



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for The Executive Office

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Introductory Briefing:  
Ms Jenny Pyper, Interim Head of the  
Northern Ireland Civil Service;  
and Executive Office Officials

3 February 2021

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

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

**Witnesses:**

Dr Mark Browne	The Executive Office
Dr Andrew McCormick	The Executive Office
Ms Jenny Pyper	The Executive Office

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** If we can bring Jenny Pyper into the spotlight along with Andrew McCormick and Mark Browne. I can see that Mark, Andrew and Jenny are up into the spotlight, but they have not populated the screen so I cannot see them. However, I hope that they are there. Jenny, if you said "Hello", it might bring you up on the screen.

**Ms Jenny Pyper (The Executive Office):** Hello, Chair, I am here. I cannot see myself, but I can see you and the members.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** That is brilliant. That has brought you up for us now so that we can see you. I know that we have spoken before, but this is the first time that I am actually seeing you.

You are welcome to the Committee. Just before Christmas, you took up the role of interim head of the Civil Service (HOCS) and are thus permanent secretary at the Executive Office (TEO). We wish you well in that task. It is no small task at the best of times, but it is an even greater one in the current times. These are difficult times for our health and our communities, our businesses and retail. You are having to undertake quite a lot of work, and we certainly appreciate all that you are doing.

As, I am sure, you are aware, Jenny, the way we normally operate is asking for a few minutes' introduction about yourself, your work and your priorities before opening out to members' questions.

**Ms Pyper:** Chair, thank you very much, and thanks for the invitation to meet the Committee today and for your good wishes. It is very much appreciated. I am grateful for the early opportunity to talk to you. It is day 65 — not that I am counting — but it still feels very early in my appointment. I am glad to have Dr McCormick and Dr Browne with me today. I know that the Committee is very familiar with both of them. I suspect that I may lean on them for a lot of the detail. As you suggested, Chair, I will try to outline to the Committee what I understand to be my key priorities over the period that I will be in post.

As you know, I was appointed by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister on 1 December for eight months. I know some members of the Committee. I have appeared before them in the past and was a career civil servant for many years. In 2013, I left the Civil Service and became chief executive of the Utility Regulator. My appointment came at a time of ongoing challenge for the Executive, during which they were continuing to manage the response to the pandemic, and that continues to be the focus for many of us. In addition, just before Christmas, we were coming to the end of the EU transition period, which, in normal times, even without a pandemic, was going to be a huge administrative challenge. It continues to raise challenging issues for all of us. Those two issues remain inescapable pressures for Ministers and civil servants for obvious reasons.

My role as interim HOCS has a number of interconnected strands, the first of which is leading the overall Northern Ireland Civil Service and ensuring continuing and coherent support for Ministers at what continues to be a challenging time. In addition, as you mentioned, I am permanent secretary of the Executive Office, and I lead what may be a small Department but one that, the Committee knows only too well, has some of the biggest and most sensitive challenges to manage. I mentioned COVID and the EU exit, but, as you know, TEO is deeply involved in victims' issues, in important work to build better relationships between communities and, indeed, in improving the quality of life in those communities. You just had a session with Chris Stewart about the important work of the high street task force, and that is a critical piece of TEO's work on building communities. Of course, TEO also operates directly on the political interface, not just with the Executive but with the UK and Irish Governments. All of that is creating challenges at a time of continuing resource pressures, including those imposed by the pandemic.

The Committee will know that the Finance Minister's recently announced Budget indicated an overall 24.3% budget increase between 2020-21 and 2021-22, but the reality for the Executive Office is that we have not received any additional funding for business-as-usual activities, and the increase for 2021-22 is for particular things such as victims' payments, historical institutional abuse (HIA), EU match funding and EU exit, all of which are ring-fenced. Essentially, for TEO, as with other Departments, we are looking at an outcome next year that is essentially a flat-cash settlement, and that, in reality, as, I know, the Committee understands, means a reduction in our finances once increased costs and demands on services have been taken into account. The Budget settlement means that it will be a challenging period across the Civil Service and, indeed, for this Department. I know that the Committee will be actively involved in the Budget consultation process, and we welcome your constructive engagement because you understand the range of work and the range of challenges that we face. Dr Browne, who is with me today, will be happy to pick up on any specific questions about the Budget.

The third leg to my role as interim HOCS is that I am formally the secretary to the Executive Committee, and I see one of my key responsibilities as ensuring that the Executive continue to function as effectively and efficiently as they can as they work through the challenges of the pandemic. Part of the role is also to minimise any admin barriers that might be put in the Executive's way as they continue to work with an unprecedentedly high level of intensity and on a virtual basis. It is far from ideal. As you know only too well from a Committee perspective, StarLeaf, Zoom or one of the other platforms are far from ideal, and that problem is exacerbated for the Executive, who would work much better, as many of us would, if we were able to be round a table together. Those continue to be challenges, but I want to pick up specifically on a couple of things, including the Executive COVID task force (ECT), which, I know, you will be interested in. One of the key tasks that the First Minister and deputy First Minister asked me to take on was to chair the newly established ECT. It was just a reflection of the extent and scale of the pandemic and its enduring impacts that continue to surpass the initial assessments back in March, April and May last year. It is a response that recognises the need for a strategic and collaborative plan to tackle the pandemic. The aim of the COVID task force is to provide a bit of a step change in the Executive response through coordinating a more integrated programme of work in response to the pandemic, which is being led, as it should be, by the Department of Health, but also in recovery planning. As chair, I convene the strategic oversight board that meets regularly; in fact, it is meeting this afternoon, and when I finish with the Committee, I will join that strategic oversight board to pick up on progress.

We have structured our work around four work streams. The first relates to the ongoing management of the pandemic. That work stream is around protection and is led by the Department of Health. Then, we are looking at adherence and behavioural issues related to the restrictions. We are looking at strategic communications, and I can say a bit more about each of those work streams in due course, and, critically, as I mentioned, working on recovery, when that starts, what it looks like and what it needs to involve. Work under each of those strands is being led by permanent secretaries from Health, Economy, Communities and Justice, as well as the Executive information service, and they all sit on the oversight board.

Our priorities for the next four to eight weeks are around developing a pathway to recovery that will, essentially, act as a road map out of the current restrictions; looking at ways of increasing adherence to the public health guidance and regulations; and enhancing the Executive's strategic communications capacity. I am happy to pick up on any of those strands in questions, because I know that you have a great interest in that area, and I imagine that Committee colleagues do likewise.

Like any major organisation, the Northern Ireland Civil Service faces significant challenges not just in responding to the pandemic but in improving the scope and responsiveness of its services to a wide range of customers against a background of challenging financial constraint. We have to work through challenging recommendations coming out of the renewable heat incentive (RHI) inquiry and the Northern Ireland Audit Office report on capability and capacity in the Civil Service. Those reports highlight the scale and challenge of the transformation that needs to take place. As interim head and with the support of the Civil Service board, I want to continue to develop that programme of reform and transformation to ensure that the Civil Service has the confidence and trust of a range of stakeholders and, most importantly, the wider community in Northern Ireland. We believe that the key to that will be the development of the new strategic outcomes-based Programme for Government. That programme is designed to form the basis for the Executive to partner with civic society to respond to people's needs and community needs to help build a more inclusive society with outcomes related to individual and collective well-being. The Programme for Government consultation document has been shared with the Committee, and I am sure that members will want to fully engage with that consultation. We really value your involvement.

Equally important and running in parallel with those priorities will be the continued work on the national and international dimension of the work of the Northern Ireland Executive, which I would hope to sustain and develop with colleagues in the UK Government, in the devolved Administrations in Scotland and Wales and in the Irish Government. Those relationships are critical and have been important throughout the COVID pandemic. I believe that they will also be important as we start to map the pathway to recovery.

I know that you have received briefings recently on EU exit issues, and I do not think that I need to go over that ground. However, needless to say, events following the end of the transition period have been difficult, and we continue to manage the complexities associated with the trade development agreement and implementing the protocol.

The final priority for me is to do myself out of a job and to help to develop the new competition for a permanent head of the Civil Service. That work is under way and is being led by NICS HR, working with Strategic Investment Board (SIB) colleagues, the Civil Service Commissioners and me. From a personal priority perspective, it is important to progress that so that we have a competition and an appointable candidate in time for a smooth handover before my period of appointment ends in the summer.

I hope that that overview has been helpful to the Committee in understanding the roles and priorities as I understand them and where my focus will be over the next few months. I am happy to take questions from members on anything that I have covered and on other TEO issues. As I said, depending on the questions, I may draw on my top team of Andrew and Mark, but I am at your disposal.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** OK. Thank you very much for that, Jenny. A quiet week at the office, then, with that resumé of all the strands and areas of work that are taking place. I recognise how it illustrates for us the strangeness that there can be. The Department has a relatively small headcount and budget at times, looking at the start of the year, but, when you take in the full breadth and strands of the work involved, the engagement and the cross-departmental and cross-Executive work, it highlights the important role of having a Department in the middle that draws all that together. I suppose that it highlights the importance of the Committee being able to scrutinise the work that takes place in the Department and, at times, reaches out across the other Departments.

I want to begin by asking for your perspective on one of the bigger issues, which is the financing of the victims' pension. That has been rattling on for some time, and we need to start delivering for people on the ground. We all know the stories: people are passing away and are not getting conclusions and some closure to their stories and involvement, which was quite significant and was thrust on them. There is this sort of bartering about whether it will be London or Belfast that will pay. It is important for us and for you to be part of that and have that as part of the conversation, but, for those on the ground, it is irrelevant: they just want the whole scenario done and dusted and the payments and other elements concluded. As the head of the Civil Service and the permanent secretary in the Department, can you give us a flavour of what your involvement in that process has been and what your expectation is of things rolling out in the weeks ahead?

**Ms Pyper:** You are right to identify it as a difficult issue. You are aware that, while the draft Budget set aside funding to TEO for the implementation costs of victims' payments schemes, it did not provide any funding for the payments. The position is that the Executive are committed to the delivery of the scheme, but Executive Ministers have been very clear: it is for the British Government to fund the payments, and the shortfall there is, I think, of the order of £22 million. I meet with my counterpart in the Northern Ireland Office frequently, and I spoke to her this morning. It remains an item on our agenda, and we continue to press that case. Mark may have more detailed updates than I have, but the Executive Ministers have made it clear that it is for the British Government. We are pressing the case, because we recognise it on the ground. We see it in the delivery of some of our other programmes and in the liaison and the contacts we have with stakeholders and those involved.

I understand that it sounds like pass the parcel, and that is very suboptimal from our perspective. Mark may want to pick up on some of the direct dialogue that he has had on this in recent weeks.

**Dr Mark Browne (The Executive Office):** To add to what Jenny has said, there is a request for a meeting with the Secretary of State, which he has agreed to in principle. That has yet to be arranged. The important point to emphasise is that, while the discussion about securing the full funding goes on, all the arrangements that are necessary to deliver the scheme are proceeding.

I chair an oversight board and work with the Department of Justice very closely on this. We are putting all the necessary arrangements in place, including the victims payments board, all the arrangements for assessment and evidence gathering, and the IT system. All that is being put in place, and there is engagement with victims' groups about the applications process, to make sure that it meets their needs. The draft Budget includes £2.5 million for this year, so that those preparations can continue, and £6.7 million for next year, to ensure that continues and to meet the time frame set out by the Justice Minister for opening in March. There is reassurance to victims in that all those preparations are going ahead and all the arrangements are being put in place. It is really in the political sphere that the funding issue has to be sorted out.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** It seems that the Secretary of State is the person who needs to make the next move. The Executive have said that they want to meet. We are hearing from Mark that the infrastructure clearly is in place, but it needs the final piece of the jigsaw. Jenny, you are making the case to your counterparts in the Northern Ireland Office. What we need is the Secretary of State to open his ears, listen to what people are saying, and then respond and have that meeting. At least it will allow people to move forward. There is little point in us getting to 1 April and having all the infrastructure in place but no money. That will not allow anything to be delivered. We will keep amplifying that noise that the Secretary of State needs to meet with Executive Ministers and move this forward.

You referred to the COVID recovery task force. We have just had a presentation from Chris Stewart about the high street task force. Obviously, the high street was having significant difficulties before COVID, but the pandemic has accelerated and exacerbated the problems. He said that the first strand of that work, which is to deal with the impact of COVID on the high street, would be left to the task force that you are dealing with. You made reference to that as well. Can you give us a bit more flavour as to what type of initiatives the high street retailers and others may be looking for from the task force that you head up?

**Ms Pyper:** The COVID-19 task force is taking an overarching view of all the Departments. The task force is not a whole new machinery or branch set up in the centre. It is very much there to join up initiatives that are taking place in other Departments to make sure that left hand and right know what is happening and we do not get into silos and focus on economic recovery alone, when there are serious challenging issues in community recovery or recovery of the health service. The purpose of the task

force is to join up the dots and look for gaps in provision. We are not at the stage of developing specific initiatives; we are very much still in the space of reflecting on what has happened over the past nine to 12 months. What have we learned about the damage or limitations that the restrictions have caused for people, communities and businesses? What is it going to take in order to build a recovery?

The shape of the high street has fundamentally changed, not just because of the pandemic but because of bigger market changes that have taken place; I think of the loss of Debenhams and many other retail outlets that are characteristic of many high streets — the likes of Dorothy Perkins, Burton and so on. Those businesses will not come back as actual concerns; they will be virtual shops now. The whole dynamic of what might be in the high street is something that we need to look at again, and it provides opportunities for different retail offerings to come forward.

One of the things that we are trying to do as part of the recovery aspect of the task force is to look at the likely timeline for recovery. We know that, at the moment, the restrictions run to 5 March, and we know what the deadlines and targets are for reopening schools, so what does a pathway to recovery look for? We will not suddenly see the return of everything, but we would hope to see restaurants and bars and coffee shops and so on beginning to open up. Those establishments will be critical in drawing footfall back on to the high streets and into the city centre.

What might that look like, assuming that things start to open up again after March? Nobody has a crystal ball, and we still travel in hope because the indicators are positive with the roll-out of the vaccination programme and its effectiveness in addressing the virus. The work that has begun is led by Mike Brennan in the Department for the Economy and Tracy Meharg in the Department for Communities, working together to look at what bigger economic recovery would look like, including getting back to promoting Northern Ireland as a good place in which to do business and to invest, alongside what needs to happen on the ground in communities.

That is where the work of the high street task force will also come in. It has its own distinctive remit, and its scope started before the COVID task force came on board. We will look to find a place for it as we start to map the pathway to recovery. We are aiming to get a paper to the Executive within the next couple of weeks, and, once that happens, it can be shared with the Committee. Essentially, however, it is about trying to project forward in the short term and in the medium term the various elements that need to take place across all of the Departments.

Some work is already under way. We know what the key elements of a new energy strategy might be like. We know what the Department of Agriculture's levels of ambition are for climate change and green growth. We know what the Department of Education's priorities are in relation to children and young people, and so it goes on for all of the Departments. We also, then, need to look at the Programme for Government and how some of its outcomes get joined up as part of the recovery. I know that that all sounds like good Civil Service stuff, but the task force will not be delivering; it will try to pull together, in a coherent way, all those various elements that Northern Ireland is going to need in order to recover. That will include really big challenges, such as health service recovery. We know some of the big issues that that Department is facing.

The Departments have reshaped themselves and they have reprioritised people and *[Inaudible]* initiatives, and then the forward look, aligned to the Programme for Government and to some of those other priority areas that are going to need a focus, like the high street task force. It is about looking at a glide-path exit from the pandemic and, then, a pathway forward. That is being worked on this afternoon. I would love to be able to dip into the meeting, find out where they are, and be able to share that with you. Hopefully, within the next couple of weeks, it is something that we would be able to share with you in a bit more detail.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** I appreciate that response. I know that you made a certain acknowledgement to it there. However — I absolutely do not mean this as an insult, so, please, do not take it as one — someone whose high street business is on its knees could have listened to that answer and said, "But how does that help me? You said loads there, but I do not actually know what it means". I think that the Committee may have a role in trying to decode "We are aligning with the Programme for Government", "We are looking at long-term strategies", and "We are looking at redevelopment". The issue for a lot of high street retail businesses specifically is that they do not know whether they will be able to open their doors again next week or next month. It is important that this takes place quickly. I am just a little concerned, but I will hold my reservations for another month or so. The high street task force seems like something that a lot of other outside agencies can come to, get involved in and work with, but it seems to be saying, "No; we need to pause a little bit and pass that over to a COVID task force", and then the COVID task force is saying, "We need to look at the

medium and long term". It is about making sure that there is some action and delivery on the ground as quickly as possible. That is what businesses see. If they see a wee bit of action, they will get a bit of comfort. I did not mean that as harshly as it may have sounded. I just wanted to say that.

**Ms Pyper:** I understand that. We do know where we are with regard to the current restrictions. We know that those restrictions will be in place until 5 March. It is possible that the Executive might decide to lift those restrictions sooner. However, I think that we are pretty clear. We are having dialogue with the likes of Colin Neill from Hospitality Ulster. There is real concern from some players who, if there is a risk of them closing down again, would actually rather wait until things are clear and we are absolutely certain that we will not go back into restrictions again before they go back out, bring their staff back, start ordering stock and start opening up again. If I sound vague, it is because we are trying to balance expectations out there. There is no point in telling people that there will be lots of good stuff coming down the road, but it might be in March or April, or it might be in May or June. Do you know what I mean?

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** Yes.

**Ms Pyper:** We are trying to proceed by looking at how much we can join up, looking at where there are gaps, and trying to see how we can best get going and use the likes of the high street task force quickly and effectively once we know that we can. There is not a lot of point in raising people's expectations now. We saw what happened with the voucher scheme. Expectations were raised only for them to be unable to be delivered. This is very much about trying to ensure that Departments act together and are not just looking and thinking, "Well, OK, we will plough ahead with our bit and never mind what is going on in Communities or the education sector". This is really about trying to look at how we get a joined-up recovery that can build a bit of momentum.

Work is also being done at national level on wider recovery. We are very much looking to say that Northern Ireland is a smaller place, and we might want to go at a different pace to what is being proposed nationally and look at our own initiatives. We might want to look at what we can do ourselves. We might also want to take advantage of anything that is available, particularly from the Chancellor, in wider economic recovery schemes. Right now, we do not know where that will land.

Forgive me if I am vague. It is because I am trying very much to join the dots and not raise people's expectations when we know that we have a challenging Budget settlement. We know that there is no point in talking about lots of new stuff if we do not have the additional funding to help to make the recovery happen. There will always have to be that trade-off. I absolutely hear you. I know how quickly I slip back into sounding like a civil servant. However, we really want to ensure that we can get momentum into a recovery plan once we are free to do it. That is all very boring Civil Service planning work that we are doing now.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** Thank you, Jenny. I will open the floor to members.

**Mr Sheehan:** Thank you, Jenny, for your wide-ranging contribution. Since you mentioned the voucher scheme, I will ask you about that first of all. My understanding is that £90 million was available for that voucher scheme but that the Department for the Economy was not able to deliver it and the money will be handed back. Have any suggestions been made to the Minister for the Economy about alternatives to the voucher scheme so that that money can be kept here?

**Ms Pyper:** I think that Chris touched on that a bit in his presentation. The Department for the Economy is currently running something like seven or eight different support schemes that it was not running before the pandemic. It is at capacity in terms of getting out those various business support schemes, which are essential to small and medium businesses right across Northern Ireland. Of course, those schemes have had to roll forward several times. The Finance Minister has been very keen to try to find, with Executive colleagues, alternative uses for that money; even if it is not for the Department for the Economy, perhaps it can be brought in to the centre and utilised elsewhere. Minister Murphy is also working very hard to see whether we can get rollover arrangements so that we do not lose that money. Obviously, if we do not lose it, we can look again at a voucher scheme or some other scheme in the future. I am not over the detail of what the Department for the Economy might have brought forward, but there is active work to try to make sure that that money does not get lost and that we try to find other uses for it. It is not an unreasonable question by any means. It is one that has been asked of all Ministers.

I do not know whether Mark or Andrew are aware of anything specific coming from the Department for the Economy. I see Mark shaking his head. I think that all of us across the piece are trying to see whether we can make use of that money rather than lose it, but, at the same time, I know that Minister Murphy has been asking the Chancellor and Treasury to allow us to hold on to it. We are going to need money for recovery; there is no question about that. He has been making the case, supported by Finance officials.

**Mr Sheehan:** OK; thanks for that. I want to ask you about the COVID task force. You mentioned the cross-departmental membership of it. Have you brought in any outside expertise, particularly around public health?

**Ms Pyper:** The overall health protection piece is being led by the Department of Health and Michael McBride and his team, including the Chief Nursing Officer. We are not second-guessing the work that is being done by the health professionals. We are trying to supplement that public health work with work on behavioural insights around adherence to and compliance with the public health guidance and restrictions. Everybody is very tired of the restrictions. We have, at least, had a period where the restrictions have not changed for a few weeks, which has been helpful, but we went through a phase where different parts of the island and different parts of the UK and Great Britain had different restrictions. The messaging had the potential to be confusing. The behavioural insights work that we are doing to help to inform the public health messaging is under way. The task force has access to resource that public health officials perhaps do not have the time to pursue or access to. As we, hopefully, come out of the restrictions over the coming weeks and months, we need to do so gradually, so how do we get people to focus on the things that really matter, and how do we stress some of the positive benefits rather than always having negative messages? That behavioural insight work is the key way in which the task force is working with the public health officials. We are not bringing in any other experts to second-guess. When we look at the roll-out of the vaccination programme, we see that Northern Ireland has been doing exceptionally well. Our delivery record is very good, and it would not be helpful to bring in people who were, perhaps, second-guessing that. It is about trying to add value to what is already being done.

**Mr Sheehan:** Hopefully, the vaccination programme will continue to roll out in the way that is anticipated. My difficulty is that we have ended up in this cycle of lockdowns in the combating of the virus and the leadership that has been given by the Department of Health has been poor. If we benchmark ourselves against other jurisdictions, we see that we have done poorly. People always want to compare us with our nearest neighbour, but why would they not? They have performed, probably, worse than almost any other country in the world. However, there are countries that have not had to endure endless cycles of lockdown. Their economies are performing well, and their economies, hospitality industries and sporting activities have been opened up. We have not done well. For example, we had the situation before Christmas when Matt Hancock said that the virus was out of control in the south of England and the new variant was becoming dominant. We then heard Boris Johnson say that it was much more transmissible than the original virus and there was a higher mortality rate associated with it. Yet, the advice from the Department of Health was that unrestricted flights into the North did not pose any significant risk. However, we are in a situation now in which the UK variant is dominant here. It did not waft in on the eastern breeze, so, obviously, it posed a significant risk. I accept that the Health Department has the lead in the response to the pandemic, but it has not done a good job. Is it not time that some other expertise was brought in to give advice on how we combat the virus?

**Ms Pyper:** It is difficult territory when you are a health professional, and it is easy territory when you are an observer, as I am, looking at what is going on in different jurisdictions. A lot of jurisdictions have got their messaging and response worse than us. One of the frustrations for us as officials is that we have not been able to get a better coordinated response across these islands, North/South and across the devolved Administrations in Great Britain. In more recent months, there has been better momentum for a coordinated five-nation approach, and there is a lot of discussion between the Chief Medical Officers and between leading health officials across the islands to try to better coordinate restrictions and to make sure that we are not leaving loopholes or sending mixed messages. That is difficult work, because each jurisdiction wants to tailor its response as it sees best.

The task force has been looking at methodologies in other jurisdictions — what has worked where and why — and whether we could apply some of the lessons that have been learned elsewhere. We are doing that piece of work. The Strategic Investment Board is helping us with that work. That is designed to help to inform our public health officials. The Executive have been clear that they will take their decisions based on the best public health advice available, and that remains the position. It does not

mean that we should not look to see what others are doing. As you said, other jurisdictions have taken different responses and have been able to open up sporting venues, restaurants, hospitality, and so on. At both political level and official level, the sense is that, unless we coordinate across the islands, we potentially run a risk. We could do everything right in the North, but that might not necessarily be matched by the same behaviour in the South or in England, and the virus has shown that it does not respect land or sea borders, people or populations.

**Mr Sheehan:** That brings me to my final question. It is a short one, Chair. Has there been direct engagement between the task force and the Dublin Government or officials there?

**Ms Pyper:** Yes, I have had several conversations with Martin Fraser, John Callinan and other senior officials in the Department of the Taoiseach. We had dialogue about how better to align our advice, and the timing of restrictions is a key one. We went first in extending our restrictions until 5 March, and, following dialogue, the Irish Government decided to go for that same date for their restrictions. That is one example of where we managed to get alignment, and the more that we can do that and the more that we can collaborate on the timing and nature of restrictions, that will be beneficial to the economy North and South. Messaging will also be easier if there is greater certainty.

**Mr Sheehan:** OK. Thanks for that.

**Ms Sheerin:** Thanks, Jenny, for your presentation and for your answers thus far. It has been over a year since 'New Decade, New Approach' (NDNA) was agreed, and a number of agreements and commitments were made as part of the process that got Stormont back up and running after the impasse that we had for almost three years. A lot of the conversations that we are having in the political discourse of the past week are about Brexit, the protocol, and rights and concerns that people from different communities have about everything that is going on. A lot of the agreements set out in NDNA relate to rights.

On previous occasions, I asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister about this, and I want to know whether you have a plan around Acht na Gaeilge. We have seen lots of graffiti over the past number of days, and one item of that graffiti was incredibly incendiary messages about the Irish language, which is a threat to no one. Do you have a plan around that and the implementation of the Stormont House Agreement? My comrade and party colleague Mairéad Farrell, who is a TD from Galway, asked the Taoiseach, this afternoon, about his commitment to the Stormont House Agreement and implementation of that. What are your thoughts on that?

**Ms Pyper:** The Executive clearly have a lot of competing priorities, including those in NDNA and those in the Programme for Government, and we have agreed that there will be — for want of a better word — a "workshop" for the Executive to talk about priorities and to focus on what is deliverable, particularly in light of the difficult Budget settlement for the entire Northern Ireland Civil Service. There are lots of commitments and priorities there. Some of those commitments involve the UK Government, and we have touched on one of those already. There needs to be further dialogue there. I am hopeful that we will get a better sense of what the Executive's programme and priorities will look like once we have had that workshop, because, as you know, we do not have endless resources. A lot of the Civil Service resources have been refocused to address the pandemic. Having an opportunity to take stock, to look at the Programme for Government priorities and the NDNA commitments and to see where we are and what is possible, particularly in light of the Budget settlement, would be a good thing, because, again, there are lots of expectations and commitments that the Executive need to progress.

I do not know about the specific point that you made about Acht na Gaeilge. Mark, I see you nodding, so, hopefully, you can give Emma some specifics on that.

**Dr Browne:** Clearly, the context that you have just described, Jenny, is the context in which Ministers and officials are operating with other key issues that they face and the amount of ministerial and other time that there is to address some of those issues. However, on rights, language and identity and the three Bills, the First Minister and deputy First Minister have made clear their commitment to have those Bills introduced and passed in this mandate. We have established a small division in the Department that is taking forward the preparatory work that is necessary to allow those Bills to come forward and to pass, so preparations have been made around that. It comes back to the context of what Jenny has just said about resourcing and the ministerial time and Assembly time to progress that, but the First Minister and deputy First Minister have made clear their commitment, and preparatory work is ongoing on that.

**Ms Sheerin:** Thank you both for that. Sorry, Jenny, do you want to come back in?

**Ms Pyper:** I was just going to say that the legislative timetable is tight, as you will know, and there are a lot of Bills there that Ministers would like to be progressed. The focus of conversation amongst the permanent secretaries' group last week was about what we can get through given the limited legislative timetable. However, as Mark said, the commitment from the First Minister and deputy First Minister is there, so we are working on the basis that we will get the go-ahead to proceed with those Bills, but it needs to come soon because the legislative window is tight.

**Ms Sheerin:** Thanks for that, Jenny and Mark. I appreciate everything that you have said, and I am on the record as having said that I understand that priorities have to be prioritised, and, given the year that we have just had, which no one could ever have anticipated, it is important that people direct their energies where they are most needed at any particular time. Obviously, COVID has taken over, and now we have everything that is going on as we complete Brexit, as that has happened. However, you talk about the three Bills, and I am conscious that, if we are going to move forward in a rights-based society, we are in a phase now where we are probably in constitutional change.

We can see everything that has happened over the past number of days with the threats of threats, which led to the withdrawal of staff and people talking about things being unworkable. We should have solutions to that, and we should have people trying to find solutions on the ground. Instead of pausing checks and letting things escalate, there should be clear direction from leaders that they will not bow down and will engage and work those things through. Those Bills are so important in doing that and in protecting identities and making people feel valued in this society as we move forward. It is important that we do not lose sight of that. I take it on board that we are working with finite resources and that we are in a tight time frame, and I get that.

The other thing that I want to refer to is the focus on equality impact assessments (EQIAs) and making sure that the requirement to pay due regard to all section 75 duties is happening across Departments and that equality and a rights-based approach is always to the forefront of people's minds.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** Thank you, Emma.

Jenny, I heard what you said about legislative constraints and there being a heavy timetable, but, as a member of the Business Committee, I have to say that we are not seeing much legislation coming from the Executive overall to be delivered. We stripped out private Member's business, Adjournment debates and others, so that we would leave only legislative work, because we understood that there was a considerable amount of it to be done, and we wanted to make it that only necessary work was undertaken during COVID times. Next week, we have reduced to one sitting from two, because there is not enough legislation coming forward from the Executive. Maybe you could go back to the Department and square that out. You say that there is lots of legislation, a backlog and very limited time, yet we are reducing the number of Assembly sittings because there is not enough legislation coming forward from you. I know that the Speaker has undertaken to write to the Executive to seek some clarity on that. We need to get that concept bottomed out, because I have heard that from others as a response to why things are not happening, and Emma makes the valid point that these things need to take place. We have the time. We just need the nod from you.

**Ms Pyper:** Thanks, Chair. I hear the message clearly, but it is with Ministers to decide what legislation is coming forward. Mark has alluded to the readiness in TEO to progress the legislation that, we think, would fall on our side, but this is across the piece. There needs to be agreement on what will go forward and what the priorities are, but I hear the message back from you and understand it.

**Ms Anderson:** Thank you, Jenny. It is good to see you after many, many years. I think that, when you and I last exchanged views, it was about Project Kelvin. It was to try to ensure that it was located where the EU said that it should have been, and that was in Derry. Little did I know then that I was going to find myself in the EU.

I want to pick up on a few things, Jenny. I am not going to go over it; you probably heard my contribution in the previous session with the officials. However, I want to reiterate my disappointment about the composition of the membership of the high street task force for the reference group. I hope that you heard that and that you will take it on board and address it. I am looking not for Derry to become some place that is consulted but that it has a place at the table. I just wanted to repeat that, Chair.

**Ms Pyper:** I heard that.

**Ms Anderson:** OK. Jenny, I want to talk to you about COVID recovery in the context of that being an equal and just recovery. Many of us as representatives have been engaging with constituents and are aware that the poorest have been the hardest hit. The terminology that is being used is "to build back better". In building back better, we certainly do not want to go back to the way that things were. I know that the anti-poverty strategy is located in the Department for Communities, but I wholeheartedly concur with the commentary that Emma made, and I will ask you about the EQIA.

As we all know, with the functions of policy and service delivery, an assessment needs to be made that precedes any decisions by a Minister or, in this case, Ministers about the impact of the equality impact assessment. So, where is that with regard to the budget? I know that you have had an uplift, even though the overall Budget is flat and is a stand-still Budget. Where is the equality impact assessment done so that it considers not just the functionality of the budgetary process but any potential change to policy or service delivery as a consequence of, perhaps, a standstill Budget, with an assessment made of how that will have an impact on the section 75 categories? I say that in the context of us knowing that the poorest are hit the hardest and that women in particular are often in part-time work and can be hit. What assessment will you make across all Departments, and how will that impact on the decisions that Ministers make?

**Ms Pyper:** Forgive me, I am not sure that I understood exactly what the context for this was. Are you referring to an EQIA of the anti-poverty strategy?

**Ms Anderson:** No. I am referring to an EQIA of the Department's budget.

**Ms Pyper:** I will let Mark lead on that. Sorry, I picked you up wrongly: I thought that you were referring to a specific thing.

**Dr Browne:** We currently have our draft budget, Martina, and we are looking at what the potential impact of that is. Part of that is looking at what impact various decisions are likely to have on the different groups that you have just described. We are still in the early stages of that, because we got the draft budget only fairly recently. We need to look at the various options and to discuss them with Ministers. In doing that, we need to identify the impacts that they will have on the different groups and any potential mitigations that there are.

If you set aside victims' payments and historical institutional abuse payments, which are big, chunky items, the bulk of our baseline budget goes on supporting our arm's-length bodies. They include the Victims and Survivors Service, the Commission for Victims and Survivors, the Equality Commission and the Community Relations Council (CRC). Many of those deliver services that relate to equality. Obviously, the Equality Commission provides advice and support to those who have particular issues. The victims and survivors bodies are focused very much on a particular disadvantaged group. We have the CRC, and we provide other funding for good relations to try to develop that work. It impacts across religious communities and on deprivation. Many of those programmes are focused on deprived areas. That is something that we have built into our process. We are in the process of doing it. It is not complete yet, because, as I said, we are still working through the draft budget and looking at what our options are in managing flat cash. It will be difficult. We are looking at what the implications of that will be for equality. That will inform the decisions that Ministers will take.

**Ms Anderson:** OK. Mark, we would like to be kept across the process of the EQIA, so that we can be informed about the ultimate assessments that will be given to Ministers, preceding the decisions that they will then take based on that information.

Chair, you made some opening comments about the protocol, and, Jenny, you made reference to it in your presentation. Is there a role for the Executive Office and for you, Jenny, in your role across the Civil Service, to make sure that there is awareness raising? The last thing that we need is inaccurate information being imparted to people who obviously have different views and opinions on the protocol.

There is no credible alternative to the protocol. I say that as a former MEP. Some people proposed magical solutions, and we knew that they were not going to work. The protocol protects the Good Friday Agreement and the all-Ireland economy and ensures that there is no hardening of the border. One of the things that I was made aware of yesterday was about the hardening of the border in Ireland. We know that there has been a border in the Irish Sea for almost 100 years, but, as I acknowledge, there has been a change in the operation of that border. That needs to be resolved. We

need a resolution to the trading adjustment shocks that there have been because of the last-minute decisions that have been made.

Jenny, the Agriculture Minister spoke in the Chamber yesterday. I know that he is only standing in. I was able to impart that the North sells more to the EU and the rest of the world than it does to Britain, and the NISRA statistics show that. That is not to diminish what happens in trade with Britain; in sales of goods from here, it is a crucial market. However, in response, the Minister almost lambasted me for being, he said, inaccurate with the information. That is unfortunate. Any impartial observer, having done a little bit of research on Google, would have known that the Minister was not across his brief — I am sure that it is difficult, and it was day 1 for him, anyway, so that can be forgiven — and was giving out information that is factually inaccurate. That is something that we need to avoid.

That is why I am asking you, Jenny, about awareness raising. Some people are concerned that things are being orchestrated at the moment and that attempts are being made to undermine the protocol. Some have described what is happening as theatrics. It is difficult, and some of the things that are happening out there are dangerous, whether they are shows of strength or whatever the case may be and however it is presented. We need people to be informed. We need people to get factual information. We need to encourage Ministers not to feed into an inaccurate perception of how things are, so that, when they answer MLAs, for instance, they do so from an informed position and give accurate information, even if they have a different view of how things are rolling out. If we can, we should encourage that kind of factual, accurate information. That needs to happen at a ministerial level.

**Ms Pyper:** Yes. I would not disagree with you at all on the need for the provision of consistent evidence-based and factual information. TEO absolutely has a role in that, and we do provide that information to Ministers. As you know, there is an Executive meeting on Tuesdays specifically to focus on EU-exit matters. The briefing papers are provided to all Ministers, and all Ministers are given the same updates on what is actually happening on the ground. There are very regular and thorough read-outs of the actual trading figures, the factual information and the evidence of what is happening on the ground.

I do not know whether Andrew McCormick is still here. I cannot see him, and I know that he has another meeting. Obviously, Andrew's role was created specifically to deal with everything around EU exit. If he is still here, I will let him come in, since that is his area.

**Dr Andrew McCormick (The Executive Office):** I will be very brief because I can see that that other meeting is about to start. What you have said is the main point; it is absolutely right. Through the Executive information service, we work with all the Departments. We also work with colleagues in Whitehall on the provision of information. Everything is about making clear the factual position and the issues that businesses and citizens need to be aware of and having very straightforward factual information.

Some of that took a long time to work out, partly because the deal was done only on Christmas Eve. Some things could not be made clear until after that. Further things are still being worked on. Of course, there is still work to be done on clarifying, resolving and phasing in all the work that is under way. That means that we need to get a very clear message out. We have had innumerable cases of businesses getting in touch wanting specific solutions to specific problems. Often, that is because there has been a degree of confusion and something has not got through or messages have not been picked up; you are absolutely right. We have a team in the Executive information service that does that work and is part of making sure that there are facts available for all.

I need to break off, as I think that everybody, except one, is ready to start the next meeting. I am sorry to have to leave. I hope that that was of some help anyway, Martina.

**Ms Anderson:** No problem. Thank you, Andrew, Jenny and Mark.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** As I do not see any other member indicating, I will take it that there are no other questions. Jenny, Mark and Andrew, thank you very much for your attendance this afternoon. It has been good to meet you and to hear of the Department's priorities and the work that you are doing. We absolutely get that it is a difficult time and that there are competing priorities and competing budgets in the work that you do. We continue to offer you our best wishes in that work. We have absolutely no hesitation in doing the cross-examining, if that is needed.

**Dr Browne:** Thank you.

**Ms Pyper:** Thank you, Chair. I look forward to coming back to the Committee with something more granular to talk to you about in respect of the task force. Hopefully, we will have the opportunity to do that in the coming weeks and months. Thanks, everybody.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** Thank you very much indeed.