



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Infrastructure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Taxi Financial Assistance Scheme:
Department for Infrastructure

13 January 2021

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

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

Witnesses:

Mrs Beverley Cowan	Department for Infrastructure
Ms Julie Thompson	Department for Infrastructure

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): We welcome Julie Thompson, who is the deputy secretary for the planning, safety and transport policy group, and we have Beverley Cowan, head of driving policy, who is coming to the meeting via StarLeaf. You are both very welcome. It is good to see you. Julie, I understand that you will make an opening statement. Members will then follow up with some questions.

Ms Julie Thompson (Department for Infrastructure): Thank you for the opportunity to come along today and give you an update on the Department's provision of financial assistance for the taxi sector. As well as several responses over recent months from the Department to the Committee on the issue, in advance of today we obviously gave you a written briefing which set out the background to the scheme and various issues around it. Now I want to give you an update on where we are with the scheme and plans for a second scheme for taxi drivers.

I will look at taxi drivers first. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to cause a significant and long-lasting impact right across our businesses and communities, and that includes taxis. In recognition of the challenges faced, the Minister acted swiftly at the outset of the pandemic to put in place a number of regulatory easements, such as automatic licences, amounting to over a million pounds of support. In addition, after new powers were granted to the Department by the First Minister and deputy First Minister on 3 November, the Minister opened the taxi driver financial assistance scheme on 13 November, and it closed on 27 November. As you all know, the scheme was agreed by the Executive and was designed to provide a contribution to overhead costs, including PPE, that had been incurred as a result of the COVID pandemic. It is in addition to all the other financial support provided to taxi drivers and, indeed, all self-employed workers through the self-employment income support schemes and the newly self-employed schemes in particular. In order to ensure value for money, the scheme

was dependent on expenses having been occurred during the period 22 March up to 30 September. Taxi drivers who had evidence of continuous insurance were eligible for the payment of £1,500, and that was based on feedback from the sector on their overheads and that the most significant overhead that they incurred was insurance.

In terms of scheme uptake, a total of 4,582 applications were assessed for eligibility. In just over three weeks following the scheme closure, 3,500 applications were processed to payment prior to Christmas. That equates to almost £5.3 million and was over 76% of the applications submitted, and that was the position when we gave you the briefing paper. We are very aware that taxi drivers needed their payments urgently. Staff continued to request information, sought clarification and resolved the issues on the remaining applications. We expect that, by the end of today, final payments to all applicants will have been issued, and they will bring the total payments to over 4,000 at a cost of over £6 million. That is some 87% of the applications submitted. The notification letters to the unsuccessful applicants of the current scheme will also be issued this week. At the same time, they will be advised about the second scheme that I will come on to shortly.

As an update from the briefing paper, the current analysis of applicants' data indicates that almost 13% of applicants failed to meet the continuous insurance eligibility test. They failed for a number of reasons. For example, they took a break in their continuous insurance or reduced it to social, domestic and pleasure for part of the six months, and for understandable reasons, for the potential lack of trade and to save themselves money. Others may not have applied to the scheme at all given their lack of continuous insurance or because they had left the taxi industry. As the first scheme was wrapped up, the Minister has recognised and is very sympathetic to the fact that, while some of those drivers did not have continuous insurance, they still incurred a proportion of the costs that were not covered by other schemes. She is also mindful that the current and ongoing restrictions continue to impact on taxi drivers financially, making it difficult for them to cover the costs that they continue to incur. For those reasons, last week the Minister announced her intention to bring forward a further financial assistance scheme for taxi drivers that is subject to Executive agreement and First Minister and deputy First Minister agreement of a further determination and designation.

I will take a few minutes to outline the principles of that new scheme, because I am conscious that it is completely new and was not in the briefing pack that was provided to you. Members will also wish to note that the Minister met sector representatives on Monday as part of the plans for the development of the second scheme. Given the ongoing restrictions impacting on the taxi trade and the gaps in the existing schemes for taxi drivers, the proposed scheme is consistent with the policy intention of the first scheme. It is intended that it will go to the Executive for discussion tomorrow, and an Executive paper has already issued in draft to Executive colleagues.

The second scheme would run for a 12-month period from 22 March 2020 until 21 March 2021. It would be open to applicants who have either continuous or partial insurance throughout the entire 12-month period, thereby capturing applicants who were not eligible for the current scheme but also capturing drivers for this new period from 1 October to 21 March. It is based on the same principles about sector evidence around provision of insurance details. However, payments would be based on a pro rata basis in order to deal with the issue of partial insurance. To reflect the variation in costs incurred amongst drivers, it is proposed that £250 would be paid for every 30 days of full insurance, up to a maximum of £3,000. Just to give you an example, that would mean that a driver who fully met the criteria and had already been paid £1,500 from the existing scheme would be eligible for maximum support of up to £3,000 for the total 12 months. They would have already received £1,500, so they would receive £1,500 from the second scheme. However, if somebody had not applied and were now applying for the first time, we would work that out based on how many days of insurance they had incurred expense for from the start of the year.

As you are aware, the maximum payment of £3,000 is reflective of the analysis provided by the sector and confirmed by our departmental information. The details of the scheme will go to the Executive and are subject to their approval. The designation needs to be provided by the First Minister and deputy First Minister under the powers of the Financial Assistance Act (Northern Ireland) 2009, and the SL1 will then come to the Committee if all that goes well. That could be next week, so I am just alerting you to that possibility for next week's agenda. The regulations will need to be finalised, and it is expected that the scheme would launch by early February. With regard to improvements, given the thousands of emails and related correspondence that we have received for the first scheme, further consideration is being given as to how applicants can track an update on their application and, at the same time, not divert staff away from the processing and urgent issue of payments. While not all of the COVID support schemes have telephone contacts, we are looking to see if we can put in a phone line for the future scheme.

The Committee has also asked about taxi operators and why they were excluded from the scheme. As part of the stakeholder engagement process, the Minister and officials have held a number of meetings with taxi operators, including the meeting on Monday. A bespoke scheme has not been set up for the operators, given that they can avail themselves of existing financial support such as business support grants, loan schemes, VAT deferrals, rates relief and furloughing of staff. Taxi operators also advise that providing financial support to drivers will provide indirect support to them by helping taxi drivers to remain in business. However, the Minister continues to press for the inclusion of the taxi sector in the DFE-led schemes, particularly part B of the coronavirus restrictions business support scheme. Officials have liaised with DFE to establish whether taxi operators are eligible, which it has confirmed. During the meeting on Monday, it was clear that some taxi operators were not aware of this. We have advised them of the link to the scheme in order to try to increase awareness that they should be applying to that scheme. There are obviously a range of eligibility criteria for that scheme that they must meet.

The Minister remains fundamentally of the view that the Executive need to take an inclusive and fair approach to the financial support provided for the restrictions through the DFE scheme and that all businesses that are eligible to apply should be able to do so. We recognise that this is an exceptionally difficult time for all businesses and workers. We are working to provide valuable support alongside all the other schemes that are available across the Executive and government. Obviously, Beverley and I are happy to take your questions and provide answers.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): OK. Thank you very much for that. I appreciate the time, prior to Christmas, when you met me and the Deputy Chair, although it was disappointing that no one could come to the Committee at the earlier stage to discuss the difficulties that were very real at that time. We were heading into Christmas and, at that stage, a substantial number of drivers had still not received any support.

I welcome the comments in relation to the new scheme that is being devised. Obviously, lessons are being learned around communication, because that has been really difficult. All members will have had numerous taxi drivers come to them — I know that from experience over the last few days — and have communicated that to the Department, so the ability to track an application is certainly welcome. There is also recognition that the costs have continued for those drivers during this time and that it is not getting any better for them. Although we are looking towards the vaccine and trying to bring confidence back to the community in the next number of weeks, it is going to take some considerable time for services that we have become very reliant on, and very used to, to get back to some level of normality, given the lack of a prospect of hospitality opening up in the foreseeable future.

With regard to the moneys that are available, obviously £14 million was set aside for the scheme. You have said today that around £6 million has been spent. What is your estimate for the cost of the revised scheme?

Ms Thompson: We estimate that the revised scheme will cost around £10 million. It is quite difficult to estimate because we are not sure exactly what the take-up will be, particularly if taxi drivers have left the industry; that is difficult to work out. However, based on £6 million that has already been incurred for the first six months, taking in a second six months and allowing an estimate around the numbers that will come in now because of the partial insurance that did not meet the original, we reckon that it will be around £10 million. That will be £16 million in total for taxis across the two schemes.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Obviously, the delivery of that element of the scheme will be quicker because the majority have already applied, although I appreciate that there will be those who have not applied to that before and will be new applicants to you. However, the main cohort, who have applied, should receive money subject to things being in place very quickly.

Ms Thompson: It depends on what their insurance was doing. Because we have not looked at the period from 1 October to March of this year, we still need the evidence data around what they have done in those six months. We will need to look at that. We want to work with the sector to establish whether it is easier to look at the entire year and take off the £1,500 if you have already received it, or whether it is better to look at the six months and leave the original six months. It will depend on when people's taxi insurance renewals came through. We know from the first time that matching things has been difficult, just because of the sheer numbers. We are looking at the IT aspects of that, and Beverley could talk a bit about that. We recognise that we need to get the matching as quickly and as automated as possible, but that has proved challenging due to the sheer numbers involved and the quantity of emails that are coming in. We will therefore meet the sector to establish the best way,

operationally, of doing that, both from our perspective and theirs, to try to reduce the time if we possibly can. Beverley, do you want to add to that?

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Beverley, we cannot hear you.

Mr Boylan: You are on mute.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): We still cannot hear you.

Ms Thompson: I normally hear her.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): We still cannot hear you, Beverley.

Julie, do you want to continue? Sorry, Beverley.

Ms Thompson: We will keep going. Beverley, can you try to find out what is wrong? I will keep going. Sorry. It has been working. Normally, I am able to hear her without any problem, but this is the first time that she has used StarLeaf. She was practising yesterday.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): From the papers, we are aware that £25 million was set aside for the schemes. Some £19 million was allocated: £14 million for taxis and £5 million for coach operators. This is likely to take you over the £14 million. According to the indications that we are being given, it should be easy to receive any top-up that is required. It should be fairly straightforward.

Ms Thompson: Yes, the assumption is that we will need access to —. As you say, we have only got £19 million at the minute, and we will need to access more than that from the centre. A further £6 million ring-fenced for the sectors is sitting at the centre, and that will be the first call to get us up to £25 million. Our supposition is that this scheme can be funded from within that £25 million.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): You said that, at the time, the sector had not informed you that a significant number of drivers may not have been able to qualify for the continuous insurance criteria. Had you been aware of that from the outset, might this have been a different scheme?

Ms Thompson: It is difficult to know, but it is possible. The more information that you have about schemes, the more you can assess them. If we had been fully aware of the extent of the issue, then, yes, we would have been able to do something about it, potentially. Once the regulations and whatever were signed, we had to proceed, and the quickest thing to do was to proceed on the scheme that we got. Rather than putting in two new schemes — one for fully covered drivers and one for partially covered drivers — we are looking at one scheme that will encompass all of those, and which will go forward over the next six months. From that point of view, we have ended up with two schemes. Considering that we were always going to have to look at the October to March period, potentially, given what has happened, I am pretty sure that we would have ended up with two schemes anyway, but it is their design that is slightly different.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): You will be aware of the presentation that the taxi operators made to us a number of weeks ago. There have been subsequent requests for meetings with the Department and those representatives. I appreciate that there was a discussion at the beginning of the week, but that was primarily in relation to this new scheme and keeping them informed of it, as opposed to looking at something bespoke for taxi operators. Undoubtedly, they are incredibly disappointed at the lack of any progress around a scheme. You have referred to other benefits that they may or may not be eligible for, particularly part B of the scheme run by Economy. Again, not all operators will be able to meet its criteria. Anecdotally, we are aware of a number of operators who either have closed their businesses or whose businesses will no longer be sustainable within a number of weeks. There is a knock-on effect for drivers as a consequence of that. You will be aware from the presentation they gave that the support the operators have been given and have been giving to drivers on an ongoing basis is probably quite extensive during that time, particularly around rentals and so on. You referred to the fact that only two operators applied for the Economy scheme. There are a number of reasons for that. Some did not know that they were eligible for it, and others were holding out for a scheme from the Department, as per the indication that was given at the time that schemes were being drafted. A number of schemes will be coming out from Economy for hospitality and so on, which are above and beyond the schemes already in place, and which hospitality can avail itself of,

yet taxi operators still will not have a scheme that is focused on them. Is any serious consideration being given by the Department to looking at a scheme for taxi operators?

Ms Thompson: When the Minister moved, in late October, on the taxi drivers, there was no request at that point on behalf of taxi operators. The focus of the scheme, as you know, was on taxi drivers. That was based on evidence that had been provided to us around the support that they had already been given. At that point, the DFE coronavirus scheme was coming into fruition, and part B in particular. The scope was broadened to include those businesses that are dependent on the businesses that have closed in order to run their business and are able to demonstrate a 40% reduction in turnover because of the closures. As to why only two applied to the original scheme, it was pretty clear on Monday's meeting that there was a lack of awareness among the operators generally about access to that scheme, which would help them to meet some of their costs. The business support that I have already talked about, they were able to avail themselves of at the start of the year. That is where we are at with taxi operators. Obviously, we are keen that awareness is increased around their ability to access the part B scheme that will cover them for the restrictions, that they put in applications and, hopefully, that they get more success in those.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): There was ongoing discussion in relation to the sector. Did the Department not feel that they should have been clearer in relation to what they were planning, and how they would support operators, given that they were holding out for a scheme for themselves?

Ms Thompson: We have been clear that we would provide support for taxi drivers. That was what went to the Executive and was announced in the press. We have not, at any point, announced a scheme for taxi operators. That has been the case since October. Obviously, there is definitely an issue about their awareness of part B of the DFE scheme. Obviously, the Minister would prefer that even more businesses were able to access that. For the moment, we definitely need to increase their awareness that they can access that scheme, which can give £400 to £800 per week per property to eligible businesses, so it is a substantial amount of money.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Again, not all of them will be able to meet those criteria. I appreciate that there was more of a round-table discussion in the last couple of days, but I ask that you meet the operators directly to discuss their circumstances and see whether there is something you can do for them or give them advice about what they need to do.

Ms Thompson: The lack of an operator scheme was discussed at the meeting on Monday. The outcome was an agreement that our Minister would contact the Minister for the Economy and establish whether there was a possibility of their having a joint meeting with the operators.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Recognising the vast number of schemes that are going through the Department for the Economy, and the pressures that it is experiencing, is there any willingness within the Department that, if there were a discussion that there is, perhaps, an opportunity to support operators, the Department for Infrastructure would step up to assist with that?

Ms Thompson: At the moment, we have no plans to introduce a scheme for taxi operators. As I said, the outcome from the discussions was to have a conversation with the Minister for the Economy about the scheme that she already has in place.

Mr Boylan: You are very welcome, Julie and Beverley. From an MLA's perspective, if operators come to us for advice, am I saying to them, Julie, that there is going to be a meeting between the two Ministers and the operators? What about those who have not engaged? How do we get that message out, because it is important?

To be honest with you, we should be looking at a scheme. Those schemes are well advertised. We, as Members, try to get the message out to as many people as possible. Clearly, some of them did not realise that, but the operators should be looking at some scheme to try to facilitate them. The question is how we get the message out to the operators. Some have contacted Liz and me in relation to this, so what is the message?

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): We can hear Beverley now. The fact she is not on mute means that we can hear everything that she is saying. Beverley, if you would like to mute, and we will then call you back in.

Mrs Beverley Cowan (Department for Infrastructure): I am trying [*Inaudible.*] I do not know why I was unmuted. I will give it another go.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): OK, no problem.

Ms Thompson: There are a couple of messages for all operators. One is that they need to be made aware that they can apply for part pay. They need to meet the criteria of that scheme, absolutely, but the option is there for them to do that. We definitely think, following Monday's meeting, that there has been a lack of awareness of that.

More generally, the outcome of that meeting was that contact would be made with the Minister for the Economy about taxi operators. That meeting will need to be set up, and the private offices would need to be in contact and establish what can happen. That is the next thing that would happen, but, at the moment, there are no plans for a DFI taxi operator scheme.

Mr Boylan: Does the Minister require additional powers?

Ms Thompson: Yes, she does. Because the original powers were for a scheme, we looked at that from a legal perspective, and we therefore need to go back to the Executive and the First Minister and deputy First Minister to get powers again, even though it is another scheme for taxi drivers.

The short answer to your question is yes. We need more powers to be given to us because they were given to us only for the operation of the scheme that we have run and finished. To run any new scheme under the Financial Assistance Act, we need to go back to the Executive and the First Minister and deputy First Minister, which we fully intend to do.

Mr Boylan: Is the SL1 that you are bringing forward for the new scheme?

Ms Thompson: Yes. For the Committee's scheduling, that will be dependent on the Executive Committee discussions and then on the FMDFM designation time frames. If everything runs smoothly, there is the potential for that SL1 to be with the Committee next week, and then we move on from there.

Mr Boylan: Is the first scheme officially finished?

Ms Thompson: Yes, it closed on 27 November 2020.

Mr Boylan: You said that 13% of applicants did not meet the continuous insurance eligibility test. Were all those 13% under the criteria of the insurance break?

Ms Thompson: I will bring Beverley in on that. It is where they had partial insurance or maybe even no insurance, but had put in an application. Is there anything you want to add about the rejections, Beverly?

Mrs Cowan: No, that is it. Cathal, the insurance ineligibility will be for the reasons you just mentioned. There will be some other reasons, such as those who were not affiliated to an operator's licence or did not have a valid driver licence. However, in the main, they did not have the full insurance and did not meet the criteria.

Ms Thompson: We also got quite a few duplicate applications and applications from England, Scotland and Wales, and those have been rejected as well.

Mr Boylan: The issue is now the people who are still waiting for confirmation. The Department has asked for extra evidence on the insurance. Will the majority of those people who can provide the evidence about insurance now be facilitated pro rata?

Ms Thompson: That is exactly right, Cathal. This week will see us close out the final payments on the closed scheme, issue rejection letters to those who were unsuccessful and point people to the new scheme that is coming. We expect that will address virtually all of that, but I cannot guarantee all. However, it will address the vast bulk of those who fell out and were rejected from that particular scheme. The pro rata element means that you get £250 for every 30 days. We originally looked at

months, but insurance does not always operate on a start and end month. Therefore, we are going for a 30-day block whatever that block may be and ratchet it up. If you have 60 days, you will get £500 etc.

Mr Boylan: When does that go back to?

Ms Thompson: It goes back to 22 March. We will pick up claims backwards and forwards. As I said to the Chair, one scheme can go both forwards and backwards. We are looking at the issue caused by the scheme opening sometime in early February. We will not have evidence from February, as it is a scheme running effectively until March 2021, so there is a little bit of an issue about what to do with the last few weeks. Assuming we can find a way around that, it is one scheme that operates the whole way through.

Mr Boylan: Do you have to amend the scheme using an SL1?

Ms Thompson: We do, yes. It needs a new Executive paper, new designation, an SL1 and new regulations because the detail of the scheme is different from that which was approved.

Mr Boylan: Finally, did you say 4,800 had applied?

Ms Thompson: A total of 4,582 applied,

Mr Boylan: Potentially, how many could apply under the new scheme?

Ms Thompson: That is slightly challenging. You can assume that the 4,582 had continuous insurance for the first six months and are likely to still have continuous insurance moving forward. For the remainder, we want to pick up the people who fell out of the first scheme or the 13% that did not work this time. If those figures are multiplied, they produce the £10 million estimate. It is quite challenging because, for every person who applies, there is now a range of options. The last time it was quite easy to quantify. However, this time, every person could be applying for one month or 12 months, and that is where the estimate of £10 million has come from. The figure could be higher or lower depending on the uptake. We understand that it is highly unlikely that all 9,000 currently licensed taxi drivers will apply. It will be a lower number than that, but it is difficult to know the extent to which it will be lower.

Mr Hilditch: You are very welcome, Julie. You are starting to sound like Bruce Forsyth: "Higher, lower; lower, higher". I thought it was a game show.

There are issues that need to be communicated from today's meeting and when the Executive agrees on the process. This requires a very clear yes or no: can people who have already been paid out of the first scheme also be paid out of the second scheme?

Ms Thompson: A very clear yes.

Mr Hilditch: I have been asked that question a number of times, mostly by those who have not been paid yet or who did not make it onto that first scheme. Will those who have already been paid have another bite of the cherry?

Ms Thompson: It applies whether or not you were successful. If you were successful in the first scheme, you will have received £1,500 up to 30 September. That person can apply and get the money for the second six months, assuming that they still have insurance in place. For those who were unsuccessful because they had partial insurance, if they reapply, it will work for whatever time frame they have insurance for between March last year and March this year. We will work it out using 30-day blocks. It will then become scalable to the individual circumstances of the taxi drivers, and that will cause us —. The Chair asked whether we could do it any quicker. That element makes it slightly slower because it is more complicated, so we are looking at how we can speed that up. That is something that we have not done before, so we are just a little bit cautious about it.

Mr Hilditch: As you know, some of those folk have received nothing. One of the biggest things that my office, like the Chair's, has been dealing with has been the requests from taxi drivers. It has been phenomenal; it really has. Some of their stories are heartbreaking. They work long hours, they may have kids and are potentially the only breadwinners in their houses because they work long hours.

You can guess at some of the stories that we have had to listen to, and it has been very difficult for the people to tell us about that and their difficulties. I hope that there is some light at the end of the tunnel.

There are also those who did not renew their insurance for long periods because they were shielding. Again, they did not have any extra income for that. Basically, they had no income for that. The insurance element will, again, do those guys out of getting something towards —.

Ms Thompson: To respond to your first point, we fully recognise the challenge and have had an awful lot of correspondence from taxi drivers about that. That is part of the reason, or the reason, why we could not come the last time. The guys were working really hard to get out as many payments as they could, particularly before Christmas. The ones after Christmas have had various issues that needed to be matched or worked through. Your message back to taxi drivers should be that this week will close all that out.

On the point about those who are shielding, it is a scheme that provides support for overhead payments. You will have had to incur those overhead payments to get funding from the scheme —.

Mr Hilditch: Some of them will have shielded from, say, March to September and had to get back in to earn a crust, at the end of the day. They were back in and had to get that stuff. As they were shielding, there was nothing to cover them for that period at all.

Ms Thompson: That is what I was going to say. The DFI scheme fits in alongside the other schemes that are available, such as the self-employment income scheme (SEIS), the newly self-employed scheme and isolation grants. A range of other support is available, and we know that taxi drivers have availed themselves of those. The self-employed scheme, in particular, has been extended by the Government and is now back up to 80% of profits based on the previous year. Those schemes are still available whether or not you are shielding.

Mr Hilditch: It is a disappointing time. Communication, or the lack of it, has played a big part in it, and I was delighted to hear that you have a dedicated phone line. Is that right?

Ms Thompson: Not yet, but we are looking to put one in place.

Mr Hilditch: Hopefully, that will work out.

Ms Thompson: Yes. Not all the schemes have a phone line, but some do. We hope that we can learn from that.

Mr Hilditch: OK. On the operators/depots, when you took the scheme on, did you not feel that it was to be for the taxi industry per se and would not be split? Was that not something that the Department should have recognised in the early stages instead of being in a situation now that is nearly like "them and us" between the drivers and the operators?

Ms Thompson: In the early stages, we gathered evidence from operators and drivers. Meetings have taken place and continue to take place with both. Occasionally, we have met one group, but we have run operator-only meetings, driver-only meetings and joint meetings. The evidence —.

Mr Hilditch: Did the thought of doing joint meetings not indicate recognition, from an early stage, that it is a taxi industry? The Department for Infrastructure should have been looking after all of it, not just one part.

Ms Thompson: We have looked at the evidence that has been provided to us by the industry. We have had evidence provided by both drivers and operators. That demonstrated that the operators were able to access quite a range of financial assistance schemes. They have, obviously, talked to you about that as well. From that evidence, since October, we have been working on the drivers' scheme and then, obviously, the second scheme for drivers.

Mr Hilditch: What seemed to be the blockage at part B of that particular fund that was getting people turned down?

Ms Thompson: Part B explicitly says that taxi drivers are not allowed to access it. That is a very explicit exclusion.

Mr Hilditch: I am talking about the operators and depots.

Ms Thompson: Operators can access it. On Monday, it sounded as though there was —.

Mr Hilditch: There seems to be uncertainty.

Ms Thompson: Yes. There has been a lack of awareness. Because, at the bottom of the scheme guidance, it talks about exclusion of taxi drivers, I think that there was an interpretation that that included taxi operators. However, we have talked to officials and they have advised us that operators can apply. Therefore, I think that there has been a lack of awareness, to be honest. We and, obviously, you can probably get the message out to operators that they are able to apply for that scheme.

Mr Hilditch: OK. I take it that the 772 from other jurisdictions were mostly from the mainland. It is quite a high number.

Ms Thompson: It is a very high number. I think that we will put "Northern Ireland" very strongly at the top of everything the next time. It was there, but I guess that people, potentially, were just reaching out and thought that they could apply.

Mr Hilditch: Of course, we are now in another lockdown situation that started off with a curfew during what would probably have been the busiest week of the year for taxi operators and depots. It is crucial that we get that communication and message out as best we can.

I would also just like to take the opportunity to thank you and your staff for what you have done to date, because it has been quite an operation to get through all that work. I also want to express my concern that staff were abused at times. That should never happen. I want to sympathise with you on that as well.

Ms Thompson: Thank you very much. I really appreciate that. Beverley, can you pass that back to the team? They will really appreciate that. It has been very difficult for the staff.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): It was actually difficult to hear that your staff were abused in the way in which they were. While there is an appreciation that tension is high and people are very anxious, there is no call to be rude or abusive at all. I think that it would be the sentiment of all members that that is not acceptable.

Ms Thompson: Thank you very much.

Mr K Buchanan: You have covered a lot of points. I have a couple of quick questions. Will it be a new application and not one that rolls on?

Ms Thompson: You will definitely need to apply again, yes. As I say, we are working on the actual details of exactly how that will happen.

Mr K Buchanan: Therefore, if I applied last year, for example, as a taxi driver, and had no insurance, I got nothing, based on that fact. If the new system or application process opens, obviously, I need insurance to apply.

Ms Thompson: Yes.

Mr K Buchanan: OK. At what point do you look back? If I know now that, say, today, a new scheme is coming out, and I go out and get or upgrade my insurance, will you look back at a certain timeline on that or purely at whether I have an insurance document?

Ms Thompson: We will look at the days from and for which your insurance is applicable. We appreciate that one of the complications of this is that people have been putting their insurance up and down depending on the situation. That is completely understandable. We will need to have the ability

on the application form for you to be able to record different time frames over the year for the insurance that you have actually had in place.

Mr K Buchanan: It could have been a month on and a month off.

Ms Thompson: Yes; a month on and a month off. That is why we have ended up going for days. We already knew, from what we could see on this scheme, that the ability to do it on anything other than a daily basis was not going to work. It is a very flexible scheme. However, we are, obviously, still working through the exact working out of it.

Mr K Buchanan: Therefore, if you equate 30 days with a month, obviously, or thereabouts, and you are off for two weeks and on for two weeks, you want a total of 30 days to get you the £250.

Ms Thompson: That is exactly right.

Mr K Buchanan: My final question is about the 895 duplicate applications. Why were there so many?

Ms Thompson: The simple answer is that we are not sure. Some of them were made twice. Some were made more than twice. It may be partly because people could not understand what had happened to their application and maybe they applied again. When we get everything closed this week on all the payments and the notifications for projections back, we intend to look at those to learn for the next time and whether there is a way to block that sort of thing. It could have been that people just needed a simple reassurance that their application had gone through and that there was nothing to worry about. We think that a large proportion was to do with not being able to see the application moving through.

Mr K Buchanan: Does it concern you that Joe Bloggs, for example, applied three times but that was purely because he was not sure if he had applied?

Ms Thompson: It is very difficult to know why somebody did it. I am posing one reason why they may have done it. We need to reflect on that. We have guaranteed that we have only issued a payment once, so that is taken care of. Obviously, with regard to public money, that is exactly what we need to do. We need to look at whether we can stop that from happening again and make sure that there is a way of doing that. The same taxi drivers, at times, had different email addresses and that sort of thing, so it is something that we intend to look at, absolutely. I can assure you that, even on those duplicates, only one payment was issued.

Mr K Buchanan: Thank you.

Mr Beggs: I thank you, the Department and the Minister for reacting to the concerns expressed by many taxi drivers and the injustice around being excluded because they had, perhaps, had a two-week holiday and had received no money. I appreciate that the Department, the officials, yourself and the Minister have responded to that. For clarification, another taxi driver who contacted me was ill for the two weeks that the scheme was open. Can they now apply for the scheme that they were unable to apply for?

Ms Thompson: Yes, they can. By applying for the second scheme, because it is working both backwards and forwards, that will deal with that problem as well. I appreciate that, as I am talking to you, this is all subject to the Executive agreement tomorrow. If that all goes through, then, yes.

Mr Beggs: Given the fact that it fixes many injustices, I hope that the Executive will promptly approve it and allow you and your officials to get on with processing and getting payments out. Thank you very much.

Mr Muir: I echo the words of other members in thanking the officials, Julie and Beverly and all staff who have been involved in processing the grant applications. I am extremely grateful for that. It has been a significant volume and processing such applications is not what the Department is designed to do, but they managed to turn them around, and I am grateful for that and also for the ability to track future applications under what will, I hope, be the second grant scheme. That will be useful in reducing the volume of work around that.

I have two points to make. A lot of questions have already been asked and answered around the depots. We understand about part B. The issue is that the rateable premises for the taxi operators are, largely, quite small so, as a result, the payments under that will be quite small because the rateable value will be low. It is a concern, and I want to note that the level of support for those operators will come under part B. My second point is around the first scheme which is now closed and the payments are being finalised. One issue was the requirement to have continuous insurance. It was something that many of us were contacted about. Would having a representative body for the taxi industry something that might have helped to identify potential issues around that scheme? Can the Department urge the establishment of something like that to allow it to engage with representatives throughout the sector?

Ms Thompson: We have been liaising with taxi representatives — operators and drivers — and it has been pretty much the same cohort the whole way through from September. They are very clear that they are representative of the sector but do not represent the entirety of it, if you understand the distinction that I make. We have also backed that up by, at key points, writing to everybody on our database, whether they are operators or drivers, to advise them, and we have been using all possible mechanisms to make sure that people are alerted. However, as Mr Beggs pointed out, there are some people who potentially missed the first scheme and were late, and, obviously, the second scheme will help to address that, provided people know about it and apply for it, and those same issues, I guess, again.

The question about whether there should be a representative body or a more official body is probably a matter for the sector more so than us to reflect on. We are using the mechanism that we have to engage with them. As I say, we supplemented that and advised everybody on our database about the first scheme. We will do that again, assuming that the scheme goes through and is running fine.

The continuous insurance issue came up quite late. The regulations had already been approved, and, therefore, we had to proceed with what we had, but I think that what we have done in the second scheme, by having only one further scheme, has maybe dealt with the issue effectively. I appreciate that there were a lot of disappointed people who had that partial insurance, and that is the 13% that, unfortunately, were not able to get money this time, but we will sort that out the next time.

Mr Muir: Cheers.

Ms Anderson: Thank you, Julie and Beverley, for your update and your input. Julie, I wrote down what you said about your intention to contact TEO and the joint First Ministers about the powers. I was a wee bit surprised at that, because, five days ago, your Minister said that she had written to TEO asking for the powers. When will you actually write to the Executive Office seeking the powers?

Ms Thompson: The Minister has written to the Executive Office seeking the powers, and, subject to the Executive discussions, we expect that the First Minister and deputy First Minister will be able to give us the powers, but that is obviously a matter for them. The letter has been issued.

Ms Anderson: Do we know when it was issued?

Ms Thompson: It was issued on Friday.

Ms Anderson: OK. That allows us to chase that up.

Julie, you talked about the taxi operators and listed the kind of support that they could access, including rate relief and so on. We also know that the bus operators and wet pubs, as they are called — I do not like that term — which are the traditional pubs, can access that kind of support, yet specific financial support was put in place. Why did your Department differentiate between bus operators and taxi operators?

Ms Thompson: We engaged with both sectors in September, and the evidence showed that the ability of the coach operators, in particular, to access the existing support grants had been very limited. Their model of operation was different in the sense that the insurance and maintenance costs, which are all taken care of by the taxi drivers rather than the operators, were going through the coach operators, so it was based on the evidence provided, the scale of what support was already available and what had been happening in the two sectors.

Ms Anderson: Going to a business model to make that kind of assessment has made this process quite bureaucratic and has resulted in the exclusion of taxi operators. If you had interrogated their business model further, you would know that the taxi drivers' supply chain had been cut off. We were advising people to stay at home, so the people on whom they depend to get into their taxis did not exist, and taxis were not running in the same way. I do not understand, Julie, the rationale behind why, when you looked at the bus operators and the taxi operators, how you did not arrive at the conclusion that both of them were being severely impacted by the pandemic.

Ms Thompson: As I said, we looked at the evidence at the time, and the level of support that the coach and bus operators were able to access was very low. They were impacted by the first three months of the pandemic, and a lot of their business also completely fell away.

Ms Anderson: That applies to bus operators, but their business is like taxis. We all know that one of the reasons that taxi drivers temporarily suspended their insurance was that nobody was getting into their cars because we asked people to stay at home, just as we are doing now. If you want to enforce the "Stay at home" message and the curfew and every other restriction that has been put in place, you would not be suggesting that there would be some kind of activity that would allow taxi operators to continue because they were severely impacted by the restrictions.

Ms Thompson: They are then able to access part B around the restrictions, recognising, as you said, that their businesses have suffered a decline and they are dependent on those businesses being open. Part B was widened to cover supply chain-type issues and dependency issues that would allow taxi operators to apply. From the discussions on Monday, it would appear that they either were not aware of that or had not done so. Therefore, that needs to be taken back to the operators.

Ms Anderson: I had a discussion with some of the operators after the meeting on Monday, and they were not coming at this from the point of view that there was a realisation that there was support there that they did not receive. They were quite disappointed that, given that the regulations for the industry are in the remit of your Department, they believe that your Department should ensure that they get the financial support.

You said that there were 4,582 applicants, and then you repeated that that may be the number of applicants coming forward. Based on a rough calculation, if 895 of those are duplicates, I suggest that, based on what was coming into my office, a number of those drivers were quite frustrated because there was a communication issue. They were sending in their emails, and they were not hearing back. They were not sure whether their application was being processed, and I suggest that perhaps that is why a number of people applied again. It was borne out of that frustration. If you were to remove that from the 4,582 and then the 772 who did not live in the North, you are talking about 2,915.

Ms Thompson: No. The 4,582 is the figure after we had taken the duplicates and applications from other jurisdictions away.

Ms Anderson: So it is 4,582 plus the 1,669.

Ms Thompson: That was the original figure.

Ms Anderson: Out of the 4,582, 13% of those were taxi drivers who had temporarily suspended their insurance.

Ms Thompson: Yes, or they had some issue or other with their application.

Ms Anderson: I would be concerned if you had to go into every individual circumstance. For instance, with the localised restrictions support scheme, I would be concerned if everyone who had their business impacted were entitled to that support and they then tried to calculate how many times someone came through their door or they tried to delve down further. I am concerned that, every 30 days, some of them will lose £250. We know from evidence being given to the Committee that there was a four-day suspension for one taxi driver. He had been receiving cancer treatment, and, by the time he got his taxi renewed, there was a four-day gap. Do such people lose the 30 days? Do they lose the £250?

Ms Thompson: We have proposed £250 for 30 days as a means of getting greater fairness into the system and to ensure that we are encompassing more drivers than we did the last time and to ensure

that people do not lose out fully, which is the case for the first scheme where, if you did not have insurance for the four days, you would have lost that entire money. It is a bit like your vehicle tax or whatever; it is the same sort of idea. If you go into a second month, you may not be able to get a refund on your vehicle tax; it works on 30-day blocks. We believe that that gives flexibility to people's circumstances. It is not that we will make a payment for every day, but we believe that 30-day blocks are a manageable and fair way of dealing with the issue. As I said, we looked at dealing with it monthly but decided that that would not work as it would not give enough flexibility. By using 30-day blocks, we believe that we can bring that fairness into it in a much more refined way than we had the first time.

Ms Anderson: I do not believe that taxi drivers who had to suspend their insurance temporarily should be, as some of them will feel, penalised as a consequence. The Executive told people to stay at home, and we all supported that. People were told not to take taxis and not to go out, and, consequently, those drivers had no work. It will create additional pressure for the 13% whom we are talking about, with those taxi drivers feeling somewhat disappointed and disheartened at the scheme that you are attempting to put in place.

Julie, I have been in regular contact with the Minister's office and one of her officials about 50 taxi drivers. Taxi drivers are coming to me and to other MLAs, and they have not received any notifications. I have told them again that there will be a payment run this week. I have been told that. Can you confirm that there will be a payment run this week and that, at the end of this week, all the taxi drivers who have applied and are eligible for the first scheme will have received their payments?

Ms Thompson: I will maybe bring in Beverley, but a payment run is absolutely going out today. We expect that to deal with all those who are eligible for payment. That will add to all those who have already received a payment. Those who were not successful because they did not have full continuous insurance will also be notified and advised that a second scheme is, hopefully, coming as well.

Beverly, is there anything that you want to add to that? Do I have that right?

Mrs Cowan: That is fine. We expect it to be wrapped up by the end of the week.

Ms Anderson: OK. Can Committee members and other MLAs who are interested in it tell taxi drivers that there will be a payment run this week?

Mrs Cowan: Yes.

Ms Anderson: Many taxi drivers have been coming to us. If we are going into the next scheme, there needs to be communication with the taxi drivers, whether through the phone line that you said would be in place or something else. Obviously, no one should be getting abuse — we all concur with that — but part of the frustration was that they had heard nothing back and were dependent on receiving that before Christmas.

Mrs Cowan: Martina, that is fine. I completely accept the point about communication. When someone applied, got their ID reference number and were asked to upload their insurance details to the mailbox, they received an acknowledgement. I hope that that acknowledgement indicated that their application was being looked at, but, as we have discussed, there was a scale and volume of applications and emails. We take the point that we can tighten up communications and make life a bit easier for applicants and for us.

Ms Anderson: Yes, Beverley. Although taxi drivers received an acknowledgement and, from your end, you probably assumed that they would have known that that was in the system and being dealt with, weeks and weeks went by, and they had all hoped that they would receive a payment before Christmas. At this stage, the worry is impacting not only their mental health but their families, livelihoods and everything else. They are now totally disheartened with the scheme. I am glad that I can report back that there will at least be a payment run by the end of this week. I will argue that all drivers should be eligible even if they did take a break. However, at least they will have their grant funding in place by the end of this week.

Mrs Cowan: To clarify, Julie mentioned the 3,500 payments made before Christmas for cases where we did not have to go back to applicants seeking further information. For the Committee's information,

I completely accept that people are frustrated that they are getting a payment only now while others got theirs before Christmas. I will illustrate why that has happened with some examples. If people provided additional information, they may have entered the incorrect ID reference number. That has happened in some of the cases that you sent in, Martina. In some cases, they may be known by a different name and have used their full name in the application form or entered reference numbers incorrectly. As Julie pointed out, we did a 100% check on 4,500-odd insurance documents. Some individuals did not provide the correct insurance documentation, and we had to go back maybe two or three times to some individuals. I appreciate that that has been frustrating, but we had to ensure that they met the eligibility criteria and that we had the right evidence, and that process has taken time.

Ms Kimmins: Thank you, Julie and Beverley. I will not labour this, as most of the questions have been asked. To be clear, has the £25 million that the Minister received now been fully spent with the revised scheme? There was around £6 million left, and Julie said that the revised scheme will take us up to about £10 million. Am I right in thinking that there is about £2 million left?

Ms Thompson: I will go through the figures for you. The Department has had £19 million already. The other £6 million brings it to £25 million, and that is still being held at the centre and has not yet been allocated to the Department. The existing scheme will cost £6 million. Our estimate for the new scheme is a further £10 million, and it will be £16 million in total for the two taxi schemes. The balance is that we had the £5 million estimate for the coach scheme, and that brings the total to £21 million, and there is another £4 million, potentially, if we call down the whole £25 million. That is where the numbers sit at this point.

Ms Kimmins: Is the £6 million still separate?

Ms Thompson: The £6 million is still sitting separately. We have got only £19 million, and that is why Linda MacHugh was talking to you about £19 million as that is the only actual money that has been allocated to the Department at this point. The other £6 million is sitting in the DOF books.

Ms Kimmins: Is it being held centrally for transport?

Ms Thompson: Yes.

Ms Kimmins: Is there any reason that we are not trying to get that money?

Ms Thompson: Obviously, this scheme will need access to some of that, potentially up to the full £25 million, depending on where we go. However, we will definitely need access to some of that money. I am sure that the Minister will be discussing that with Executive colleagues.

Ms Kimmins: OK. My only other question is that, obviously, there will be new applications for the taxi scheme because people who took insurance breaks will now qualify. Will those who have been successful get the second payment automatically, or do they have to reapply?

Ms Thompson: They need to reapply because we do not know anything about their insurance from October through to March. We might know, but it depends on when people renewed their insurance. It is easier to ask the drivers to reapply.

Ms Kimmins: Apologies if I have missed this as there is a lot going on. There are taxi drivers who were ineligible for the first scheme for insurance reasons who will want to backdate their application. As they have not received anything, will they be prioritised?

Ms Thompson: I hesitate to say that we would be able to do that, to be honest. We will look to see what we can do to automate it as much as possible. That is the fairest way of answering your question. We will look, with the sector, at how to make it as easy as possible from a driver's point of view. We found it quite challenging to pull out their applications. If somebody asks us how an individual application has been done, you end up spending more time on that than you would on processing a batch of payments. I hesitate to say that we could prioritise those applicants, because I suspect that it would mean that we end up going slower overall. The priority will be to get out as many payments as quickly as possible and that we do that as smoothly and as fast as we possibly can.

Ms Kimmins: However, they can apply for the full 12 months in one go.

Ms Thompson: Yes.

Ms Kimmins: I know that there are challenges with a lot of this, but getting information to people so that they know what to expect is half the battle. Martina and others mentioned communication. Taxi drivers who have contacted me have probably applied twice because they thought, "I'm not getting any word back on my application. Maybe something's wrong. I'll stick another one in". They are probably getting that feedback from other Departments where there has been an issue or an error and they have had to reapply. It would be good to get as much information out as possible, even through members on the Committee.

Ms Thompson: That applies to the self-employed income support scheme. You have to reapply for that. It is about making sure that people know that those schemes are there — you are absolutely right — that they can apply for them and that they are kept running the whole way through. That is really important. That applies Executive-wide in ensuring that people know about all the schemes out there.

Mr Hilditch: One driver applied four times.

Ms Kimmins: Chancer.

Mr Hilditch: He definitely was not taking a chance.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): How many staff are processing the applications?

Ms Thompson: Beverley can probably answer that better than me. Go on ahead, Beverley.

Mrs Cowan: There are 18 staff on the policy side and on the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) side, so 18 staff in total have been working on this since the scheme closed on 27 November.

Ms Thompson: That is a considerable resource from a Department that does not do grant making. We do not have that level of resource, so we had to pull in people from different areas of the Department in order to process those applications, and we will do that again for the second scheme.

Mrs D Kelly: Thanks very much for the presentation. Communication is one of the most important issues. Under the taxi operator scheme, were they eligible for the first payments of £10,000 or £25,000, based on the rateable value?

Ms Thompson: Yes, they were. We know from the returns given to us that they accessed the £10,000 scheme, and one of them accessed the £25,000 scheme as well.

Mrs D Kelly: On your last point, Julie, I understand that this was a unique piece of work and set of circumstances for your Department. It is not normally engaged in this sort of grant process, so well done to you and your team for responding so quickly.

I take it that the issue around not being able to pay the insurance is one of financial probity, where the insurance had been not incurred as a cost and that audit would not have stood over that if any other divergence had been taken by the Minister or you?

Ms Thompson: Yes, it is the mechanism that ensures value for money and the good use of public funds. We need to evidence that expenditure was incurred, and it is on the back of that evidence that we can make the payment. It secures value for money, and that is very much the reason for it.

Mrs D Kelly: Members are right to say that so much information and so many grants are going out. People are responding to emergencies or to gaps. Some people dropped off the scale because they had not been seen. In terms of pulling it together, taxi drivers, for example, can apply to the Department for Infrastructure for a grant of £1,500 for their overhead costs. They can also apply to the Department for the Economy's income support scheme. Will that information be put out jointly by both Departments so that people are informed at the earliest opportunity?

Ms Thompson: I think so. The income support scheme is run by HMRC, so it is a bit like furlough; it comes from the UK Government.

The nibusinessinfo website is probably the most comprehensive one; it covers a lot of the schemes, whether they relate to individuals or businesses. It takes effort and time for someone to make a distinction between what they can and cannot apply for. We appreciate that part of it is about getting awareness out there and ensuring that people are aware of the support that is available to them. We want them to apply; that is what the scheme is there for. It is about encouraging awareness. The Executive as a whole are working around that. The schemes support each other. It is about making sure that everybody accesses everything that they should be able to access and that they do not miss an opportunity that might be out there for them. It is very complex. The number of schemes is huge.

Mrs D Kelly: You were right to correct me on HMRC.

Another scheme is the Department for the Economy part B. I am not sure whether taxi drivers have been able to access that. I have spoken to a number of accountants who are assisting businesses to access a number of schemes. Is there any engagement with the representative body in that regard?

Ms Thompson: We have been working with accountants on the coach scheme because it requires an awful lot more business-related data. The taxi driver scheme has not required that because it is dependent only on insurance information. To answer your question, part B is not accessible to taxi drivers. The Minister had wanted it to be, but taxi drivers are specifically excluded; only taxi operators can access part B. We are working with accountants where we need them and where they are required. That is definitely in play on the coach and bus operator scheme; we are in contact with accountants regularly on that scheme.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Does anyone else wish to ask anything further at this stage? No.

Thank you both, Julie and Beverley, for coming this morning. It is nice to have advance knowledge about some of these things. Obviously, we are ahead of the game with regard to even the Executive having the discussion, so, hopefully, that will go as planned. As members highlighted, there are still issues with the scheme that will probably become more evident as we work through it. I thank both of you for attending. Please pass on our thanks to the staff who are working through a very challenging time for everybody.

Ms Thompson: Thank you very much. I am sure that Beverley will pass that on to the team.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Thanks very much.