money?

Mrs Dodds: I do not want to take up time reiterating the process around the grant scheme, but I do not see the two things as mutually exclusive. In every part of our lives, including the economy, we have to rework, reinvent and take things forward, so I do not see the two things as mutually exclusive. I do not see that supporting FDI should be set against supporting SMEs in Northern Ireland. You will recall that the £10,000 grant supported — Mike will keep me right — about 27,000 small businesses and small manufacturing businesses in Northern Ireland at a time when things were very difficult. I do not see that the two things cannot operate together. Mike might want to come in.

Mr Brennan: That is right, Minister. The £10,000 scheme assisted around 25,000 small businesses, and the £25,000 scheme assisted just under 3,000. A further 5,000 companies were assisted under the microbusiness hardship fund.

Mr Stewart: At no stage did I say that they are mutually exclusive. My point is that, if you have identified bids that are key to economic rebuilding, how is supporting the businesses that already exist not part of that? Therefore, how is it not a requirement of the Department to identify that? You have covered the ground that, thankfully, on the back of the unanimous decision of the Assembly last week to call for that support, your officials will talk to colleagues — it is long overdue, in my opinion — in Wales and Scotland.

I made the point during that debate in the Chamber that, if the key need is hardship, surely that can be demonstrated by the businesses themselves. Why can that not be put together very quickly by your Department and a bid put to the Finance Minister? He replied to a letter from me and Steve Aiken two days ago saying that he is willing and would welcome any bid from the Department to help sole traders and sectors that have benefited little from schemes to date. Again, Minister, I implore you to do that.

During our discussion with Richard Ramsey last week, he identified that many people who have, unfortunately, lost their jobs during this will be looking to open as microbusinesses and use those key skills. For example, we saw that when the telecoms industry boomed with microbusinesses on the back of the closure of Nortel. They require start-up schemes. Is there anything in your plans to help new businesses, through Enterprise NI and other start-up business programmes, so that we can get businesses up and running when that time comes?

Mrs Dodds: OK.

Mr Brennan: Sorry, Minister, I was just going to make a point. There was reference to learning from experiences in Scotland and Wales when constructing these schemes. Colleagues in Wales recently made us aware that, with their scheme, there is significant concern around fraud and error. We need to learn from issues like that before we construct a scheme and rush to put it in place.

Mr Stewart: It is just a pity that it has taken 12 weeks.

Mrs Dodds: It is important to remember that the Finance Minister has set aside money for taxis, haulage, etc. So far he has not received a bid. There is no problem in allocating the money even though the bid has not been made.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): Can we get Claire into the spotlight, please?

Ms Sugden: Thank you, Chair, and good morning, Minister. I will try to be quick, as I know that you are keen to get to your next meeting. You mentioned the energy strategy, but I understand that that is not due to be published until towards the end of next year. I understand that we have far exceeded our renewable energy targets. Is there any idea or consideration that, in the interim, we might increase those targets, whilst we anticipate a strategy, to try to stimulate that investment, give some of the businesses in the industry something to work to and maybe, in itself, create jobs? Are we looking at

other opportunities throughout your remit to try to provide opportunities in jobs that would not necessarily be linked to the current issues with COVID?

I would like to quickly come back to Sinead's comments on targets and the Programme for Government. Can I assume that, as we have less than two years left in the mandate, we are not expecting a Programme for Government? Are we just working off what the Department had in its bag before the Executive got back up and running?

I want to point to the comments that Mike Brennan referred to on fraud. I do not think that we should not help people because there is a chance that some people might behave badly. If that was the case, we would never develop any government programme. I would ask you to reflect on those comments, and let us not assume that all the people who have not received help up until now will behave badly around any support that they might get at the last minute.

Mrs Dodds: Thank you, Claire. I fully accept that worries around error or fraud would not preclude us from doing any kind of scheme. Most people will recognise that, at very short notice, we provided schemes for the general business community that have helped tens of thousands of businesses. Those schemes might have taken months and months on end but were implemented within weeks, and I pay tribute to the staff in the Department for the work that they have done on that.

On the Programme for Government, no, I do not think that anybody should be just pulling something out their back pocket and saying, "Here's one that will do fine". The Executive, having been hugely distracted by COVID in the very early months of COVID's existence, are going to provide and work on the draft Programme for Government that existed in the earlier part of the mandate. We will be working on that to make sure that there is a properly assessed outcomes-based Programme for Government for Northern Ireland.

I will allow Mike or Shane to come in on the point about energy, because it is an exciting element of the Department and an important part of the bids that we are making. It is an important part of the money that we are trying to reorientate, even within the Department for the Economy. It is amazing that, in Northern Ireland, 48% of our electricity comes from renewable sources, and that is a huge tribute to the sector in Northern Ireland. I want to increase the value of renewable energy, both to the environment and to the economy of Northern Ireland. We are working on some very exciting projects on hydrogen. It would be useful to brief you on those projects, and perhaps we will be able to do so in the days ahead. There is huge potential in that sector, not just in the decarbonising agenda but in creating jobs for people in Northern Ireland.

I will ask Mike or Shane to come in on the timetable for the energy strategy. That is one of the key and important pieces of work that we will take forward. There are many things that we can do in the short period left to this Executive. One of them is to lay the pathway for an energy strategy that meets our commitment to zero carbon and our commitment to a greener economy and a better start within our economy.

Mr Brennan: OK. Thank you, Minister. On the renewables point, I stress that we have already exceeded the target of 40% that was set by the previous Programme for Government (PFG). Renewable energy that is coming into the system is not being constrained back. As the Minister said, it is sitting at 48%, which is a remarkable achievement. Work is not paused and waiting for the delivery of a new energy strategy in September next year. There are lots of initiatives that we are pursuing very aggressively. The Minister referred to the hydrogen initiative, but there are other initiatives that we are looking at that will encourage greater uptake of, for example, wind electricity generation. There are some significant opportunities in the use of batteries, for example, to store renewable wind generation that is not used at night. That feeds into opportunities in the production of electrolyzers that could, possibly, generate many hundreds of jobs. There is also the use of hydrogen in a vast array of public services, for example, by NI Water or Translink.

A raft of things is happening in the energy space; it is not as if everything is waiting for the miraculous appearance of an energy strategy in September next year. All those things are happening at pace. The Department has appointed a panel of independent experts to advise us on the construction of where we go with all that. If the Committee thought it useful, we could even bring people from the energy strategy group along to talk you through what is going on in the space as we speak.

Mr Murphy: A point was made earlier about long-term planning. Off the top of my head, I remember that, 10 or 12 years ago, energy from renewable sources was sitting at about 8%. When the energy

strategy came out with the 40% target, it looked like something that very few folks believed could be achieved. However, that is the benefit of having a strategy and implementing it. You can look back after 10 years and see that you have made an impact. Getting the strategy right, sticking to it and implementing it is hugely important. That is not just important for the energy strategy or the skills strategy; it will also be important for the forthcoming economic strategy.

Ms Sugden: I take your points, and I appreciate that the Department has continued to work towards all of that in anticipation of a strategy, but that strategy is a year away from now. My point was about the target. I congratulate you on exceeding your target by 8%, but why not be ambitious in the meantime and extend that target to something higher? My understanding from speaking with the industry is that that in itself might bring new opportunities and investment. I am not disputing what you have done; I am just saying that we should be a wee bit more ambitious, given that you have been so successful in meeting your target.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): I am sorry, Minister; I know that you have to go.

Mrs Dodds: I do, and I apologise for that.

I am up for increasing targets and putting pressure on people to work on them, but we will have to take the advice of the experts in the field to see what is possible in the setting of those targets. Certainly, it is a conversation worth having. The sector has performed well in many respects, and, again, we need the road map and the pathway to get us to that place. We are not sitting back and waiting for the miraculous appearance of a strategy. We are getting on with the things that we want to do anyway. I am excited by some of the prospects that we have. I will be speaking to Kwasi Kwarteng this week again about the impact of hydrogen on the economy and about bids that we can make and support that we would like to see at a UK level.

I apologise for having to leave. I was to have a meeting at 11.30 am.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): Thank you very much, and thank you for your time. We will let you leave; I am sure that you will be back with us soon.

Some comments were directed at you, Mike, so I would like to offer you the right to reply to them, if you wish to do that.

Mr Brennan: Thank you. Obviously, after my last appearance at the Committee, I revisited Hansard to see what was drawing all the attention. I have looked closely at Hansard, and the point that I was making — I probably should have been more eloquent — was that the Executive have spent £340 million on assisting 30,000 businesses. There are, roughly, another 90,000 commercial entities in Northern Ireland that have not been supported to date. The Executive have only £120 million left to spend in the remainder of this year, so how they use that money and how we construct bids has to be carefully put together to make sure that we maximise the positive returns from that. That is what it said in Hansard. I have received correspondence from some individuals who are quoting things that were not said in Hansard.

The Committee Clerk: If it is helpful, Chair, we will tweet out that Hansard, so that it is more widely available.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): Thank you, Mike, and thank you, Shane.