



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Ad Hoc Committee on
the COVID-19 Response

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Ministerial Statement: The Executive Office

6 January 2021

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Alex Maskey (Chairperson)

Mr Jim Allister

Ms Martina Anderson

Dr Caoimhe Archibald

Mrs Rosemary Barton

Ms Paula Bradley

Mrs Pam Cameron

Mr Gerry Carroll

Mr Alan Chambers

Mr Trevor Clarke

Mr Stewart Dickson

Mr Mark Durkan

Mrs Arlene Foster

Mr Colm Gildernew

Mr Daniel McCrossan

Mr Colin McGrath

Mr Justin McNulty

Mr Gary Middleton

Mr Andrew Muir

Mr Mike Nesbitt

Mrs Michelle O'Neill

Mr Matthew O'Toole

Ms Emma Sheerin

Mr Christopher Stalford

Ms Claire Sugden

Miss Rachel Woods

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): I welcome everybody to the meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response. I want to move very, very swiftly to suspend for 15 minutes to allow members to continue reading the statement from the Executive Office. We received it at around 11.30 am, and we issued it as quickly as we possibly could. As I said, we will suspend for 15 minutes to allow members to finish reading that statement.

The Committee suspended at 12.03 pm and resumed at 12.20 pm.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): We will move swiftly to the agenda. Agenda item 1 is the minutes of proceedings of the previous meeting, which was held on 21 December. Members are asked to note those minutes, which are at page 2 of your packs and which I have already agreed. Members should

also note that the minutes of evidence from that meeting have been published in the Official Report and are available on the Committee's web page.

Agenda item 2 is a statement from the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. I received notification yesterday that Ministers wished to make a total of four separate statements to the Ad Hoc Committee today. The statement from the First Minister and the deputy First Minister is the first of those four statements. A copy of the statement that they intend to make is included in members' packs at page 6.

I formally welcome the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to the meeting of the Committee today. Before the Ministers make their statement, I remind members that following it, there will be an opportunity to ask questions but not to make speeches. I want to be clear on that today. Members who ask short, sharp and focused questions will be invited to ask a supplementary question if they wish. Members who engage in lengthy preambles, however, may find that they do not get to ask a supplementary question.

As members are aware, there are always time pressures when this Committee meets. That is the case even more so today, given that we have a total of four statements. On previous occasions, the Committee has allowed in excess of one hour for questions following a statement. Depending on how things progress, that may not be possible for each statement today but we will do our best to include every member who wishes to ask a question. Therefore, I ask members for their cooperation and I will, of course, expect all Ministers to give their answers as succinctly as they possibly can, given the circumstances.

I invite the Ministers to make their statement, which should be heard by members without any interruption.

Mrs O'Neill (The deputy First Minister): Thank you for the opportunity to update the Ad Hoc Committee on today's COVID-19 developments. As you said, Chairperson, other Executive Ministers will provide specific detail on health, education and the new regulatory arrangements. That we are here collectively today — all Ministers in a five-party coalition Government — is a statement of our collective intent and a statement on how serious the situation has, once again, become. I wish that we did not have to make this type of statement to the Ad Hoc Committee but, as we all know, we are in the midst of the biggest public health crisis in living memory. The First Minister and I want to update you on the new restrictions that the Executive have had to introduce.

Before Christmas, in advance of other jurisdictions, the Executive moved to bring in restrictions from 26 December. That was a recognition that there was a need to intervene to deal with the predicted rise in transmission. The Executive acted last night to bring in additional measures that include remote learning for schools and limited contact in domestic settings. We have, again, introduced statutory measures to support our "Stay at home" message.

Our priorities remain unchanged. We are committed to saving lives, protecting our health service from being overwhelmed and doing all that we can to reduce the spread of this deadly virus. Those priorities have been constant and consistent benchmarks for Executive actions and decisions. They are core to all our work and our messaging. We have asked people to stay safe by following the public health guidance and we have asked for a constant focus on health and social care capacity.

Across the Executive, we have worked together to protect the health and well-being of citizens, to sustain the economy and to ensure the well-being of our society. That is why we established the Executive COVID task force to provide a high-level umbrella structure for the programme of activities involved in managing the response to and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. The Executive COVID task force provides a focus for the medium-term issues that relate to the pandemic, as well as longer-term recovery planning. The task force will work collaboratively and in partnership with Ministers and Departments to deliver the best outcomes possible, and will aim to build on, rather than replace, existing delivery arrangements. It will provide both a focal point and an opportunity for all parts of government to deliver the best-coordinated response possible to the pandemic through four complementary work streams designed to: protect all citizens; promote economic and social recovery; maximise adherence; and enhance communication of key messages.

There have certainly been many ups and downs in the COVID journey. The public health situation is now, once again, very grave. The escalation in positive cases presents a real threat to our health service. COVID-19 cases have increased to the point where it is simply not possible to protect the NHS and save lives without further significant restrictions. Throughout this pandemic, our approach

has always been guided by expert medical and public health advice. As a consequence, we have no alternative but to build on the restrictions that were introduced from 26 December. Not to act decisively would present a material risk of our healthcare services being overwhelmed.

We need to protect our hospitals and healthcare staff so that they can care for those who need it most. They need our help and support in all of this, and that means every single one of us, again, must restrict our contacts with other people as we seek to protect each other, our friends, our families and our loved ones. We need to protect people that we do not know: they are someone else's loved ones. Doing nothing is not an option. We are not in this on our own: this is a global pandemic that is affecting every country in the world. Across these islands, all Governments are increasing restrictions. We need a coordinated two-island approach as we move into this phase of tackling the virus. We can see the practical benefits of cooperation and coordination. We are working on a North/South, east-west basis as part of our response to this public health emergency.

There is more work to do, together, on international travel. Executive colleagues will shortly update you on the detail of the specific arrangements for increased restrictions and the overall health context, the very difficult decisions that we have taken for schools — which were far from easy — and the justice measures that will help underpin all of the arrangements. These measures are essential for the coming weeks.

The rollout of the vaccination programme is currently under way, and our priority as an Executive is to protect our people and society by having the population vaccinated by the summer. The early stages are encouraging, and we thank everyone involved in that work. However, we are not out of the woods yet and there is certainly more to do.

We are asking everyone to work with us over the next number of weeks. This is not the time to be complacent or to drop our guard. We know that the decisions taken this week will impact on schools, families, children, on individual's contacts with family and friends, and our economy. We can assure you that we have not taken these decisions lightly.

Finally, I want to acknowledge and sympathise with the families and friends of everyone who has died from coronavirus: you have suffered the greatest hardship of us all. I want to thank and pay tribute to all the health and social care staff right across our hospitals and care settings, the doctors and nurses and all the ancillary staff to whom we all owe a huge debt.

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): Colleagues, the health situation is grave, and we believe that we have taken difficult but essential decisions. We have to make space for the health service to deal with the serious rise in case numbers and, as always, we pay tribute to everything that our health and social care colleagues are engaged with to keep us safe and save lives.

The vaccines programme is well under way, and we are looking forward to seeing the results in the coming weeks and months — this is our way out of COVID-19, but we are not there yet. The Health Minister will provide more information, but we want to say how grateful the Executive are to everyone who is taking part in the vaccination programme and individuals taking the vaccines, for all of the logistical arrangements and to colleagues in the Department of Health who are leading a major operation that will benefit us all.

The vaccination programmes are in their early phases, although the number who have already received the vaccines is already very encouraging. While these programmes grow and expand, it is necessary to put additional restrictions in place to build on the substantive steps we took last year, particularly in December. We will be asking everyone to help us get through the next period of time by complying with the public health messaging and adhering to the full range of restrictions because it has never mattered so much. We are also asking schools, teachers, parents, children and the wider education community to take very difficult steps now. We have been there before, in wave 1, and we made it a priority to avoid impacting on schools again unless it was vital to do so. Unfortunately, it is not possible to protect the health service and keep people safe without taking steps with schools.

The bricks and mortar of schools remain open for children of essential workers and vulnerable children, but the vocation of education will continue for all through online learning, and we thank everyone involved in that. We have taken this step most reluctantly. We are acutely aware of the impact on children and families, and we will want to return to face-to-face schooling as soon as we can. The Education Minister will outline the arrangements and the factors that the Executive took into account. However, we wanted to say in advance that we are pleased that childcare arrangements and SEN schooling will continue. We appreciate how important these are.

We are underpinning our "Stay at home" message through regulations. We are asking everyone to stay at home unless there are good reasons for leaving it and, even then, to stay at home as much as possible. The virus passes and transmits when people are together, so staying at home makes a significant difference and helps to break the chains of transmission. There will be police powers to direct you home if you are not following the regulations. We totally appreciate the gravity of this step, and, again, we do so reluctantly. The Justice Minister will provide details to the Committee. We did not take this step lightly, and we know that the PSNI will do everything that it can to engage and explain before turning to its powers.

Taken together, the measures that we introduced in December and our decisions this week amount to difficult circumstances for everyone, and we understand that. Businesses are closed, our freedoms are restricted, and we cannot see our loved ones in our home. We do not take the simple view that we did this in March and can easily do it again. We understand that it is difficult to return to these arrangements. We put our trust in the fact that people will see the difficult situation that we are all in and the need to dig in to stay safe, protect the NHS and save lives.

We will keep the situation under constant review. The Health Minister keeps us fully briefed on issues for the health and social care sector, the Minister for the Economy advises us on the economic impacts, which we know are being felt acutely, and all other Ministers keep us fully apprised of wider impacts.

We will come through this, and the vaccines programme, which is a credit to the dedication of the scientific community as well as our health and social care sector, will be our way out of this. However, in the meantime, there is a lot to do. We need to follow the health advice at all times and do everything that we can to stay safe, protect the NHS and save lives. We have said before that the small daily acts of washing our hands, keeping our distance and wearing face coverings all add up. They remain vital and are more than the sum of their parts. Colleagues, we have more difficult weeks and months to get through, but we will get there together.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): I thank the Ministers for making their statement. I invite members to ask questions, and I will allow around an hour for this. First, I will call the Chair of the Committee for the Executive Office, who, as is normal, has a little more latitude than other members in asking questions.

Mr McGrath (Committee Chair - Committee for The Executive Office): I begin by utterly condemning the death threats made against the First Minister. Politically, we disagree on much. However, in a democracy, we settle our differences in the Chamber and at the ballot box. No other way is acceptable.

The leaders of other devolved regions, and even Boris Johnson, were out on Monday night to update people on the decisions that they had taken and the impact that those would have on people's lives. That was seen as decisive leadership by Nicola Sturgeon and others. What did we get? We got dithering and delay. Meetings were postponed, there was a lack of agendas, and there were no papers from Ministers. There was anything but the decisive leadership that people want. Once again, the people of Northern Ireland are being failed by the leadership from the Executive Office.

First Minister, an area that has caused some of the most distress and hurt has been that of education and testing. Children have been left weeping and stressed over the Christmas holidays. Even the children of the North are caught up in the dithering and indecision. When will discussions about the transfer tests cease and give our children a break?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Chair for his comments in relation to the threat that I was advised of yesterday. I absolutely agree that this is the place where we discuss matters. I condemn any threat to any democrat, and, indeed, to the family of Glenn Quinn, who have had to deal with threats over the years.

I hear what the member says about what happened on Monday. However, I am sure that he is aware that we took decisions before Christmas that put us ahead of the whole of the United Kingdom. We have had restrictions in place from 26 December. He should recognise that. What happened on Monday brought the rest of the UK into line with what we had done just before Christmas. The additional steps that we have taken put into law, as opposed to guidance, what we decided on 26 December. The "Stay at home" message is now law, as opposed to what we said before Christmas, which was that people should stay at home and leave only when they had good reason to do so.

We regret that we have to put that message in law. I have to say that, because we are restricting freedoms. As somebody who believes in personal freedom, that is very regrettable. However, we had to take that decision because, on Monday morning, very early, the four CMOs from across the United Kingdom came together, looked at the data and decided that we needed to move to alert level 5 to deal with the issues in front of us. I am sure that the Health Minister will reflect that in his statement later today. As I say, the two issues that we had to deal with were putting the guidance into regulations, and education.

I absolutely regret that we are not having face-to-face teaching for our young people. That is, of course, the best way to teach children. We have to go to remote learning for all but children with special needs and vulnerable children. I regret that greatly. The AS-level students from last year, who were meant to be doing their A levels this year, and GCSE students this year, have missed out on — you may say — a year's face-to-face teaching, and that is something that I deeply regret. I hope that it does not have a hugely detrimental impact on their life chances.

As the member knows, academic selection is the parental choice of many people across Northern Ireland. The two private companies that set the tests made their decisions and announced them yesterday. We will, of course, want to see what the public health situation is at the end of these restrictions, which will last until 6 February. It will be prudent to look at all those matters.

The member, and others, should not try to use COVID to deal with a subject matter in a way that many, who sit on my left-hand side, have been trying to do for over 20 years. They are trying to damage grammar schools and do away with academic selection. That is simply not the right course of action. We should be focused on the public health agenda. That is where my focus is, and I will, of course, act on all those issues.

Mr McGrath: Every exam cancelled, but not academic selection. We know where people stand and what they will do.

The deputy First Minister is the joint head of Government. She is jointly responsible for the mess that we have, and it happens month after month. We have had 10 months of dithering, delay and lack of leadership. What will the deputy First Minister do to stop this happening?

Mrs O'Neill: You can fault the Executive for many things, and, on many occasions, I accept that. However, today, given the grave situation that we face and the fact that all the things that we talked about back in March are now reality, I ask the Chair of the Committee to be more constructive and work with us during this period. We are in a desperate situation. It is going to get worse over the next number of weeks. All the predictions show that, as we approach the tail end of January, the situation in the health service will be much worse. The fact that we have come here today and that other Ministers will come behind us to give the detail around all the specifics is crucially important; it sends a message to the Chamber and the wider public that we are in a desperate situation and that we all need to play our part in the weeks ahead, albeit that we accept that it is very challenging.

You made a point around transfer tests. You know my view on the transfer test. It is very clear. I have been very vocal about it. I assure anyone listening that, although I have my personal and ideological view of the transfer test, my view around children sitting a test at the moment is merely to do with the pressure that children have felt over the course of the past year. The fact is that they have not received the teaching time that they deserve. They have been denied the opportunity to mix with their peers. It has been a very stressful time. It is a very reasonable ask, and I implore that the public health advice makes that position very clear. AQE appears to be the only body that is now testing children. There was a flip-flop decision-making point yesterday: in the morning, children were told that there would be no testing, and, in the evening, they were told that there would, potentially, be a test. Children have been left hanging. They do not know whether there will be a test. I implore AQE and the Education Minister to do the right thing. My views are very clear on that, but let us get back to where we are today in what we are trying to do, which is to say to the public that we are in a desperate situation and that we all need to work together to get through this.

Mr Clarke: I concur with the remarks in terms of the threat against you, First Minister. I condemn it, as any right-thinking person should do. First Minister and deputy First Minister, I am sure that you will have heard many of the criticisms that are made when regulations come forward. The chairman of the Police Federation suggested on the radio this morning that the regulations possibly do not give the police powers of entry. Both of you have taken the opportunity on many occasions to refer to house

parties. Given that those may be super-spreaders, what more can be done in relation to powers for the police?

Mrs Foster: I thank the member for his question. We want to give the police all the powers that they need. I have made it pretty clear that we understand that we are restricting people's freedoms, but we are doing so to try to protect people. That is why we have taken these powers. My understanding is that the police can enter house parties on the basis of a breach of the peace, but whether they are then able to give out penalty notices based on COVID regulations is something that I am sure that the Justice Minister will be able to deal with when she comes to the House later today. It is important that the police have the powers that they need to be able to enforce these regulations. As I said in my statement, it would be much better if people dispersed after the police explain, engage and all those things before having to use their powers. I am sure that that is something that the Justice Minister will want to take up later.

Mr Clarke: That answers most of what I wanted to know. It is about reassurance. Most people are adhering to the rules; it is about those who are not. We want to get the reassurance from the First Minister and deputy First Minister that we are going to equip the police with the powers. A small number of people are breaking the rules, and we need to be sure that the police have the powers to deal with them. I do not necessarily want to encourage that, but it is important that they have the powers to do it.

Mrs O'Neill: A Cheann Comhairle, you will be glad to hear that we do not intend to double up and answer every question, but I want to add to what has been said. We intend to meet the Chief Constable to make those points and discuss any areas of concern.

Ms Anderson: Sinn Féin condemns utterly the death threats against the First Minister. I took the opportunity to talk to her earlier today.

The joint First Minister said that the fact that all Ministers in the five-party coalition are here today is a statement of our collective intent and a statement of how serious the situation has become. It is welcome that some of the Ministers will be here today. Will you give me an assessment of how serious it has become?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes. Predictions were made before Christmas around worst- and best-case scenarios. At that time, it was stated that, if R were to get to 1.8, it would be in the worst-case scenario space. That is exactly where we are; we were told today that the R number is close to 1.8. We also know that the number of positive test cases is now at 12,487, which represents an increase of 6,500 on the previous seven-day total. That demonstrates that we have a deteriorating public health situation and that more needed to be done.

The Executive have met every day this week. We have continued to meet repeatedly on all these issues, because we have watched the deteriorating situation very carefully on a daily basis. There is no doubt that, over the Christmas period, with Christmas shopping, with people getting together and with intergenerational mixing, which was also a factor in everything, whilst we were able to anticipate that there would be an increase in cases, it has now become a reality. The fact that there is that rise in cases in people over 60, probably as a direct result of that intergenerational mixing, shows that we have a rapidly deteriorating situation.

As I said, we expect things to peak in the hospital situation towards the end of the week. Again, as we always do, I remind people that the gift to get this under control is in our hands. Whilst we know that everything has a lag period, meaning that we can expect things to rise and reach a peak in this period, we can quickly bring that peak down by our own actions and by following what we are asking of people now.

Ms Anderson: Is the current surge anything to do with the new variant as well as maybe some people letting their guard down?

Mrs Foster: Our understanding from the Chief Scientific Adviser is that the new variant, whilst it is here, is not in any way a dominant feature at present in Northern Ireland. We certainly do not want it to become a dominant feature, because it appears to be a lot more infectious than the main variant.

The deputy First Minister is right to say that our modelling at the highest end did show us going to 1.8. We had hoped, obviously, that we would not be in that position, because the modelling also gave us a

medium pathway and a low pathway. Unfortunately, we have reached the highest modelling of 1.8, and that, of course, has its consequences, with a peak in hospital admissions, probably, in the last two weeks in January. That will cause grave concerns, and I know that the Health Minister will be reflecting on that, given that the Nightingale hospital in Belfast seems to be expanding to meet that need. It is a very concerning time, and we will need to get through this. However, it is within our hands. If we take the advice and abide by the regulations, we will be able to bring down the peak in a much faster way.

Mr Nesbitt: On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I condemn without reservation the threat to the First Minister, apparently coming from a group of people who consistently refuse to embrace an inclusive, peaceful political way forward. There should be consequences for them for that refusal.

I declare an interest as a member of the Policing Board. With regard to policing powers, I return to the concerns of the chair of the Police Federation. Has there been any engagement with the federation by the Executive's COVID task force?

Mrs Foster: TEO has not engaged with the Police Federation. I imagine that that is more of an issue for the Justice Minister, and I know that she has been keeping in touch with the police at the highest level in and around all these issues. Obviously, we should be concerned about and take note of what the chairman of the Police Federation said today. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to all those officers who have been out and about dealing with these issues over the Christmas and new year period when some of us were having — I was going to say when some of us had a break. I am not sure that we had much of a break, but we had a time to recharge our batteries. I pay tribute to all the officers on the ground.

Mr Nesbitt: I understand that the First Minister is saying that it is primarily for the Justice Minister, but the deputy First Minister began her remarks by talking about being here collectively with all Ministers in a five-party coalition Government. Deputy First Minister, given the new regulations, do you think that the four Es of engage, explain, encourage and enforce is still the right approach to this COVID crisis?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, I do. I think that it is really, really important. We have said previously that there should not be an endless cycle of lockdowns. Unfortunately, we find ourselves in this scenario again, but we have to be using this period to look towards the future. It has to be about how we have enforcement and compliance in the here and now and about what the recovery plan is. That is what the task force is doing. We have five parties in an Executive, and we have Ministers with ministerial autonomy. We have Ministers with policy responsibility for different areas. The task force is an attempt to bring that all together, to pull the strands together, to recover together and to get us through this period together. For me, that is key to our success in the weeks and months ahead. Given that we took the decision last night with regard to putting the "Stay at home" message into legislation, there will now need to be engagement with the Chief Constable in terms of the outworking of that. I am quite sure that, with regard to the work that is done around the enforcement piece, the task force will have to speak to them at some stage. I believe that there have been many positive and worthwhile engagements, which the junior Ministers have laid out, with regard to working with the PSNI, local councils and other statutory agencies that have got responsibilities in dealing with the crisis, so that will continue.

Mr Dickson: I, too, add my words of condemnation to those that have already been expressed to the First Minister, particularly in coming from the town that these threats have emanated from. I clearly stand with the Quinn family, as you do, First Minister. That is a rock on which we both stand.

Ministers, you have established an Executive COVID task force. One of the areas which it will be coordinating is with regard to the promotion of the economy and social recovery. That has been a rocky road for us thus far, particularly for those who feel that they remain excluded from the many schemes that have been delivered to help business through this period of time. Can you tell us exactly how your Executive COVID task force will now drill down on top of these very difficult issues?

Mrs O'Neill: One of the things that we discussed at the Executive last night was around those groups who have still not received any financial support, and we are actively looking towards using any available funds that we have to target those people. You will see more of that over the course of the next number of weeks as the Executive develops that conversation. We had a discussion with the Finance Minister around the allocation of funding yesterday, which is not new money in itself. However, we are looking at what we have and who we can target out of the resources that we have. Certainly, our focus last night was on how we can target those people who have been excluded to date.

Mr Dickson: Thank you for your answers. Ministers, given the vast sums of money that have already been expended with regard to supporting our economy and other activities in order to work our way through the COVID pandemic, do you agree with me that the public would be unforgiving in seeing money returned, which remained unspent, provided that opportunities had been given for it to be spent appropriately within the finances of Northern Ireland, and that the public would be very unforgiving if Ministers returned funds because they had not been able to spend it in the ways in which they had planned?

Mrs Foster: Yes, I think that that is absolutely the case. To pick up on the point about the extra money that was announced yesterday, when we drilled down into that the Finance Minister indicated that that was money which was announced before Christmas. Therefore, I think that we are looking for an update tomorrow on all of that in and around the schemes. The money has come throughout the year — I think that the member will accept that — and it is therefore important to always remember that it is public money and that we have to make sure that it is spent in the appropriate fashion. I am sure that that will no doubt be looked at in the future. We are working at pace and it is important that we get the money out to those who need it most. Certainly, that is a discussion that we will not just be having tomorrow, but I imagine over the next coming Executives.

Mr Stalford: My question is for the deputy First Minister. In her statement, the deputy First Minister said that:

"Not to act decisively would present a material risk".

However, I have been informed that there was a major republican funeral that was held last Saturday in Beragh in County Tyrone. Why do these rules, which are legally enforceable with the power of the law, apply to everybody but Sinn Féiners?

Mrs O'Neill: I cannot comment on a funeral that happened in Beragh last week; I was not there and I do not know anything about it.

Mr Stalford: If it is established that elected representatives of Sinn Féin attended a republican funeral that breached these regulations then will the deputy First Minister demand their resignation?

Mrs O'Neill: I am not going to comment on something that I do not know anything about.

Ms Sheerin: Ministers, thank you both for your statement and presence here. I join in the condemnation of the threat to the First Minister.

I know that there has been a lot of attention in the general public and across media outlets about the conversations that have been had this week, so can you give an overview of the decisions that were taken yesterday on 5 January?

Mrs Foster: As I said, because we had taken decisions before Christmas and put in quite a lot of restrictions — I remember that, at the time, some people were quite critical of that because we were moving in that fashion when other parts were not doing so — we are 10 days ahead, if you like. Whilst the numbers of positive cases are in a bad place — I think that there were 1,300 or thereabouts positive cases yesterday — hopefully, we will see positive cases going in the other direction soon. Given the lag, hospital admissions will come after that and then the number of people staying in hospital will come after that. There is always a lag between the different pieces, and that is why the advisers are telling us that the peak in hospital admissions will probably be in and around the last two weeks in January. We felt that there was a need to put what we had said before Christmas into law, and we have done that now.

On education, everybody apart from those with SEN, vulnerable children and the children of key workers will not go into school, so schooling will happen on a remote basis until the half-term break in the middle of February. That is certainly not where we would like to be, but, unfortunately, circumstances have shown us that that has to be the case.

There are also restrictions on the number of people who can gather in a garden. You will remember that it was 15 people from two households; that will now be reduced again. The Department of Health is working its way through the numbers, and we will have clarity on that on Monday, if not this afternoon, certainly by this evening.

Ms Sheerin: Thanks, Minister, for that. You referred to the fact that we in the North moved earlier than other regions did. At the time, it was probably confusing for people, but we have now seen the result of what happened at Christmas coming to bear and will do so for several weeks. Can you confirm the start and end date for the regulations?

Mrs O'Neill: Officials are working through the necessary arrangements. The regulations come into play from midnight on Thursday, so from 12:00 on Thursday night; I know that that always gets confusing for people. They will have effect from Friday, basically, but the Executive are asking people not to wait until Friday but to act as though they are in place now and limit their movements. The intention is that the general restrictions will be in place until 6 February, as per our announcement prior to Christmas, and the school issue will remain until the mid-term break, but we will keep that under review as well.

Mr Middleton: I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their statement. The Ministers will be aware that many retail parks and larger retail shops are open across Northern Ireland, selling many of the goods that some smaller retailers on the high street and in town and city centres sell as well, yet they have been forced to close. Can the First Minister and deputy First Minister give any clarity on how they will address that issue and provide a more level playing field for those businesses that have been asked to close?

Mrs Foster: I feel very strongly about that issue, and it has been raised with all of us many, many times. We set the floor space recommendation for essential goods at 50%, and, unfortunately, we have seen a lot of the larger shops use that to their advantage. Many of the smaller shops that are solely clothes retailers, for example, see that as being an inequality issue, and I see it as being an inequality issue as well. We have therefore asked officials to come to the Executive tomorrow with a paper on solutions around that. I very much want to see solutions, because it is not fair, and we really have to deal with that issue.

Mr Middleton: I thank the First Minister for that response. I welcome that. We need to look at a number of issues, including click and collect. I know that garden centres, for example, have a lot of stock and perishable items that are of concern to them. I ask that the First Minister and deputy First Minister take those issues on board and ensure that some clarity is brought to the situation.

Mrs Foster: Click and collect is one of the issues that we are looking at again. Unfortunately, when we introduced click and collect in the run-up to Christmas, the restrictions that were in place before Christmas were abused by some people, not by everybody — I am not suggesting that for a second. They were, however, abused by some people, who allowed people to come into the shop to collect their goods and then go out of the shop when they had paid for them. That was not the intention. The intention is that you go online, identify what you need and then you collect it at a designated appointment time. That was to try and cut down on all of that. I know certainly that the Economy Minister feels that if we put in the appropriate restrictions on that, that we could do that, but that is something that, again, we will be discussing tomorrow.

Mr Gildernew: I express my condolences to each and every one of the now 1,384 people who have lost their lives here in the North and to the 2,282 in the South. I also extend our thoughts to all those who are suffering COVID at home and in hospital and to their carers, both informal and healthcare staff, who are so hard pressed at this time. Given those figures, do the Ministers agree that we need a coordinated all-island — indeed, a two-island approach — to tackling coronavirus?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, that makes common sense. On the issue of travel, there is an ongoing conversation, particularly on travel between the two islands. I think that there is a meeting later this afternoon to discuss that and there will also be a meeting between, I think, Simon Coveney from the Irish Government, Brandon Lewis and us at some stage over the next hours or days. It makes sense that we cooperate and work together to ensure that the travel restrictions that we have are consistent across the two islands because I very much believe in a two-island approach and I have made that point in recent meetings with the British and Irish Governments.

We need to develop a more common approach and cooperation. We have a renewed sense of crisis on our hands in terms of the situation here and in England and we need to work together as best we can on a North/South and east-west basis. That is just good common sense in responding to the pandemic.

Mr Gildernew: It is crucial. We have heard a lot about what the public need to do at this time, and we are asking the public to do some very difficult things and they are largely doing that. However, it is incumbent on us also to do certain things. At this morning's Health Committee meeting, we heard from the Chief Scientific Adviser that he thinks now that there might have been merit in taking action around travel right from the beginning. The action needed here is that we identify those who need to isolate, provide them with support to carry out that isolation and that we monitor and stay in control of that across the island. Will the Ministers update us on how that system is going to be improved to deal with the situation?

Mrs Foster: The member is right that the system to date has not been great in terms of people who come in through Dublin and then come up to Northern Ireland. The Health Minister has raised concerns about the travel locator forms, and the member will know that that is the case. I understand that the Health Minister had been advised that there was some issue from a legal point of view around that. The Attorney General in the Republic has now said that that is not the case. Therefore, we should be very much pushing to have those travel locator forms shared between Dublin and us so that we can identify people who come in, particularly on international travel.

I note that the Republic's Government have now said that if you are coming in on an international flight, you must have had a negative COVID test. That is a sensible thing to do. I hope that the UK Government move in a similar direction so that anybody who comes in on an international flight can show a negative COVID test. That would then be something that we could proceed on.

I think that we are going to have conversations this evening with Michael Gove and with representatives from the other devolved Administrations, so, no doubt, we will have updates on international travel after that.

Mr O'Toole: I join others in condemning the threats that were made. They are completely unacceptable and appalling.

First Minister, I welcome the fact that you, on behalf of the Executive Office, are here today to answer questions, but, over the past few months, the people of Northern Ireland have witnessed your party use a cross-community veto to block COVID restrictions, which precipitated a spike in cases. They have seen prominent members of your party flout regulations, including Members of Parliament who are now in Westminster despite the instruction of the Speaker of the House of Commons to avoid coming if at all possible. They have seen DUP Ministers prioritise academic selection over public health. They have also seen DUP Ministers and MPs seek to deflect blame for the consequences of Brexit.

First Minister, your party has immense power over the lives of the people of Northern Ireland. Is it time to take some responsibility for the power that your party wields?

Mrs Foster: I take responsibility for the party that I lead, and I take it every single day. He is wrong about prioritising academic selection over public health. That is simply not the case. That is not what I said, and he should reflect on that. On colleagues going to Westminster, there is a system of proxy votes, as I am sure he is aware, given that he was in another place working at one time. Therefore, they have to go over and deliver the votes of their colleagues, so he should reflect on that also.

The SDLP are engaged in hyperbole, as they often are, to try to make political points. I regret that, given where we are. We are trying to deal with a public health crisis in a joined-up, collective way, as the deputy First Minister said, and I regret the tone of his and the Chair of the Committee's contributions.

Mr O'Toole: I regret that the First Minister regrets my tone, but I am afraid that that is the way that many people in Northern Ireland feel.

Can I ask both First Ministers about communication? One of the issues around the public health response has been a feeling that communication has not always been as joined up as it should be. Will they commit today to regular updates? Specifically, will they commit to updating people about vaccination progress? The First Minister was right when she said that there has been some good progress here in the vaccination process. It would help to build public confidence and give people a sign of where we are going in terms of normalisation if we could get regular updates — daily, if possible — on where the vaccination process is.

Mrs Foster: The Health Minister has made it clear to us that he has been contacted, as, indeed, were all the Health Ministers around the vaccination programme, by the Chief Statistician in the UK, and she warned them that any statistics that they were putting out had to be dealt with by her to make sure that the proper information was put out. You will have noted, therefore, that not only our own Health Minister, but other Health Ministers, always talk about "in the region of 45,000" or "in the region of 46,000", because they do not want to fall foul of the Chief Statistician.

Some of us have asked the Health Minister to put it on the dashboard, which is public-facing. He wants to put it on the dashboard, but has to abide by the rules and regulations around that. I am quite sure that if the member were to raise that matter with the Health Minister today, he would be able to clarify it for him.

Mr Chambers: I wish to be associated with the remarks around the despicable threat made to the First Minister.

At the emergency Health Committee meeting this morning, a member directed questions at the Chief Scientific Adviser around what he alleged was a failure of the COVID response strategy, and called for a more robust and transparent approach. Does the Minister agree that any COVID strategy is only as successful as public buy-in, but, more importantly, by political leadership not only respecting but complying with all aspects of public health regulations and guidance themselves?

Mrs O'Neill: Public buy-in is crucially important, and that is why we are sending a very strong message that, in the here and now, we are in a desperation situation and need the public's help not for ourselves but for the people who we represent, for the health service, which is under pressure, and for the situation that healthcare staff are facing now and are going to face towards the end of the month.

This period of lockdown has to have a purpose. Lockdown cannot be a means to an end. The vaccination is all of our light at the end of the tunnel, and something that we are all much focused on, but it is going to take some time before the vaccination can be rolled out in the manner that would give us protection as a society.

In the meantime, we need a clear strategic approach, whether mass testing or other measures that need to be taken. We cannot wait until June to have a situation whereby everybody is vaccinated and then we can have schools open and everybody going back to normal. That cannot be the scenario. Lockdown has to have a purpose, and I hope that the strategy that Health brings forward is about what the middle of February looks like in terms of mass testing and the other component tools that we have to fight back against COVID until we have the maximum number of people vaccinated.

Mr Chambers: Does the deputy First Minister agree that we cannot afford any major undermining of the Executive's public health messaging by any party in the Chamber?

Mrs O'Neill: Of course. That goes without saying.

Ms P Bradley: I join members in condemnation of the death threat against our party leader and remind everyone that she is not only the First Minister of Northern Ireland but a mum, a wife, a sister and a daughter. All of them must be going through sheer hell at the moment.

First Minister and deputy First Minister, we know that, over the past nine months, the community and voluntary sector has stepped up to the mark emotionally and practically in delivering food parcels or whatever that might be. Has the Communities Minister put forward any plans to protect the most vulnerable in our society and to support that sector?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes. We asked the Health Minister for confirmation around shielding. Obviously, shielding is not in place as it was in March, but clinically vulnerable people are going to receive a letter from their GP. The Communities Minister said at the Executive yesterday evening that her Department and Health met yesterday to see how they can put in place the type of supports for more vulnerable people that we saw previously. I expect to see a roll-out of those in the weeks ahead. These are the people who are most vulnerable in our society and who need our support the most, so it is really important that we have those targeted supports again.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the deputy First Minister for her answer. Another subject that I want to bring up is sign language. I was contacted this morning by a few people from the deaf community. I know that this is not always possible when you are delivering various announcements from your home town,

your back garden or wherever and that it is much easier in a formal setting. However, we should just to bear in mind that a lot of people in that community are learning of big announcements much later than others. We could possibly even work with our local TV companies to try to address that.

Mrs O'Neill: Thanks for raising that. Of course, we will take that on board. In our press conferences the whole way through the pandemic, we have been very conscious about making sure that we have that as part of our communication plans. We will find a way to address that.

Mr Muir: I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for coming here today. These restrictions are having a serious impact on people's everyday lives. Last night, I spoke to a friend who has lost a loved one. Having that conversation on the phone and not being able to meet that person and give them a hug is one of the hardest things. Can the First Minister and deputy First Minister confirm that the support bubble arrangements will continue? What arrangements will apply for who can meet outdoors and where?

Mrs O'Neill: I am very sorry for your friend's loss, and please pass on our condolences. That is the reality of dealing with COVID and the restrictions that are in place. It is not just the people who have died as a result of COVID and the families who have lost them; it is the many people who have died of other causes in this period and been denied the normal comfort and, as you say, people being able to put their arms around them and given them a hug.

This is a desperate situation. The support bubbling arrangements are still in place. The exemptions if you live alone and those things remain as they were announced prior to Christmas. What was your other question?

Mr Muir: It was about meeting outdoors.

Mrs O'Neill: Sorry. An anomaly has been identified in the exercise number and the health regulations. Health is going to bring us another paper and we are going to discuss that at the Executive tomorrow. We will clarify that and make sure that it is rectified before the regulations are made.

Mr Muir: As a Christian, I really enjoy going to church. My church has moved all its services online, but I am worried about other people contracting COVID-19 at church services. I am really worried about that in respect of the need to tackle the spread. What plans is the Executive Office making to try to deal with this issue? Will regulations be brought forward requiring church services, other than funerals and weddings, to be held online?

Mrs Foster: I thank the member for his question. We have had a very positive engagement with our faith communities throughout the past year. They have taken a lot of steps to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and they should be absolutely commended for doing that right across Northern Ireland. Our junior Ministers will be engaging on these issues with the faith communities, if not today then certainly tomorrow. As the member indicated, many churches have already taken the decision voluntarily to move online. I would much prefer that those issues were dealt with in a voluntary way, recognising the fundamental nature of being able to worship together. Therefore, we will have those discussions. They will take place very soon because we gave a commitment to faith communities that we would collaborate and communicate with them through a partnership approach. That is what we are doing. The member will know that some jurisdictions, such as England, have decided to allow churches to remain open, whilst Scotland and the Republic of Ireland have decided to put the closure of churches into regulations. I hope that we can find a collaborative approach to that so that we can keep people safe at all times.

Mrs Cameron: I join in the condemnation of the threat against my colleague and boss, the First Minister. I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their statement, and thank them and every Minister in the Executive for their work during the horrendous past year.

Messaging is probably the most powerful tool in the fight against the spread of the virus. We are all aware of the naysayers, deniers and those who would rather blame the House for the virus than their own actions. What is the Executive Office's message to those individuals?

Mrs O'Neill: We must re-emphasise to everybody the seriousness of the situation and the fact that our healthcare staff are under huge pressure and our health service is on the verge of collapse as a result of dealing with that pressure. There are the normal winter pressures and then COVID on top of that.

More of the Nightingale facilities are having to be opened up, which shows the preparation and planning that are going in to deal with the fact that we are going to be overwhelmed over the next number of weeks. Therefore, our message has to be to everybody in society: please, work with us. Everybody needs your help. Think not just about yourself. You can have your views on everything in life, but your actions have implications for others. Think about your loved ones. Think about your mummy, daddy, sister or brother. Think about your neighbour. Think about your friends. We ask people to work with us and let us get through this. We will get through this. We always have to tell people that because we have to give them hope. The vaccine is here. With just a bit more hard work, we will get out the other side of this.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the deputy First Minister for that answer. Can she tell us whether the Executive will support the call for the 24/7 roll-out of the vaccine in order to maximise the protection of those who are most vulnerable and ensure that as much normality can return as soon as possible and that the economy can be supported through that as well?

Mrs O'Neill: We have to pull out all the stops. We have to do absolutely everything possible to get the vaccine rolled out as quickly as possible as it becomes available, get it out the door and get people vaccinated, and do it in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions. Let us get it out there. There are many people out there with the skill set and facilities who are more than willing to help us to roll that out. Certainly, we, in the Executive Office, will push to ensure that the roll-out is as speedy as possible. We have to be creative and use the other people and goodwill that is there to the public's advantage and get the vaccine out there as quickly as possible.

Mr Durkan: I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their statement. Can they please outline what the Executive intend to do to support students in Northern Ireland and those from the North who study elsewhere and are being charged extortionate fees for education that they are not fully receiving and accommodation that they are not using or, in many cases, are not able to use?

Mrs Foster: Clearly, students are more of an issue for the Economy Minister, as the member will know. I know that hardship schemes have been set up by Queen's University and the Ulster University. An unfortunate issue is the problem with regard to young people who have signed contracts with landlords and not actually for accommodation that is in university ownership. It is one that I know the Economy Minister has looked at in the past. We cannot force people who have a contract to just have that contract superseded. Therefore, it is a problem. Fees are an issue that we would need to take up with the Universities Minister in England. I presume that the member is talking about fees for young people who are at university on the mainland and here, so it is something that we would need to raise there. We will certainly take it back to the Economy Minister that it has been raised in the Chamber today.

Mr Durkan: The current situation is grossly unfair and unjust, and it is causing massive hardship, heartache and headaches for students and their families. I recognise that responsibility lies with the Department for the Economy, but therefore that is where the responsibility for the inaction to date lies as well. I say to the First Ministers, as our heads of government, that something needs to be done and ask for an assurance that they will work with Executive colleagues to take action and to listen to our students' desperate plea for help.

Mrs Foster: Yes, we will do that; I have no doubt about that. We have heard those pleas for help, and I should have declared an interest in relation to that as the mother of two students. I know what is going on with private rented accommodation and rental accommodation that is in the ownership of the universities, as well as fees. They are not receiving the level of education that they should be receiving, and we all know that that is the case. Most of it — all of it is online at the present, and they do not have the facility to deal with things in the way that they should. We absolutely hear what the member says, and we will take it back to the Economy Minister.

Mrs O'Neill: Just to add to that, I absolutely accept that the situation is unfair and unjust for students. I have met the student representatives, and we have heard their plea. We have increased the funding for the student hardship support scheme. That is important, and I refer students who are in financial difficulty to that support scheme. I also make a plea to the landlords to do the right thing in the absence of our having the ability to stop them because of a legal contract: do the right thing in this scenario. There is a draw from everybody at this time to pull their weight in the middle of the pandemic, and landlords should do the right thing towards students who cannot go to university because of the pandemic.

Mrs Barton: I also would like to be associated with the remarks made on the death threat to the First Minister, my colleague in Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

There is still a little confusion about the number of people permitted in a home or in a garden. You have, for example, reduced gatherings to a maximum of six people from two households allowed in a home, but then you have a garden gathering of a maximum of six people from one household. Can you clarify that a little? It seems that you are allowed people from two households inside your home but only one outside.

Mrs Foster: There is an issue here, and the member has absolutely put her finger on it. The idea, as I understand it, was to align outdoor gatherings with indoor gatherings, but, unfortunately, there has been a bit of confusion. I understand that the Department of Health is looking at this, and perhaps the Minister of Health will be able to clarify it when he comes to the House later on or later this afternoon. Of course, if you are saying only six in a garden from two households, there may be many more in the house because they are all from the same household. You could have a family of 10 living in a household, so that does not really match up. That anomaly has been identified overnight, and we need to deal with that in the coming hours to make sure that there is clarity on it.

Mrs Barton: During the last lockdown, quite a lot of people went for walks and exercise to local forests. A lot of them were used for forest walks, and they became overcrowded, with cars lining the roadside in the parks and local forests. Is there any way in which you are looking at that now to maybe try to control that?

Mrs Foster: One of the learnings from the last lockdown was that some of those forest parks were closed, yet people were still going to them. They were not using the car parks, because the car parks were closed, so they had to park along the roads. People should get out and go for a walk, but the point is that they should not do it in large groups, and that is part of the difficulty. People are, of course, entitled to go and walk, and I think that the forest parks are being kept open on this occasion to allow that to happen. We want to avoid large groups coming together: that is where the problem arises. As the deputy First Minister said, we will speak to the Chief Constable and have conversations about how we can deal with the large groups, but it is absolutely right that people should be able to go out and exercise. That is fundamental, given mental health concerns and the need to be outside the house to get exercise.

Miss Woods: I also condemn the threat made against the First Minister.

There are so many questions that people wish to have answered, and it is disappointing that we have had to get used to getting information on social media. Perhaps that can be addressed in future through communications plans.

Mrs Barton stole my first question, but I have also been contacted by a friend who will, unfortunately, have to attend a funeral in the next couple of days. Will the First Minister please confirm whether the numbers and arrangements for funerals are as they stand or, if they have been changed, what are they?

Mrs Foster: The arrangements for funerals remain as they were in the announcements that were made in December. The number is 25. We recognise that that is very restrictive, particularly for families who have a lot of relatives, but the number has not changed.

Miss Woods: I thank the First Minister for her answer, and the answer to my next question may be similar to her first answer. I have been contacted by local businesses, especially in the catering and takeaway food sector: are they allowed to remain open as they are now?

Mrs O'Neill: That situation remains as is. The measures that we announced yesterday are in addition to what was announced before Christmas. We had one week of additional restrictions, but takeaway services are still valid.

Mr Allister: I associate myself with the remarks condemning the threat to the First Minister.

It is, surely, always important to remind ourselves of how alien these oppressive regulations should be to all of us. We should also be mindful that, although we are all paid from the public sector and,

therefore, do not have a financial prejudice, there are many across this country in the private sector who are suffering and will continue to suffer because of the regulations.

You tell us that all of this is necessary because of the threat, in your words, I think, of our National Health Service falling over. Is there any acknowledgement collectively from the Executive that we are, in part, in this position because, since devolution returned in 2007, 2,000 beds have been taken out of our hospital system with the attendant nurses etc? Is there any acknowledgement of that? When this is over, will we begin to correct that and put things back to where they need to be to deal with a pandemic?

Mrs Foster: If the Health Minister was here, he would absolutely say that that is the case. It is part of the problem with the capacity of our health service. Of course, the member will know that we had started a programme of transformation and reform and, unfortunately, given what has happened this past year, we have not been able to proceed with that transformation and reform agenda. It is important to have that capacity.

It is not just about beds, and the member has recognised that. It is also about having the staff to deal with the people in the beds. In intensive care, I think, the ratio is one nurse to one bed. At some points, we have had to lower that ratio to one nurse for two beds. That is dangerous, and we do not like doing that and nor does the Health Minister. We need to have more skilled nurses. There has been an increase in the number of nurses in training, but that, obviously, takes time to come through. It is important that we continue to invest in our health service but also have the transformation and reform agenda, which is there and which is needed. Otherwise, we will not be able to deal with the health service into the future.

Mr Allister: Today, again, I listened to the deputy First Minister pontificating about how important it is that the public follow the rules. That will cause many of my constituents to want me to ask this question: if another terrorist friend of the deputy First Minister should die in the next few weeks, will she attend their funeral?

Mrs O'Neill: Well, I encourage the member to ask his constituents to work with the public health advice and follow what we are asking of the public today. We are all in this together, we are facing this crisis together and it is really important that we respond together.

Mr Carroll: I also condemn the threats made against the First Minister.

When discussing the regulations a few days ago, the First Minister stated:

"none of this was inevitable",

before going on to chastise people for going to the coast, although, I note, the MP for East Antrim was not chastised. I found that breathtaking in its arrogance, considering that the Executive have presided over a shambolic response to the virus. Is the First Minister at all repentant for that shambolic response, which has included ignoring medical advice, exiting previous lockdowns recklessly and putting young people through hell in a handbasket and, ultimately, led to the loss of lives?

Mrs Foster: I do not recognise much of what the Member has said, and he will not be surprised at that. The point I was making about the north Antrim coast is that, of course, we all love the north Antrim coast — nobody more so than me — but it is important that, when people go out for exercise, they do not gather together in large numbers, because we are trying to make sure that the public health advice is adhered to.

I do not expect anything better from the member than to describe us as "shambolic". His politics is not something that I subscribe to, and I am sure he will not subscribe to mine anytime soon.

Mr Carroll: I certainly do not subscribe to your politics, First Minister, especially not the approach to handling the pandemic.

You did not answer my question. There has been a shambolic handling of the crisis, lockdowns have been exited recklessly and young people treated disgracefully. Are you in any way repentant for how you have led the response to the pandemic?

Mrs Foster: You got to the question in your supplementary as opposed to the ramble before that. Can I say to the member that there will be a time to look back? As it says in the scriptures:

"There is a time for everything".

There will be a time to look back at what has happened over the past year. I am sure that the member will have a great time looking back over what has happened.

The decisions that we have taken have always been led by the public health advice. They have been, and the record will show that, when we go back to look at all of this again. He can shake his head all he likes. The reality is that, when we look back at what has been a terrible time for us all, he will see that all the Executive Ministers have made very difficult decisions in quick time and it has all been for the protection of our people.

Ms Sugden: Thank you both, and happy women's Christmas, the day that women are thought to take a rest. We all know that that never happens.

My question is for either of you. Prior to Christmas, the Minister for the Economy announced a gift card scheme that was due to be rolled out in the coming weeks and months. Given that this period of restrictions will continue until mid-May and that the gift card scheme funding will have to be spent by the end of March and cannot be rolled over, will there be any discussions about putting money into such a scheme, or can it be allocated elsewhere?

Mrs Foster: Yes, and happy Epiphany to the member as well.

The Minister for the Economy and the Finance Minister are in discussions about that scheme. Obviously, the idea behind the scheme was to help our much beleaguered high streets to get back on their feet again. Obviously, as the restrictions are in place until 6 February, there are difficulties around that scheme. The Economy Minister is discussing rolling over the money into the next financial year with the Finance Minister and whether there are alternative things that need to be done. Those discussions are ongoing.

Ms Sugden: The "Stay at home" message is set to be put into the regulations. Can the First Minister or deputy First Minister explain how that will be written into law? Will it be similar to the regulations of 26 December to 2 January, which enabled the police to ask people to go home, I believe? I felt that that was quite open to discretion and potentially undermined the message.

Mrs O'Neill: Nollaig na mBan shona daoibh go léir. Happy women's Christmas to you too.

The Justice Minister will be here this afternoon, and she will be able to explain that in more detail. Certainly, we were conscious that we needed to give the police the power to escort people home if they had left home for reasons other than those specified. The Justice Minister will update you on the actual wording when she comes into the Chamber.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): Before I call the next speaker, I will remind Claire Sugden that there is a festive occasion called Nollaig na mBan when women in Ireland are supposed to have a day off, but, as you have said, you look forward to seeing that happen.

Mr McNulty: I join others in condemning the threats against the First Minister.

Given that the South is likely to move to close down elements of the construction industry, what approach will be adopted here?

Mrs O'Neill: I am not aware that the South is to make a move on the construction industry. As a matter of fact, the whole way through the pandemic, the Government in Dublin have kept the construction industry going. They will obviously make their own decisions on the basis of the prevalence of the virus. What is important is that we continue to have a joined-up approach where we can and to share experiences and learning where we can. Indeed, we will have conversations with representatives of the Dublin Government over the coming days.

Mr McNulty: If, when the South partially shuts down the construction industry, will you abide by European law and take ownership of and responsibility for the cross-border workers who reside in this

part of the island and ensure that they are supported sufficiently to support their families and keep them safe in these dark times?

Mrs O'Neill: We should always make sure that cross-border workers are supported. We have made that case the whole way through the pandemic and raised it repeatedly with the Irish Government. I think that it was wrong for those workers to be left out. That remains the situation. I have no indication of what the Twenty-six Counties intend to do on construction. We will follow the public health advice. If that is the case —.

Mr McNulty: *[Inaudible.]*

Mrs O'Neill: You do not want us to follow the public health advice?

We have to follow the public health advice, and, at this stage, there is certainly no indication that we need to intervene in the construction industry. However, as with everything in the pandemic, we will keep it under review.

The Chairperson (Mr Maskey): Members, that concludes questions on this statement. I thank everybody for their cooperation. We will now have a brief suspension of five minutes prior to the next statement, which will be from the Minister of Education. I remind all members of the importance of maintaining social distancing during the suspension. Members who are leaving the Chamber should do so via the nearest door to their seat. The meeting will resume in five minutes.