



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

13 January 2021

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 Chairperson (Mr McGrath): The First Minister and deputy First Minister will brief us on the response to the COVID pandemic and provide general updates from the Department. Hopefully, via StarLeaf, we have Arlene Foster, First Minister, and Michelle O'Neill, deputy First Minister. As ever, as a precursor, I inform everyone that the meeting is being recorded by Hansard, and the transcript will be published on the Committee web page.

You are very welcome. Happy new year to both of you, and thank you for meeting us today. I will pass over to you, and then we can open up to questions.

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): Thank you. Can you hear me, Chairman? Is that clear enough?

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Yes, indeed. You are maybe a bit faint, Arlene.

Mrs Foster: *[Inaudible.]* Can you hear me OK now?

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Yes, that is better now.

Mrs Foster: *[Inaudible.]* Thank you, Chair and members, for the opportunity to *[Inaudible]* events since our last appearance, which was way back in July 2020. It has, of course, been an eventful period. In July, we had growing optimism about the prospect of a return to normal business. However,

the subsequent resurgence of COVID-19 has continued to dominate and shape our work. That is not just in relation to the effort required in our direct response to it but it, of course, has an impact on our capacity to take forward other areas of business. I know that the Committee takes a close interest in the range of our business, and we are happy to take questions on any and all issues that members have. However, in the time available, it might be useful to focus on a number of key developments over the past six months: EU exit, of course; victims and survivors; the Programme for Government (PFG); and New Decade, New Approach (NDNA).

I will hand over to Michelle *[Inaudible.]*

Mrs O'Neill (The deputy First Minister): Just *[Inaudible.]*

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Arlene, the sound is still very faint. I am not sure whether this is the issue but with the type of headphones that you have, the microphone needs to be very close to your mouth to pick up what you are saying. I do not know whether moving it a bit closer would help.

Sorry, Michelle, back to you.

Mrs O'Neill: OK. Hopefully, my sound is OK.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Loud and clear.

Mrs O'Neill: OK, thank you. I also thank members of the Committee for the opportunity to brief them across a wide range of issues today. This week marks the first anniversary of the restoration of the Assembly and the Executive. The focus on COVID from early in the restoration was both unexpected and unavoidable. I do not think that any Executive Committee has faced such a major challenge, especially so soon after the return of devolution, which was back in January 2020. It has, without doubt, tested all of us in many ways.

We are very grateful for the support of the Committee throughout the pandemic. COVID is clearly our priority. Nevertheless, it is important to note that, despite all the pressures, there have been significant achievements in other areas, and we hope to build on those in the remainder of the mandate. The First Minister has suggested an approach to the discussion today, and we are happy to hear and respond to what members have to say.

I will hand back to Arlene.

Mrs Foster: We will start with Brexit matters. The Committee is aware that the UK and the EU *[Inaudible]* on the future relationship, and the European Union (Future Relationship) Bill received Royal Assent on 30 December, ratifying that agreement into the domestic law of the UK. While, of course, there are differences across the parties in the Executive, there is also consensus that it was in no one's interests to leave without a deal in place. Therefore, while it is welcome that a deal has been reached, it is clear that it is a complex agreement that will require careful scrutiny by all Departments and Ministers over the coming weeks. It is also much wider than a trade agreement. We all know that it covers a wide range of areas, such as transport *[Inaudible.]* The deal's implementation will be a challenge and will, most likely, be an evolving process, so it is important that we understand what the impacts will be as well as the opportunities that the agreement will provide, particularly in rebuilding our economy following the COVID pandemic. Whilst it provides for a zero tariff, zero quota deal, it does not mean that things will remain as they were, as evidenced in the first few weeks of trading. The agreement will be implemented and operated alongside the protocol, and interactions between the two will need to be carefully monitored. There are difficulties with the operation of the protocol at present, and I am sure that we will come back to those in the course of this year.

Mrs O'Neill: Undoubtedly, significant progress has been made on the protocol and the future relationship agreement with the EU. However, it is clear to us all that there remain some operational issues that have the potential to impact significantly on our economy and on our people. We are committed to ensuring that those are resolved as quickly as possible.

I am sure that Committee members are aware that businesses have indicated that there has been disruption to goods coming here from Britain. There are two main reasons for that, the first being that companies at the British end were not prepared for the changes in processes associated with the protocol and were, therefore, at a low level of readiness. The second reason is that agri-food goods

were usually transported as part of groupage/mixed loads. That is a major issue for hauliers, who operate to tight margins and tight turnaround times.

What worked in the single market may not work in the post-transition arrangements. The groupage issue also affects smaller companies, which are not benefiting from the grace period for supermarkets. We are also seeing impacts of the lack of preparedness of British businesses on the Holyhead to Dublin route. You can see that that is where problems are arising. Most of those issues have resulted in lorries being displaced, which impacts on the ability to send scheduled loads from here to Britain because the trailers have not come back from Britain. That causes the viability issues that all of our businesses have been voicing over the last number of weeks.

We have stated very clearly to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster that those impacts need to be resolved at a rapid pace. We continue to raise our concerns at the daily meetings of the Cabinet's EU Exit Operations Committee, which we or the junior Ministers attend, and through officials who are working with their Whitehall colleagues. We also have assurances that Revenue and Customs, the Department for Transport and the border delivery protocol group are increasing their engagement with British companies and working to find creative ways to reach smaller businesses to ensure that there is a greater level of readiness. Our officials are also liaising with their counterparts in the Irish Government in Dublin to resolve issues that are mainly related to the absence of customs declarations. We will continue to press the British Government for resolutions across all of those issues.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Before you come in again, Arlene, we are still struggling to hear you. I do not know whether it is possible to remove your headset and use whatever microphone you have there. Christopher Stalford cannot hear you, and I know that he hangs on every word that you say. *[Laughter.]* He is quite keen that you can be heard.

Mrs O'Neill: There is no sound, Arlene.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): OK. It might help if it is plugged in again.

Mrs O'Neill: There is still no sound, Arlene.

Do you want to move on to another piece of business, Chair, and come back to us?

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): I am happy enough to take a five-minute break to allow things to be sorted out.

Committee suspended.

On resuming —

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): The meeting is back in session, and I pass back to the First Minister, who will continue with the presentation.

Mrs Foster: The next issue that we wanted to address with the Committee was victims and survivors. We have concluded the consideration of options for the post of Commissioner for Victims and Survivors and instructed officials to commence the process of appointment, which must comply with the code of practice for ministerial appointments. We have asked officials to draw up terms of reference for a review, to be completed within six months, of the office of the commissioner. Those two issues are under consideration.

I will hand back to Michelle.

Mrs O'Neill: *[Inaudible.]*

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): This really is a joint office, is it not, Michelle? We cannot hear you now.

Mrs O'Neill: Can you hear me now?

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Yes, we have you back.

Mrs O'Neill: Apologies. We are committed to meeting the needs of bereaved victims and survivors. Victims' groups have highlighted concerns, particularly regarding the lack of acknowledgement of the trauma that bereaved victims have experienced, so our officials have been exploring options to address the need to acknowledge what bereaved victims have suffered, and that could be delivered by the Victims and Survivors Service (VSS). We are considering those options and will reach a decision shortly.

Mrs Foster: The Justice Minister has indicated to the Assembly that her aim is to open a victims' payment scheme to applications in early March. A substantial programme of work is under way with the Department of Justice. However, more work needs to be implemented before a scheme of that complexity and magnitude can become operational. Progress to date includes ongoing development of an online system to receive applications; a tender process for the appointment of an assessment service provider will conclude shortly; the Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission (NIJAC) is at an advanced stage of the selection process for an interim victims' payment board; and accommodation has been secured. Department of Justice officials, in conjunction with the Executive Office, continue to engage with all relevant bodies regarding evidence retrieval processes, and fortnightly engagement meetings continue to be held with the sector. The Lord Chief Justice has announced the appointment of Mr Justice McAlinden as interim president of the payments board.

I will turn briefly to historical institutional abuse (HIA). At the end of December, the Historical Institutional Abuse Redress Board had received 959 applications for compensation. The board has made determinations totalling [*Inaudible*] million pounds and paid out £5.76 million of redress. The new president of the board is Mr Justice Ian Huddleston, who was appointed on 8 January as part of a periodic reallocation of judicial roles. The previous president, Mr Justice Adrian Colton, is returning to the courts to take on the role of lead judicial review judge. We acknowledge the key role that he has played in establishing the scheme, the first payments from which started to be made just seven weeks after the scheme opened.

Mrs O'Neill: I am very pleased to confirm that Fiona Ryan took up her position as commissioner on 14 December. Her role will be to represent the best interests of all HIA victims and survivors. There is no doubt that she has many challenges ahead, such as work on an apology, a memorial and ensuring that the proper support services are put in place. I am sure that we all want to take this opportunity to wish Fiona well in her new post. A new package of support services was launched with the VSS, WAVE and Advice NI on 1 December. It includes additional psychological therapies, complementary therapies, support for social isolation and support for people experiencing persistent pain. To date, 82 survivors have registered with that service.

Mrs Foster: The mother and baby homes are very much in the news today. The Department of Health is, of course, the lead Department on that issue. Ministers are naturally concerned at the findings of the report by the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes. The deputy First Minister and I will meet Minister O'Gorman next Wednesday 20 January to discuss the commission's findings and, in particular, any issues that have a cross-border dimension. The interdepartmental working group on mother and baby homes, Magdalene laundries and historical clerical child abuse, which is chaired by Judith Gillespie, is considering the findings and recommendations of that report.

Mrs O'Neill: I am glad to say that the research into Magdalene laundries and mother and baby homes here, commissioned by the interdepartmental working group and undertaken jointly by Queen's University and Ulster University, is complete. We understand that a paper will be brought to the Executive shortly for consideration. Subject to the Executive's approval, it is intended to publish the research report before the end of January. Alongside the publication of the research report, the Executive will also be asked to consider and agree recommendations on the way forward. The chair of the group has established a reference group that includes victims and survivors and their representatives. They clearly have to play an important role in this work programme.

Mrs Foster: Finally, Chair, I will talk about the Programme for Government. Significant work has been done to develop a new outcomes-based Programme for Government. The programme reflects the dependencies and connections that exist between the different strands of public policy. The Programme for Government is something that we can all contribute to. It has a clear focus on the things that matter most to people, namely health, happiness and life satisfaction. However, it is also a programme that will provide a sound and lasting basis for designing, shaping and delivering public services so as to achieve the best possible outcomes on societal well-being. At a meeting on 22 December, the Executive agreed a draft outcomes framework for use as a starting point in a public consultation about the direction of the Programme for Government. We expect the process to launch

very soon. We will, of course, share the document with the Committee as soon as we can. Our officials will be able to say more about the PFG development process and consultation when they attend the Committee next week to provide an update on NDNA matters, which, of course, include the PFG.

Mrs O'Neill: In the work that we are doing to develop the new outcomes-based Programme for Government, it is important that we get the wording of the outcomes right. That is the critical first step, and that is what the Executive are seeking to achieve in the forthcoming public consultation. The new draft outcomes framework is only the beginning of the conversation. As the Committee knows, it is a starting point for discussion and, no doubt, debate. The framework sets out the draft wording of the outcomes and incorporates some early thinking on what the key priorities might be under each. The Executive have also committed to work in a very joined-up way to put in place impactful strategies and actions that tackle our most intractable problems and to deliver real and lasting change on the things that matter most to people. At the end of the consultation, when finalised, the new framework will provide a new basis for longer-term policy planning by the Executive and act as a touchstone for all strategies and actions moving forward.

Those are our opening remarks, Chair, so it is over to you.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): OK. Thank you very much for that. I am glad that we got our technical hitches sorted out and are up and running.

I will start. As we said, July was the last time that we had the chance to catch up via the Committee, so I will ask a question about the public messaging on COVID. Public messaging and behaviour have been critical to preventing the spread of the coronavirus in our communities. Has the behaviour of politicians reached the standard asked of them by the public? Does going to London, when the advice suggests that we do not, help? Does going for long-distance walks well away from your home help? Does not wearing a face mask help? Does attending large-scale events help to curb the spread? Does using your veto in the Executive to prevent an essential lockdown, the lack of which led to the further spread of the virus in our communities, help? Do you regret some of the decisions that you have taken? Do you feel the need to apologise to the public for asking them to do what some in the political cohort have evidently been unable to do?

Mrs Foster: Thank you for that question. We should all remember, including everyone on this call, that politicians are human beings. We are like the rest of humanity. Decisions have been made that people will probably need to reflect on. However, if you are making a political point about members of my party going to Westminster, my response is that they are representatives, just as you are. You are in the Assembly today. You travelled to chair a meeting, which, of course, is essential work. Michelle and I, having decided not to do that today, are attending remotely, and we can see all the difficulties attached to that. It is very challenging for all of us to try to continue to represent the people who put us into these positions and, at the same time, ensure that we send out very strong public messages on COVID and the need for us to stay at home and do what is right.

The veto, as you know, is a mechanism that was put in place by the Belfast Agreement. No changes were suggested to the veto in New Decade, New Approach, and therefore it is open to three members of the Executive to call for it. You will recall that, at that particular point in time, we were trying to give hope to hairdressers, small coffee shop owners and others who were really under a lot of pressure, and the decision was whether to allow them to open for a week. I do not regret that, because when you look at other jurisdictions and see what has happened across Europe and the world, you realise that none of us could have foreseen the severity of what was coming down the tracks towards us, which is what we are having to deal with now.

The Executive, and those of us who lead parties within the Executive, have always striven to take a proportionate and balanced approach to COVID-19. Hindsight is a wonderful thing, and we can look back and say that there are things that we should have done and things that we should not have done in the past year, but there will be plenty of time for reflection. We are involved in trying to make sure that we lead Northern Ireland in a way that gets us quickly out of this dreadful situation. It is a situation that is not without hope. I am delighted to say that Northern Ireland is leading the United Kingdom on vaccine roll-out — it is wonderful to see that going so well — and our positive case number, from a high of over 2,000, is falling, and the number today is 1,145. However, that does not take away from the fact that our hospitals are under incredible pressure and that, therefore, much needs to be done by those of us who are in public life to get the message out to people that they should stay at home as much as possible.

Mrs O'Neill: The only thing to add is that I concur on the point that there will be plenty of time for reflection. Given the challenges that we face right now, we have to focus on the here and now and the situation that we have. Our health service is under huge pressure, our healthcare workers are under huge pressure, and the system is on the brink of collapse. Yesterday, on a joint platform at the Hill of The O'Neill in Dungannon, we took the opportunity to reinforce the message to stay at home, and we ask the Committee for its support by doing likewise. Some of the work that the Executive are involved in, particularly the work of the task force, looks to strengthen communications. We have our internal Executive information service, and all Departments try to deliver on their role in responding to the Executive. However, looking to the future, strategic communication will be a key part of getting us through the here and now and on to the recovery piece. I am glad that we have been able to commission some work on strategic communications. We are working with the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) to move forward on that.

From today's appearance at the Committee, let the joined-up public message from Arlene and me, as First Minister and deputy First Minister, be very clear. It is, "Please stay at home. Help us to get through the next few weeks as we try to alleviate some of the pressure on the health service". This current period is probably the worst position that we have been in throughout the pandemic. We are living through all the nightmare predictions made last March and the worst-case scenarios that were modelled. For today, the message is certainly to, "Please stay at home and limit your movements as best you can."

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Thank you very much for answering the seven separate questions contained within that last question. I think that no was the answer to them all.

What is your message to the large multinational supermarkets that are stretching to the limit their ability to sell non-essential goods when the regulations clearly state that they should not? How do you think that local traders feel when they are prevented from selling items, yet their customers can go to larger retailers, often in the same town, and get the non-essential items from there? Those traders would like to hear that you understand the hurt that that causes to them and their businesses. Will a mere guilt trip cut it with the larger retailers, or will you regulate to stop this from happening and ensure a level playing field for retail for the period of the coronavirus?

Mrs O'Neill: The Executive are working their way through this. It is more than a mere threat — is that what you called it?

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): I called it a "guilt trip".

Mrs O'Neill: It is more than that. We are looking at what else we can do. We have had this discussion at the Executive. All Ministers, including your ministerial colleague, have been chatting out what else we can do to bring this in by way of regulation, if there is a way for us to do that. It is not straightforward, but we absolutely recognise that smaller retailers are being disadvantaged because of larger retailers taking liberties. We will discuss this again at the Executive tomorrow. We also have a round-table discussion scheduled for Friday with major retailers on this very issue, which is very topical. None of the smaller retailers, who are doing the right thing by complying and keeping their doors closed, should be in any way disadvantaged. Larger retailers are, perhaps, exploiting the current flexibilities that they have. If we have to regulate, that is what we will do.

Mrs Foster: Thank you, Michelle and Chair. We have always approached this in recognition that we are asking people to do something that, ordinarily, we certainly would not ask of them. We have always asked people to work with us in partnership. That is true whether we have been working with the churches, local government, the Health and Safety Executive or the police. That is why we are bringing people together to have that conversation. We would much rather that people recognised their moral duty in all of this. As I have already said in the Chamber, it is wrong that small independent stores selling clothes, for example, are told to close by the Executive, yet the multinational stores that sell clothes as well as essential goods are able to continue to sell clothes. I do not think that that is fair. It is not right or equitable; it is discrimination.

We will look to those companies to take action. Some, by saying that they will enforce the mandatory wearing of masks, have already done so. That comes a little late for our liking. Still, we welcome the fact that they have decided to do it. We ask also them, as large retailers, to look at their responsibility to the rest of the economy in Northern Ireland, because it is not right that those small independent retailers, who are now receiving stock for spring and summer, still have a lot of their winter stock left.

We absolutely agree that something has to be done, and we will approach the meeting on Friday to try to deal with those issues.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): That would certainly be welcome, because, where the moral outrage is concerned, there are even some examples of larger retailers closing down sections in their shop to make sure that the majority of what is open is essential. That allows them to sell essential and non-essential goods, and I think that that has been particularly hurtful to the small retailer in the local towns right across Northern Ireland. I think that movement on that would be very welcome.

Ministers, you mentioned the report into the mother and baby issues here and said that there will be a report, hopefully, by the end of the month. There is a small perception out there that maybe there has been quite a delay with the report. If there is a delay, what caused it? Do you feel that, if the report warrants it, there needs to be an apology and even a public inquiry, if required, into the issue here in the North in order to acknowledge the significant damage and emotional hurt that has been caused? Will you commit to that if the report suggests it?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said, we expect to receive the report by the end of the month. I know that a lot of work has been taken forward by Judith Gillespie and her team on working with the victims and survivors, who have to be at the core of any decisions on what happens next. I believe that the Executive will have the report by the end of the month, and I look forward to getting it and to turning around a response very quickly. I think what happened in the South yesterday was appalling in that the report was leaked to the public before the victims and survivors had sight of it. I think that that was a further slap in the face, and we need to make sure that that does not happen here. We need to make sure that the victims and survivors are the first people to know, and we need to make sure that we take them with us.

Whatever is asked in the report, I will respond accordingly, and no doubt Arlene will feel the same. It is really important that victims and survivors be at the centre of whatever comes next as recommended by the report, whether that is a full public inquiry, an independent investigation or a statutory investigation. Whatever that may look like, I am prepared to do whatever is required to make sure that these women are no longer denied access to justice, which is what they require. Whether an apology, investigations or whatever are required, I am determined to do that.

Mrs Foster: I think, Chair, that it is important that we reflect on the fact that what happened in mother and baby homes and in Magdalene laundries is not that far back in our history. It is atrocious, when you read some of the accounts, to read of the forced adoptions that happened to and the excess deaths of those young mothers. It is very traumatic to look at that, so I can only imagine the trauma that some of those children who were adopted by force feel now. Indeed, in some cases, they have not been able to trace their mum because of issues with data in the Republic of Ireland. I think that that needs to be looked at as well.

I think that since she came in as chair, Judith Gillespie has made great progress. When we met her recently, both Michelle and I were very taken by her energy and determination to get to the truth, so I very much look forward to her report. Whilst I totally understand that some people will call for a public inquiry, I think that it is also recognised that, because this is such a personal and private issue, others may not want that to take place. We will listen to all those arguments to hear what Judith has to say to us about the way forward. As Michelle says, we will want to take that forward, whatever it is.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Thank you. Finally from me, do you accept that the empty supermarket shelves and the major delays for the haulage firms are a direct result of Brexit?

Mr Stalford: No.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): It is what parties such as mine warned about all along. There was an opportunity for the UK to remain in the single market and the customs union and to enable the UK to meet its obligations to other agreements, such as the Good Friday Agreement. Some of the usual voices saying, "No. No. Never" were heard, and here we are. Do you feel that the situation that we are in is a price worth paying for the freedom that Brexit was going to offer us?

Mrs Foster: Northern Ireland does not have the freedom that it should with Brexit because of the protocol. Of course, your party calls for the rigorous implementation of the protocol instead of trying to deal with the huge difficulties that have arisen because of that protocol. I regret that deeply. Michelle will have a different view, of course, on Brexit, but there are opportunities for us. It is a gateway to

opportunity but only if we deal with the iniquitous protocol, which is causing so much difficulty for the people of Northern Ireland.

Mrs O'Neill: Chair, as you know, we do not have a shared view on Brexit, and you know that my personal view is that there is nothing good to come from Brexit and that we have known all along that it comes with huge challenges. We also know that the people here voted to remain, so we have been taken out of the EU against our wishes. What we experienced in the last number of weeks has been a direct result of a trade and adjustment shock. It is clear that, because of the lateness of the deal and the detail, on the British side, there has not been preparedness and the operational readiness has not been where it should be. It is clear that businesses at this end have been very ready because of the major implications for our businesses. From speaking with the business community and directly to hauliers, for example, it is very clear to me that the major issue of operational readiness on the British side has not been where it should be.

We also have groupage, which I referred to in my opening remarks and which is also causing problems. However, I am pleased to say that our officials have informed us that the major retailers' flow of fresh food, for example, is now above 95% of the norm. Our food flow is continuing to improve daily, and, hopefully, it will be back to where it should be. The reality is that businesses in Britain were not ready for the new trading realities, and our businesses are now bearing the brunt of that.

Mr Beattie: Thank you, Chair. I hope that you can all hear me. Arlene and Michelle, thank you very much indeed, and happy new year to you and to the whole Committee. An awful lot is going on. I can absolutely see that nothing can stand still and that nothing should stand still. We are talking about a Victims' and Survivors' Commissioner, historical institutional abuse, mother and baby homes and the Programme for Government.

I will focus on two things, COVID and Brexit, which are the two defining issues at this time. Will the First Minister and deputy First Minister give us a sense of where they see us with regard to the COVID lockdown? I know, Ministers, that you are due to assess it on 21 January and that lockdown is due to end on 6 February. Will you give us your sense of where we are? In one breath, we are saying that there is not much else that we can do with regard to lockdown and, in another, we are saying that maybe there are other measures that we can take. Are we likely to spread on to the end of February, as the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) believes? Where do you see us in coming out of this?

Mrs O'Neill: It is hard to say at this stage where we are going to be on 6 February. However, we know that we are in a desperate situation. As the Chief Medical Officer and Ian, the Chief Scientific Adviser, stated publicly, it looks like we are on the other side of the peak in the number of cases. The number of cases is coming down for now because of the restrictions that are in place. However, we have not reached our peak in our hospital admissions, and that is where the huge pressure is being felt right now. We had an Executive meeting on Tuesday, and I put it directly to the Health Minister to say whether there is anything else that we need to do in order to help in the here and now, particularly to take the pressure off the hospital situation. There was no recommendation for additional measures, for example, right now.

As we know from throughout the whole pandemic, this is a very fast-moving situation and sometimes you have to move according to the prevailing situation. We will review the restrictions again. If they are needed for longer, they are needed for longer, and if we can lift anything, we will do that. As we speak, it is very hard to give any certainty about what post-6 February will look like. If you were basing it on today's situation, you would say that it could last longer, but we need to keep an open mind about what happens next and work with the public health advice when it is given to us.

Mrs Foster: I will add to that, briefly, Doug, and say that I know that people want to have certainty, and we hear from different sectors quite frequently that we have not given them certainty. I wish that we could have certainty, but we have not been able to have certainty for a whole year now. It is hugely frustrating. I am on record many times saying that none of this is inevitable. It is down to personal responsibility and taking action to cut down on social contact to make sure that we are not putting pressure on the National Health Service. Today, our number of COVID inpatients has reached the grand figure of 869. That is incredible. We were nowhere near that in the first wave. I think that that is double, if not more than double, where we were in the first wave. The pressure on our health service is immense.

I take the opportunity to pay tribute to the resilience and determination of our healthcare workers, whether they are ancillary workers, nurses, doctors or consultants. They have all stepped up. You

could see that at the weekend when the call went out from the Southern Trust and the Western Trust to say, "Come in, please, even if you are off duty. We need your help". When this is all over, we will have to recognise the work of our health heroes in a meaningful way. We know that. We are going to have to step up and do that. I think that the whole Assembly would want us to do that.

Mr Beattie: You are right, First Minister. Thank you both for that. I was not trying to hold you to a time frame or anything like that. The big concerns for people are to get business and society open again — of course that is what we want — but there is also the fear that we will do what we did before and open too soon or too quickly and will have to go back into lockdown again. There is a fine line to be danced along to make sure that we look at this over a slightly longer term than the next two or four weeks to ensure that we have things in place.

I have a second question, if I may. This is my last one, because I know that others need to come in. I will be honest about this: it annoys me that anybody is gloating about food shortages, or any other shortages, in Northern Ireland. Nobody, whether they are pro-Brexit or anti-Brexit, should be gloating over empty shelves. The people who suffer as a result of our supermarket shelves being empty are the ones who go in to buy the cheapest food and cannot get it. Nobody should be gloating about that, and I hope that people are not.

There is a fundamental problem, however. I met Hospitality Ulster and its supply group yesterday. They said that things were bad but that it is a good job that we are in lockdown, because if we were not, things would be 10 times worse. I found that quite stark. What the Irish Government did was to tweak the customs checks and regulations in very small ways just to be able to free up a backlog into Irish ports. Is there no way that we could do something similar here in Northern Ireland to clear the backlog and to make sure that the flow comes through slightly better than it does now?

Mrs Foster: Doug, you are absolutely right. No one should be gloating, because it is people on very low wages who will be hit hardest when stores like Iceland are not able to get their goods through.

In looking for solutions to all these things, which is what I am trying to do, I am pleased to say that today the Government confirmed that they have a solution to VAT on second-hand cars. That is an issue that I have been working on. It would have been incredible to, essentially, have double-taxation for people who buy cars from Great Britain. That is being dealt with.

You are right. We need to find solutions for some of the issues that Michelle mentioned with groupage. I understand that the Minister in DEFRA is looking actively for solutions there and hopes to come back to us on that in the near future. Solutions are also required for pet travel, which may seem like an issue that should not be an annoyance, but we know that it is, particularly for assistance dogs, for example. We have to be able to have those trained dogs coming over here to help people who are partially or totally blind. Therefore, we need to seek solutions; it is why we need to keep pressing the Government. You rightly identified that the Irish Government were able to tweak and make relaxations, so why in heaven's name can our Government not do that for internal traffic in the United Kingdom? It should be very easily done, and we will keep pressing the Government on it.

Mrs O'Neill: I think that there are a number of challenges that need to be addressed, and these meetings are happening on a daily basis in order to try to get to the resolution point. There has been some progress, but I think that a lot of unintended — sorry, unexpected — situations are occurring. For example, manufacturing companies have just this week realised that they are going to have an additional 25% charge for buying steel. That has huge implications for anybody's trading books, so it is something else that needs to be resolved. We have very much been pushing for solutions. Certainly, I do not believe that anybody can gloat about any of these things. These are the realities of Brexit and the things that we were warned about. They are also the reality for now. Given that they are, we have to find solutions to make sure that our businesses continue to trade, that we have a steady supply of goods and services and that those things continue into the future.

Mr Beattie: I will add something to that. I just want to get your thoughts on this matter, because I raised it previously. In the UK, we have commissioned the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, but they have not in the EU. While that is OK now, what happens come the end of this year if the EU has not commissioned that Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine? Are we putting in contingencies if we have to get another load of vaccines from somewhere else because the EU will not let that one into Northern Ireland? I ask because it is a category 1 good, is it not?

Mrs Foster: Yes. The Health Minister has written to Michael Gove about the fact that we need priority for the medical shipments that are coming across to us. Obviously, the vaccine is the one that comes to mind, but there are many others that need to be given priority. We signed off — I think that it was this week, Michelle — on giving the go-ahead for that letter to go to Michael Gove. It is important that we get priority for our medical goods and devices because we, obviously, need to be able to protect our citizens in the UK, just like any other British citizen.

Mr Lunn: I wish both Ministers a happy new year and a better one than last year. To go back to steel and second-hand cars, I heard Michael Gove speak before I left to come here, and he was making a good announcement about second-hand cars. He was very definite about it. He did not seem to be quite so definite about the situation with steel and the prospect of tariffs being imposed on that. He said something about a marginal agreement and that there could be a refund or a relaxation of that rule. Are we fairly certain that that situation has been resolved? I did not think that he was definite enough.

Mrs Foster: I do not think that the steel issue has been resolved yet, Trevor. I think that that is something that we will have to continue to work on. Certainly, it looks as though we have found a solution to VAT on second-hand cars, but I think that the steel thing came into our vision really only very recently. This is about steel coming into GB, where a tariff is paid, but if it comes across to Northern Ireland, another tariff is imposed because it is going back into GB again. We are seen to be making goods through the single market for goods in Northern Ireland in the European sense. We have to get that sorted out, because, as Michelle says, manufacturing companies just would not be viable if that was to come to fruition.

Mr Lunn: Yes.

Mrs O'Neill: Just to add to that — I concur with what Arlene said — what Michael Gove said today promised something on steel imports, but it did not go as far as to say what the solution is. I think that there is a bit more work to be done. We will meet Michael Gove later today, I think, and probably repeatedly over the coming days. We will make sure that we raise it, given the significance of the matter to the manufacturing industry right across the North. Arlene and I represent constituencies that have a very high manufacturing industry and that produce the vast majority of steel equipment for the whole of Europe, so it is detrimental to all those businesses.

Mr Lunn: To continue with Brexit and the supply chains to retailers in particular, it is no surprise to hear that I am totally against Brexit and that I wish that it had never happened. I do not think that the effects of it are working out to be quite so serious as we thought for stocking supermarket shelves and so on.

I was in a major supermarket last week, and it was very obvious that there were a lot of bare shelves, which was worrying. Somebody close to me was in the same supermarket this morning, and —

Mr Stalford: Not too close, I hope.

Mr Lunn: — two things that she noticed — it was my wife [*Laughter*] — were that the shelves were well-stocked again, but she did not recognise a lot of the brands on the shelves. The feeling is that our businesses are doing what business always does, which is to adapt to circumstances and to find a way, and that a lot of the stuff was coming up through the Republic of Ireland rather than across the Irish Sea.

Mrs Foster: There are two things, Trevor. Some of the shortages that we saw last week were related to the French blockade, which was nothing to do with Brexit and everything to do with COVID. You will recall that, just before Christmas and the new year, the French stopped lorries going across because they said that drivers needed a negative COVID test, which took some time to work through. We lost a couple of days, and that has now fed its way through because we are on the end of the supply chain and we have seen the evidence of that. It is not all protocol-related, but that piece has now been rectified.

On your point about the other goods on our shelves, I noticed that Sainsbury's put some Spar products into some of its shops in Northern Ireland. I do not see that as a negative, Trevor, and I want to tell you why. The AERA Minister was telling me that a limited amount of Northern Ireland produce goes into the supermarkets in Northern Ireland. Therefore, if supermarkets are increasing the number

of products from Northern Ireland in their shops in Northern Ireland, that is a really good thing because it shows that our produce can take advantage of that. I would not like to see consumers experience a reduction in the number of ranges that they are able to access. We have seen a little bit of that happening, and we will engage with the supermarkets on it.

Mr Lunn: I agree with you; I was not disagreeing. It is a good thing that Sainsbury's is managing to access Spar products. Wherever they access the products from, I am fine with that.

We had a discussion earlier about the mother and baby homes. Both of you will probably remember that we had a debate in the House a few years ago about the Bon Secours home in Tuam. It was Barry McElduff, Michelle's ex-colleague, who sponsored the debate. A lot of the things that were alleged at that time turned out to be true. In fact, in the Republic, it turned out to be a lot worse than anticipated at that time.

I know that Judith Gillespie — I have met her about this — is doing an excellent job, and I am sure that she will continue to do so. However, there is no border in this; these homes were organised by the same organisation, North and South. The practices that have been revealed in the South are absolutely horrifying. There is no reason to think that it was any better up here. At least two of those homes were still open in the early 2000s. It is hard to escape the notion that the only thing that will satisfy people will be a full public inquiry the same as that in the South. I acknowledge the work that Judith Gillespie is doing, but it probably needs to go further than that.

Mrs O'Neill: Trevor, you have to look at how you approach this. Judith has done her piece of work, but she will make recommendations to us, and that is where we will decide what will come next. The victims and survivors should be right at the centre and the heart of everything that we are doing. They should own the decisions that we take, and, to me, that will be fundamental to how we respond to the report. It has been long awaited, and Judith will present it within the next two weeks. It comes hot on the heels of the report in the South so, timing-wise, that is a good thing. As you said, the things that happened are harrowing, and that they happened until so recently is even more harrowing. People think that this happened away back in the day when clearly that is not the case. We have to respond in a way that listens to the stories of victims and survivors and is responsive to their needs, showing sensitivity and respect for what they have been through and how far they have come. I do not want to jump the gun, but we need to embrace whatever recommendations come forward from the group quickly and we turn them into the next step so that victims do not feel that they have reached a certain milestone and things are then parked again. We need to turn this around very quickly.

Mr Lunn: I have one more quick question, Chair, if you do not mind, about COVID-19 and the closing of schools, particularly primary schools. As you know, the children of key workers are still being accommodated in schools, and I have been approached about the situation where quite a lot of very young children are being dealt with in one of our prep schools. The teachers and classroom assistants are having to come in, but they have very little protection. Is there a case for, in those circumstances, people who are doing their job at risk to be prioritised for vaccination?

Mrs Foster: Trevor, the prioritisation in relation to vaccinations is set by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation, and that is where we take our lead from. It looks at all the different priorities and information and decides how to have the maximum impact on society. That is why our care homes and our over-80s were first.

We had a meeting with Jonathan Van-Tam, the Deputy Chief Medical Officer for England, who told us that, if you vaccinate 43 people in a care home, that saves one life. However, when you go down the priority list and move into, for example — I am not saying that all teachers are young — vaccinating young teachers, I think he said that a couple of thousand of young teachers would need to be vaccinated before you save one life. That Committee is looking at it from the point of view of saving lives through vaccination and how we can get the maximum impact.

It was interesting to hear Assistant Chief Constable Alan Todd say today that he would rather elderly and vulnerable people were vaccinated instead of his police officers. You might think that strange coming from a police officer, but he recognises where the most vulnerable groups are and, particularly when you look at our death rates, where the most vulnerabilities are.

Mrs O'Neill: Trevor, I understand why there is a prioritisation, particularly as you are dealing with the vaccine as it arrives in different batches. However, there is merit in arguing for people on the front line in public services to be vaccinated first. Through our Executive task force, we are pulling out all the

stops to allow us to vaccinate people as quickly as possible. There is so much goodwill out there. Pharmacists, GPs and community nurses are all playing their part, and we also have massive community infrastructure and people who want to get on board. We want a speedy roll-out of the vaccination, and we want to do everything we can and leave no stone unturned in supporting the Health Minister to get that rolled out as quickly as possible and reach all those on the front line.

Mr Lunn: Vaccination is one of the good points in Northern Ireland, so thanks for that.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): OK. We need to move on. If you feel it relevant, Ministers, one of you might want to answer the questions as we progress, as in the Ad Hoc Committee, unless the other feels that there is a different element to it. That might shave a bit of time from the responses. Is Pat Sheehan there to ask his question?

Mr Sheehan: Yes. Thank you, Chair. I want to focus on the COVID-19 task force and its objectives, strategy and priorities. The countries that have been successful in combating the virus have all used integrated, coordinated strategies and a wide range of measures to tackle it. It is my view — I have said this all along — that the Department of Health does not appear to have an integrated coordinated strategy, and some of its advice has been questionable.

The result is that our health service is under more pressure now than at any stage of the pandemic. My fear is that the Department of Health will put all its eggs in the one basket of the vaccine. There are difficulties with that. First, it is not known how long protection will last after people are vaccinated. Secondly, given the high transmission of the virus across the world, scientists tell us that there is a chance that, over time, it will mutate and become resistant to the vaccine. There are serious questions about our strategy to combat the virus. That includes contact tracing, mass testing and so on. To cut to the chase, what will the task force do differently from what has been done in the past?

Mrs O'Neill: Thanks for that, Pat. Each Department has its own policy responsibility. Health has responsibility for the testing programme and contact tracing and all those things that need to happen. It was clear to us that we needed an overarching umbrella structure to bring together the various threads. We are clear that, although we need to deal with the here and now, we need to look to the future: what does recovery look like? I share the view that we should not put all our eggs in the vaccination basket; even though the vaccination is our hope — as Trevor said, it is our light at the end of the tunnel — different strains of the virus are emerging. Fortunately, to date, none of those strains has proved resistant to the vaccines that have been developed, but there is no doubt that the virus will continue to mutate and that there will have to be different vaccinations at different points.

We cannot wait until the summer — until such times as everybody has been vaccinated — before we get back to some semblance of normality, so, in the here and now, the issues of tracking and tracing and of mass testing need to be focused on, as we have suggested on many occasions. We do not want to be in endless lockdowns; we want to find a way of opening things up until we get to the point at which people are vaccinated. Without trying to cut across existing ministerial responsibilities and accountabilities, we tried to focus on what we can do to bring all the different threads together.

The task force was established and it received terms of reference very quickly. We are working with the Strategic Investment Board, which will help us with our four key areas of work, one of which is strategic communications. It is important that we communicate with the public, but we are also doing a lot of detailed work on behavioural science and how to encourage people to comply. We are looking in the here and now at how we can support mass interventions for the vaccine, as well as mass testing. We are looking at adherence and working with those responsible for compliance with the regulations. We met the PSNI and the Chief Constable yesterday. We will meet local government and those tasked with dealing with compliance.

The final issue that we are looking at is economic, societal and health recovery. The task force will be the tool to bring all the various threads together to help us to move forward by making sure that the notion of putting all our eggs in the vaccination basket is resisted at all times.

Mr Sheehan: Can I come back in there, Chair?

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Yes.

Mr Sheehan: Thanks for that, Michelle. One of the things that you did not mention was travel restrictions. When the Chief Scientific Adviser was at the Health Committee last week, I asked him

about his advice to the Executive before Christmas on restricted travel from England, particularly the south of England, into the North. His view was that it did not pose a significant risk to public health in the North. To me, that sounded counter-intuitive, as the Health Minister in England had said that the virus was out of control and that a new variant was gaining dominance, yet people there could walk into an airport unchecked, unrestricted, fly to here, get off the plane, unchecked, unrestricted, and go about their business. If the scientific advice was that the risk was insignificant, it must have come straight from the Donald Trump school of science, and people can be forgiven for thinking that.

The Dublin Government have now imposed restrictions of a kind, and travellers coming into Ireland will have to have a negative test before they can get on a plane at the point of departure. Is that not the minimum requirement here to ensure maximum North/South cooperation and protection for the island of Ireland in general?

Mrs Foster: We have asked about travel, as you have. The Chief Scientific Adviser's analysis is that travel is not a big part of the spread of the virus. We take what he has advised, as we are not scientists and cannot second-guess what Ian and Michael will advise us. I have to say: their modelling has been spot on many occasions. When they told us that we needed to put restrictions in place on 26 December, we did that. I am glad that we did do that because we are now seeing the benefit as the number of positive cases is starting to go in the right direction, and that is very important.

On many occasions, the Health Minister has reflected his frustration with the amount of data shared between Dublin airport and ourselves. There has been an ongoing discussion about data sharing. The Republic of Ireland has indicated that there is no legal difficulty with sharing data from ROI airports with Northern Ireland. We would certainly like the information on the locator forms so that we can make an analysis of people travelling through Dublin into Northern Ireland.

As I said, our scientific advice is that travel within the common travel area, which is the British Isles, is not contributing in any meaningful way to the spread of the virus. The fact that the R rate is starting to go down from 1.8 10 days ago to 1.1 or 1.2 at the moment, and the fact that the new variant present in the Republic of Ireland, southern England and Scotland causes the R rate to rise by up to 0.7, means it is thought that the new variant is not dominant in Northern Ireland. The new variant may be in Northern Ireland, but it is certainly not dominant as it is in places such as London at present.

Mrs O'Neill: Chair, I know that you do not want us to add to every question. However, I will add that we will be discussing the COVID-19 situation by phone with the Taoiseach later this evening, and, no doubt, travel will be discussed. My personal view is that there should be an all-island approach to travel. We should maximise North/South cooperation and use the fact that we are on an island to our advantage, which has not happened sufficiently throughout the pandemic. However, it is important that we talk to the Taoiseach this evening about what else can be done on travel or cooperation in any other area. We are in a very difficult situation across the island. The two health services are under huge pressure. It is important that we share learning and approaches and do whatever we can to maximise that cooperation.

Mr Sheehan: Thank you. Chair, could I respond very quickly?

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Yes.

Mr Sheehan: Thank you. I concur with Arlene that there have been problems with data sharing; the responsibility rests with the Government in Dublin. It is disgraceful that those problems have not been resolved.

I accept that the Executive act on the scientific advice given to them, but my problem is that there are many other scientists giving different advice. We have examples of international best practice on travel restrictions. Sometimes, we need to look beyond the advice from the Department. Last week, Deirdre Heenan and Gabriel Scally, both prominent in the field of public health, published a 10-point plan to deal with the pandemic. That plan should go to the Executive for discussion. We should not take a narrow view on scientific advice that comes in.

There is no question there, but thanks for coming in today and thanks for listening. Thanks, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Thank you, Pat. Nothing chills me more than the mere suggestion of a Donald Trump school of scientific research; the mere thought of it puts years on me. Hopefully, this

day next week Donald Trumpism will be behind us. Next is Christopher Stalford, who is a Trump supporter.

Mr Stalford: I am not a Trump supporter; you should not malign my character in that way. I was about to say that the Donald Trump scientific approach would be desperately affected if supermarket shelves ever run out of Domestos.

The recent report on the mother and baby units contained some stark findings. In 2017, the infant mortality rate in the United Kingdom was 3.9 for every thousand. It has now been established by this report that the infant mortality rate for children in those institutions was 150 per 1,000. That is a scandalous figure that would not exist anywhere else in the world. I agree with Trevor that it is likely that on this side of the border the figures will ultimately prove similar. Can I ask the First Minister or the deputy First Minister when we will get an update in the House on the progress on investigating this brutal treatment of women and children?

Mrs O'Neill: I concur that we will find that we are no different. What happened to women in the Twenty-six Counties happened to women here in the North. When we receive detailed information on what happened, I do not think that we will be shocked. I agree with you — it was abhorrent. These were women who were forced into homes, forced into labour, forced into giving their children up for adoption and forced into their children being stolen from them. It is beyond belief that this went on until comparatively recently.

As soon as the Executive receive the report, given the significance of the issue — I am sure that Arlene would agree — that whether it is Health or us, or however it is done, there will have to be an Executive statement to the Assembly to give Members a chance to express their views and to ask questions on it. It is important that we turn it around very quickly and provide a next step for the victims and survivors.

Mr Stalford: I agree with the deputy First Minister that all these things need to be victim-centred and that any processes need to be shaped by those who suffered. I have absolutely no objection to the state issuing an apology to them. Whilst those institutions were largely clerically run, the state, in many cases, handed people over to them. From my perspective, I think that the state should absolutely apologise.

The HIA is related to that. The recommendations of Sir Anthony Hart's report are to be rolled out. Is there an established matrix for payments to be awarded, such as a sliding scale, so that people have an idea of what compensation they are entitled to?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not think that we have.

Mrs Foster: It is not a sliding scale. I think that it is determined by the board, Christopher. In my remarks, I referred to the fact that, when Mr Justice Colton was in office, he turned round those awards very quickly. It took seven weeks for the first one to come out. That was very welcome. We all recognise that victims of institutional abuse have faced undue delay in getting justice and monetary compensation. Fiona Ryan is now in post, and we look forward to working with her on the outstanding recommendations of the Hart report in an effective way.

However, apology has to be meaningful to the victims of institutional abuse. Michelle and I could issue an apology today, but we need it to be a meaningful apology that recognises what happened to those people. It will be the same for those who were forced into Magdalene laundries and mother and baby homes.

Christopher, you are right: the state has a responsibility, as do the Churches. However, society as a whole has a responsibility. It was considered acceptable to send an unmarried mother or a girl who was unmarried and pregnant into one of those institutions, and nobody batted an eyelid. We should not shy away from looking back at societal attitudes at that time.

Mr Stalford: I absolutely agree.

The reason that I asked about an matrix for HIA awards is that it has been highlighted to me that some people feel almost as though they are being bounced into accepting the lowest band of award. A relatively low offer is being made to some people and, because they have waited so long, are so frustrated and because, frankly, especially in the current climate, people are not working or unable to

work, they are desperate and will take it. That has been raised with me by some survivors. I wonder how we can ensure that the process is protected against something like that from happening.

Mrs Foster: We will take that concern back to our officials and ask them direct questions about it, now that you have raised it as an issue. I would have hoped that anyone applying to the board would have had independent legal advice. However, let us take back your issue, and we will come back to you on it as soon as we can.

Mr Stalford: I have one final question. First Minister and deputy First Minister, you will have heard that there has been talk on social and mainstream media about invoking article 16 of the Northern Ireland protocol. I will not pick a fight with the Chairman, but I find it funny that people who have argued for this protocol for three years, now encourage the Executive to do all they can to ameliorate the outcome of it. I did not argue for the protocol; I argued for Brexit for the United Kingdom. However, we will not go there. Could you talk through the processes of how exactly article 16 of the Northern Ireland protocol would be invoked? What are the mechanics of how that would happen? Do the Executive have a role in that?

Mrs Foster: It is for the UK Government to decide whether to invoke article 16. I thought that it was interesting to hear the Prime Minister say today that he would not hesitate to implement article 16 if that were necessary. The way in which the protocol has rolled out has shown that there is a necessity to look at all of this again. There is a necessity to ensure that there is no "economic, societal or environmental" damage to Northern Ireland. I am quoting from article 16 of the protocol. The daily conversations that we have will therefore continue. We will look for solutions, of course. If article 16 has to be invoked, however, that is a matter for the UK Government. There is then a role for the Joint Committee in that. Of course, as a result of New Decade, New Approach, we have observer status on the Joint Committee. I have to say that it was very useful for us to be involved in that during the latter part of last year.

It is not a straightforward matter, however, as I am sure that you recognise, Christopher. Nothing that involves the European Union is ever straightforward. Our own Government definitely need to take action on the protocol, which is causing damage to the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Stalford: Just to be absolutely clear, because it is important that it is put on the record and in Hansard, sole responsibility for the invocation of article 16 rests not with the Northern Ireland Assembly but with Downing Street?

Mrs Foster: That is correct.

Mr Stalford: Thank you.

Mrs O'Neill: I will add briefly that, when you have a problem, it is important to diagnose it properly, and certainly if you are trying to find a solution. What we have here is the fact that Brexit was run right down to the wire. A deal was reached at the eleventh hour. There was a failure to prepare on the British side, particularly to support businesses in Britain that trade back and forth. The adjustment that businesses are having to make in the here and now is what is causing a huge number of these difficulties. As I said earlier, we are working to try to get a resolution that helps minimise disruption for businesses. With all these things, as we have always said about Brexit, or as I have always said about Brexit, the best that we can do is to mitigate the damage. That is what we are trying to do right now. That is why we have always said that Brexit would be bad and would come with problems. It goes back to the point that someone made earlier about gloating. It may have been the Chair. It is not about gloating. These are the realities of Brexit and the challenges that we have. For my part, I will work with the local business community to try to find a resolution to the issues that are causing concern right now.

Mr Stalford: I disagree on Brexit. I do not think, however, that anyone could argue that the Government's handling of the past 12 months has been an example of strategy and statecraft.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Christopher, of course we will occasionally disagree —

Mr Stalford: Just occasionally.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): — but we never fight. *[Laughter.]* We never fight.

I will go to Emma Sheerin now. Emma, are you there?

Ms Sheerin: Sorry. It took me a wee minute to unmute myself there.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): That is fine.

Ms Sheerin: Can everyone hear me?

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Yes, we can indeed. Go ahead with your question.

Ms Sheerin: Thank you very much. I want to thank both Ministers for joining us. We have had a lengthy discussion up to this point, so I do not intend to keep anyone any longer than they need to be kept.

I want to bring you back to the conversation that you had with several members about the report into mother and baby homes that was published yesterday in the Twenty-six Counties. The subject is very topical because of that. There has been a lot of discourse on social media and in the media. Among the general public, everyone is talking about it. It cannot be overestimated just how widespread and recent that was. There were probably instances in almost every family in the country, North and South. It is just horrific and makes for harrowing reading. A litany of abuses and injustices was served on women — mothers, many of whom were still children themselves — and their children by the state and Church organisations working hand in hand. They were complicit and working in collaboration with each other. It is heartbreaking, particularly when you consider the fact that many of those women, who had their future denied to them and decisions taken away from them, did not even know a lot of the time what was happening to them. They had come out of a system in which sex education was minimal. They probably did not even understand what was happening to them for a large portion of their pregnancy. It is devastating and cannot be overestimated.

I thank you both for the assurance that you gave at the very start that, when we have our report in the North, it will be victim-led and that the response from the state will focus on the victims and the responses and accounts from the victims. What has been highlighted over the past 24 hours and what has caused and compounded the hurt felt by the victims and their families is the language used throughout the report and the use of phrases such as, "This account cannot be verified", or where it states that a person's report of abuse or domestic violence that happened in those homes cannot be backed up by any other evidentiary claims. That is what has exacerbated the hurt that those people have gone through. I wanted to say that at the outset, and thank you both for assuring us that, when a report is released in the North, it will be handled differently.

Mrs O'Neill: Thanks, Emma. I think that we both want to be very clear that everything that we do will be victim-centred. On the question of what comes next, I think that victims and survivors have to be part of the design, and we will make sure that that is the case. You have set out the experience of far too many women of going through the trauma that they went through at a point in time and then being re-traumatised by Church and state by being denied information about and access to birth records, details of parents and everything else. My message to all those women, and to all the victims and survivors, is that we hear you, we see you and we will do everything that we can. We will leave no stone unturned to uncover every bit of detail that we can in order to give you what you need for what comes next. We look forward to getting Judith Gillespie's report, and we hope to be able to turn it around as quickly as possible. We will be respectful, and we will listen to every woman and to her real, lived experience of what has been a harrowing time.

Ms Sheerin: Thanks. I have one other question, Chair, if that is OK. Monday was the first anniversary of New Decade, New Approach and the resumption of Stormont. I know that 2020 was a difficult year and that it provided us with challenges that no one could have predicted, but what are the big wins that have been achieved from NDNA's aims? Can we have an update on the language Bills? The goal was to have action on an Acht na Gaeilge within three months, but, obviously, that was waylaid by COVID. Where is it sitting at?

Mrs Foster: I do not think that any of us thought that we were going to be faced with a global pandemic when all of those timelines were set in place. We certainly would have wanted to see more progress made on a whole range of issues, and we do, of course, recognise that the culture and language accommodation that was agreed in NDNA has to be dealt with in a meaningful way. We will want to deal with that this year.

It is also important to say that, although we have not made the progress that we wanted to make, some good things have put in place, not least a mental health strategy. We have been able to start committal reform in dealing with the courts and undertaken the reclassification of housing associations so that the private sector can build more houses. There have therefore been some good things that have been moved along. They are not the headline issues that we would like to have seen moved along, but, all the same, progress has been made. We will, of course, turn our minds to all the rest of the issues in NDNA. We recognise that we have a short period left in this mandate. We will all be going out to election next May, so there is a lot to be done in the short period that is left. We really want to get on with that, so, once we are able to be in a recovery position, we will be dealing with all the issues that brought us back into this place. That is important to say.

Mrs O'Neill: It has been a hugely difficult year on many fronts, not least because of the two major issues of COVID and Brexit. Despite all the challenges, and despite the fact that we are five parties in an Executive, which is challenging in itself, we have had some achievements. It is still important to acknowledge those.

There has been progress made across Departments, from the mental health champion to the big shake-up in the housing programme, as well as all the vital support that we have been able to deliver for communities throughout the pandemic. I am glad that we have an Executive that are able to respond to the pandemic. We do not always get it right, and we certainly do not always agree, but we try our best, and the public want us to work together to respond in the best way that we can. Yes, there are many things outstanding. We want to see progress made on those things, and we hope to see progress over the coming weeks.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): We now go to Martina Anderson. Martina, are you there?

Ms Anderson: That is me unmuted. Thank you, Arlene and Michelle, for your presentation and answers. Given that the transition period was not used as it was supposed to be used — the clue was in the words "transition period" — which was to get businesses ready for what was going to happen at the end of the Brexit period, when some of us were kicked out of Europe against our democratic will, do you believe that there will be practical solutions to some of the reports that we have been hearing about food shortages? What work is being done now to avoid any new challenges when the grace period runs its course in 10 weeks' time?

Mrs Foster: Our companies in Northern Ireland did a lot of work to get ready. Part of the difficulty is that GB businesses selling into Northern Ireland had not done as much work and were therefore not as ready. Everybody seems to be in common cause on that, and it is something that we are trying to rectify through communications and by making sure that they do know what is required. Yes, I take your point on that, but it is more a case against GB companies as it is against Northern Ireland companies. They knew for some time that, regardless of what happened, they were going to have to take action.

As Michelle said, we have daily meetings. We or our junior Ministers are on what is called an XO meeting to try to deal with some of the issues that have arisen. We have been applying pressure about VAT on second-hand cars, so we are pleased to see that a solution to that is coming. We are trying to take this issue by issue and look for a solution. One of the biggest issues is groupage. Hauliers collecting different loads in different places is causing problems, and we need a solution to that. That is one of the things that we will be talking about to Michael Gove later this afternoon. We are absolutely committed to trying to find solutions to all those difficulties, and that is what our focus is on.

Ms Anderson: May I ask about Peace funding? I want some assurance that the much-valued Peace funding across the board is going to be matched and continued. Related to that, given that we have heard a lot about the shared prosperity fund, I am a bit concerned about reports of discussions on the Budget paper that some funding being looked for from the EU is going to be lost to the North out of other Ministers' budgets. The British Government told us that we were going to get the funding replaced out of the shared prosperity fund. Where is that at?

Mrs Foster: On the PEACE PLUS programme, there is a really good story to tell. The initial programme has been increased. The UK Government recently announced that there would be additional funding of over £200 million. That brings the total programme value to approximately £1 billion.

We, the Irish Government and the UK Government put in the funding. We had a discussion on some of the high-level, thematic Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) proposals that came to the Executive on Tuesday past. We will be engaging more with its chief executive on those thematic ways forward, so the PEACE PLUS story is a good one, Martina. We still do not have clarity on the UK shared prosperity fund. We need to know about its competitive nature, because, if it is a competitive fund, it is more challenging for us in Northern Ireland, as you will understand. We therefore need to get that clarity, and the Minister for the Economy is pushing hard to get it in the coming weeks.

Ms Anderson: May I make an appeal to you for tomorrow's Executive meeting? We were told at the Infrastructure Committee today that there will be a discussion tomorrow at the Executive — I do not know about the reality of this, but it is what the officials told us — about a second scheme for taxi drivers and taxi operators.

You do not need reminding, Arlene and Michelle, that you made a statement on 24 November. Arlene, you clearly sent a signal to taxi operators, private bus operators and coach operators that they would face a significant reduction in demand for their services. Michelle, you also mentioned the negative impact on taxi operators, private bus operators and coach operators. When the scheme was devised, however, the bus operators were left out. Moreover, some taxi drivers temporarily suspended their insurance and, because of the way in which the scheme was devised, were left out. Some of them were shielding, and their insurance company advised them to take a temporary break, so they ended up being excluded. They are now being told that they might, on a pro rata basis, lose some funding if they have, for instance, temporarily suspended their insurance for a month or two. In the statement that you put out on 24 November, you told taxi operators and taxi drivers that they would be included in the scheme en bloc, but it seems that there has been a lot of bureaucracy around it that has ended up in some taxi drivers and the bus operators being excluded. I ask you to look at that issue tomorrow, please, if, indeed, it is discussed tomorrow, or, if not, when you are dealing with the second scheme.

Mrs O'Neill: It has taken some time for that scheme to come about. We can certainly raise those points with the Infrastructure Minister tomorrow at the Executive, if she is intending to bring forward the detail of the scheme. I am more than happy to raise that issue on behalf of taxi drivers.

Ms Anderson: I have one final question, and it is on an arrangement between Enniskillen hospital and Cavan General Hospital for COVID patients. For instance, if bed availability exists in one or other hospital, is some arrangement being made? We have heard about a memorandum of understanding — Arlene and Michelle, you have talked about it in the Chamber at times — but will it deal with such issues?

Mrs Foster: Martina, I was speaking to Anne Kilgallen, our mutual chief executive in the trust, and she did not mention that, but, as Michelle said yesterday, if there is a request for assistance, that should, of course, be looked at. It does not matter whether it is coming from us to the Republic or from the Republic to us. We should, at all times, try to assist, particularly in circumstances in which the hospitals are under incredible pressure.

Ms Anderson: Thank you both for that.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Members, thank you very much for all those questions, and thank you to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for giving us nearly two hours. The key message for all of us with COVID is safety. We all need to continue to do what we can to minimise our movements and ensure that we follow all the guidelines and regulations.

I welcome the leadership from our Committee today. Only two Committee members are present, and they are local to Parliament Buildings. As all MLAs know, Standing Orders, unfortunately, do not permit Chairs to chair a meeting virtually. It has to be done through a presence in the room, so I am required to be here to enable the Committee meeting to happen.

I thank the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for their attendance. I do not know whether it is by default, design or accident or because you are not in the same room, but I feel that your approach today was very harmonious and that you were determined to try to address all the issues. It is fair to say that, in 2020, the public were, rightly, a little bit sick of all the fighting and bickering. I think that they like politicians and the Executive best when they are working together and pulling in the same direction to tackle the issues that impact on people's lives day and daily. At this time, the most important issue is to get ourselves past this virus. I thank you both for your attendance today and wish

you a happy new year. The Committee looks forward to further contact with you as the year progresses. Thank you very much indeed.

Mrs O'Neill: Thank you.

Mrs Foster: Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Committee, I suggest a two-minute break for us to catch our breath and to get ourselves ready for the next presentation.