



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Infrastructure

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

COVID-19 Update and Current Issues:  
Minister for Infrastructure

23 September 2020

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Infrastructure

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

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)  
Mr David Hilditch (Deputy Chairperson)  
Ms Martina Anderson  
Mr Roy Beggs  
Mr Cathal Boylan  
Mr Keith Buchanan  
Mrs Dolores Kelly  
Ms Liz Kimmins  
Mr Andrew Muir

**Witnesses:**

Ms Mallon	Minister for Infrastructure
Mrs Katrina Godfrey	Department for Infrastructure

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** Hansard is recording this session. We welcome Nichola Mallon, the Minister for Infrastructure, and Katrina Godfrey, the permanent secretary. Good morning.

**Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure):** Good morning.

**Mrs Katrina Godfrey (Department for Infrastructure):** Good morning, Chair.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** You are both very welcome. Minister, I understand that you want to make an opening statement. We will follow up with questions.

**Ms Mallon:** Great. Chair, thank you, and thank you for the invitation to attend the Committee meeting today to provide an update on how my Department is helping with the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

I wrote to you on 17 September, and, if you are content, I do not intend to repeat the information in that update. Rather, I will focus on providing an overview of some of the key issues and allow time for members to ask any questions that they might have.

I start by reiterating my thanks to the Committee for its support during the current crisis. The pandemic has dramatically impacted on all of our professional and personal lives. We have seen significant changes to a range of services that my Department provides, and I pay personal tribute to the staff across my Department, in the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA), Translink and Northern Ireland Water, who have been working exceptionally hard in often very difficult and challenging

circumstances. I know that you are keen to talk about recovery, but it is also important to realise that we are still in the middle of the pandemic. With the worrying recent increase in COVID-19 cases, we must be wary of the resurgence of the virus, particularly during the winter months. That is why everything that we are doing or planning as a Department is being done with safety at the forefront and by using the latest Public Health Agency guidance and advice.

You will be aware of how the pandemic has impacted Translink, NI Water and the DVA, with all of them now having to deal with a substantial reduction in income. I very much welcome the recent short-term additional investment that the Executive provided. However, as Committee members will know, that does not provide a solution to the longer-term funding that is required to ensure that we have public services — they are critical public services — that are fit for purpose, nor does it solve all the immediate problems that we face.

Looking at the weeks and months ahead, the investment to avoid an immediate and serious crisis in Northern Ireland Water has been very welcome. I also welcomed the allocations that have been made to Translink, but I am very conscious of the Finance Minister's insistence that Translink is moved immediately to a sustainable footing, and I am very concerned about how, with the scale of the losses in fare income that it faces, that is to be achieved within the Finance Minister's timescale. I am concerned that that cannot be achieved without significant consequences to the public transport network that so many of our citizens and workers rely on. The Finance Minister and I are due to discuss that shortly, and I will, of course, keep the Committee fully updated.

You will be aware that I am due to be given new powers by the First Minister and deputy First Minister to enable me to provide support for the taxi, haulage and bus and coach sectors. I have already begun work on that. I have written to the Minister for the Economy and the Minister of Finance to ask for the critical information that they hold and for their support to help me to bring forward a robust, evidence-based scheme at the earliest opportunity. I am also due to meet representatives of all the sectors next week to advise them on the actions that have been taken to date and the next steps.

Those are immediate concerns, but I am also very determined to keep a longer-term strategic focus. To that end, I presented a paper to the Executive at the start of September that highlighted the importance of infrastructure to our economic and social recovery post-COVID. That also highlighted the need for a wider Executive focus on our strategic infrastructure. Investment in our water and sewerage services was a key element of that paper and of the New Decade, New Approach deal, which re-established these institutions and rightly recognised the need to fund those services. You heard last week from NI Water about the substantial amount of investment that is needed to ensure that we have an up-to-date water and sewerage service that helps to support economic development and recovery. Without that investment, there will be many areas throughout the North where new developments, be they much-needed new homes, hotels, schools or hospitals, will not be able to happen.

Before the pandemic, we saw record increases in the use of our public transport network with the introduction of the Glider, additional park-and-ride services and enhancements to our railway network. That shows the value of investment in infrastructure. It can change travel behaviour, reduce the reliance on private cars and help to tackle climate change. I believe that we cannot and should not lose sight of the valuable role that that change will play in our recovery. You will have noticed my recent announcement about the advancement of park-and-ride schemes in this financial year, and I hope to be in a position to make further announcements shortly.

Recent flooding in Newcastle also highlighted the critical need to provide flood defences in a timely manner. I recently committed to investing £6.5 million to alleviate the flooding in the area and for those works to be accelerated. Significant investment is also needed to protect other areas here.

Finally, as infrastructure projects also have a long lead-in time, I established a ministerial advisory panel on infrastructure that will advise me on how we might more effectively support long-term strategic planning. That group has already met and is taking evidence from a range of stakeholders. I am keen to hear its recommendations for the future, which should be made available to me in the early autumn. I know that the panel is keen to engage with the Committee, and I very much appreciated the support for an infrastructure commission when we discussed it at a previous Committee meeting. As we move to recovery, my focus is very much on supporting the Executive's five-step pathway to recovery plan as we continue to expand our service provision in line with appropriate health and safety guidance.

I hope that has provided you with a helpful overview, and I am, of course, happy to take any questions that you may have.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** Thank you very much for that. We are all very much aware that we are not out of this pandemic at all. The statements yesterday bring that back into real focus. No doubt there will be an impact on the Department, particularly in the areas that you highlighted — Translink, Northern Ireland Water and the DVA. Those have been the topic of conversation for us over the last number of months.

We are concerned about what we heard from Northern Ireland Water last week about the very difficult situation that it finds itself in. You referred to Translink and to how it needs to be put on to a sustainable footing, which, of course, we all want. At the same time, we want a sustainable public transport system. Translink made announcements last week about £20 million savings. On reflection, that is a small amount of money compared with what is required. In the mind of the Finance Minister, what would be required of Translink in order to make it sustainable?

**Ms Mallon:** The Finance Minister, to my knowledge, has not put a figure on it. He certainly has not shared an efficiency saving figure with me, although he has made it clear that efficiencies have to be found. I agree that we should have effective and efficient public services. The difficulty for Translink, as you know, is that, pre-COVID, it was in a very precarious financial situation because it relied so much on reserves. Those are resource pressures. Therefore, the allocation that was made pre-COVID was about trying to put it almost on a level footing; it was still in a very difficult situation. None of us predicted COVID or the dramatic reduction in revenue that would be experienced by Translink. I very much welcome the allocations that have come from the Executive. We need to be clear that that allocation is not an investment in our public transport network; it is to cover loss of earnings for a critical public service in order to keep it running.

I pay tribute to our Translink staff because they kept working and are keeping working in order to get our key workers to and from work. They have gone over and beyond. However, as you say, Translink has taken on the mantle of finding £20 million in savings. That will lead to redundancies. While it is a matter for the accounting officer in Translink and an operational matter, I have said that the voluntary redundancy avenue should be explored as much as possible, but it is inevitable that redundancies will ensue. I have to be honest that, if further cuts are made to Translink, while this time the public transport network, that is, the services, have been protected, next time it will not be possible. As an Executive, we will have very difficult choices to make because we own and have a responsibility for and duty towards a publicly owned public transport network.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** OK. You said that there could be significant consequences to that for jobs and services. We are not in the business of scaremongering; it is about working together to protect those services, particularly for rural dwellers. The majority of us represent rural constituencies, and those services are important because they are lifelines to people there.

**Ms Mallon:** I completely agree, Chair. This is about working together. This pandemic has illustrated, and the statements made by the joint First Ministers yesterday showed, that people want to see their politicians working together to solve the difficulties that they are facing in their daily life. I am very much up for that. I also recognise that, just as I do, a number of members have ambition for a public transport network. I get representations asking me for additional train halts and to expand the rail network and increase our bus service provision. I am very keen to try to do those things. At the moment, however, the focus is very much on trying to get Translink on an even footing in order to ensure that we have that critical public transport network that so many of our citizens, particularly those in the rural areas that you highlighted, rely on.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** When officials last came in June, we were given figures on COVID pressures. Have they been revised in any way?

**Ms Mallon:** Yes, we have made a recent departmental return in the latest round of COVID allocations. I am sure that Katrina will talk about those. We had hoped, at our previous meeting on Thursday, that there might have been Executive agreement on an allocation. That has not yet happened. We are hopeful that it might happen at Thursday's meeting. We submitted revised bids, which allowed us to release pressures on some areas, but I do not have those figures to hand. Maybe you do.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** I see from the paper that you supplied that you have a departmental bid for £51.9 million resource and £29.8 million capital. Do you have the detail of those?

**Mrs Godfrey:** I have been rounding the figures up: I remembered them as £52 million and £30 million, but you are right. The resource bid is, primarily, for Translink, as the Minister just mentioned. We also have bids for lost income in other parts of the Department, particularly the DVA. There is also winter service, which, traditionally, we have been able to fund through late year allocations, and that remains the case. We have made a bid for that of, I think, around £7 million. About £5 million of that is for winter pressures to keep winter service routes going.

**Ms Mallon:** The capital bid for Northern Ireland Water was, if I recall correctly, around £15.5 million. The remainder was for the A6, because we have managed to get construction back on track much quicker than had been anticipated, given the impact of COVID. We submitted a bid to ensure that that can progress at pace. Those are the two capital bids.

**Mrs Godfrey:** It is worth adding that, particularly in relation to the capital bids, there is a double whammy, in a good sense. As the Minister said, the money would allow us to make progress, but that progress provides its own stimulus, in that it requires investment.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** The £8.1 million earmarked for the transport sector remains in the centre. How will that be allocated?

**Ms Mallon:** No decision has been taken. My understanding is that when I can work up or devise a robust scheme in respect of the sectors — the hauliers, buses, taxis and so forth — a bid will come from my Department for that money in the centre. I cannot pre-empt any Executive decision. That is just my understanding.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** Have you a figure that you anticipate be required for that scheme?

**Ms Mallon:** We have written to the Minister for the Economy and the Minister of Finance. In a previous options paper, the Minister for the Economy had identified potential options and made estimated allocations alongside them. We have requested that information and detail, and that will feed into the process of establishing the evidential basis and the best way forward for any scheme.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** You said that that should be delivered at the earliest opportunity. Do you have a timescale?

**Ms Mallon:** We do not have a timescale as yet. I asked my ministerial colleagues to get that detailed information to me by Monday, if possible, because I am meeting the sectors on Wednesday. We will then, hopefully, be able to ascertain the evidential basis and move forward.

I am considering whether taking forward any scheme will require external expertise or whether we can work with the Central Procurement Directorate. We are exploring a number of options. I am clear that this must demonstrate value for money and good governance. I am also mindful that time is of the essence. Those are the criteria by which I will identify the best route.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** I have pages of questions that I could ask, but I will not be greedy. My final question is on driving tests. You anticipated that the backlog of key workers and those whose tests had been cancelled would be addressed within six to eight weeks. We are still at the early part of that timescale, but are you on track to achieve that target? Are we still looking at opening the general booking line at the beginning of November?

**Ms Mallon:** Yes, we are. I saw an update as recently as last night to ensure that I would have the most up-to-date information for the Committee. Yes, we are still on track to clear the 3,800 backlog within the six- to eight-week period that commenced on 1 September. That has not changed.

**Mr K Buchanan:** Thank you, Minister. Do you know how many health service workers availed themselves of Translink's offer of free bus and rail travel?

**Ms Mallon:** I do not have the figures to hand. We understand that it is being utilised. I can go back and see whether can get a sense of the scale of use for you, Keith.

**Mr K Buchanan:** OK. Thanks for that.

Moving back to the Chair's point about MOT and driver testing, I have received several complaints from constituents about the call centre. I asked the Department about that but did not get an answer. Do you have any idea of the number of people who are manning — maybe "manning" is not the right terminology now — the call centre, answering the phones and taking bookings? How many people are in the call centre? People are having serious difficulty in getting through to it.

**Ms Mallon:** You are absolutely right. We have seen a huge increase in the volume of calls, and, as you will be aware, because the online booking system is not live, telephone calls are the only modus operandi to book a test. We have taken a number of steps to address that. Capita manages the call centre and has increased the hours that it is manned; it has increased its operating hours by two hours, between 5.00 pm and 7.00 pm, from Monday to Wednesday. We also saw that a number of people who were calling the call centre were doing so for reasons other than booking a test. So, we have put in a call messaging system to divert people to other numbers or to redirect if their query does not relate to the call centre. We have also been engaging with the haulage industry to try to free up capacity by letting its members make bookings through their local test centre as opposed to having to go through the call centre. By bringing in those measures, we are trying to free up capacity and provide additional capacity.

We are focusing our efforts on getting the online booking system live and are on track to see it restored for vehicle tests for HGVs and trailers only from 1 October. From 5 October, the online system will be open for practical driving tests for all new customers, and, from 12 October, it will be available for vehicle tests for all other categories. We are doing a phased return because we want to manage the volume of people making applications online. In addition, as I think we have said previously, DVA officials have been working with the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency in England very closely because its system crashed. We are trying to mitigate any problems and are procuring a queuing system and software to try to manage the whole online system.

So, I am very conscious that there has been huge difficulty, and I apologise to people who have had difficulty in getting through to the call centre. We are putting in the mitigation measures to try to address that. A significant majority of people book online, so by bringing in the online system we hope to significantly ease the pressure on the call centre.

**Mr K Buchanan:** Do you have any idea of the number of people who are answering the phones?

**Ms Mallon:** I do not know the total staff number, but I can get that for you. On Monday evening during the additional two hours alone it serviced 116 calls. So, the additional hours on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays are helping. We can get the number of people who are operating in the call centre to you.

**Mr K Buchanan:** OK. Thank you for that.

The Chair raised a point about the haulage sector, taxi and coach operators. I appreciate that you cannot give us a timeline, but with every week that passes companies go out of business. I am not pressing you, but do you envisage testing for vehicles in those sectors beginning before Christmas?

**Ms Mallon:** I hope that it will. However, I am also very clear that people have been waiting a long time and need to have honest information and clarity. I do not want to raise expectations, but, as I said, I am meeting the sectors early next week. I have already given them my commitment to keeping them fully informed and updated, and I will reiterate that, because I realise that time is of the essence. I will be keeping the sectors fully informed and updated along the way.

**Mr K Buchanan:** Can you confirm that you are meeting Coach Operators Northern Ireland?

**Ms Mallon:** I am.

**Mr K Buchanan:** On the issue of road safety, the proposal for 20 mph speed signs in front of schools, which I welcome, is in our tabled papers. I have spoken to you personally, Minister, about the issue that I have with speed indicator devices (SIDs). Do you have any update on where that sits? You have announced funding for groups or whoever can avail of it to make roads safer, and obviously communities will want to put SIDs up, but they cannot put them on street furniture or poles, etc. Do you have any update on that?

**Ms Mallon:** That is an issue that you have brought to my attention. As you said, I have launched a grant scheme to which community groups can apply for up to £10,000 for road safety initiatives. I am aware of the appeal of SIDs and the fact that, through PCSPs, a lot of communities are very keen to get them. You raised the issue of where they are located, and I have asked officials to look in to that.

**Ms Anderson:** Thank you, Minister, for your update and for the paper that you sent. In the context of the economic recovery, I am glad to hear about the A6, particularly about construction being on track. That brings me to the A5. We heard that you received an inspector's report on 2 September, and we know that your officials are looking at it. Do you have a time frame as to when they will come back to you with that analysis and when you will report your decision to the Committee?

**Ms Mallon:** Officials received the inspector's report on 2 September. I have not been given sight of the full report. At present, officials are analysing the recommendations and seeking legal advice. I have also asked to meet the Departmental Solicitor's Office because I would like to obtain legal advice. I am very clear that that is a very important strategic project and that we need to progress it. As soon as I get the legal advice and the recommendations from officials, I will update the Committee and announce the next steps.

**Ms Anderson:** I would like to ask you about the A2 Buncrana Road, particularly in the context of economic recovery. I have met DFI Roads and the retail units on each side of the road, and we looked at the design of the road. The retail units brought forward some suggested modifications to the design. We are galvanising support across the city and district for the A2 Buncrana Road. I ask you to try to come up with a solution, such as the one at Crescent Link, where we had to make sure that there were exit points so that you could get to Tesco or whatever retail units you wanted to go to. Solutions were found there, and I believe that a solution can be found here that satisfies the retailers and those who have outlined concerns about the current design. It is only a small modification.

**Ms Mallon:** Thank you for that. You will be aware that I allocated money in the budget to strategic roads. That is one of them. I met the local business owners in the area in March, just before lockdown, and listened to their concerns. I am aware that they held a number of site meetings with elected representatives in the area in the last week or so. I have said to officials that I am always keen to work in partnership and bring many heads together; when you bring strategic roads information and you marry that up with local knowledge, you get a better outcome. I have asked my officials to engage with local stakeholders, and I am keen to find a solution as I decide on the next steps forward. I am very aware of that.

**Ms Anderson:** Co-design is crucial.

I would also like an update on the Reservoirs Act and the transfer of functions. When we engaged with your officials, they outlined the technical guidance notes on planning policy in proximity to reservoirs, and they recognised the shortfall of the current process. Obviously, it has to be done in the context of safety, but there are a number of projects — for instance, in the Glens, Magee and Fort George — that could be adversely affected unless we get it right. We would like to know about the transfer of functions, but, primarily, in the context of safety, can decisions be taken to allow potential development to go forward?

**Ms Mallon:** I totally agree. We have a huge need to build more homes. That is why I always advocate for investment in our waste-water and water infrastructure. As you say, we need to make sure that development is in safe places, particularly when in close proximity to reservoirs. You will know that the Act has not been enacted because it was wrongly transferred to DAERA. The Executive Office has agreed a transfer of functions to my Department. We await its bringing it forward to the Executive.

**Ms Anderson:** You have no time frame on that?

**Ms Mallon:** I do not, but we can ask the Executive Office for an update.

**Ms Anderson:** Finally, Brexit is 99 days away; the clock is ticking, and, as you know, it is getting louder. Twenty-three of the common frameworks are in your Department: transport, aviation regulation, driver hours, rail safety and rail passengers' rights. When we had NI Water here last week, we talked about the chemicals for the purification of water. Officials said that, although they believed that the supply chain would enable them to get access to chemicals, it would cost more because of the

disruption to the supply chain. Can we have an update? We have talked about it before, but how much further forward is the Department with the 23 common frameworks?

**Ms Mallon:** Obviously, work on all those issues continues. You are absolutely right about NI Water: it has a number of no-deal Brexit contingency plans for the additional stocking of chemicals and re-routing to ensure the critical supply route. Contingency work is ongoing, and NI Water is building on it. From my Department's perspective, the hazardous substances common framework is probably the most advanced. The framework was approved at the beginning of September, and work is continuing on its full implementation.

In the other areas, officials are working on the development of provisional frameworks for the end of the transition period. We all agree that the lack of information and detail from the British Government is of huge concern. My Department is working very closely with officials in the Department for Transport to ensure that they are aware of the unique circumstances facing Northern Ireland. I have been very clear with my officials that we must transpose everything that we can, that we must do what we can to ensure high alignment, and that we must have contingency planning in place. As you say, the clock is ticking, and it is an area of huge and growing concern.

**Ms Anderson:** NI Water can only have seven weeks of stock because the chemicals are dangerous.

**Ms Mallon:** Seven weeks is correct.

**Ms Anderson:** Thank you.

**Mr Hilditch:** Minister, you are very welcome. I will start by referring to the serious flood in Newcastle, although the flooding was Province-wide as well. Thank you for sorting out the flooding and the taxi issues that I contacted you about, and I thank your staff for their efforts.

**Ms Mallon:** Thank you.

**Mr Hilditch:** When an unexpected turn of events takes place, such as a flood, there may not be a specified budget for it. Where does the money come from? Who sustains the loss in the budget? Does money have to be moved in the budget? These are substantial sums.

**Ms Mallon:** I will bring in the permanent secretary on the technical aspects of the budget.

**Mrs Godfrey:** Yes. We operate in a fairly flexible way, David, to allow for a reaction when it is needed. Both you and the Minister will have seen that at first hand in Newcastle a few weeks ago. We do have teams that can be on the ground very quickly, and that is covered. It may mean that some other things take a bit longer to get done, but that is covered by the way we operate our budget. It happens all the time. It happens with the Roads Service budget when there are incidents, and it happens with the winter services. The guys and girls that we have on the ground are enormously flexible, and, as you said yourself, their emergency response is very impressive, which is hugely heartening for me.

**Mr Hilditch:** From a lay person's point of view, you can see the operation going on and know that it costs money and wonder where it will impact on other services.

**Mrs Godfrey:** Yes, and it may mean some other things happening more slowly. However, because it is prioritised and a response service, it means that you go to where the need is greatest at the time. In the longer term, it is about planning to take forward some of the meter schemes that will stop this happening. In many ways it is classic triage: you are responding to the immediacy but also putting in place the arrangements to try and stop it happening in future. The Minister has been very clear about the priority to be given to the alleviation scheme in Newcastle.

**Ms Mallon:** Yes. About 45,000 properties are at risk from flooding from rivers, the sea or surface water, and they require infrastructure improvements. In reality, because of climate change and the lack of investment in our water and wastewater infrastructure, this will become an increasing occurrence. It is almost like — pardon the pun — a perfect storm. It is something that more people will have to deal with, and it will become an area that requires more investment. The scenes in Newcastle were shocking, and while I was delighted to be able to help residents there, there are residences in other places where the long-term solutions they need cannot be provided, and that is a frustration. It is

certainly an area that I am very conscious of and one that will require additional investment in the future, without question.

**Mrs Godfrey:** Water and wastewater infrastructure is an area that did not get the attention that it needed in the past, and now, with climate change and other events, we see that it is really warranted. Over the last number of years, understanding of the infrastructure that we take for granted — until something happens — has developed significantly.

**Ms Mallon:** There are opportunities. We look very much at hard infrastructure, but there are other huge opportunities. I was recently up on Divis Mountain, where we were discussing the potential of using the Belfast hills to help with a soft solution to water drainage. We can do things that are not only more cost-effective but are good for building resilience into flood defences, and I am keen to try to explore those.

**Mr Hilditch:** OK. Thank you.

On Northern Ireland Water, we have heard a lot about the increased capacity and all that, more so in provincial towns than the city. It has been put to me by some in local government that there has been movement on the closure of buildings that have been empty in the long term but that the deductions do not come off their figures. Can someone look into that situation? Obviously, the capacity keeps increasing because of new builds, but, on the other side, factories are disappearing, as are large areas of housing, particularly, for instance, the high-rise flats in Larne. May I leave that with you? When I raised it previously, the answer was a wee bit convoluted.

**Ms Mallon:** I understand the point. Let us go away and ask Northern Ireland Water how it verifies its figures for new developments, the spaces and capacity that are freed up and how it arrives at its overall figure. We can share that with the Committee.

**Mr Hilditch:** That would be good. Thank you.

It has been indicated that the replacement for the road safety strategy will be completed by 30 November, which is about two months away. Has it started?

**Ms Mallon:** Yes, I have met officials to discuss that. The issue for me was that, when we looked at the road safety strategy, we saw that it had a huge number of action points. My questions were these: could we have a more outcomes-focused approach, and could we look at what Scotland, England and other places were doing to see whether we could have a more effective and targeted road safety strategy? Officials have gone away to compile that information, and I am due to meet them again to finalise it. I am also due to meet the PSNI. Officials are engaging with the PSNI and others, but I am keen to do that myself. I am conscious that the strategy runs out at the end of this year, so we are keen to get an improved road safety strategy that sits with the outcomes approach to the Programme for Government and very much with the active travel agenda.

**Mr Hilditch:** Do you think that it will move quickly enough to complete by 30 November?

**Ms Mallon:** There has been some slippage with COVID — there is no doubt about that — but we are very keen, because we see the importance of it, to get that done as quickly as possible and to share it with the Committee.

**Mr Hilditch:** I come from the angle that I am chairperson of one of the few road safety committees that still operate in Northern Ireland or *[Inaudible]*. We have had some good work done through the Department, so there is an advantage to having local set-ups as well.

**Ms Mallon:** I agree.

**Mr Hilditch:** Could consideration be given to those coming back again?

**Ms Mallon:** OK.

**Mr Hilditch:** On the special events review, the closing date for responses is not until tomorrow, but are there any early indications? I know that you were unable to meet Mo Farah the other day; you missed that.

**Ms Mallon:** I know. I had constituency stuff.

**Mr Hilditch:** You can see how important road closures are for events and special events.

**Ms Mallon:** Definitely.

**Mr Hilditch:** Is there an early indication of where that review is going, given that a lot of people probably responded very early?

**Ms Mallon:** No, I have not had any early indications. I wanted to wait until it was complete before getting an analysis. My instinct tells me that the views will be overwhelmingly in favour of changing the legislation. That was what precipitated my decision to look at the issue. Mr Muir brought people from a range of running clubs and different sporting organisations to meet me and discuss it. Even at a local level, it is an issue of huge concern. I suspect — I do not want to pre-empt it — that there will be a clear signal that it is overly burdensome on local running and sports clubs. We will need to identify a way forward. Yes, councils have a role to play, but we need to ensure that what we do does not stymie people trying to live healthy, active lifestyles or those trying to raise money for charities and other hugely good causes in their community. We can get an update on that once we have collated the responses.

**Mr Hilditch:** I know that there have been a number of questions on Translink, its budgets and its outworkings going forward. There is a rumour, which came to my ears only in the last couple of days, among local folk that Clipperstown halt in Carrickfergus faces closure. Given that you are trying to get people on to public transport, that is one halt that you would not want to do away with. The excuse is that there is antisocial behaviour at the halt. Perhaps Translink wants to close it at certain hours or something like that. May I leave the issue of Clipperstown halt with you as well?

**Ms Mallon:** Yes, certainly. I am not aware of it, but I can raise it with Translink.

**Mr Hilditch:** It has been brought up only in recent days.

I will leave it at that.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** Yes, there was loads there.

**Mr Muir:** I declare an interest: previously, I was on the board of Translink; I was a member of Ards and North Down Borough Council; and my stepfather is equality manager for the A6.

I have a couple of questions. We have had discussions on the future of Translink. I am very concerned to see the trajectory that we are on with regard to the potential time bomb of air quality, pollution and congestion. For a number of months, the public message has been to avoid using public transport, so people have been using private cars. What efforts are being made by the Department to have a recovery strategy for the use of public transport so that, when we come out of this, there is not more private car usage, given the impact that that would have on communities? It is key to ensure that, when this pandemic eventually passes, people return to public transport.

**Ms Mallon:** I share your view. As somebody who really believes in public transport, it does not sit well with me that we are sending out a message that people should travel on public transport only if it is necessary or essential for them to do so. However, the truth is that we are in a public health crisis, and we have to follow public health advice.

Translink has demonstrated its responsibility for its passengers by implementing a range of measures: screens, a no-cash policy and the cleaning of buses. A whole regime was put in place to keep passengers safe in bus stations, rail stations and on buses and trains.

We are very conscious that we need to encourage people back safely. The key thing in the recovery strategy is to ensure that we are able to maintain services. If we do not maintain services and ensure

that public transport is accessible, people will never make the shift back from cars to public transport. That is why I think that it is absolutely critical that we are able to maintain the investment.

The other avenue for me to explore, and I referenced a park-and-ride announcement, is the amalgamated journey. For instance, if you can walk or cycle to the local train station, where you have somewhere to store your bicycle securely, you can then use public transport. It is about enhancing that whole experience.

The Executive have also begun to think about car parking at the government buildings that we own and what we can do there to encourage people to use public transport or find more active ways to get to and from work. There is also a responsibility on employers. It seems contradictory to be talking about the importance of public transport and, simultaneously, telling people to travel on it only when it is essential. However, we have to keep doing things in line with public health advice; encourage as many people as possible to safely use our public transport network; and maintain the services.

The third strand is enhancement. Rail connectivity in the north-west, for example, requires significant improvements, and I am a firm believer in:

*"If you build it, they will come."*

Those are the three strands that we will take in our approach to recovery.

**Mr Muir:** I thank the Minister for her response. I live beside the railway line and see trains going past, and it is devastating to see the level of patronage after so much work was done to increase usage. However, if we cut those services, how will we increase the usage of public transport when we come out of this pandemic? Clear barriers to using it have been created. So, it is really important that we invest in public transport and, as we come out of this pandemic, encourage people to use it.

You talked about sustainable travel. How is the Department working with councils and other bodies to make bids for funding? You need to make bids for funding, and we need a real concerted effort on that. My council area got only £25,000 as part of the recent greenway strategy. I understand that work is under way on that, but what work is being done with councils so that the greenway strategy can be delivered?

**Ms Mallon:** We have been writing to councils, and I have been trying to meet them. In fact, I am due to meet with Lisburn and Castlereagh Council after this meeting. I am trying to be proactive. I have met with Newry, Belfast and Derry councils, and we are saying to them, "Please, get the proposals to us".

The challenge for me is that I do not think that change from on high works. I do not think that coming in and imposing on communities changes in where cycle lanes should be will work. We need to work in partnership. So, I have said that it needs to be from the bottom up. The council is the most appropriate vehicle for bringing the proposals forward. In saying that, some councils have brought forward more proposals than others. I encourage members to engage with their councils to ask them to submit proposals to my walking and cycling champion.

The other challenge is that this is capital money, and it has to be spent within this financial year. That means that some projects will, necessarily, be at a more-advanced stage than others. I have been telling councils that I cannot pre-empt future budget allocations but am committed to this agenda. If they can work up proposals, even this year, that would be ripe for funding next year, I would be very keen to do that.

We are taking a proactive approach. We had good uptake on the greenways, although I know that you might be a bit disappointed. We are doing the park-and-ride schemes as well. I am keen to work with councils, and I encourage members to encourage not only their party councillors but their council officers to be as creative and energetic as they can in getting proposals to us so that we can support them.

**Mr Muir:** Nearly every MLA and councillor has been contacted by people concerned about MOTs and driving licences. A decision was made not to issue temporary exemption certificates (TECs) for four-year-old vehicles and to move towards getting people to ring up and book an appointment. I urge the Minister to ensure that, as we move to the next stage, there is the capacity to deal with this issue. I am worried that we will get a tsunami of complaints from people trying to book online and getting really

frustrated. If we are to do this, we need the resources to do it right. Otherwise, people will get extremely frustrated.

My TEC runs out next year. I am happy to get an MOT, but I need to make sure that I can go online and book it. The experience that some people have had would drive you round the bend.

**Ms Mallon:** I will update you on MOTs. The Craigavon test centre is to be handed back to the DVA on 28 — did I pre-empt your question, Cathal? *[Laughter.]* Sorry, do you want me to hold back?

**Mr Boylan:** Those are my 15 questions done now, Chair. I will have to think of something else to ask *[Laughter.]* Go on ahead.

**Ms Mallon:** The centre is being handed back to the DVA on 28 September, so we will be carrying out practical driving tests from 1 October. Belfast is due to be handed back on 2 October, and we hope to be carrying out MOT tests there from about 5 October, as soon as we get the lifts installed. Belfast, because it is a big test centre, will help our capacity to deal with MOTs.

We are on a recruitment drive, which should further reassure members, and have recruited two temporary vehicle examiners. They will require minimal training because they are former employees. We are in the process of recruiting 12 temporary vehicle examiners to assist with MOTs, and 12 permanent vehicle examiners. We are looking at a recruitment of 26 additional vehicle examiners. Their recruitment will not only help with MOTs but free up dual-role examiners to help with the practical driving tests.

I understand that the situation is confusing. We agreed an updated communications plan yesterday, which will be rolled out. It uses GIFs to explain simply to people whom to contact. I encourage members to direct constituents to the check-your-status section of the website, where you can see whether you have an MOT or when your TEC expires. We have found that that is helping to clear up some of the confusion.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** It is still useful to reinforce the message that people have an obligation to keep their vehicles roadworthy. I have heard of instances of people thinking that, because they do not have an MOT appointment, everything is fine. The message probably needs to come out again and be reinforced.

**Ms Mallon:** I agree completely, and I always try to reinforce the message on safety and responsibility when commenting on the subject. I thank the Committee for reinforcing that important message. It is important to state that it is the sole responsibility of the owner of the vehicle, and it is not a matter of having that responsibility for just a week or a few days before your MOT test.

**Mr Muir:** That is important because some people bring their car to a garage just in advance of an MOT, whereas they should do so to keep it roadworthy.

**Mr Beggs:** That message needs to be reinforced. I have been talking to a few local garages that do a lot of MOT preparation, and their business virtually disappeared. There is a public safety message that we need to get across, which is that people need to keep their vehicles roadworthy.

You said that you have been in discussions with the Finance Minister and Translink about public transport and financial pressures. Has Translink communicated to you the range of options that it is having to consider so that you, in turn, can transmit that to the Finance Minister so that there is no ambiguity about what will happen, depending on what funds become available?

**Ms Mallon:** Yes, I have submitted detailed Executive papers on both Northern Ireland Water and Translink. We have also shared with the Department of Finance all of the accounting in respect of Translink. We are being very open, honest and transparent about what money is coming in, where it is going, what is being used for and, if it is not there, about the difficulties that will ensue.

Assurances have been given that saving £20 million will not impact on the network and the provision of services. It will result in redundancies, but I have been very clear with Executive colleagues that we cannot guarantee that any further cuts would not affect services. We would be in the realm of trying to do an analysis of service provision on the basis of profit, not need. To me, that is the antithesis of a publicly owned public transport network and does not sit well with the Executive's obligations. I am due

to meet the Finance Minister to discuss these matters, and I am sure that we can share with the Committee the details that we have provided in respect of Translink in particular.

**Mr Beggs:** That would be very helpful. Thank you.

With regard to test centres, MOTs, PSV and other vehicle testing, I am pleased that the DVA has hired a considerable number of staff, but I assume that, during the past six months, some staff will have reached retirement age. Are we satisfied that there will be sufficient staff to meet the considerable demand that will be there? Is there the capacity to be flexible and put on additional shifts? People are desperate to keep their vehicles on the road. To do so, they will drive long distances or go to a late or very early appointment. Will that capacity be there? Will the DVA be flexible so that those who need a test can get one?

**Ms Mallon:** The answer is yes, but we have to do everything after we have completed a risk assessment and in line with public health advice. It would be remiss of me to say to people that capacity will be back to pre-COVID levels. The additional measures that have to be taken to keep staff and customers safe will have a knock-on effect, so people will have to wait longer for their MOT. We are trying to maximise the capacity that we have and to utilise the TEC system so that nobody is disadvantaged by it.

**Mr Beggs:** You mentioned the effect of the coronavirus on capacity. What is the percentage link to the test centres? Its impact requires major planning and has to be worked in. I am glad to hear that some thought is going into it. Do we know what the percentage is?

**Mrs Godfrey:** It very much depends on the size of the test centre, Roy, to be honest. Every one is different. Some are relatively small. My local one, in Downpatrick, is a three-lane centre, whereas the Belfast one is much, much bigger. I have to say that, in the Department and in the agency, the health and safety leads have worked tremendously well. The key is to look at each site and the business that it does, and you work out the risk assessment on that basis. You can have generic principles for a risk assessment, but the assessment becomes live only when it is in the workplace. The Minister is absolutely right: key for staff are the reassurances that they and their customers are safe; that social distancing measures are in place; and that they might have to take a bit longer between vehicles. However, there is no easy answer. I cannot say that the capacity is down by 20% or 30%, because it depends on the individual test centre.

**Mr Beggs:** Typically, the driver takes a seat alongside the test facility. I hope that, if customers cannot stay inside the centre, a canopy or some sort of shelter will be provided. Can you assure me that that will be the case and that customers will not be standing in the rain, as has happened to others?

**Ms Mallon:** We have been looking at that, and I have asked officials to scope out options. My view had been that putting up a canopy would be straightforward. However, it is not straightforward because people will congregate and not socially distance in a canopy, which throws up complications. There are always complications that you did not foresee, so we have been trying to work through options. One of our key concerns was driving instructors. They go repeatedly to test centres, so this has a big impact on them. We have carried out a number of risk assessments, and, following those assessments, we are looking at utilising reception areas where social distancing can be maintained. That will ensure driving instructors, at least, have shelter. They are at the centres on multiple occasions and for longer periods than individual customers. In saying that, as we approach winter, when we ask people to come for their MO, we do advise up front that there is no sheltered provision at present and ask them to be mindful of the weather and prepare accordingly. We are exploring options, but I am pleased that we are moving to a solution for the driving instructors, at least, at this stage.

**Mr Beggs:** Like other Members, I have been picking up on pressures and concerns from people seeking a driving test and the delays they are experiencing. There has been an indication that, instead of an instructor having six or seven tests per day, they only have four or five. What percentage of the capacity and ability to test has been affected? Are additional testers being employed, shifts extended etc so that we can meet the six months of pent-up demand that is in the system?

**Ms Mallon:** Do you mean the practical driving test?

**Mr Beggs:** Yes.

**Ms Mallon:** Pre-COVID, the testers carried out six tests per day, and that has been reduced to five because of the additional measures such as cleaning vehicles and social distancing. That is down, but, as I have previously said, we have 40 dual road examiners on our books who can carry out vehicle testing and the practical driving tests. One purpose of the recruitment drive for vehicle examiners that I just spoke about is that it will free up more of the dual officers who can carry out the practical driving tests. Boiling it down, I have asked officials for figures. Pre-COVID, there were around 4,000 tests carried out per month, and, with the existing examiners and the additional capacity, officials have said that they are confident that 3,500 tests can be carried out per month. It is not exactly at the same capacity as before; it is slightly less. However, we have to be honest with people that, because of the additional mitigations, people are going to have to wait slightly longer for their practical driving tests.

**Mr Beggs:** To be clear, you are saying that, even with the additional staff, you are predicting that the backlog will get longer?

**Ms Mallon:** We are saying that, even with the additional staff, we will be carrying out just under what we were doing pre-COVID. Now, that is before we look at increasing the hours. As we have said before, we are looking at carrying out driving tests in the evenings and on Sundays, which would provide additional capacity. Obviously, we have to make sure that the driving conditions are right in order to test the candidate's ability to drive.

**Mr Beggs:** I fully appreciate that. However, I am quite alarmed at the thought that the six-month waiting list will get longer if we are not meeting the normal demand levels. Will you and your colleagues look at how we can at least provide more than what would normally be provided in order to shorten the backlog? This is a major concern; it is affecting people getting to work. A couple of key workers have been in touch with me, and I have corresponded with the relevant agency on the second one who has just got in touch. We have to provide, surely, at least the capacity that was needed before and start to eat away at the six months of pent-up demand.

**Ms Mallon:** I agree, but the difficulty is that with risk assessments, the physical capacity of space and the ability of staff to work, the truth is that we are not going to be able to deliver capacity over and beyond what we were doing before. However, we are saying that we are recruiting additional staff to increase the number of tests, and we are looking at additional hours in the evening and at Sunday service. I also have to be mindful that you cannot book a practical driving test unless you complete your theory test. The theory test was not accessible for a number of months. There are people who would have been in that backlog in normal circumstances, but they are not because they have not yet been able to sit their theory test, even though that resumed in July. We are mindful and we are working, but I have to be cautious about lifting pre-COVID exact figures, adding them up for six months, and saying that that is the level of demand. Certainly, the level of demand is high, and we are doing everything that we can to work through it.

**Mr Beggs:** I hope that the theory test will not have considerable delays, because that will give you a signal about what is coming through.

Finally, I have a question about potholes. I have been told that, in the past, a pothole had to be very deep before it would be touched. I have seen potholes marked and then no work happen because it was not deep enough. What is the current depth for a pothole before work is carried out? Is it four inches? Is it two inches? There are road safety implications if this maintenance work does not happen. Have you bid for additional funds to enable potholes to be repaired?

**Ms Mallon:** Yes, I always bid for additional funds. I am the bane of Minister Murphy's life. Yes, I always bid for additional money. I am also very clear that I get the basics right. That is not to mean anything derogatory, but it is fundamental; if you are not fixing people's potholes and street lights, you are not providing them with the minimum service that they require. You will know that I have allocated money to ensure that we have a 12-month repair ability for our street lights, but obviously we have so many potholes as a result of years of underinvestment and patching, which is not good for our road network and is not value for money. You will also know that the independent Barton report said that we should be spending £143 million per annum on maintaining our road network. We are nowhere near that; I do not have any allocation to be anywhere close to that. I need to check, but, from memory, it is around fifty-five —.

**Mrs Godfrey:** I cannot remember the actual figure.

**Ms Mallon:** There are depths —

**Mr Beggs:** Is it 55 millimetres?

**Ms Mallon:** — against which potholes are assessed. We can get that detail to you; I just do not do not have it in my head.

**Mrs Godfrey:** They are prioritised in terms of *[Inaudible]* and what resources we have. There is a priority approach so that the ones that carry the most risk are top priority.

**Mr Beggs:** The public are not satisfied with deep holes not being repaired, and it is a waste of resources having several people visiting them and no work being carried out.

**Ms Mallon:** I completely agree with that. If I had additional funding, it is certainly an area where I would seek to have dramatic improvements.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** Following on from Roy's point in relation to the backlog, can you clarify the issue around the annual leave entitlement of testing staff? I understand that most staff were not redeployed and maybe did not take their leave during the COVID period. I have been told by a number of sources that they are now being instructed to do so by the end of January. Perhaps you can confirm or deny that. Has that been factored in to addressing the backlog? Obviously, you could have a number of staff taking substantial time off.

**Ms Mallon:** That is not an issue that I am aware of, but I am conscious that it would be an operational matter. I am not sure whether you are able to deal with that, or we could come back address that issue via DVA.

**Mrs Godfrey:** The Chair is quite right; it is a requirement right across the whole of the Civil Service. The limit to the carry-over of annual leave is nine days. The only exceptions to that are where you have been prevented from taking leave. It is also worth pointing out that leave carry-over carries a cost in terms of every Department's annual accounts and the liabilities that they have. It is not something that comes without a financial cost. Right across all Departments, the message has gone out very clearly that staff should be encouraged to take leave. We have to manage that; the DVA chief executive is managing that in the context of the backlog and the priority of getting people tested, whether it is themselves or their vehicles. There is a careful management, but it is also really important — I know that trade unions agree with me on this — that staff take breaks. We are managing a really challenging situation. At the end of July, we probably had considerably less leave taken than we would have done in a normal year, in common with all Departments. It is something that every Department is looking at and trying to find the right balance.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** My concern is that, while we welcome the efforts that have been made to recruit staff, they could be, essentially, coming in to cover for staff on leave as opposed to adding any real value in addressing the backlog.

**Mrs Godfrey:** It is a challenge. Staff have rights to leave, and it is really important that they are able to take their leave. It is one of those things that, at every level of management, we all juggle with to try to make sure that we have the cover for services to continue while not eroding the rights of employees.

**Ms Kimmins:** Thank you, Minister, for coming this morning. Some of what I was going to ask about has been covered, but a few points have come out. Roy mentioned driving tests. I have been engaging with driving instructors for the last number of months. Even though things are starting to get back to some sort of normality, they still have a few wee queries. There is reference in the papers to the longer duration test and the approved driving instructors. Is there any timescale for when they will resume, or are we still working on that?

**Ms Mallon:** Officials are working on that. Obviously it is a longer test, and we are trying to work through the priorities. It is a service that has not resumed as yet, but I have asked officials to resume it as safely and quickly as possible. As soon as I am able to give a time frame, I will share it.

**Ms Kimmins:** I spoke recently to one of the representatives in DVA, and he was very helpful around driving instructors' access to centres while a test is taking place. I know that some centres are allowing them indoors, particularly as we are coming into the winter months, but there seems to be inconsistency in that some still are not. Is any work being done to make that a more consistent approach? I am conscious that you can see a change in the weather even this week, so it is quite difficult for people to stand outside for an hour or so.

**Ms Mallon:** I agree. It has to be done on a test centre basis, because each will require its own individual risk assessment. Some centres have lent themselves to finding a shelter solution much more quickly than others, but we are working through all of them. Driving instructions are there multiple times and, with the weather, they need provision of shelter. We are just working through risk assessments for the remaining centres to find options.

**Ms Kimmins:** OK; that is fair enough. On the more basic maintenance issue, street lighting has been raised with me. It becomes more prominent as we come into the darker evenings and people see lights that are out. Locally, we have experienced difficulties with response times for repairs. For example, in my area of Bessbrook, the lights in a full housing estate, Carrick Vista, have been off for the last week and a half or two weeks, and there is still no sign of repairs. It is quite a block that is out, which concerned me because that is usually prioritised. Is this an issue right across? I know that, historically, there have always been issues with street lighting and that they are always at capacity. It is just that it has been reported a number of times now and it is usually repaired fairly quickly. Is that a one-off, or is it a problem right across?

**Ms Mallon:** Certainly, group outages is not an issue that is being brought to us. As you rightly say, group outages are a priority. I do not have the specific detail. I will take it from you and look myself —

**Ms Kimmins:** OK; thank you.

**Ms Mallon:** — at whether it is an issue around Northern Ireland Electricity as opposed to DFI. You sometimes find that that is the case. However, if you give me the details, I can look into it when I go back up to the office.

**Ms Kimmins:** Yes; that is fair enough. The 20 mph zones are obviously very welcome. Given the limits of the 100 schools, quite a lot of schools in my area have missed out. Only one school in the whole of Newry and south Armagh has been lucky enough to benefit from it. Is there a commitment to extend that further? It is an issue that concerns me because a lot of my constituency is fairly rural. An example that I use all the time is Killeen Primary School, where there is a 60 mph road outside the school, because it is a national speed limit road. I do not even know if, based on that, it would meet the criteria for future roll-outs, or whether there would have to be a legislative change for rural roads that have the national speed limit, if that makes sense.

**Ms Mallon:** Yes. I will leave the legislative element but, as regards the 100 schools, the level of demand for this was always going to exceed supply. We tried to take a fair approach. We divided it equally across the four divisions, and it was also rural-proofed; I know that some members had concerns about that. Again, I cannot pre-empt what future allocations will come to my Department, but I have been clear, and I have communicated to schools that were not successful, that my commitment is that we will see a further roll-out of this scheme and that additional schools will be included next year. The same matrix was applied across the scheme: traffic volumes, speed, collisions and all of that were assessed. We have agreed the first tranche of 100 schools this year, but I am very keen to see it rolled out next year. We assessed every school in each division to take a fair approach. We are able to move on to the next tranche. Do you want to come in on the legislative aspect?

**Mrs Godfrey:** Yes. There is a process that has to be worked through, but it is reasonably straightforward, Liz, so I am not overly concerned about it. As the Minister said, we are very clear that this should be a rolling priority. There are always cases where there are complexities — perhaps schools near junctions, where you are keen to do something, but it might not have been possible this year so, rather than losing the opportunity for somebody else, it is about finding ways of working through solutions in local areas.

**Ms Kimmins:** Yes. My concern was that the legislation on those types of roads would knock them out completely anyway, so that is good to hear. At that school in particular, they have to cross the road for break times and things like that. Now, I would say that most cars or vehicles cannot go 60 mph, but

there is nothing really there to make them slow down. It is just a very narrow and dangerous road that is continually highlighted to me.

With regard to the transport regulation unit, I know that the whole public inquiry is against operators who may not be compliant with regulations and standards. I am aware that there has been considerable backlog. Is there any progress or update on that?

**Ms Mallon:** Yes. That is a frustration, because progress was being made pre-COVID. We were bringing in commissioners from England to carry that out. That has been paused. We were also engaging on premises because that has been a difficulty. There has to be the right kind of environment because witnesses are coming in and so forth. We have been working with DOJ in order to try to secure a venue. Then, obviously, COVID came and courts could not operate. We are working urgently to try to be able to carry out the public inquiry. Because of its importance, I have also been engaging with the PSNI on the issue. I am very keen that the inquiry happens as soon as possible. Obviously, the enforcement side continues to do its job and to work closely with the PSNI on that.

**Ms Kimmins:** My last point is that we are still very much anticipating an official announcement on Casement Park. Is there any timescale for when we are likely to hear anything about that?

**Ms Mallon:** No. Officials are still working through the objection that was received very recently. Once they go through that and carry out all the statutory processes, it will come up to me for a recommendation. As yet, that has not happened.

**Mr Boylan:** I am just wading through all those questions. There were a couple of interesting points. Are there any early indications of the uptake of the road safety grant? You released money last week. I am keen on it, and my colleague mentioned it. It will take legislative change. I will use Middletown village as an example. It is on a main arterial route. A change was made a number of years ago. Down around the hospital in Dungannon, road bumps were put on an A road. I think that the rules and the legislation were changed again. It will definitely take legislative change to facilitate some of those roads. I am not saying that there will be bumps or whatever. I hope that we would look at that through the road safety strategy. SIDs were mentioned earlier. They are an option in some cases. In the likes of Poyntzpass village and at Foley Primary School in Ballymacnab — I could name a number of schools in Newry and Armagh — we need to be creative. It will take legislative change. I would appreciate if you would look at that. Obviously, the scheme is welcome. Road safety groups will be able to apply to it. It is very welcome.

I wanted to ask about a couple of other points. You mentioned capacity issues, MOTs and all those things. I was a wee bit concerned when I heard this, but you mentioned voluntary redundancies. Job losses are not a good way to go at any point. Ulsterbus Tours has been cut. Will we see a full analysis of the piece of work that Translink is doing now in order to make savings? Can you ensure that we see a full analysis of the efficiencies and how Translink goes about that process? I am worried about those jobs. There may be people who will take voluntary redundancy. We know that, during lockdown, there were capacity issues. Buses were running empty, and there were no tours whatsoever. I am using that as an example. I would appreciate if the Committee could see that element.

I appreciate what you said about Craigavon test centre. All those questions have been asked. You brought up dealing with the Economy and Finance Ministers. Obviously, the powers have been transferred over now for you to take the lead.

**Ms Mallon:** They have not been transferred.

**Mr Boylan:** They have not been transferred yet. When do you see them being transferred?

**Ms Mallon:** That is a matter for the First Minister and deputy First Minister to decide, because they confer the power. Very quickly, what we are doing is working with the Economy and Finance Ministers because part of the legislation requires that you provide an evidential basis for the exceptional intervention. That is what we asked our colleagues for.

**Mr Boylan:** Can you expand on the kind of evidence that you need?

**Mrs Godfrey:** There are three components to the legislation, if I remember correctly. The first is whether there are exceptional circumstances; the second is whether there is evidence that

intervention is needed; and the third is whether the First Minister and deputy First Minister then decide to make a determination that a scheme would be the best means by which to provide a solution to that need. Therefore, there are three points to consider before the First Minister and deputy First Minister would be able to decide to make a determination to identify a Department. That is the process that the Minister is outlining.

**Mr Boylan:** Minister, on the opposite end of that, many Committee members would endorse any support for taxi drivers, hauliers or bus or coach operators. That would certainly be welcome and I appreciate your answer. Has there been any discussion on guidance for private operators?

**Ms Mallon:** Yes. There is guidance on the Department for the Economy website that is relevant to private operators and taxi drivers. On guidance, when the regulations came forward from Executive Office at the very beginning of lockdown, I emailed the Executive Office that Saturday evening to inform it that I was concerned about those industries because they would have particular challenges, and I was assured that guidance would come forward from the Department for the Economy. That did come forward and it is on its website.

For some time, I have advocated for mandatory face coverings. I have always argued that there needed to be a wider societal response in that area, and you will recall that I sought support for making face coverings mandatory on public transport. The second proposal in that Executive paper was for the establishment of a cross-departmental working group that would specifically engage with the sectors and look to roll that out across those industries. As I understand it, the latest update is that the Executive Office is to bring an Executive paper on Thursday that will put into regulations a wider implementation of mandatory face covering. I understand that that will include those sectors. That is an important step forward, particularly given the circumstances that we are in

**Mr Boylan:** Thank you. I want to go back to the rural areas, because I know that there is some concern about the mandatory wearing of face coverings, with schoolchildren and others using the buses. How do we address that? There is a cross-tying of those services and some of them are full. Is there an opportunity to put on extra buses to facilitate that? Have there been any discussions on that?

**Ms Mallon:** If I remember correctly, Translink put on an additional 500 buses because of the mix of the public transport network and home-to-school transport, which falls within the Department of Education. My view was that a simple, uniform message was probably the best approach. I would have liked to see a move for mandatory face coverings for young people aged 13 and above on transport, whether public or school, and I engaged with the Minister of Education on that.

I also think that there is a body of work to be done on education, and I know that Translink has engaged with schools directly where we are seeing some young people from schools not wearing face coverings. There is also an educational piece, and I would appeal to parents. There are exemption categories, but when you are giving your young person their lunch in the morning, you should also hand them their face covering and make sure that they know that they need to wear it when they are travelling to and from school and when they are moving about in school, as is the case with some schools, to keep one another safe.

**Mr Boylan:** That is a concern for bus drivers. It is a concern for everybody, to be honest with you.

I have one final point. Mr Muir made the point about travelling and getting people to use public transport and all those things. You mentioned key point service provision earlier. I do not see it as an urban/rural divide, but it is an urban/rural challenge. I welcome park-and-ride schemes, but I do not know what work needs to be done on that. We will learn from COVID-19, and I hope that people will change their attitudes towards different things.

Has a scoping exercise been done on that? Any of us who travel down the motorway — on any motorway — into the city will know that rural people rely on car transport. If we are serious about tackling the issue of moving away from fossil fuels and using cleaner and greener transport, we have to consider that. There has been no greater opportunity over the past six months to try to change and address behaviours and attitudes. We might need to look at that separately, but, overall, in the context of travel, there is certainly that issue, and I still see it coming down the motorway. If we are to address that, we will need to look at it.

**Ms Mallon:** I have access to traffic volume figures and we are almost back to pre-COVID-19 levels. I did not expect that to happen so quickly, especially as we are still operating with people working from home if they can. That is a challenge; I totally agree.

I am a big advocate of the active travel agenda, but it lends itself better to cities and towns. There is a huge challenge for our rural communities. We need to recognise that, and that is why we need to invest in our public transport network. We need to make sure that we have routes that can connect our communities in rural areas to the opportunities that they need, but we also need to enhance the network. While I have made an announcement about park-and-ride schemes, for me this is the beginning. I was very clear to keep emphasising that this is the first phase of the park-and-ride schemes. These are schemes that either are at a point where land can be obtained or where we can do the detailed design work to get them to the planning application stage. I am keen to work with councils and others to see whether we can expand the park-and-ride network to make sure that it is servicing rural communities.

**Mr Boylan:** The Committee has asked about the Mid South West regional strategy, and we know some of the stats such as that region has 8% of the road network, with all of the rest of the road network being over in the east. I have asked for a response, and the Committee would like to see the overall strategy and plans from the Department on how it can address some of those issues.

**Ms Mallon:** I think that it is important, and I have said from day one of taking up this post that we need to tackle regional imbalance. It is the fair thing to do, but it is also really important for economic development and the growth of the economy; it also fits in very much with the climate action agenda. We are happy to get that to you, Cathal.

**Mr Boylan:** Thank you very much.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** Mrs Kelly, you did not indicate, but would you like to ask a question?

**Ms Mallon:** It is not like her not to. *[Laughter.]*

**Mrs D Kelly:** Yes, please. First, I welcome the decision on Craigavon test centre. That is very important and was a huge issue at local level, so it is good to see that moving on.

We have the PSNI coming to the Committee at a later stage about road safety. As you know, Chair, the PSNI has already given a presentation to the Policing Board, and there was discussion about legislative gaps that are in place in GB but not here in relation to the behaviour and responsibility of cyclists as road users. Has the Minister given any consideration to that in the development of the road safety plan? Also in relation to road safety, I am meeting later a local primary school that does not have any road-safety measures around it or even a patrol-crossing person. In looking at those particular needs and collaborating with the Department of Education, how are those specific areas, or gaps if you like, being addressed? The public will not want to see that it belongs to this Department or that Department; it will want a coordinated response to legitimate concerns.

My other point is on the response times from Roads Service as statutory consultees to planning applications. The Minister will be aware that I wrote to her recently about a strategic new build at St Ronan's school in the Lurgan area. If we are to meet the planning committee, the only outstanding statutory consultee now is Roads Service, and that has been the case for some considerable time.

**Ms Mallon:** Thank you, Dolores. I have been meeting the Chief Constable regularly about dangerous cycling and other gaps in provision, and my officials are working with his. I have signalled to the Committee the intention to introduce legislation on mobile phone use while driving, and we also are looking at the issue of dangerous cycling, given the welcome increase in the number of people who are out on bikes. I have been discussing that with the Chief Constable, and I am keen to try to address that.

Consultee response times are certainly an issue in my Department and further afield. The Department has established an interdepartmental forum that involves senior leaders, and it brings all the consultees around the table with a firm focus on improving consultation response times. It is something that I am very conscious of, and it is an area on which we need to see significant improvement.

**Mrs D Kelly:** That is very reassuring because, if we are looking at infrastructure as a key driver, those are easy wins if everything falls into place with planning applications.

Finally, on the commitment by the British Prime Minister on turbo-charged infrastructure and any Barnett consequential, have we any updates from the Finance Minister or, indeed, the Treasury, on any benefits that we might get here of additional funding for strategic infrastructure projects?

**Ms Mallon:** The short answer is no. As you say, there are very firm commitments on turbo-charging infrastructure in New Decade, New Approach. I also watch with interest as the Prime Minister talks about how fundamental infrastructure is and how we "build, build, build" our way out of this economic difficulty. I have a raft of strategic infrastructure projects that I am very eager to get started on. The ministerial advisory group has been set up so that we can take a strategic focus and long-term approach. I genuinely believe — I think that I said this at Question Time and would say it whether I was Minister for Infrastructure or not — that investment in infrastructure is a multiplier and a catalyst for economic growth, employment and social justice in terms of housing provision. If I can get the money, I can guarantee you that I will drive ahead with a very ambitious infrastructure project and agenda.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Thank you very much, Minister. Chair, I have to drop out for five minutes to address an urgent constituency matter, so apologies for the next five or 10 minutes.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** Ms Anderson, you indicated that you want to ask a very short question. I am mindful of time.

**Ms Anderson:** I apologise, Minister; I should have asked you this when I had my opportunity. I want to get back to the context of tackling regional inequalities, as I am Sinn Féin spokesperson for that. I know what you said about the delivery of low-carbon solutions, and given that transport is second only to agriculture for greenhouse gas emissions, I am thinking primarily of rail. There are 54 train stations in the North and only three of them are west of the Bann. I am keen to move forward, not just with Derry to Coleraine, but to look at the long-term strategy that is required for Derry to Dublin and Derry to Sligo. The audit report said that 59% of the budget is spent on roads. It has taken us long enough to get the A5 and the A6, and those will be appreciated — hopefully we will get the A5 up and running — but only 18% of the budget is spent on rail. We need a long-term vision for the north-west, particularly for connectivity from Derry to Dublin and Derry to Sligo, and you should at least start to set out the vision for how it should be taken forward.

**Ms Mallon:** I completely agree. I have allocated £50 million of funding for 21 new railway carriages and I am trying to do what I can there. I am also closely engaging with Into the West so that we can make progress on phase 3. You are right: we need to do more. Rail is an untapped opportunity, and there is a need for that spine of connectivity down the island. I was heartened to see that a number of these issues were discussed at the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC), including a high-speed rail connection. There is momentum building to maximise the route there, and I am keen to work alongside that.

**Ms Anderson:** Was the north-west mentioned in the conversation at the NSMC?

**Ms Mallon:** In the NSMC formal meeting, no. We just worked through things. It is quite scripted. I hope that I am not talking out of school, but it is quite scripted. Anyone who has been there will know that.

**Ms Anderson:** What about the sectoral meetings? When is the next sectoral meeting?

**Ms Mallon:** I have been engaging with Minister Ryan. I have not had a sectoral meeting yet. My sectoral meeting is not until October, but I have been in conversation a number of times with Minister Eamon Ryan because we share an ambition on public transport, having connectivity and regional balance but also taking climate action. I have ambition for rail, but we need to make sure that we get the funding to keep Translink alive to ensure that we carry out the services and ensure that people can get through the routes that currently exist while also drawing down the investment to make sure that we can do just as you outlined: have a more ambitious rail programme that connects that part of our country.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** Finally, before we move on to the next session, your ministerial advisory group on infrastructure is carrying out a focused piece of work at the moment and has, I am aware, spoken to a number of people. It will report back to you. At what stage will you be able to share the group's findings?

**Ms Mallon:** My hope is that it will present me with its recommendations towards the tail end of this month. I want to give that a very quick review, because a huge amount of work has gone into it. I would like to collate that into an Executive paper for Executive colleagues to consider, and I would obviously be very keen to share it with the Committee as well. This is an exciting opportunity, and there is a real appetite across all political parties to have a more strategic approach in this way. So, I will share it at the earliest opportunity.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** Although we may meet them individually, it would be useful to have that broader conversation as a Committee.

**Ms Mallon:** I agree, very much so.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** Thank you very much for your time. Are you staying on, Katrina?

**Mrs Godfrey:** I am going to swap chairs with Jackie, whose specialist subject is now the port loans Bill.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** OK. Thank you very much.

**Mrs Godfrey:** That probably means that you have to sanitise the table.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** Yes. We do. That will take a couple of minutes.

**Mrs Godfrey:** Thank you, Chair and members.