



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Departmental Priorities: Minister for
Communities

30 September 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Ms Paula Bradley (Chairperson)
Ms Kellie Armstrong (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Andy Allen
Mr Jonathan Buckley
Mr Mark Durkan
Ms Sinéad Ennis
Mr Fra McCann
Mr Robin Newton

Witnesses:

Ms Ní Chuilín	Minister for Communities
Dr Heloise Brown	Department for Communities
Mr Anthony Carleton	Department for Communities
Ms Joanna Gray	Department for Communities
Mr Martin McDermott	Department for Communities
Mr Paul McKillen	Department for Communities
Mr Gerard Murray	Department for Communities
Ms Roisin Sloan	Department for Communities
Ms Maeve Walls	Department for Communities

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): There is no briefing paper for this agenda item. However, in this week's correspondence, members have been provided with letters about the impact of COVID-19 on live music, arts and culture. At today's meeting, the Minister will deal with the following issues: social strategies; COVID-19 funding for the arts, culture and heritage sector; COVID-19 funding for councils; the Supporting People programme and its budget; and the Kickstart scheme. Minister, you are very welcome to the meeting.

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister for Communities): Paula, can you hear me?

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): I can hear you now, Minister. If you want to go ahead.

Ms Ní Chuilín: The sound is not great. I can hardly hear you.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): I do not know if you can hear me now, Minister, but I should also have mentioned that Hansard will cover this briefing session. If any of your departmental officials speak, they should identify themselves before they speak so that the Hansard reporters can identify who is saying what. If that is OK, Minister, you can go ahead if you can hear us.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Paula, that is grand. I can just about hear you. I am hoping that someone will come into my room and fix this for me.

At the start, I want to thank you for allowing me to come in front of the Committee. I have a whole, big speech here, which I am not going to use yet. I understand that members have a list of issues that they want to raise. My understanding is that we have just under an hour.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): Yes.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I want to make the best use of Committee members' time and would prefer to try to answer some of the questions.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): That is OK. Do you want us to kick off with some questions, Minister?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yes. Paula, could you all speak up, because I cannot —. I have hearing aids and everything, and I still cannot hear.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): Yes, that is OK. Go ahead.

Minister, I will start with a couple of questions to get things going. First, as you will know, representatives of the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) will brief the Committee tomorrow. It was great to hear about the £40 million that you managed to secure for local councils last week through the Executive. I was listening to either you or the Minister of Finance in the Chamber the other day — I cannot remember which debate it was — and future finance and bids for councils were mentioned. Those will be required, especially with the way that the furlough scheme has played out and the number of councils that have furloughed many of their staff and will need to get them back to work. I want to ask you about future funding for councils. Will there be further bids? What is your plan of action on that? To kick off, would you just like to talk about the councils?

Ms Ní Chuilín: OK. The £40 million covers the next two quarters. We have been in discussions with local government since the start of the pandemic. As I said to you before, we did a lot of due diligence. Councils were asking for certain figures, and my officials worked very closely with the chief executives to get down into what the councils actually needed and worked it out from there. We have done that ever since and have reached a good situation as regards working out costs.

I put in a bid for only two quarters because that was all that I was allowed to do. We anticipate that additional support will be needed, but I am thankful that the Executive supported a bid for local government. My officials are here. Anthony, who, along with others, has done the bulk of this work, might want to elaborate on that. Conor and I both said in the House that the bids were successful and that we will work to see what other support we can give in the future.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): That is positive news and good to hear, because I was a little bit concerned about the future. It will hopefully be a lesser amount, but something similar will probably be required for a little bit of time yet. So, thank you for that. I know that your Department has been working closely with councils and dialogue has been ongoing, which is brilliant and will really help.

I want to ask you about the funding announcement for the additional £29 million to Ulster — Ulster? That was a Freudian slip, wasn't it? — to culture, arts and heritage. Again, that is very welcome, and we are glad to see it. I am sure that you were also delighted that you could make that announcement. I asked you at Question Time in the Chamber, the other day, when this will be rolled out. Do we have an allocation process? Has the Department been working behind the scenes for the last couple of months to get that ready to roll out ASAP? Even this week, the Committee is getting more and more correspondence from the people whom you mentioned in the Chamber: the likes of independent musicians and freelancers who have availed themselves of nothing other than universal credit over the last six months. We hope to hear something positive on when that will be ready to go. Do you know yet what the criteria for the allocations will be? Any news on that would be welcome.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Papers are starting to come in this week. We are looking at finalising bids beside each section next week. As I said, I envisage substantial money being set aside for some of the annually funded groups, particularly those with venues that need to pay recurrent costs, such as public liability and insurance. Some of those groups, even though they have not been able to open their doors for

performances because of the health restrictions that the Executive have placed upon them, are still in receipt of substantial amounts of public money. We will look after those groups. We will also look after the freelancers that you and others have mentioned. We will try to work our way through those. We have to look after libraries, museums, cinema, sign language, Ulster Scots and Irish language. Some of the big heritage pieces need some money as well. However, rather than talking about "some money", we will look to see the exact specifics of what they are doing and what they need money for. We will, hopefully, then pass that on to the Arts Council and the other arm's-length bodies (ALBs) for them to start to disseminate that money and open up the allocation processes.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): OK. So, are we looking at sooner rather than later?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Tomorrow is 1 October. We should have this with the Arts Council, and it should be open so that groups can get it, by the end of October.

I will also just mention that the £5.5 million support is still being distributed. You will be aware that almost £2.5 million was set aside for small to medium-sized groups. Over £500,000 of that £2.5 million was for individuals. They have availed themselves of that. The Arts Council then opened up a second round, which has closed, to look after those two groups. That process will be concluded by the end of October. I wanted seamless links between one or two pots of money ending and the bigger pot opening, because we cannot have any gaps. Some of those small freelancers got access to universal credit, but not all of them, so it is quite scary for people.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): We have correspondence in our file today from people who have been affected. Some are the likes of musicians, and we know the decision that was made last week to prevent musicians in bars and restaurants from singing, which they had been doing for six or eight weeks before that decision came in. I know that that is an Executive decision, but we will be sending it on. I am just asking again whether you could just be mindful of those people, who could earn a living safely. They believe that they can do it safely, but because of some Executive decisions, they have been unable to do it. I know that it is an Executive decision and not yours, but we will be sending that on to you from the Committee today. I will open up the Floor to some members. I hope that they stick to the script.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you very much, Minister. The other day, Minister Murphy said very clearly that the money that was coming in from Westminster was going to be quite limited moving forward, and I am delighted to see that the councils are getting money for the two quarters. We have talked before about the potential for you to ask councils to do something for that money. Is there any criteria that you will be considering or giving to the councils for money to cover loss of income?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Apologies, Kellie, I do not know what was passing by in the city centre when you started to talk. I could not hear the start, but I heard most of what you said. Apologies for this, but I ask everyone to use their microphones because I can hear virtually nothing on this computer. What I think I picked up was that the money has been given to local government. I think that you asked whether we are putting conditions on that funding for them to do something in return. Is that correct?

Ms Armstrong: Yes, that is right.

Ms Ní Chuilín: The answer is yes. They need to try to ensure that the public-facing services that they completely wound back as a result of COVID are opened up as much as possible. For example, I am aware that some councils were not even operating their pest-control services. They need to take the same approach and use the same guidance that the Housing Executive and housing associations use when they approach homes for emergency repairs. I think that it is inexcusable that residents are left living with vermin, particularly rats, in their homes and the surrounding areas. That has been brought to my attention, and, as well as that, they need to make sure that the essential services that are so front facing, and on which our people completely rely, are there. Also they must maintain strong links with the community and voluntary sector, because those links were so important to us at the start of this pandemic, and they need to endure, I hope well, after it ends.

Ms Armstrong: The next thing that I was going to ask you about is your Supporting People programme. We have just heard from your officials about the October monitoring round. Some of the money that will have to go back to the central pot is from Supporting People. Is there any way that you could put a bid in to get that back? There are many vulnerable people who have been isolated for a long time, and it will take a lot of encouragement to get them back to where they were?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yes. To say that I was unhappy that that money was handed back was a complete understatement. It is inexcusable. I understand that the money is ring-fenced. I get all that, but there are long lists of people who have been waiting on additional support and who have not been able to access Supporting People. I do not want a situation where it is easier for the Housing Executive to hand it back to the Department. So, I assure you that I will review it. I have had meetings with groups today, and with some of the users of the Supporting People programme. I will be doing that very quickly.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you. I know that work is going on in the background on your social strategies, Minister. I encourage you to keep going with the work that is happening. I am particularly interested in the social supermarket that is mentioned again in your budget. It would be good to see the Strategic Investment Board report to see how social supermarkets are meeting needs. Thank you for your time.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): I have Robin Newton and Mark Durkan. If any other members want to ask a question, they should signal to me, please.

Mr Newton: Thank you for joining us, Minister. I see you have attached your earphones.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Robin, I can actually hear you. I felt like I was under water.

Mr Newton: You might regret that. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Ní Chuilín: I feel that I will, but I will just have to live with it. I will have to roll with the punches. Go for it.

Mr Newton: Chair, I welcome the Minister here. I welcome the fact that we are getting an oral briefing. I do not welcome the fact that we have no paper in front of us. However, I do understand the reason for that in this context.

Minister, you have an enormous Department, with a lot of very important things — a huge mix of things — going on. Before I come to my question, and I will speak for myself on this, I could better understand it if there was a strategic plan for the Department presented to the Committee, and coming out of that strategic plan, the complex theme areas that you have to deal with, such as sport, culture, environment and Supporting People, and what your priorities are within each of those areas. I would find that information useful in the future.

I want to press you on the allocation of the arts funding and the allocation to the various categories that you have already mentioned. The Chair mentioned those who sing in pubs and clubs. There are museums. Can you define the support for those categories? How will organisations and individuals qualify for support?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Thank you, Robin. I will answer your last point first. This week and next week, we will be looking at the real needs and asks from the Arts Council. The Arts Council has received an overwhelming amount of correspondence, as has the Department. The Arts Council has received lots of correspondence, and it knows the arts sector better than anyone. I intend to look at the papers that my officials are working on with the Arts Council and the other ALBs. I will look at the financial asks and section it under arts, culture and heritage headings. Then, the budgets will be broken down under each of the headings. It will be as simple as that, as I want to do this both quickly and well. We need to have due diligence and ensure that the money is going to the people in most need.

As soon as that process is completed and has been approved by my Executive colleagues, I will ensure that the Committee gets a paper. I will also make an oral or written statement to the Assembly. As you can imagine, every MLA has received substantial amounts of correspondence about this funding. I want to respect the Committee, and I will come to you first and meet the Chair.

On your first point, I want to assure you that the priorities in the Department are about dealing with the COVID pandemic. However, the social strategies have been announced under New Decade, New Approach (NDNA). We are looking at drafting a Bill for sign language. As part of the social strategies, we are also looking at the strategies for Irish language and Ulster-Scots culture and heritage. We are also looking at areas around the Housing Executive and a substantial housing reform programme that was in NDNA. With our colleagues in DOF, we are working out how to get rid of historical debt. No matter what way that happens, even if the Housing Executive were exempt from paying corporation

tax, that, in itself, is not enough. What we need it to do is to start building homes. In order for house building to commence with the Housing Executive, there are certain things that we need to do. I understand that you feel that the Department does not have strategic priorities, but I assure you that it does. If it would be helpful, I will put that in a paper and send it to you. You can then mark our progress and scrutinise our performance against a document. At this stage, if we can have that done within this mandate, we will be flying.

Mr Newton: I welcome that, and I am sure that you, Chair, would also welcome that. I was not going to raise this one with you, Minister, but you mentioned the Housing Executive. In the Chamber on Monday, you referred to the housing targets as being "miserable". If you have any thoughts on that, could you say a few words? Sorry, I am talking to the Minister through you, Chair.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): That is all right.

Mr Newton: Could you perhaps say a few words around what you would see as, or how you would enhance, those "miserable" targets? In your MLA role, you represent a constituency, in the same way as I do in East Belfast, that has a number of tower blocks that are potentially going to be demolished. Enhancing the "miserable" targets would give some confidence to those who are living on the 14th floor of the various tower blocks.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I repeat that the ability to meet the Executive's targets for new builds has been well below par for a long time. I think that there has only been one year in which we met the target of 2000 new builds. The housing waiting list and the list of people who are living in housing stress continue to increase. Within the last number of years, that has more than doubled.

You are right, the Housing Executive came out with the tower block strategy. I wonder where the families will go from those tower blocks in Paula and my constituency of North Belfast, if they are not building houses to put them in. What land will they acquire to build on? I do not see enough ambition, in my opinion, to address the housing waiting list. The Department, housing associations and the Housing Executive need to be advocates for those on the waiting list and, particularly, for those in housing stress. If you are living on the 14th floor of a tower block and you are isolated, particularly because of COVID, it is miserable. It is absolutely miserable. I have spoken to families living in the New Lodge — this will be the experience of us all, across the board — and when we were bringing the food parcels to them, they wanted a yarn rather than a loaf of bread. They have been stuck up there for years. The condition of some of the tower blocks is horrendous.

Robin, I want to give you and the other members of the Committee the assurance, and you will know from my time on the Committee, that I am passionate about housing for everyone. As an Executive and a society, we must recognise that the conditions that people are raising their families in are not good enough. The fact that families are calling hostels and hotels "home" is horrendous and that needs to stop. I will soon be bringing a paper to the Executive. Certain conditions are required, such as ending the Housing Executive's obligation to pay corporation tax and the removal of its historical debt, for it to be allowed to build, but it also needs to be fit. The reform piece needs to start, and I am aware, as we all are, that it will cost a substantial amount of money. However, we need to start somewhere, because, if we do not, we will be condemning families to a life of misery, which none of us wants on our watch no matter what political party holds this ministry. It is not good enough.

Mr Newton: Thank you, Minister.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): I would love to talk about the multistoreys in Rathcoole for the next hour, but hopefully we will have you back just to talk about housing. You know about the issue; I have sent you many questions about our beloved multistoreys in Rathcoole.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have answered them, Paula.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): I know. Hopefully, we will get you back to talk about housing so that we can have a more in-depth conversation on the subject.

I still have Mark, Andy, Sinéad and Jonny left to ask questions. Mark, are you there?

Mr Durkan: Thank you, Chair and Minister. I start by reiterating my "well done" on the arts funding. While we will not claim full credit for the decision, nor give you full credit for it, Minister, it demonstrates

how effective the Committee can be by working together. It shows that, although we are here to scrutinise, we are also here to support the Minister, because, in this case, we were all very much singing from the same hymn sheet on arts funding. We got there, or at least we got the hard bit done. That is not to say that the bit of work that is left will be easy: namely, getting that money allocated and designing a scheme that is fast, fair and equitable.

At Question Time the other day, Minister, you said that you had been looking at other industries. I am interested in that — you have raised this before — because there are people who are not classified as artists but are entirely dependent on the arts sector. You gave the example of sound engineers, and I had written to you about a company in that sector from my constituency. Will you elaborate on that? Do you envisage there being something in the £29 million of funding that is applicable to those people?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yes is the short answer, Mark. There needs to be. None of us is naive. We, as an Executive, for all the right reasons, have put in place fairly draconian measures because we are in a health crisis. However, all those people are part of an overall picture. You may be able to get support to the performers on the stage, but the people who get them to the stage are also important. Unlike Rishi Sunak, we are not saying, "The industry is not there; we'll just let them wither". The businesses that we are talking about were thriving, employed local people when there was not very much out there and would, if the conditions changed tomorrow, be thriving again. We need to protect them. The short answer is that I envisage those people being part of the rescue package for the arts.

Mr Durkan: That is brilliant news, Minister, because those people have not been able to avail themselves of the same support through rate relief as businesses in the hospitality and tourism sector. They are getting hit both ways.

There are lots of things that I want to ask about. I am mindful that departmental officials were here earlier to present on the October monitoring round and the new Budget, which is great, because, for too long, bids have not been scrutinised properly. The three-year Budget is fantastic as well, and it would be unfair of me to start asking you about the detail of that so I will not do so.

On the broader piece, perhaps I could ask a wee bit about mitigations, because I saw stuff in the Budget paper on them. The mitigations have been extended by regulation a few times, but do we have any indication of when the primary legislation on the new mitigations will be introduced? I ask that because I am concerned — I am sure that you share this concern — that, as we get closer to the end of the financial year, the more likely it is that we will run out of time and that the legislation will require accelerated passage — for example, it will not leave time for proper scrutiny and improvement by the Committee, the Assembly and stakeholders. Are you conscious of that and determined to avoid it?

Ms Ní Chuilín: One hundred per cent. We have had enough legislative consent motions (LCMs) and accelerated passages to last us a lifetime. We all appreciate that we are in a pandemic, but mitigations are a political issue, and we are not there yet.

Deirdre Hargey brought issues to the Executive. To be fair to the Executive, they have not had time to catch their breath. However, we will be looking at those issues. Mitigations are being considered under a Budget (No. 2) Bill. We need to have our own bespoke legislation, and, to use a cliché, we do not need a cliff edge.

What we fund and continue to fund will require political agreement, because it will require a substantial amount of public money. I am very much aware of that tension increasing.

Mr Durkan: I thought that you might be. On the mitigations, at Question Time the week before last, you indicated, in a response to my colleague Cara Hunter, that there should be additional mitigations for families affected by the benefit cap and the two-child tax credit rule, and you envisaged that being included in any future legislation. I very much welcome that, particularly as I got a sense from you that, while it was certainly desirable, you were concerned that it would not be possible. Will you confirm that it will be included in any upcoming legislation?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I cannot confirm that today. It is my hope, because the asks from the cliff-edge coalition are much broader than the three issues that I outlined then and that you outline today.

If you had the money, the priority and the political agreement on affordability, my hope would be that we could cover those three issues and try to work towards the rest. To be fair and frank, because that is what Committee meetings are for —

Mr Durkan: I appreciate that.

Ms Ní Chuilín: — we need to get into the space where we are having those discussions at the Executive. You are talking well over £100 million per annum for the two-child rule and benefit cap alone. There is the bedroom tax mitigation on top of that, so you can already start to see the noughts going up.

However, that is life, and it is my job to go and make that case. I provided clarity to people after that Question Time. It is my hope that that happens, but we are not there yet. I am not saying that we are stuck in a political vacuum on this; we are not. We have just not had the ability and space to get normal stuff back on the agenda. We have started to do that. To be totally honest, if I got the support and money to do that, between that or going for full passage through the Assembly, I hope that we do not have to go for accelerated passage. If we can get those covered, I could live with it, but I need to get political agreement and the budget, and I need it to be a piece of work that the Executive can endorse, otherwise it will not move. That is where we are at this stage.

Mr Durkan: I do not think that anyone could accuse you, Minister, of not being frank or fair, that is for sure.

I have submitted a question for written answer on the issue, so you might wait —

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): Mark, is this part of what the Minister is here to discuss today? Are you sticking to the script? No? That is OK.

Mr Durkan: I never got that memo, Chair.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): It is in your pack.

Mr Durkan: The earlier sessions threw up so many other questions, and I do not want to miss this opportunity. I have submitted a question for written answer, Minister, and you may want to wait for that to answer me. It is about what we are going to see in job losses — everyone is agreed on that — and the financial difficulty into which so many people are going to plummet. Obviously, you are largely concerned with the social housing sector, but many people will find mortgages unaffordable and be at risk of losing their homes as a result of not being able to pay mortgages. Are you considering a mortgage rescue or support package? We had them previously, going back 10 years or more. The housing sector is becoming increasingly anxious about that, because people will end up homeless as a result of not being able to afford their mortgage. That will put more stress on social housing, which, it appears, is already beyond manageable.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will look at a lot of issues in that regard. It came up during Question Time on Monday, and people have raised it before. My officials are working away in the background, but it will need Executive agreement, because it requires substantial amounts of money; you could not do it on your own.

Mr Durkan: I recognise that.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yes, because it was removed. If people who access benefits go into the private rented sector, we all know that, in the long term, that will cost money, never mind the untold misery that they and their families will endure. I understand why you are raising the issue.

Mr Durkan: You talk about people having to go into the private rented sector. That will have a major impact on people who are already in the private rented sector if their landlord cannot pay the mortgage or has other financial difficulties as a result of COVID and the consequent recession.

Thank you, Minister, and thanks for the latitude, Chair.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): Several members have yet to talk, and we have only 20 minutes left.

On Mark's last point, have the Executive or the Finance Minister had conversations about Westminster bringing in something specifically to do with mortgages? As we know, benefits stopped paying even the interest on a mortgage a long time ago. If Westminster came to a decision on that, it would save us an awful lot of money in the long term.

Ms Ní Chuilín: If Westminster came to a decision on that, we would expect a Barnett consequential from it.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): Yes. That would be a much better outcome, if any.

Mr Allen: Given that other members have still to come in and we have only 20 minutes, I will try to be brief. Like my colleagues, I very much welcome the £29 million for the arts sector. Minister, you indicated in the Chamber during Question Time — a lot of this was covered in Question Time — that you will attempt to ensure that you cover the wide range of the arts sector. That is very welcome, because, quite often, as you indicated, the funding streams do not go to people across the wider sector. How do you intend to try to reach hard-to-reach individuals and groups who may not be linked to arm's-length bodies?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Basically, the small and medium grant that is out there in the first tranche — we are now looking at the second tranche — was to help groups that normally were not recipients of annual arts funding from the Arts Council. The arts is an evolving thing. We hear about the ecology of the arts and all the rest of it, but let us be honest: there are groups out there doing an excellent job that do not get one red cent from the Arts Council or anybody else. They need our support. It is not just about topping up what some of the groups on the Arts Council's funding list get; it is about opening up a whole process. I hope that large, medium and small groups benefit and that there will be a pot, and a different opportunity, for poets, freelancers, actors, comedians or whomever. It is really important that people feel that, if they apply for that money — that opportunity — they will get support. I know that it will be spread very thinly, but, if you spent it only on the people who shout the loudest, there would not be a penny for anybody in your constituency or in anybody else's.

Mr Allen: Absolutely. Thanks, Minister. I agree: we need to cover as many people and groups as possible, right across the wider sector.

I very much welcome the point about councils. I know that, in wider Belfast, there is a particular issue with pest control. You are a North Belfast MLA. I represent East Belfast, and my office has had several enquiries in that regard. The pest control measure is very welcome.

I will make two final points, Minister. I want to ask about the Housing Executive. I know that it is not on the list, but I hope that you will forgive me, Chair, and Robin brought up the issue. During the briefing with officials last week, it was indicated that, as a result of COVID and its impact, some 1,000 new builds did not come online in the previous financial year. Knowing your stance on it, Minister, I could probably answer the question myself, but will you give a firm guarantee that those 1,000 new builds will come online in the current year and that that will not impact our ability to meet the current target and, indeed, go well beyond it?

Ms Ní Chuilín: You have answered your question. I will try to make sure, as best as I possibly can, that those targets are met. That is particularly so when procurement exercises have already been carried out, and I want to make sure that those tenders are still bona fide and good to go and that there are no issues outside of the normal things on planning, infrastructure support or whatever else. Yes, we are in a pandemic, but the building sites are open, people can buy land and the ports are open. To be frank, we just need to horse on with it.

Mr Allen: Absolutely. In the last three financial years, 156 homes were built in my constituency, and 130 are under construction. We want those homes to be built. There are almost 2,000 individuals on the housing waiting list in East Belfast, so we could do with those houses being built.

My final question will not come as any surprise to you, but could you give us an update on the Kickstart scheme and whether we are still on target for that to come online in November? Could you also confirm what sort of budget we are looking at?

Ms Ní Chuilín: We are going to call it the Job Start scheme, because, as I have said loads of times, the Kickstart scheme in England is not good enough for any kids here. The budget is £14 million-plus,

and we will need to put in additional support. Come what may, it will start in November, and I have looked at versions of the papers.

To be fair to my officials, they are flat to the mat on it and are talking, along with other stakeholders in the community, to people like the Children's Commissioner, employers and those involved in youth development programmes, and the community and voluntary sector. It is easier to say that the last programme did not work and why it did not work. They are getting all that good practice and writing a bespoke scheme as we speak. I have seen the shape of it. I have seen the first and second drafts, and it is looking good. I will be hugely disappointed if that programme does not start in November.

Mr Allen: I want to ask one final supplementary question on something that you pointed out, Minister. You mentioned additional supports in our programme, because you do not feel that the Kickstart scheme is good enough. Can you elaborate on that and on the additional supports?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will tell you what it is: I want to ensure that people with disabilities, including those with autism and mobility issues, are included in the programme. I also want to ensure that there is a recognition that those with mental health problems who want to work will not be sanctioned because they have missed appointments. I want them to have support from the start of their journey right through to the end. More importantly, I want to make sure that employers do not see it as an opportunity to exploit any youngsters. That will not happen either. I am looking at the legal guarantees so that everybody is crystal clear about what they will be asked and expected to do and what they are responsible for.

Mr Allen: Thanks, Minister. I could go on all day, but I will leave it there.

Ms Ní Chuilín: No bother.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): Well done, Andy. You got plenty in there because you were right to the point.

Ms Ennis: Thanks, Minister. Andy covered the point that I wanted to raise about the arts and how you would guarantee that the funding gets to the people who need it. I want to add my congratulations to you for the tenacious way in which you went after that money. I know that it was based on objective need and ensuring that money does not go down the black hole of those big institutions in which it is very hard to see its impact. We need to make sure that grassroots artists, from whatever sector of the arts and cultural sphere, are the ones who get that funding. It is about people's livelihoods, their families and keeping a roof over their heads. That is where we need to direct that funding.

I will pull a Mark Durkan now by being cheeky and straying from the list slightly. Again, Minister, I do not expect you to have the answers today — I know that I am being a little bit cheeky — but we had a conversation about sport and the funding for our organisations, and we know that a major issue with big sports is coming down the tracks at us. At a future briefing or at some point in the short to medium term, maybe we could have a discussion about what conversations you are having with the governing bodies, because for as long as COVID goes on and the restriction on spectators continues, there will be a huge impact on gate receipts and funding. We need to come at this in the same way as we come at the arts and cultural stuff, because it is just as important. I do not expect you to get into it now, but we need to have that on the horizon.

Ms Ní Chuilín: That is fair enough. To be honest, in our constituencies, there are loads of Liam Neesons, and I have loads of people coming up and telling me that I better do a, b, c or d. The sports bodies and the clubs right across the three big organisations — rugby, soccer and GAA — have been hit particularly hard by the loss of gate receipts and everything else. They have been really responsible: they have worked very well with our officials and with Sport NI, and they have met the Chief Scientific Adviser and the Chief Medical Officer. They are doing everything, and then some. However, some big issues are coming down the tracks, and we are very much aware of that. I will ask officials to come back in a few weeks to present to the Committee on what the issues are and, more importantly, on how, as an Executive, we can try to bring in some supports for them.

Ms Ennis: I have a wee follow-up to that. It is not just a case of laying the blame or the responsibility at the Department's door, because some organisations have received substantial sums of money recently from the likes of UEFA. It is about what conversations we are having with the governing bodies to ensure that they are doing their bit to keep clubs afloat.

Ms Ní Chuilín: On that basis, I assume that the Committee will get representatives from the governing bodies in to give evidence. That is a given. Over the next few weeks, officials from my Department will be more than happy to talk to you about the discussions that they have had and the projections that they are making.

Mr Buckley: Apologies, Minister. I missed the introduction and your briefing. I was out of the room.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I did not give a briefing, Johnny. I went straight into questions.

Mr Buckley: OK. That is appreciated.

First, I know that you are coming back to give a briefing on the topic of sport, so I will not go into the detail of that. I highlighted to your Department officials earlier my serious concern for the future of some of our sporting organisations, given the length of time that it will take to come out of COVID and get back to some sort of normality. They are on the cliff edge of the financial abyss. That is not even a threat; it is there to be seen. The majority of their income is via ticket sales, which will simply not be there, and some of our sporting clubs will go out of business and may never return. That is to the detriment of everybody, and it goes right across a plethora of different sporting organisations. I know that it is on your radar, and I just wanted to make the point to your officials this morning that we would love to see a financial package that reflects that need.

In response to Andy, you mentioned the Job Start scheme. I welcome what you said about that, its potential and the initiative to try to implement it as soon as possible. Given what you said, I would appreciate the Committee having foresight of the detail that is being worked up, because it is important for us, as a Committee, to scrutinise and look into that in more detail, given the funding and the significance of what it entails.

Finally, we all welcome the money for the arts. It is essential. It is fair to say that everyone knows that the arts is a collective expression in which our wee country punches well above its weight right across the world. There is such a plethora of art, and, as Andy said, there are questions about how you reach everybody in that sector, from performers, freelancers and writers right through to concert and marching bands, which have such an important role to play and face a detrimental impact from COVID. I was interested in what you said about due diligence. That is important, albeit that we have to caveat it with the need for speed. Have you looked into the potential of a staged funding process whereby we can get money out the door as quickly as possible to organisations that we have identified as needing it? Given the significance of the funding and the fact that is a significant amount, does the Department have the capacity to deal with that huge financial allocation and ensure that there is a breakdown right across the board to ensure that we reach all those who are in need at this time? I know that you will probably be able to bring further detail on that to us. I would be happy, through the Chair, to submit questions — I think that everyone has questions surrounding this — that you could take away and come back to the Committee on, as opposed to answering those now. I will leave it there. There is so much about the arts package that needs to be teased out. Many people are waiting for and are in desperate need of financial assistance.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Jonathan and the rest of the Committee members, let me give you this assurance: I know that there is a massive expectation. When it comes to marching bands, musical instruments for bands or whatever, the Ulster-Scots Agency, as an example, has been giving out grants for a long time. It is bona fide. It is an ALB that is part of a North/South arrangement, so not all of the money is going through the Arts Council. My plan is to bring the money through our ALBs, and through groups that we work with and which have a tried-and-tested record in delivery, to ensure that the money is not only out there in a good way but, through their due diligence and follow-up, is used in a way that reflects the needs of the community. I am looking at such things.

As soon as we get Executive clearance, my officials will go to the next level on Job Start. I will go to the Executive, and I will come to the Committee. The officials will deliver the shape of the programme, and then it will be launched. That is the way that it will happen.

Let me give you all an assurance. I looked at the Kickstart programme, and given all the criticisms of previous programmes such as Steps 2 Success, Training for Success and whatever, I do not want that for kids here. I know that the Barnett formula money that I got was to be used to do what is being done in England, so I will need additional money, and I have already started looking for that. That will be built into the programme to ensure that one-to-one support is there. It is not an impossible task, but I want to get it right — I really do — because we have had enough failure, going back years, for

children, adolescents and young people, particularly in employment. I also want to ensure that employers see it as an opportunity. It will not replace apprenticeships, because the kids who will be on the programme are not motivated to go for apprenticeships. We need to go right back to the place where they felt excluded from everything and walk them forward. That will cost money. That is not in Kickstart, but it will be in our Job Start programme. I want to give you that assurance.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): OK. Thanks, Minister.

Mr McCann: I have only about 16 questions for you. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Ní Chuilín: Paula, please, do not let him. You are too soft on him.

Mr McCann: On Job Start, it is brilliant to see a refreshing change from what has gone before in developing something new that can work in communities. Some of the questions that I was going to ask on housing have already been asked. I know that you hold in high esteem those who support people who are in poverty. On the social strategies, what role can neighbourhood renewal play in dealing with poverty in communities?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I would like neighbourhood renewal to be aligned with the anti-poverty strategy. As we all know, neighbourhood renewal and the funding for areas at risk go back a long time, and it has not really changed. The work that community workers do on the ground is, to be honest, second to none. A lot of those groups have not had pay rises in ages. They do sterling work. We saw that particularly at the start of the COVID pandemic. I want to put on record my appreciation for all those people.

I would like to see that work aligned to the anti-poverty strategy. I would also like to see their jobs aligned to the anti-poverty strategy so that they are seen as the practitioners who deliver the services, rather than some seeing them as a nuisance. That is not any of us here, by the way. We all have a genuine respect for the work that is done in our constituencies by those people and by people who do not receive funds. That is where I would like to see it, Fra.

I think, as did Deirdre Hargey, that community wealth-building should be aligned to the anti-poverty strategy. I also see it as part of regeneration. That needs to be in urban areas and right across rural communities. An example of the direction of travel that we would like to go in is that Edwin Poots and I are putting money into the revitalisation fund for councils. We said, "You are responsible for £5,000 and under. I am responsible for £5,000 and over. What can we do to make sure that whatever funding we put in reflects the needs on the ground and helps people in the here and now, regardless of what policy heading it is under?". The anti-poverty and social strategies are great opportunities to do this differently.

Mr McCann: My last point relates to the housing selection scheme. You raised it twice during Question Time. Just this week, I have been approached by a number of people who are interested in applying to move into new estates that are being built, but they have been told by housing associations that they have little chance because of the increasing number of intimidation cases. I know that you have been looking at this.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Let me tell you this, Fra and the rest of the Committee members: we all remember the debates on intimidation points. They were among the very few debates on which every Assembly Member was united. Every one got up and said, "People are taking the hand". There are genuine intimidation cases, and we need to find a better way of verifying those. Reference was made in those debates to the fact that it was called the "buy a bullet" scheme. It was as crass as that. People were getting intimidation points when they had not been genuinely intimidated, and they were jumping the queue ahead of families who were lying on sofas or living in hostels. Those people had no sense of any opportunity of getting a house that reflected and was appropriate to their needs.

As part of the whole revitalisation programme, but also housing reform, I am looking at the consultation that is under way on a new allocation of points. One of its recommendations is to remove intimidation points. I have been consistent in saying that I am not for removing the points but that what I am for doing is having stronger verification processes for applications in respect of a claim or allegation of intimidation. If, for example, women or men are leaving their homes as a result of domestic violence, or refugees or asylum seekers are being put out of an area and their house has been paint bombed or petrol bombed, it is quite obvious that they did not do it themselves. If there are mobs outside on the street and around their doors, it is quite obvious that they did do anything

themselves. I would like to see stronger verification of allegations of, and applications in respect of, intimidation. That needs to be built into the process.

While that is important and needs to be done, and I am looking at it, I also know from that consultation that it is tinkering around the edges. Unless we get into a position where we are really looking at increasing the supply of social housing to reduce the demand, we are merely tinkering around the edges. I do not think that that is good enough for any of us.

Mr McCann: Thank you.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): OK. Thank you. Everybody has asked their questions.

Minister, I know that you have only one or two minutes left. I just want to make a couple of comments. Job Start is excellent, and I look forward to it being rolled out. It is another good example of your Department's work and how it all interlinks. I spent an hour last night on the pitch at Rathcoole Boys Football Club with two of its younger teams. We know the difference that sport makes in a community, the difference that the arts make in a community and the difference that opportunity makes in our communities, and, as you know, North Belfast is a perfect example of that.

I have said many times that social clauses are not strong enough. On the subject of new builds, maybe you could bring us information on how social clauses can benefit people who are from the community and attend local further education colleges and things like that. We have social clauses, but housing associations and builders have always said that they are not strong enough. They have never been good enough. Maybe you could look at how better to weave in social clauses.

Finally, an arts task force has been mentioned. Certainly, people in the arts had asked for one. Has there been any more consideration of that? Also, just to let you know, the Committee has decided to do a research piece on the arts, given that it will take one, two or three years. It is a problem that will not be solved quickly.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I give you an assurance that, as you know, officials are there to provide answers to anything that was not covered today. To be fair to them, they are willing to answer your questions, and I expect a list to arrive after today's Committee.

I think that we need a strategy for culture, arts and heritage in the same way as we have the Sport Matters strategy, which belongs to the Executive and for which the Department for Communities has been funded. When I was in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, there was a consultation and a lot of agreement, but there were also things that were not done, and it fell when the Executive collapsed. We need to get back to that. As part of NDNA, I am using co-production and co-design as an opportunity to try to bring something forward. I am not pushing against a task force for the arts, but I want to ensure that the grassroots are reflected in that as well. I admire how the arts and culture sector lobbied for that money. To be frank, I encouraged it, so I have no issue with it whatsoever. However, I have an issue with this: how many people in Rathcoole could get Liam Neeson to talk about funding for their area?

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): I know.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Fair play to him: he did it, and he did it for everybody in the arts. However, there is the suspicion that the big will get, and the small will not. Unless we get an Executive strategy for arts and culture that is funded, and which is seen as an economic, social and cultural driver, particularly as part of our recovery, we will be in a situation where we have bits and pieces of money. The Arts Council's budget reduces every year, while the demand gets greater. The arts sector is reinventing itself, but it is not supported, and that will take money. It will also take people to be honest and open, and it will take courage on our part to have it realised. I am up for doing that.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): Thank you, Minister. I appreciate your time. We will have you back in the not-too-distant future. I am sure that, in a few weeks' time, we will have another list of issues that we need to discuss.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Thank you, guys. Take care. Bye.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): Bye-bye.