



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for The Executive Office

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Briefing by Mrs Arlene Foster MLA, First
Minister; and Mrs Michelle O'Neill MLA,
deputy First Minister

7 October 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Colin McGrath (Chairperson)
Mr Doug Beattie (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Martina Anderson
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr George Robinson
Mr Pat Sheehan
Ms Emma Sheerin
Mr Christopher Stalford

Witnesses:

Mrs O'Neill	deputy First Minister
Mrs Foster	First Minister

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beattie): First Minister and deputy First Minister, thank you very much for coming along. I know how busy you are. These sessions are extremely important to the Committee, and I know that you see them as extremely important as well in being able to discharge your duties, so thank you for attending. The session is being recorded by Hansard, and the transcript will be published on the Committee's website. We will sit back. We are happy enough for you to brief the Committee.

Mrs O'Neill (The deputy First Minister): Thank you.

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): Thank you very much, Deputy Chair, and thanks to the Committee for inviting us. First and foremost, I apologise for the lack of briefing papers for today's session. The Committee will be aware that we have had significant challenges over the last week in relation to the changing situation with COVID, and it has required significant focus — not just ours but across the whole Executive, of course. I want to reassure the Committee that we are committed to our ongoing engagement, as you said in your opening remarks, Chair, and we will do all that we can to ensure that papers are issued in accordance with the guidelines in future.

We are going to give an overview of the work going on in the Department, and I want to begin with the process of appointing a new head of the Civil Service (HOCS), which has been at the top of our agenda. Of course, the role of HOCS is a critical role of significant responsibility, including leading almost 23,000 civil servants to serve the institutions of government and, indeed, all our citizens

through the provision of public services. The importance of the role cannot be overestimated at this critical time as we continue to manage our response to and recovery from the coronavirus pandemic, the preparations for EU exit, and the delivery on our commitments set out in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document. As an Executive, we are addressing significant health, societal and economic issues, and we are working to be in the best possible place to rebuild our economy, rejuvenate our society and transform our public services.

Members will be aware that the deputy First Minister and I made a statement to the Assembly on 26 September to confirm that planning for a recruitment competition to appoint a successor to David Sterling began shortly after he announced his retirement in December last year. The recruitment process, like the 2016 HOCS competition, was via open recruitment. The vacancy was advertised locally, nationally and internationally with the aim of trying to attract as wide and diverse a pool of applicants as we could find.

Stage 1 took place on 26 August and was chaired by the chair of the Northern Ireland Civil Service Commissioners with two independent panel members, one from the Northern Ireland private sector and one from the Scottish Government. Those who were successful at first-stage interviews then attended an interview with the deputy First Minister and me on 23 September. Regrettably, a joint selection decision was not reached, and therefore an appointment was not made at that time. As per our statement to the House on 26 September, we are now urgently working to put in place appropriate interim arrangements and, in parallel, considering how best to fill this crucial role on a substantive basis.

I will move on to the Programme for Government, which I know the Committee will be very interested in. The Executive discussed their approach to COVID-19 and the Programme for Government in July and agreed a two-stage approach. First, an activity-based recovery programme is to be developed as the basis for driving economic, health and societal recovery, and that will continue for the remainder of this year and up to the end of the financial year next year. Secondly, a new outcomes-based strategic Programme for Government is to be developed for commencement from April 2021, and good work has already been undertaken by officials on that, including the establishment of formal project arrangements by the Northern Ireland Civil Service board and an analysis of what is currently known about people's perceptions of the existing 12 outcomes, taking on board lessons learned by those most closely involved in taking forward the draft Programme for Government that was developed back in 2016.

I am going to cover the immediate plans for recovery, and the deputy First Minister will then cover the longer-term aspects of the Programme for Government. The Executive's pathway to recovery, and the relaxation during the early summer of many of the restrictions that had been put in place through the coronavirus regulations, represented the first phase in the recovery process. However, recovery from COVID-19 goes much further than that. As we have seen over recent weeks, infection rates have increased. COVID-19 still remains in our community, so the economic, health and societal challenges facing us are significant. Our approach to recovery must therefore remain flexible and adaptable in the circumstances. Unfortunately, an example of that has been the need to introduce restrictions on hospitality closing times, and also in domestic settings, to address the concerning levels of transmission across the community. Unfortunately, Chair, the figures that have just been released today continue to concern us greatly, and we have to take all of that into consideration. We need to take steps now, as part of our recovery, to protect vulnerable and viable sectors and essential services and to avoid structural failures and job losses while medium- to long-term solutions are developed. It means promoting sectors and talent that have the potential for growth, so that they can develop over the medium to long term and play their role in economic and societal well-being. It also means taking proactive steps with communities to protect the vulnerable, especially in autumn and winter. We recently agreed a recovery framework which is aimed at progressing a cohesive approach across the whole of government. We are talking about economic, health and societal recovery, which has the citizen at the centre of everything we do, because we are clear that recovery is not about getting us back to where we were before. Rather, it is about providing the foundation for renewal. That is what we are aiming for in our Programme for Government.

Finally, I want to talk about EU exit and future relations. In recent weeks, there has been important engagement with the UK Government and the EU through the Joint Ministerial Committee European negotiations. The deputy First Minister and I, along with junior Minister Lyons and junior Minister Kearney, attended the most recent meeting, which was on 3 September. We took the opportunity to highlight our concerns about the limited time available for an agreement on the future relationship to be concluded, ratified and implemented, and about the need for political intervention to reach agreement. We emphasised the need to take into account the interactions between the negotiations

on the future relationship and the protocol, particularly in some key areas such as sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) checks. We also emphasised the need for appropriate ministerial engagement on operational readiness and set out our concerns about the large volume of EU exit legislation that is required for the end of the transition period, including the continuing lack of clarity on the implementation of the protocol.

Progress has been made on common frameworks. We have endorsed the outline frameworks on nutrition, health claims, composition, labelling, hazardous substances and planning. However, we note that many of the frameworks brought forward would be impacted by the protocol, and we have emphasised that our endorsement must be viewed from that perspective. On the UK internal market, we have reiterated the need for forthcoming legislation to include the commitment to unfettered access. As you know, Departments continue to undertake operational readiness planning, which includes the option of a non-negotiated outcome which we hope will not arise. The work builds on Operation Yellowhammer planning work that was completed in the lead-up to a potential no-deal exit in 2019.

Given the ever-shortening timescale until the end of the transition period, it is important that we prepare on a collaborative basis with the UK government. Officials continue to engage with counterparts in the UK government, and Ministers are involved in quadrilateral meetings with the Paymaster General and other devolved Administrations which look to operational readiness. We also need to build on our liaison with the Irish Government, of course, on preparedness for the North/South dimension. Operational readiness planning is being taken forward in parallel with the COVID-19 response and recovery to ensure that they are considered together. The Northern Ireland hub remains capable of being stood up should it be required, although it has not been stood up to date. We are keeping a close eye on that issue.

Undoubtedly, the top cross-cutting priority for us remains clarity on the implementation of the protocol and the impact on our businesses and citizens. The junior Ministers were updated on the implementation of the protocol at the Joint Ministerial Committee meeting on 28 September. Our key objective remains securing unfettered access for Northern Ireland goods to the GB market, as well as the minimum possible friction on the east-to-west movement of goods. The commitment to the legislative underpinning of that unfettered access was of course set out in New Decade, New Approach and is vitally important for our businesses and citizens. Access to the GB market is of vital importance. We are pressing UK government to ensure that the unfettered access commitment in the Command Paper is delivered. We need that to support current trade and the future strength of the economy. The Northern Ireland business guidance published in August was an important step forward, but, as recognised in the guidance, a number of issues still need to be clarified. We continue to liaise with our colleagues in the UK Government, and we will keep the Committee updated in relation to any progress there.

I pass on to the deputy First Minister.

Mrs O'Neill: I also want to thank the Committee for having us here today. I am going to pick up on a few issues, not least the announcement which we were able to make yesterday. We were delighted to be able to announce the appointment of Fiona Ryan as the Commissioner for Survivors of Institutional Childhood Abuse. That was a very significant day for victims and survivors and their families. Many Members took the opportunity to ask questions yesterday. The redress board has been established and the statutory Commissioner has been appointed, but significant work lies ahead, including the memorial, the apology and the establishment of support services to ensure that those structures are in place. We look forward to working with Fiona, as I am sure the Committee does. She is an advocate for the interests of victims and survivors. It is an important and sensitive role. We hope that the relationship between Fiona and the various victims' and survivors' groups flourishes. We have every confidence that she will use her experience and ability for the benefit of those she represents in her new role.

On the issue of historical institutional abuse, the Committee is aware that the redress board opened for applications on 31 March. Seven weeks later, the first compensation payments were made. That was all done within the timescale set out by the president. It is something that we very much welcome. As of the end of September, 570 applications had been received, and the panel had made determinations totalling £4.1 million and paid out a total of £2.17 million. The Hart report recommended that the Executive, and those responsible for each of the institutions investigated by the inquiry where it found systemic failings, should make a public apology as a wholehearted and unconditional recognition of the failures of the past. The interim advocate continues to work with victims' and survivors' groups in the coming weeks to advise on the language that they would like to

see in an apology. The interim advocate's report is expected on 16 October and, alongside that, TEO officials have also had positive and helpful engagements with Survivors and Victims of Institutional Abuse (SAVIA) on these issues.

On rights and dedicated mechanism in terms of our preparations for Brexit, the protocol reflects the commitment made by the British Government to uphold the Good Friday Agreement and, in particular, that withdrawal from the EU will not lead to any diminution of rights, safeguards and equality of opportunity, as set out in the Good Friday Agreement. That commitment is to be implemented by a dedicated mechanism, that is, providing new oversight powers to the Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) and the Equality Commission (ECNI) with adequate resources. The withdrawal agreement gives legal effect to the protocol commitment by amending the NI Act 1998 to provide ECNI and NIHRC with new oversight powers. It is intended that the dedicated mechanism will come into effect at the end of the implementation period. In the light of the resources committed by the Northern Ireland Office to cover staffing and other associated costs of the dedicated mechanism, the Equality Commission has formally agreed to act as part of the dedicated mechanism. The Equality Commission is in the process of putting its team in place, and has recently appointed a director for the new unit following a public competition. Other appointments are in progress. The Committee was recently briefed by the Equality Commission on that work.

On the Internal Market Bill, the British Government have sent a letter to Minister Dodds ahead of the Bill's introduction, providing an overview of the Bill and an analysis of its impact on devolution. The provisions of the Bill which the British Government have identified as needing our consent include, among many other things, the market access commitment, subsidy control and financial assistance. These areas of consent cut across responsibilities in more than one Department, and now they have to be considered by the Executive. Together with Executive colleagues, we are considering this devolution analysis, and we will bring the results to the Assembly, Executive and this Committee in due course.

I will now follow on from the First Minister's comments on the Programme for Government and speak a little about the longer-term development of the PFG. Ministers, individually and collectively, are fully committed to the development of the outcomes-based Programme for Government as the key to thinking and working beyond organisational boundaries and as a basis for tackling entrenched and often complex social problems in improving quality-of-life conditions for all. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated clearly the interconnectedness of economic and social policy. It has also sent a stark reminder to us all of the need for a whole-of-government approach when it comes to public service planning and delivery. Developing an all-new PFG is a significant commitment which will require direct engagement and support from individual Ministers, the Executive as a whole, permanent secretaries and lead policy officials. We are also committed to working closely with stakeholders in other sectors. It is important that the PFG is co-designed with those who are impacted by it. We will, of course, be happy to discuss PFG development proposals with the Committee and provide regular updates as the work progresses. Senior TEO officials will also be available to provide detailed briefings as the Committee might find helpful.

I will now speak about the COVID approach. Although, as we know, COVID is, primarily, a health pandemic, it is causing significant societal and economic impacts. The Committee will know that the Executive's response, therefore, aims to continually try to deliver a balanced package of measures across those areas and target support where it is needed most. Our approach continues to be flexible in responding to the emerging situation. Members who have been in the room will probably not have seen today's figures yet, but they are seriously worrying in terms of the exponential rise in positive cases, and, alongside that, the number of people who have been admitted to hospital. We have continued to try to respond to this emerging situation. Most recently, that has included the introduction of restrictions in domestic settings and on hospitality closing times. We are continuing to keep that situation under close review, and we are prepared to respond as necessary to flatten the rate of infection and, ultimately, save lives.

From a scientific perspective, it seems unlikely that the current restrictions will be sufficient to bring R back to less than 1 and for us to be able to maintain that. Single interventions are unlikely to be sufficient; a package of interventions will always be required to prevent an exponential rise in the virus. As an Executive, we are currently considering further measures to bring down COVID-19 transmission by non-pharmaceutical intervention, which is by means other than medicines, including eventual vaccines. However, to be clear, at this stage we are not in lockdown. Hospitality and other businesses continue to be subject to strict guidance and regulation and appropriate enforcement, where necessary. Indeed, the junior Ministers chair a multi-agency group to address the wider issue of

enforcement across a range of settings. However, as we all know, it is not just about enforcement; it is about us all working in partnership and everyone playing their part in helping to tackle the virus.

We have tried to be, and we remain, dynamic and flexible in responding to the situation. All the measures that we take are necessary and proportionate as required, and they are always guided by the latest scientific and medical advice. Our approach has always been subject to continual review in response to the changing nature of the pandemic, from where we were at the introduction of the restrictions and regulations and lockdown in March to the carefully managed relaxation of restrictions in line with our pathway to recovery, and then, more recently, the reintroduction of restrictions on hospitality closing times and in domestic settings. We continue to work our way through this, but we are concerned about the current situation. The Executive will discuss it in a more detailed way over the course of today and at our Executive meeting tomorrow. We will continue to try to raise awareness as we work through the winter months. We have looked very carefully at our Executive information service and how we deliver messages and target young people in particular. We have developed a primarily digital campaign that is aimed at young people aged 16 to 25 to try to reinforce the public health message to that audience.

That was a whistle-stop skirt through quite a number of issues. I am happy to any questions from members.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beattie): Thank you, deputy First Minister and First Minister, for that briefing. It is sobering to listen to what is going on. You are dealing with a lot at the minute, and we appreciate what you are dealing with. No doubt, there will be lots of questions from members here and those who are online. I ask all members to try to have a bit of brevity so that we can get as many questions in as we possibly can.

I ask, first, about COVID and how you see it in the wider sense. First Minister, you said that lockdown is not inevitable, and, deputy First Minister, you said that a suite of measures have to be put in place. However, if we continue as we are now, with a rise in cases —. People are still talking about that firebreak or circuit breaker. Can you give us a sense of whether we are still hurtling towards that, probably closer to the end of the month, or not?

Mrs O'Neill: It is evident that we are in a situation where the number of cases continues to rise. Today's number will startle people again: not just the rise in the number of positive cases but also the fact that we now have, I think, 106 —

Mrs Foster: One hundred and six.

Mrs O'Neill: — people who have now been admitted to hospital. That shows that the pressure is starting to come back very strongly on the health service. We can all remember back to March, when our biggest fear was that the health service would become overrun and would not be able to respond to the crisis. I do not want to alarm the public, but we are in a grave situation. We have always tried to take a very reasoned and proportionate approach. We made that commitment to the public when we brought in quite draconian legislation. That remains our approach. We take everything in the round. We have to be guided by the public health advice. That is why we need to have more conversations at the Executive. At this time, we have not arrived at what will be next, but we will certainly discuss that in the days ahead as a whole, collective Executive.

There is no doubt that the advice from the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Adviser has been that a single measure — for example, household restrictions — in itself will not be effective in combating the rise, and that it may take multiple measures. There are things are on the table and we have to look at everything, but we have identified a number of our priorities. For example, we want to keep schools open and ensure that children are not disadvantaged any further by being unable to attend school. If we have to take measures again, we want to be able to support families who are struggling because, perhaps, the parents have been laid off or because of the financial implications that come with this. We have to protect the health service and the healthcare workers who we will be depending on. Every decision that we take is based in the round and with all those factors in mind.

We know that it is a worrying time for the public again. We want to drive the message home again to help us deal with the situation and to very much remind people of the partnership approach that we set out from day one of the pandemic. We have the ability to stop the rise. It is about getting back to basics: washing our hands, staying apart and doing all the things that we have set out very clearly since the start of the pandemic.

Mrs Foster: Yes, we do have it in our hands to stop the spread. What we have been concerned about since the summer has been compliance. We understand that. We understand that people have become more relaxed. However, today, we have 828 new positive cases. We have 106 people in hospitals, 14 of them in ICU. Those figures are starting to ramp up again. That, of course, concerns us. We will listen very carefully to what our advisers have to say about that tomorrow, recognising that there is always a lag between positive cases and hospital admissions. However, Chair and members, it is a balancing act. I think people realise that we are on a tightrope, because if we take interventions that are not proportionate and necessary, that will have a huge impact on society and people's freedoms. People need to be able to go to work, earn money and keep their families in a good place. We have to balance all those things when we look at the figures and the advice that is given to us from the medical side.

We also have to look at — we have seen it playing out in other jurisdictions over the past number of days, whether it be the Republic of Ireland or Scotland today — the impact on wider issues as well as health. Yes, we are engaged in a huge piece of work at present. We have to take all these decisions together as an Executive. I feel that there has never been a more important time for the Executive to work together, because we are taking decisions that will be of great moment and will have huge impact, whatever we decide to do, on the people of Northern Ireland.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beattie): You are right, First Minister: this is the time when the Executive have to work together, without a shadow of a doubt. It is a worrying time for our citizens. I guess that the reason I asked that question is because the concern is out there. The conversation is out there. Having been locked down once before, people are thinking about whether it will happen again. What I am really asking is whether there will be forward thinking and plenty of lead-up time so that people know that it is coming and can be prepared for that, as opposed to — and it is nobody's fault — saying on a Thursday, "On Monday, we are in lockdown". That is my query.

Mrs Foster: Of course, that is what happened in March, and I know that it came as a huge shock to everyone. Of course, we are not in March now; things have moved on. We now have better knowledge, albeit it is still at an early stage, of this virus. We now have treatments in place, and we have a better understanding. All of those things are taken into consideration. As the deputy First Minister has said, our younger people are a priority. We know that some of them have been vilified in the press recently about not keeping to the rules and what have you, but we also realise that they are having a very difficult time. They are having to deal with restrictions that none of us had to deal with when we were that age and looking for jobs and, perhaps, going to the next stage of our lives with further education. We recognise all of that, but we are asking younger people to, please, go back to basics and do all the things we are asking them to do, and then we can get through this. When we get a vaccine, we will be able to go back to normal and go back to the life that we all look back at and wish we could have again.

It is important that we all work together. I know it is a very difficult time. I know some people think that these are very boring messages, but they are very effective messages: wash your hands, practise social distancing, wear a mask in the appropriate places and make sure that we do everything we can to break the transmission of this virus.

Mrs O'Neill: On your point about giving people notice, that is the ideal. Of course, if we have to take measures, we want to give people notice. Sometimes, with the way the virus is developing, it just comes at such a rate that we have to move at speed. Quite often, we listen to different pieces of evidence from the Chief Medical Officer or the Chief Scientific Adviser, who will show you figures for how much the virus will rise if we delay for one or two days. These are things that we have to weigh up, but, yes, the ideal is to give as much notice as possible to allow people to plan if there has to be a move to more stringent measures. These are real-life interruptions: this is about your childcare arrangement, working from home or someone who has planned a wedding. It is about real-life scenarios. We understand how difficult this is for people. As we have said through March, April and May, we are mummies and daughters and have the same challenges and concerns that every family is going through right now. We try to factor that in to all of our decision-making. On the point of giving people notice, where we can, we will. It is not always possible, but where we can, we will.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beattie): That is a fair point. I will move on to the Programme for Government and the congestion we are now going to get. We are going to get congestion with EU exit legislation, the Programme for Government, the COVID environment and the 'New Decade, New Approach' document. On the latter, we have a briefing scheduled with TEO officials on 11 November

about the work on strands under NDNA. In advance of that meeting, can you let us know the likely timelines for the three language/culture Bills?

Mrs Foster: These things are being considered at present. We recognise that some of the NDNA pieces that we should have been already dealing with have been delayed due to COVID. Officials are now doing a piece of work around prioritising NDNA because we recognise that there is a need to do that at this particular time. I hope, Chair, that in the very near future we will be able to give you a timeline in relation to the piece that you have just mentioned, and other issues that we would like to see progressing as well. As I said at our party leaders meeting on Friday, it is important that we recognise that NDNA covers five different parties, and we all have different priorities. It is important that we all work together to push through on those priorities in recognition that we are trying to be as collective as we possibly can as we move forward.

Mrs O'Neill: We have 18 months left of this mandate. It will be a mandate that none of us will forget in a hurry. Three years of the institutions being down, trying to get it back together, we finally get it back together in January, and then we are faced with a global pandemic. It has been challenging for all those reasons, but we all got back together in the Executive and the Assembly based on the NDNA proposals. It is really important that we see those proposals over the line and delivered, because that in itself will demonstrate parity of esteem and mutual respect for each other. I want to see all these things set out very clearly in a time frame that we can all work to and can deliver over the course of the mandate. The 18 months left will not be a long time for us to do a lot of the things that we want to do. We are going to have to prioritise the work of the PFG, the NDNA commitments, dealing with COVID and the post-Brexit scenario. You can see the challenges that we will have, both in political leadership and as a Civil Service, to be able to cope with and manage all those things.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beattie): You are right, deputy First Minister. This Committee will have to scrutinise upcoming Bills on languages and culture. It is a hefty piece of work. My understanding is that all three Bills have to come through at the same time. Is it likely that they will make it through in this mandate?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes.

Mrs Foster: Yes. Absolutely.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beattie): That is a fair answer. I do not need to elaborate on that. We have our work cut out for us.

I asked you a question on Thursday, deputy First Minister, about the new Commissioner for Survivors of Institutional Childhood Abuse (COSICA) and the interim commissioner, and I did not quite get your answer properly. Will Brendan McAllister cease in his role mid-October but advise, or will he stay in his role in mid-October as interim commissioner until the new one comes in? I was not quite sure if I got that.

Mrs O'Neill: Given the nature of the office, you have to have a head in place, so I am advised that he will stay in place. However, there is conversation ongoing with him around, for example, the commitment that is required from him in the period between now and 14 December, when the new commissioner will take up her post. That is as much as I can say to you. We will be meeting him on, I think, 14 October, so we will discuss those things more at that stage.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beattie): Thank you. I am going to open up the Floor for questions.

Mr McGrath: I thank the joint First Ministers for their presentation. The number of COVID cases is rising, and the number of hospitalisations is increasing. Nobody wants to see either of those. Is the messaging correct? Is it getting through? If the messaging were effective and working and people were complying, the numbers should be going down, but that is not the case. Is there a need to review the messaging to make sure that it is properly effective and the information that we need to get to people is reaching them?

Mrs Foster: Colin, I think that people are fed up with COVID-19. I am certainly fed up with COVID-19. I think that people just want it to be over and done with. It was at a low ebb during the summer months, but we know that it is a seasonal virus, so it will become more virulent when the weather changes and we come into the autumn and winter. People may look at the number of cases and the

number of hospitalisations until now and say, "Well, the numbers are not really that large. There are not that many people passing away due to COVID. Maybe it is less impactful than it was back in March and April". That would be a false thing to think.

We are advised very clearly that there is about a three-week lag between the growth in the number of cases and the number of hospitalisations. We have not gone through that lag yet, but, already, we have seen hospitalisations rise to 106 today and the number of ICU cases starting to go up as well. There is then a further lag before the number of deaths starts to increase. That is what we are concerned about.

I can understand that people are looking at the number of deaths and the number of hospitalisations and saying, "Well, I do not know what we are worried about. It is young people who are getting the disease. They can carry the disease and move on with their lives". That is wrong as well, of course, because you can suffer from what we now call long COVID, which has an impact on your body for a long period. There is also, of course, the damage caused by carrying the virus into your home to your elderly parents, grandparents or vulnerable friends and family.

Whilst people are looking at all of this and saying, "It is not going to impact on me", I appeal to them to think about the fact that there are 400 students at Queen's who are self-isolating. I want them to think about the fact that this is going to have an impact on our lives unless we keep to the fore those very clear messages. They are very clear and very basic messages about washing your hands, social distancing and wearing a mask in the appropriate place. Those are simple messages that we need to get through.

The messages are simple, but it is compliance that I am concerned about at present. As Michelle said, we have worked with the information office to get more messages out on our digital platforms to say to people that the situation will have an impact, that we are not crying wolf and that we are trying to deal with the issue. That does not mean to say that we are not taking into account all of the issues that I have mentioned, such as the economy, society and families. We are very much aware of those things as well. If you do the right thing, then you will not have to have tighter restrictions. That is the point that I was making at the beginning of this week.

Mrs O'Neill: There is not an awful lot more that I can add to that. There is a mixed bag of feelings out there. There are people who are fed up with COVID and the implications that the restrictions are having on their life and they do not like it. There has been a rise in conspiracy theories and people speculating about the genuineness of it all. It is a mixed bag, but things are going to get worse if people do not act now. That is inevitable, so what happens next is dependent on human behaviour.

We have to continue to look at the messaging, but in order to have effective messaging, you have to repeat it. The basic message is still the fundamental one, because that is what can arrest the situation. We are looking at a targeted campaign for the 16-24 age group. Not everyone reads newspapers or follows news programmes, but they may be on social media platforms. There is a particular demographic that follows different social media, so we are targeting those things now as a way to reach more people.

Mr McGrath: The key point is about changing how the message is presented. If the same message is presented in the same way, people will get bored with it after six months and will switch off. It will be important to find different ways to deliver that message.

Moving on, we will have a presentation later about the common frameworks. Brexit is looming in less than 90 days, EU legislative standardisation across Europe will be removed and those common frameworks will be required. "Barmy" Boris and his team will have to try to deliver them. As I understand it, more than 40 common frameworks need to be put in place and, at the moment, only five of them are going to be ready on 1 January. Do you have a flavour of the deficit that that will cause or the problems that it will create for industry and commerce and everyday life if all of those common frameworks are not in place in time?

Mrs O'Neill: As you know, we are only a short number of weeks away from the end of the year, and we are still unsure of the outcome. There are so many things that are still unclear to us. That poses huge challenges to our ability to prepare. I know that you have had numerous briefings from officials and, as you say, you are going to discuss the common frameworks later on today. You will know that the volume of work that we are dealing with is immense. Our ability to respond to those things, in the absence of clarity, is far from good. There are 40 active frameworks, 18 of which need a legislative

framework. Non-legislative frameworks are being considered for the other 22, and 115 policy areas have been identified as no longer requiring a framework agreement.

The scale of the work that is required is incredible. You will be able to talk about that in more detail later, but the lack of clarity that we have right now poses huge challenges for us. We are in the ninth round of negotiations, and there is the potential for a tunnel-type negotiation. Will that produce something? Either way, even if it does, we are still running right to the wire in terms of our ability to respond in the way that we need to. Some of that is outside our control because we are not at the negotiating table, but our mantra, in every engagement that we have had in the joint ministerial forum and every other forum, is that call for clarity.

Mrs Foster: I know that officials are coming in after we leave, Colin. Five frameworks have been identified as fully implementable by 31 December, but the remainder of the 40 active frameworks will undergo review and assessment by November. The aim is to progress all to provisional confirmation. There is provisional confirmation and full confirmation, and it is hoped that, by the end of November, the 40 that are active will be in the space where we can have provisional confirmation. That will be very helpful if it can be achieved. Andrew will give you more up-to-date detail on that when he comes in.

Mr McGrath: I have a quick, final question. There does seem to be a bit of a crisis of openness and transparency in the Executive Office. Since the beginning of September, Ministers, your Department has been asked more than 90 Assembly questions, and you have answered two. That may have changed since yesterday, but that is where it was yesterday. I am waiting for replies to 43 questions. I am starting to get the impression that either you have something to hide or there is an inability to answer them. Whilst I appreciate that we are in the middle of a pandemic, there still is normal work and there still is openness and transparency. We need a commitment that that information will be provided; it is the basis of democracy. Can I get that commitment from you today?

Mrs Foster: To say that there is a crisis of openness and transparency is the best bit of hyperbole that I have heard in quite a while, Colin.

Mr McGrath: I like to entertain you.

Mrs Foster: Both Michelle and I are in the Chamber most weeks. We are here today, answering questions. As you know, during the pandemic, questions for written answer were suspended to try to give us the space to deal with all of the things that we needed to deal with. Rightly, those came back online again. Sitting here as First Minister, I have no difficulty in giving you an absolute commitment on openness and transparency because we have absolutely nothing to hide, far from it.

Mrs O'Neill: I can give the same commitment. There is certainly no crisis of openness. We are here in the spirit of openness. We are here to be questioned and provide answers. If there are outstanding questions, we can give that commitment to look at them and make sure that they are answered.

Mr McGrath: The proof of the pudding is in the eating, as they say, so we will see how many answers we get in the next period.

Mr Sheehan: First, I welcome the appointment, yesterday, of the Commissioner for Survivors of Childhood Institutional Abuse. I am sure that, in particular, the survivors involved will welcome that appointment. I note that the tenure of the Victims' Commissioner has ended, and I am sure that there will be progress on that matter in the near future. Danny Kinahan has been appointed as Veteran's Commissioner. I am not sure whether that will have any impact on me or not, but I am sure that some people will welcome it. To pick up on the point that Doug made earlier around the issue of languages and culture, many of us expected the appointment of an Irish-language commissioner before now. I understand that COVID has delayed a lot of issues, but many people will be eager to see progress on that issue, certainly this side of Christmas. I do not have a question there; I am just making that point.

To pick up on the issue of the head of the Civil Service, the First Minister said in her presentation that interim arrangements would be put in place. Can either of you expand on what those interim arrangements will be and when we can expect some sort of permanent appointment to that post?

Mrs O'Neill: Thanks, Pat. On the point about the commissioners, we want to get the legislation progressed, as we have just said, and then have the commissioner put in place as soon as possible.

The HOCS recruitment process has concluded without a candidate being successfully appointed. We are very keen to move this on as quickly as possible, not least because of the challenges, which, as we have already stated, we will have to deal with in the coming period: COVID, Brexit, Civil Service reform, the NDNA commitments and all of the things that we have said we want to deliver upon. We are looking towards appointing an interim HOCS. We hope to be able to do that, and we are working with the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) as we speak to try to be able to do that. I will not commit us to a time frame, but we want to be able bring forward imminently an interim appointment.

We are also looking and relooking at the role of HOCS. We are looking at governance models elsewhere, how this is done and whether there is a better way for us to do it. That is all part and parcel of what we are trying to do to design a new process. There will have to be a new process, and these things can be quite lengthy. That is why we have decided to opt for an interim HOCS to help us through the next short while. It is not in the too-far-off future, but we do not have a time frame as yet. This Committee will be the first to know when we have that all tied down.

Mr Sheehan: Moving on to another issue, this morning or yesterday, I read about a survey that has been carried out in a number of European countries in the context of the pandemic, and more than 78% of the people surveyed were of the view that, on coming out the other side of this pandemic, there should be a fairer and more equal society. We have seen here the way that the virus has disproportionately affected those in the most deprived areas. That seems to be a pattern across the world. The inequalities that already exist are being exacerbated by this. I wonder if that will have any impact on views on the Programme for Government in the time ahead.

Mrs O'Neill: I must have read that somewhere too. It said that when people talk about the new norm, what is the new norm? Is there an opportunity for us to do something better and build something better on the other side of COVID, and I think that this is our opportunity.

The Programme for Government, as a concept, going back to when we first brought forward the new way to do it, forced a change in approach from Departments because it moved away from the silo mentality to collective working. COVID demonstrates to us all that we are able to work at speed and be far more agile in government. It has also shown us that, if we are going to successfully take on the big challenges — whether a global pandemic, climate change or any other significant issues — if we work together, we will be far more effective.

I certainly want us to use the opportunity of the new style of Programme for Government to refocus our energies and efforts and try to deliver something better. This is probably a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to do something differently because of the situation that we find ourselves in.

Ms Sheerin: Thank you both for coming in again this afternoon. Following on from what you said about COVID, it is important to say that it would be great if we all knew what was coming down the tracks, and that was said at the very start of the pandemic. However, people appreciate that we do not have that foresight, unfortunately, and we are reacting as best as we can. People are getting that, although there is so much mixed opinion on all of this.

I have some questions around the PFG commitments and, particularly, the commitments that came out of NDNA. The Assembly agreed a motion, a fortnight ago, on the racial equality strategy and called for that to be updated and implemented. Where is that sitting?

Mrs Foster: As you know, the racial equality strategy includes a commitment that the subgroup will meet three times a year. I am pleased to say that the group met yesterday. They have had very good engagement. We have been jointly keeping a very close eye on the work of the racial equality subgroup because it is a very important issue for us. We want all citizens who live in Northern Ireland to feel a part of Northern Ireland, and it is very important that we continue to say that.

I had a meeting with the African Caribbean Society here in Northern Ireland, just last month, to listen to some of their concerns. They were supportive of the strategy but said that we need to make sure that it is monitored and that some of the work on ethnic monitoring, hate crime legislation and issues such as that were taken forward. We are waiting for Judge Marrinan's report on hate crime legislation. When we have that, we will be able to move forward on some of those issues. They also said that this is the International Decade for People of African Descent and asked what the Executive are doing to celebrate that. I had to say that we would come back to them on that because I was not aware of it. I have asked officials to look into that to make sure that we celebrate that. Engagement is good. Is there more that we can do? Yes, probably. That is why it is good to have the Assembly and the Committee

for The Executive Office looking at those issues so that we can push forward with what is right for those people who have come to live here, are from an ethnic minority background and want to celebrate that they are as Northern Irish as the rest of us.

Mrs O'Neill: We are halfway through the strategy, and the motion in the Assembly was well debated and very well contributed to. It is our job, in political leadership, to make our society inclusive, one that people feel part of. It is a beautiful thing that we have a diverse society. Let us hope that we see much more of it. We, in political leadership, have to lead by example by stamping out racism and making sure that we are doing all we can to be as inclusive as we can be.

I, too, met with the African Caribbean Society, and I admit that I, too, was unaware of the International Decade for People of African Descent. We have both committed to doing something about that. I have written to the Speaker, because I was aware that it was something that he was considering. Hopefully, there will be an opportunity to do something meaningful — as opposed to just an event to which people are invited — that will have a significant impact for those individuals.

We need to look towards implementing in full all the recommendations in the strategy. We would then be looking towards what to do post-strategy, because we are halfway through it. In addition, the institutions were down for three years. There is probably a feeling that the issue has not been given as much attention as it should have been given, but we can fix that.

Ms Sheerin: I declare an interest as Chair of the Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights. As per NDNA, there was a commitment that there would be a panel of experts. They are being selected by the Executive Office. Is there an update on that process?

Mrs O'Neill: We, as party leaders, have met and are discussing all the NDNA commitments and making sure that we get those things delivered. We will seek to appoint those experts over the coming weeks. Hopefully, that will allow us to progress that work. It is significant work, and I commend those on the Committee for working their way through it.

Mr Lunn: Thanks for your answers. On the head of the Civil Service situation, David Sterling indicated in December his intention to leave. Nine months seems quite a long time, even in the troubled times that we live in, but we are where we are.

I am not entitled to know whether you both agreed that one of the candidates was suitable, so I am not asking you that. However, you are going to have to put this out to new applications, and, effectively, start the process again. Can candidates who applied before reapply? If you are going to appoint an interim head of the Civil Service, can I assume that that person will not be eligible to apply for the post?

Mrs Foster: We are working through those issues with our advisers and lawyers because we want to make sure that it is done right. As we said at the beginning, it is an important job. It is the leader of 23,000 civil servants. It is someone who is very much identified with the Executive, therefore we need them to be someone who not only the deputy First Minister and I but all Ministers can look to for advice and guidance.

With regard to the period since David decided that he was going to resign, that process was actually started pretty quickly after we came back into office and was one of the first things that was mentioned to us. As I understand it, even in quick time, the process would take six months. We did the interviews for the head of the Civil Service on 23 September, so it took nine months or thereabouts from when we signed off on the submission in January or February or whenever it was.

So, yes, it does take considerable time, and that is why we have decided that we need an interim head of the Civil Service, probably for a year. That gives us the time to do all the work that we need to do to have the new person in place, and if they have to give notice in another job, they will be able to start within that time.

We are aware of the importance of the role. As the deputy First Minister said, we hope to be able to have that interim HOCS in place in the very near future so that they can take matters forward.

Mrs O'Neill: Arlene is right in saying that we need to be careful about following due process. We will work with HR around all of this. We were guided by HR the whole way through the process. Now that

the competition has closed, we are moving to appoint an interim, but we are looking again at the process itself and what that might look like.

There are opportunities if you look elsewhere. The head of the Civil Service here has a considerable role as he or she is also head of TEO. We are looking at other jurisdictions to see if there is another way to do that. Perhaps that will help to attract more candidates to come forward.

Mr Lunn: Thanks for that, but you did not answer either of my questions. Those were: can the interim head of the Civil Service apply for the job and can the, I think, three people who were considered for the job reapply if there is a new process?

Mrs Foster: I do not think that there would be any difficulty in the three people reapplying. Of course, more than three people applied for the job. Those were the last three.

Mr Lunn: Yes, you narrowed it down to those three.

Mrs Foster: Yes, those were the last three that were presented to us at the final stage. A wide range of people applied, and I cannot see why they would not be able to reapply. I say that subject to advice from NICS HR, but I cannot see why they would not be able to reapply. It is our understanding that the interim head of the Civil Service will not apply for the substantive role.

Mr Lunn: That would be normal.

Mrs Foster: Yes.

Mr Lunn: OK. Thanks for that.

I have another quick question on COVID, which is obviously very serious. I listened to the statement from the Health Minister the other day in the House. He referred to the excellent cooperation between the four Chief Medical Officers from across the home countries. He did not mention the Chief Medical Officer from the country with which we share an island and with which we have a completely porous border. I would have thought that the symmetry between North and South was well worth consideration. What level of cooperation is there between the health authorities and people at your level North and South?

Mrs Foster: There is very good cooperation. It is for Robin to answer the allegation that you are making against him, but I can only imagine that he was talking about the fact that four-nations calls take place quite regularly, simply because there is the UK. Likewise, there are many calls between the Chief Medical Officers in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. I think that daily calls take place, and I know that Robin speaks to Stephen Donnelly on an ongoing basis. The deputy First Minister and I spoke to the Taoiseach on Monday night about the restrictions that were coming in in the Republic of Ireland.

There is very good cooperation and sharing of information, which is very important given what happened in Donegal. That was a very good piece of working together, because we were then able to say to our Chief Medical Officer that there was a need of him to speak to the Chief Medical Officer in the Dublin to see if we could coordinate what was going on with people travelling in and out of Donegal. We were then able to say on Friday that people should not be travelling into Donegal, and, of course, we had to take our action in the north-west. There is very good cooperation.

Mrs O'Neill: There is a scheduled meeting every Friday between the Chief Medical Officer here and Tony Holohan now or Ronan Glynn, who was previously the acting Chief Medical Officer in the South. Alongside that, there are all the ad hoc or when-required conversations. In all those things, there is always room for improvement; such is life.

Your points about the virus, how it spreads across the island and how it does not stop just because of different jurisdictions, mean that it is common sense for us to cooperate in the strongest possible terms. For some time, I have advocated that we need an all-island approach, but I have also advocated that we need both islands to have the same approach. That would be more beneficial. We are aligned on some things and not on others, and, in my opinion, it does not always stack up.

Mr Lunn: I was in Donegal about two months ago, and, at that time, I was told that there had not been a case in County Donegal for 56 days. In a very short time, it went from that to being the worst in the Republic at the same time as Derry and Strabane went over the cliff. There must be a reason for that, and that is why I stressed the point. I am reassured by what you said. That is fair enough.

Mr Clarke: First, I would like to acknowledge Pat's point about the appointment of the Veteran's Commissioner. Danny Kinahan is a former party colleague of yours, Chair, and he represented the same constituency as me. I think that we should all wish him well in his endeavours. It was a commitment from our parties collectively to see that and was in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document. I can understand Pat's frustration that he may not qualify, but I could point him towards the Older People's Commissioner [*Laughter*] in a couple of years, if he wants to give Eddie Lynch a call.

Mr Sheehan: If he likes, we can go down together [*Laughter.*]

Mr Clarke: That is certainly an option if he feels left out in terms of commissioners.

All joking aside, I have listened carefully today to what the First Minister and deputy First Minister have said. I can understand the scepticism about COVID, and we all get that. You both started off very well with the messaging during the summer, and people were listening. I am not trying to be controversial today, but I want to talk about your actions, deputy First Minister, in some of the things that you were involved in. We cannot fix that, but many of us think that there should be a full apology to people, because what you have done, through your actions, has caused confusion and created mixed messages. I think that, collectively, we want to come out the other side of this with as few people as possible having been affected. To get back to that messaging, it is important that you both work in the way that you did at the start. I think that your actions have greatly affected the messaging. Indeed, I heard one of your supporters saying that very thing on the radio this morning. I am not saying this as a unionist; your own supporters are saying that your actions caused mixed messages. Do you see there being any time in the future when you would change your opinion on that and apologise for your actions to try to get us back on track to get the outcomes that I know that both of you want? We want to try to get that message back to people so that they can understand that you are sorry for what you did.

Mrs O'Neill: Trevor, we have never stopped working together. We have continued to work together the whole way through the pandemic, from the very start when we were first alarmed and started to see the pandemic come upon us. The whole way through that process, we have worked day and night. Quite often, we have joked about being in each other's bubble because we have had to work so closely as joint First Ministers and in the Executive as a whole. The whole way through, my commitment to the public has been unquestionable.

I think that I have answered your question today at previous Committee meetings, on maybe one, two or three occasions. I have been before the Assembly Chamber. I have spoken to all MLAs' queries and questions. I have said publicly that I regret it if the public health message was in any way jeopardised. I have said that. It is on the record.

What is important is that we focus on where we are today. I have said my piece. It is important that we focus on where we are here and now, and where we are here and now is in a very difficult position. Where we are in the here and now is that we have increased numbers of people in hospital and increased positive cases, and we are going in the wrong direction. What we — all of us in political leadership — have to focus on today is getting us through the next period and getting us through the winter months. I do not need to paint a picture for you of how difficult it will be. We have tough decisions to take. I have a job to do, and I am determined to do that job.

Mr Clarke: I appreciate what you have said and the work that you have done, and I can see the work that you have done. What I am saying is that the issue is with the messaging. You told people to do one thing, but you were seen to do another. I accept what you have said, and I am happy to move on from it at the minute.

It was interesting to hear what you both said about the figures that you get from the scientists being accurate. Again, there is scepticism out there, given that other scientists are saying different things. I hear what you have both said about the numbers rising, and we are all genuinely worried about that. I was shielding over the summer months, and it was particularly strange for someone who is out all the time to be confined to the house. There is a degree of fear; there is no doubt about that. There is fear right across the community about the direction in which this is travelling. What alarms me even more is

when you say that you are continually alarmed by the figures on every occasion. Given that you have an insight into the figures, would you say that the figures with which you have been presented on each of those occasions and the trajectory that the scientists have set out have been accurate?

Mrs Foster: In terms of the data on positive cases, yes. Obviously, the number of hospitalisations is accurate, because that is a reflection of the factual position in our hospitals at that time. We can look across the hospitals to see how many vacant beds there are, for example. You will remember that, when we started all this at the end of February/March, we had the objectives of trying to push the curve down so that our NHS was not overwhelmed. We still want that to be the case. Now that we are coming into winter, we are acutely aware of that, because we know that there are other diseases and viruses out there. Of course, the winter flu is out there. We know that hospital space will become very tight. The Health Minister will be looking at whether he needs to take action by, for example, standing up a Nightingale hospital. He may also look at whether he needs to stop elective surgery, and I listened very carefully to what some of the surgeons were saying about that just yesterday.

I have called this a tightrope, and that is what it is. It is not only a tightrope in terms of economic and societal impacts but in terms of non-COVID healthcare. You and I know of the impact on cancer care and many other issues, and we have all received letters about people who have not been able to get their treatment or to get surgery. That is a huge issue that we have to take into consideration because we want to make sure that people with a red flag cancer diagnosis get the care and attention that they need. In order to do that, we have to make sure that hospitals are not overwhelmed. We have to take all those things into consideration. Sometimes, when I listen to the sceptics — they are absolutely entitled to be sceptical — they do not have all the information. When we look at all the information on the economy, isolation and mental health issues, cancer and COVID diagnoses, that is a big job of work.

Mr Clarke: One of the junior Ministers was asked yesterday about the end goal, and his response was "the vaccine". Is that the end goal? Do we see any option other than the vaccine? Will the vaccine be mandatory?

Mrs O'Neill: You have to remember that none of us has been through this before. Globally, people have not been through it before. What will allow us to live with the virus? Increased testing, which means a first-class contact-tracing system. There are advancements in testing all the time. How quickly can we get to rapid testing so that people, if they have symptoms, can get tested and get back out into everyday life? A combination of things will allow us to get to that point or allow us to live with the virus. The vaccine is ultimately where we want to get to, but making something mandatory will not always be welcome or well received; people have all sorts of concerns. We have to get to the point at which we learn to live with the virus. That is ultimately where we are trying to get to because none of us knows where the end point is. A vaccine will be a game changer. We do not have a time frame for that, because there is global demand for a vaccine. Once we have a vaccine, we will have to look at who gets it first, targeting those who are most in need and implementing a roll-out programme.

Mr Clarke: I wish you both well in your endeavours. I am sure that it has been difficult for you all summer.

In response to Doug's question about the very heavy workload that we will have between now and the end of this mandate, First Minister, you said that those things will be done. Are we saying that those things will be done with full Committee scrutiny and that we will not be looking at accelerated passage, particularly on the language issues?

Mrs Foster: We will discuss those issues with the Committee. As I said, we have not had the opportunity to discuss them at the Executive so we will have to do that.

Mr Clarke: OK.

Ms Anderson: Thank you both for the presentation and, once again, coming before the Committee.

I am extremely worried about my constituency of Derry and the wider council area of Derry and Strabane. As Trevor said, from the end of June into July and most of August, there were no COVID cases being reported in the city. I looked today at the figure of 959 cases — nearly 1,000 cases — over the last seven days and the rate being 636, and it is absolutely alarming. The message is being heard that we are hosts and carriers. People may have dropped their guard in June, July and August, because they felt that we had tackled the virus and hoped that it had gone. During May, I remember

discussing with both of you how we were worried after engaging with carers, agency workers and the low paid. This is soft intelligence — there is nothing academic about it — but there are carers who are worried about what will happen if they have to self-isolate. The statutory sick pay that the Health Minister — I think that it was £11.5 million — gave to the independent sector will apparently run out in a few weeks. Some agency and low-paid workers cannot afford to self-isolate, which is a problem across Derry and Strabane. Will you comment on that? I know that, in the past, you were deeply concerned about those low-paid workers and the implications of COVID for them in the first wave. It is the same now. It is not the cause, but it may be contributing to the spread of this deadly virus across our constituency.

Mrs O'Neill: We hear what you are saying, and, as was said in answer to the previous question, the only way that we will be effective and start to come out of this is if we have an excellent find, test, trace, protect and isolate system in place. If people, just because of their need to survive, are not able to isolate or choose not to, even though they may have symptoms or find themselves in that scenario, is that not a desperate indictment of us all? We have to continually look at supporting people.

As an Executive, we have limited financial levers open to us to support people, which is why Conor Murphy, as the Finance Minister, Diane Dodds, as the Economy Minister, and the Executive as a whole have made the case to the Treasury that, in order for us to be able to deal with the pandemic and respond in the way in which we need to, based on public health advice, we need that financial support package to support people to get through this. We continue to make that case, and we hope to make progress. We do not have anything more than that to say about it today, but certainly be assured that we are fighting the corner to get what we need to respond to the pandemic and to support people.

Throughout the pandemic, we have all seen that the people on whom we rely and depend — I think that I said this before in Committee — are the people who keep our shelves stacked, the people in our shops and the care workers in nursing homes and domiciliary care. We depend on all those people very much. That is traditionally a female workforce and the lowest paid in society. As Pat said, that begs the question: what type of society do we want to live in? That is a bigger fundamental question for us going forward.

Mrs Foster: I have two things to add, Martina. You will know that today the Finance Minister announced a support package for the hospitality sector. That comes out of our block grant, and we committed to that. Indeed, if any other area has to have similar restrictions, we will do the same again. It is big commitment from us, but we absolutely recognise the need to help those businesses at this time.

There were conversations around a £500 payment in England for those who have to self-isolate, and we are trying to bottom out whether that payment will come across as a Barnett consequential or whether it will be demand-led and people who have to self-isolate will then be able to access it. The Finance Minister is trying to get answers. You are absolutely right: if people feel that they will lose out financially by having to self-isolate, that is a disincentive. We have raised that during our quadrilateral meetings with Westminster, as, indeed, have representatives from Scotland and Wales. It is an ongoing issue that we continue to raise.

Ms Anderson: Thank you. I appreciate that.

You will not be surprised that I am going to ask a question about Brexit. You both mentioned the ninth round of negotiations. What is your assessment of where things are and the possibility of getting a deal before the end of this year, when we could crash out?

Mrs O'Neill: Unfortunately, I do not know whether I would wager a bet on that one right now. It does not bode well that we are very close to the date that Boris Johnson mentioned. I think that he said that, if there is no deal by 15 October, there would not be a deal. However, intense negotiations are going on as we speak, I believe, in Brussels. They are in the ninth round of negotiations, and, if there is progress and they can go into a tunnel, the outcome is still to be seen. Our principal point in the middle of it all is that we need clarity either way, even if a deal should be achieved. We have such a short period in which to respond to that and be ready that it puts us in a very difficult situation. We need clarity and we need to be able to plan. We need certainty for the business community and we need the protections that were afforded to us in the protocol to be implemented in full.

Mrs Foster: I am slightly more positive than that, Martina, as you would expect me to be. I think that we will get a deal by the end of the year. We may not get it by the deadline of the Council meeting, which, I think, is next week, but, as with all negotiations — in this room, we are very well versed on negotiations and how they run — and as we move towards the end of the year, there is a realisation that, on all sides, we need to get an agreement. I am not sure what that agreement will look like, but I think that we will get there.

Ms Anderson: I have one last question. In the Assembly on Monday, we had a vote, and the overwhelming majority of Members voted that the British Government have broken international law. Some of us are worried about the implementation of the Irish protocol. Is there a date for the next Joint Committee meeting to ensure that the protection of the protocol is upheld?

Mrs O'Neill: I am not sure about the date.

Mrs Foster: I think that it is 9 October.

Mrs O'Neill: It will be 9 October, perhaps, and the British Government and the EU side are in the room. At that stage, we will have an opportunity to seek an update, but the EU has been very firm in saying that there is no role, remit or opportunity for the British Government to break international law. It flies in the face of anything that is right in a democratic process to say that you will break an international law and the protocol to which you signed up. The EU has a strong opinion on that.

Ms Anderson: Despite our differences at times, I want to say to both of you that you are doing a remarkable job.

Mrs O'Neill: Thank you, Martina.

Mr Stalford: The EU is a rules-based organisation that consistently rips up its own rules when it chooses to, but I will just step over that. In New Decade, New Approach, there is a commitment to review arm's-length bodies and quangos. The First Minister will know that the wording is:

"with a view to their rationalisation".

She will recall that I was very keen to have that wording included. Various drafts kept coming back with that phrase missing, and it had to be put back in. Where is that at?

Mrs Foster: As I understand it, the Finance Minister is leading on that work. I do not have an update, but it has certainly started. Chair, maybe we can get an update for the Committee on where that sits at present.

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, I believe that the work is under way. Hopefully, we will be able to give an update shortly.

Mr Stalford: OK. I do not want to sound like Donald Rumsfeld about "known knowns" and "unknown knowns", but we now know certain things that we did not know at the start of the outbreak of COVID. We now know — figures released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in America demonstrate this — that, compared with an 18- to 29-year-old, someone between the ages of 75 and 84 is 220 times more likely to die of COVID. Someone who is 85-plus is 630 times more likely to die than an 18- to 29-year-old. For the same age bracket — 18 to 29 — a 75- to 84-year-old is eight times more likely to be hospitalised. An 85-year-old is 13 times more likely to be hospitalised. Given that those are now known knowns, which we did not have at the start, will information like that shape potential responses to a worsening situation?

Mrs Foster: Of course we have to take that into consideration. Even if we look at the figures in Northern Ireland — we know very well that the over-65s suffer disproportionately — we are aware of that. As I said in response to Trevor, there is also the issue of long COVID, which concerns us. It is known about, but not fully as yet. The implications are that, after you suffer from COVID, it continues to have an impact on your life. We do not have that statistic at present, Christopher, because we do not know how many people are suffering from long COVID. We will have to consider that issue.

We know — we have known from quite early on — that this disease targets older people and those who are vulnerable with underlying conditions. That is what we know, so we take that into

consideration. It is probably one of the reasons that we say that it is so important that schools stay open and that young people, who have already missed out on some chances because of COVID — we all remember what happened in the summer with A-level and GCSE results and all that — need to be able to sit their exams next year and continue with their education and life chances. That is very important.

Mr Stalford: Talking about people who are at a disadvantage, the kids who are sitting their A levels and GCSEs this year —

Mrs Foster: Yes, absolutely.

Mr Stalford: — are at more of a disadvantage because of the sheer amount of time and —

Mrs Foster: I agree.

Mr Stalford: — schooling that they have lost. The reason that I ask is because I am concerned — I do not want to say, "using a sledgehammer to crack a nut" — the pattern that appears to have been established is that there is a rise in cases, we go into lockdown, the cases fall, we ease the lockdown, and the cases start to rise again. I have a concern that, if we keep doing that — as, I think, someone said in the Assembly — when do we get off that merry-go-round? I am also mindful of the fact that yesterday the Assembly passed a motion asking for the Economy Minister and the Finance Minister to produce a financial package. We are now running at a situation where the UK national deficit has risen from 2.4% to 13.9%, and the national debt is above 100% of GDP for the first time since the 1960s. It is easy to pass a motion in the Assembly saying that the Economy Minister and the Finance Minister need to produce money, but from where will that money come?

Mrs Foster: It is back to the money tree again. We are a devolved Administration and have always had the difficulty that we have to work within our block grant. As I said with regard to our interventions in the north-west, which we hope will be helpful, they will not solve all the problems for those businesses. We recognise that. We hope that that will be helpful, but it has to come out of our block grant. That is why we are strongly telling the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Michael Gove, that we need an assessment. The furlough scheme is coming to an end at the end of October. If the country has to go into stricter restrictions, what will Westminster do to help, whether that be Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland or England? We simply do not have the wherewithal to intervene for the whole economy. We do not have it.

Mr Stalford: It is important that people take cognisance of that fact. As I said, it is one thing to stand up in the Assembly Chamber at a plenary sitting on a Tuesday and say that something must be done when you do not have any costings attached to the "something" that you want to be done.

I am very pleased that the Commissioner for Survivors of Institutional Childhood Abuse has been appointed. There may be some disagreement about what a memorial will look like. Some people may want a window or a statue. I happen to be of the view that a living memorial would be of more benefit, such as something for disadvantaged children to help to bring them on in life through education or something like that. Has any consideration been given to what the memorial might look like?

Mrs O'Neill: We have to be very careful about that. It has to be a co-design, because you have your view about what is important —

Mr Stalford: Yes, absolutely.

Mrs O'Neill: — and others may have a different view. However, at the heart of everything that we do, whether a memorial or an apology, it has to be the wishes of victims and survivors. Some work has been done on that, and we will meet the interim advocate in a few weeks' time to discuss those issues. I imagine that Ms Ryan, in her new post, will want to pick that up very quickly. I have no doubt that she will want to seek views and learn for herself exactly what is the best way forward. We will all have an opinion. Will we satisfy everybody all the time? Probably not, but we will try our very best to get the best consensus to find the most fitting memorial.

Mr Stalford: I have one final question. You both have a cross-cutting role across all of government. My understanding is that the Minister for Infrastructure was warned in July that up to 23,000 people could be waiting for a driving test and that additional provision would be required. Thousands of

people have been waiting in an online queue to book a driving test since Sunday. Today, a spokesperson for the Department said that it is considering securing additional examinations. I ask you, as you have done before with the remit of the Department for Infrastructure, to take a direct interest in this matter and to pursue a resolution. There seems to have been a bit of dithering about getting to grips with the issue, and people need their driving tests.

Mrs O'Neill: Absolutely. For a lot of young people, it is a coming-of-age experience.

Mr Stalford: I waited until I was 27 because I lived in Belfast *[Laughter.]*

Mrs Foster: Ah, Belfast.

Mrs O'Neill: When you live in the country, as soon as you are the age to drive, you want to get your driving test. We know how important it is to young people. We have an Executive meeting tomorrow so we will pick that up.

Mr Stalford: Thank you.

Mrs Foster: Again, it disproportionately hits young people, as we have been saying throughout this meeting. We have talked about the matter at the Executive, and I am certainly happy to raise it again.

Mr Stalford: Thank you.

Mr Robinson: I commend the First Ministers for the excellent work that they are doing and have been doing over the past few months. I am sure that it has not been easy.

I have a couple of questions. I am not trying to be controversial, but, now that we seem to be in a second wave, what measures are the Executive considering to address transmission of the virus due to large numbers of people gathering at social or sporting events, such as we witnessed at those GAA matches in the recent past? There is no evidence of social distancing or anything there. All that needs to stop now that we are into a second wave. We need to be a lot more conscious of what we are doing and how we are behaving.

My second question is more to do with the ordinary man on the street. People are ringing the Public Health Agency (PHA) over a weekend, and nobody is there. It is also very hard to get the 111 number over a weekend. Although that may not be your remit, can something be done about it?

Mrs O'Neill: Thank you, George. We can pick up the PHA issue about no one being available over a weekend. I have heard the same in my constituency office, with people saying that they needed advice and could not get it. We maybe need to ask the Health Minister to look at that. To be fair, the PHA is undoubtedly under huge pressure, but let us take that on board.

The GAA was exemplary at the start of the pandemic and was the first organisation to shut things down. I am very much from a GAA family and community, and the GAA, the whole way through the pandemic, has assisted its communities. It has been absolutely first class and led from the front when it came to looking after the most vulnerable. I commend the GAA on its action to shut down all club activities this week because of the fears arising from the difficult position that we find ourselves in again. I commend it for its work and welcome the words from the Ulster Council over this week and previous weeks. We are into a challenging period in the time ahead. Whether it be the GAA, soccer, any of the sporting codes or any kind of gathering at all, it will be challenging for everybody. We all have our part to play, and the GAA is playing its part again.

Mrs Foster: George, I raised this issue with Brian McAvoy, Ulster GAA's chief executive, because I was concerned about what had happened at the Tyrone county final and in Dungannon. I recognise that it had been 64 years since Dungannon had won the Tyrone county final, and it was a big moment for them. However — Brian acknowledges this — we are, unfortunately, seeing cases in that area, which are probably as a result of what happened. I welcome the fact that the GAA has decided to cancel those games; that is the right thing to do. I had a conversation with the Communities Minister this morning about some of those issues.

On the other side of this, we recognise that many local football clubs, hockey clubs, rugby clubs and what have you rely on gate receipts to be viable, and they are in big difficulties at the moment because

they do not have any spectators. You will know about that from an Irish League football point of view, George, and you have raised it with me before. The Communities Minister is looking at all of that. She is working with all the sporting organisations to see what she can do to help, whether that be guidance or financial support. We are very aware of the issue. We understand that, when people go to support their team, they want to do so in an exuberant way, but we have to try to protect people, and that is why it is right that we take those social-distancing measures. On Friday night, for example, Ulster Rugby did that very well in their pilot, and I know that the club is working with the Communities Minister on bringing spectators in and what have you. We are keeping an eye on it, George, but you are right to raise the issue around some of the matches that have taken place.

Mr Robinson: May I ask a supplementary, First Minister? The Irish League starts on Saturday week, 17 October. Has there been any talk about how clubs will cope with spectators?

Mrs Foster: That is what we were talking to the Communities Minister about, George. She is very much aware that many small local clubs rely on people coming to see the game, and paying to get in, to make them viable. No doubt, she will come back with some solutions.

Mr Robinson: Provided that there is social distancing.

Mrs Foster: Yes.

Mr Robinson: Thank you.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beattie): Thank you, George. May I ask a last question, briefly, deputy First Minister? I ask it only because there is considerable public interest. Have you been interviewed by the police yet in regard to the Bobby Storey funeral?

Mrs Foster: No.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Beattie): OK. Good enough.

Ministers, thank you very much for your time. You have been very generous with your time. There was a fair range of questions, and you gave some really good answers and gave us a better understanding.

Mrs Foster: Thank you.

Mrs O'Neill: Thank you.