



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Economy

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Economic Recovery Action Plan: Mr Gordon
Lyons MLA, Minister for the Economy

29 September 2021

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Dr Caoimhe Archibald (Chairperson)
Ms Sinead McLaughlin (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Keith Buchanan
Mr Stephen Dunne
Mr Mike Nesbitt
Mr John O'Dowd
Ms Claire Sugden
Mr Peter Weir

Witnesses:

Mr Lyons	Minister for the Economy
Mr Paul Grocott	Department for the Economy
Mr Pearse McCann	Department for the Economy
Mr Richard Rodgers	Department for the Economy
Ms Michelle Scott	Department for the Economy

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): I welcome the Minister for the Economy, Gordon Lyons, who is joining us in person. We are joined virtually by Paul Grocott, the head of the Department's economic strategy group; Richard Rodgers, the head of the energy group; Michelle Scott, from the economic strategy group; and Pearse McCann, from EU exit resources. The session will be recorded by Hansard. I invite the Minister to make an opening statement, after which we will bring in members.

Mr Lyons (The Minister for the Economy): Thank you very much, Chair. I am delighted to be able to join Committee members here this morning for an update on the Department's work. I know that you have invited me here to discuss the economic recovery action plan (ERAP), but I also know that Committee meetings can take us on a journey, sometimes with an unknown route and destination. I have alongside me, as you said, Paul Grocott, Richard Rodgers, Pearse McCann and Michelle Scott, just in case members might want to discuss wider economic issues or recent energy challenges that have hit the headlines.

I have now been in this job for almost three months and, during that time, I have been able to engage with hundreds of businesses across Northern Ireland, hearing how important the financial support that was given by the Department has been in keeping them afloat over the past year and a half, as well as how important the high street scheme is in reorientating spend back to the high street.

All of us in the Executive have a responsibility to weigh up the economic, societal and health impacts of the decisions that we take in relation to COVID-19. That can be very challenging, and I am sure that

we have not got everything right all the time, but I am determined that we avoid any further lockdowns, circuit breakers or restrictions on our economy. My focus is firmly set on building a healthy economy that creates opportunity for everyone in Northern Ireland, no matter where you are from, no matter your background and no matter where you are starting from.

Whilst economic activity was severely curtailed over the past 18 months, there are clear signs that the reopening of the economy has had a positive impact. Indicative data relating to purchasing managers' index (PMI) surveys, mobility and high street footfall are showing a marked improvement. Job vacancy and furlough numbers are also more promising than they were just a few months ago. It has been eight months since the economic recovery action plan launched and six months since the Executive agreed to provide an additional £287 million to help deliver the actions that are set out in the plan. Work is under way across my Department and its arm's-length bodies (ALBs) to deliver those actions.

We also launched our 10X vision and a number of 10X-related plans. Whilst I cannot claim credit for that vision, I have been overwhelmed by the buzz that it has created among stakeholders in Northern Ireland and, indeed, much further afield. Only a fortnight ago, I was at the showcase event in London, and delegates from across the UK and as far away as the United States were complimenting the approach and agreeing with our priorities.

Members will be aware that this is a significant week, with the launch of the high street scheme, the highest profile action within ERAP. I place on record my thanks to Diane Dodds for bringing forward the scheme in its early stages, and the team at the Department who have brought it to this stage.

The scheme portal opened on Monday, and people have begun to apply for their prepaid cards. We knew that demand would be incredibly high, but our systems remain relatively robust and have verified thousands of applications. I take this opportunity to thank the Chair, members of the Committee and my Executive colleagues who helped to reassure the public about the systems that we have in place and encouraged people to be patient when there was a very high demand. The scheme will give the local economy a huge financial shot in the arm and reorientate people towards our local retailers, hospitality, leisure and entertainment sectors.

The Spend Local message is one that I am passionate about. Since my appointment as Economy Minister, I have heard from many business owners and workers about the incredible challenges that they have faced. The high street scheme will provide a welcome boost to local businesses and bring people back on to our high streets.

Securing funding and having plans that stakeholders endorse is good, but it is not enough. People deserve more. We need delivery, and we need to be agile. At its launch in February, it was recognised that the plan needed to be able to adapt to changing economic conditions. That was the start of our recovery journey. Since then, we have continued to listen to feedback and work collaboratively with our delivery partners. Thanks to that strong, collaborative effort, 40 of the 58 actions that we had planned to do at the time of the launch are in progress or have been completed. We have provided £5 million of vital support to airlines as part of the Northern Ireland domestic aviation kickstart scheme (NIDAKS) to help maintain and enhance Northern Ireland's domestic air connectivity with Great Britain. Early indications are that the scheme is having a positive effect. We have extended support for the InnovateUs programme to include the social enterprise sector, and to allow businesses to undertake a third innovation project. In response to feedback from industry partners, the Department launched a number of new Assured Skills academies, including the collaborative welding academies. None of that would have been possible without the additional funding that was awarded to the recovery plan. As we anticipated, the plan has evolved. We have been able to scale up our offering of support where the demand and benefit has been high. For example, Invest NI was able to launch a third call for applications for the digital selling capability grant and a second call for the COVID-19 energy efficiency capital grant. The productive investment capital grant has also reopened following high demand, and 39 projects from the pilot have been approved. Support for a further 60 to 70 projects is anticipated.

Since its publication, many new actions have been added to the plan, including raising the confidence and aspirations of young people in STEM education careers; collaborating with Innovate UK to extend funding to Northern Ireland applicants who have been assessed worthy of Innovate UK funding, but failed to secure it; and providing additional support to businesses via the further education colleges to help them develop their capabilities in innovation and research and development.

It is clear that significant progress has been made against the actions set out in the plan and that it is providing the critical first steps in our economic recovery journey. However, it is important that our

efforts extend beyond the current financial year. We must continue to work collaboratively to overcome the damage that has been caused to lives and livelihoods by the pandemic. That is not going to be easy. We are going to have to take bold decisions if we are to realise the art of the possible.

I hope that that has been a helpful introduction. I look forward to taking your questions.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): Thank you very much, Minister. You mentioned a number of things, which, I am sure, members will want to explore in more detail.

My first question is on an issue on which the Minister and I will have no meeting of minds: Brexit. Over the past couple of weeks, we have seen the impact of Brexit in Britain become starkly apparent, while, here, we are hearing about how the protocol is insulating businesses from those impacts, particularly in relation to the carbon dioxide and fuel shortages. Given that we are discussing economic recovery, which is clearly a priority for supporting businesses, protecting jobs and workers' livelihoods, how do you justify your party's threat to collapse the institutions because of the protocol and put at risk those plans for economic recovery, when it is very clear that the protocol protects businesses from some of the worst impacts? What we see is a lack of recognition, in some of the strategies that have been brought forward, of the potential opportunities for exporters under the protocol.

Mr Lyons: OK. I do not agree with the assertions that you have made in your questions, that the protocol has, in some way, insulated businesses in Northern Ireland. It is the opposite. I have visited well over 100 businesses, in many different sectors, since becoming Economy Minister. I hear from them the challenges that the protocol brings.

To begin with, you mentioned the issues in Great Britain around fuel shortages, for example. That issue has more to do with HGV drivers, which, the Chair has just said, is to do with Brexit. It is not. The Irish Government were concerned about that in the summertime. It is also happening in other parts of Europe as well. A large part of this is down to skills issues and the testing issues that we had. Back in 2019, some 3,000 people were able to get their HGV licences in Northern Ireland; in 2020, that was below 300. So testing is a big part to do with this as well. That one issue, of HGV drivers, is not something that is unique to Great Britain or Northern Ireland. It is a wider problem.

As to what you said, the protocol is harming businesses in Northern Ireland. If you are in a position where you are trying to import goods, you now have to go through customs arrangements etc simply to bring goods from one part of the United Kingdom to another. That is having an effect on businesses, and we cannot deny that that is the case. We cannot assert that the protocol is solving the problems that we face at the minute. It is just not the case. It is compounding them. There needs to be some realism in relation to that.

From the UK Government, we have started to see some recognition of the problems that the protocol is causing. Even the EU realises the problems that are being caused. If we want a healthy economy, we need to make sure that those problems are dealt with.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): Minister, you have a somewhat blinkered view of the protocol, the protection that it provides and in relation to these issues in general. There is recognition that there have been some issues with implementation. Discussions are ongoing to try to identify solutions. It is important that we all participate in that process and try to work in the best interests of businesses. I am not sure, from what you have said and from your perspective, that that is the case.

One of the things that we know could help reduce those difficulties in east-west trade would be an agreement on sanitary or phytosanitary (SPS) measures. Is that something that you are willing to explore further and support?

Mr Lyons: It is important to recognise that the problems exist in the first place. I welcome your acknowledgement that there have been problems. I hope that parties are moving away from wanting rigorous implementation of the protocol to actually recognising the problems that exist.

SPS is a so-called solution that the EU has put forward. It does not deal with all the issues that people are facing, and, essentially, it says that you have to sign up to our rules again and that might sort out some of the issues that are being faced. Fundamentally, there are other ways in which these challenges can be dealt with. We need to look at those alternative arrangements that have been put in place. They have been there for a long time but, because of a lack of political will, they have not been explored or developed. What we have instead from the EU is this very blunt instrument of simply

treating Great Britain as a third country compared to Northern Ireland. That is where the issue lies. This is not a bespoke solution for Northern Ireland, and it does not take into account our circumstances. It does not protect the Belfast Agreement; it is simply a very blunt tool. It puts in place the same border that extends along the other boundaries of Europe. That has huge problems for the supply chains between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. That is where the real issue is. It needs to be sorted out, not just for businesses but for consumers in Northern Ireland, and not just for unionists but for everybody across Northern Ireland.

For a long time, Governments, the EU and other parties were saying, "There is no problem. The protocol is great". At least, now, most people have moved into the arena of recognising that there are problems. Let us get those problems dealt with.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): Minister, I do not recall anybody saying, "The protocol is great". In fact, most of us were talking about how it mitigated the worst impacts of Brexit. I have heard an awful lot of people use the terminology "a least worst option" about the protocol. You have your head in the sand if you think that it will be done away with; it was negotiated and agreed, and it needs to be implemented in a way that will work. Neither you nor I will come to a meeting of minds on the issue this morning.

Mr Lyons: Given a bit more time, I might be able to convince you.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): I do not believe that that will be the case. I will move on to other issues.

In your comments, you picked up on the issue of HGV drivers. I recall a private meeting with you and the Deputy Chairperson in which we had a conversation about skills programmes that might be put in place to support more people getting equipped with the necessary skills. Will you speak to some of those issues? I also want to explore the high street voucher scheme with you in a bit more detail. Will you pick up on the specific issue of skills and the general question of labour shortages? We had a letter from you and the AERA Minister this morning about the issues that labour shortages are causing in the meat sector.

Mr Lyons: Yes. First and foremost, one of the easiest and quickest ways in which to provide some relief to the HGV driver shortage is to increase our testing capabilities. That is not a matter for my Department, but I shared with you the figures from the past couple of years. They are stark. If we had maintained the 2019 level of testing in 2020, the availability of more than 2,500 extra drivers would have made a huge impact in Northern Ireland. We need to increase testing. People are coming forward, which is good. We need to make sure that they can be tested.

Clearly, wider labour market shortages are of concern. They have been particularly important for the agri-food sector, potentially more so than for others. Edwin Poots has been involved in a lot of work on the issue and has written, as have I, to UK Ministers, because, ultimately, it is a migration issue. We should have the flexibility in migration policy that we need to enable us to have additional talent and skills at the right time if we need them. The solution needs to be led from that. I will not be backward in making representations to the Government to ensure that we will have the skill set that we need.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): Is the Department taking forward potential skills programmes?

Mr Lyons: We do not have them right now, but they can be explored further. I will be happy to furnish the Committee with further information when we have it.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): OK. I want to pick up the issue of the high street voucher scheme. I put on record my thanks to officials. From correspondence at the beginning of the week, we know about some of the initial teething problems that were to be expected from the huge volume of people trying to access the scheme at the start. Can you share any figures with us on the number of people who have registered so far and the number who have been successful? How will the phone system to support those who cannot use an online system, for whatever reason, roll out in the initial stages?

Mr Lyons: I am happy to provide an update on the figures. We have now sent out over one million links to the portal. Of those one million links, 560,000 applications have already been completed. We have begun the process of verification, and the first 300,000 have been verified through the Electoral Office database. By anybody's measurement or standard, it is an incredible achievement to have that

many people sign up to a government scheme within 48 hours and to have delivered that, in terms of links sent out and applications sent back completed and verified. It shows the popularity of the scheme. It shows that people want to support local businesses. All the feedback that I have had from people is that they are looking forward not just to spending the money but, genuinely, to helping businesses that are struggling. They want to help the economy and support those who have struggled. It is a good-news story that we have been able to get so many people's applications completed so far.

The telephone portal service will open on 11 October. Over the past few weeks, I have been surprised at the number of people who have said that they want to help their friends and family to apply. A number of third-sector organisations are helping as well. Libraries NI has been fantastic, as has Advice NI. I know that many MLAs are opening their offices on extra days to help people with the process. In my area, Mid & East Antrim Agewell Partnership (MEAAP) is helping older people as well. A lot of people, who might otherwise have used the phone service or who do not have any technical skills, have been using the help of others to apply, and that is really encouraging. That will help us to deal with the, potentially huge, numbers using the telephone service when it opens. That is why we delayed it for a couple of weeks: so that people could find other ways. What I do not want is a vulnerable person having to use the phone service if we can get somebody else to apply on their behalf in a far easier way.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): On the number of links sent out versus the number of applications, I know even from comments on my social media that people have submitted up to eight applications to get the email sent out, because they did not understand that there was a delay and a queueing process. Are those filtered out before the links are sent, or could people put in duplicate applications, not for malicious reasons but because they think that they have to?

Mr Lyons: We have sent out — Michelle or Paul may have an updated figure — well over 1.5 million links in total. There were duplicate requests, and we were able to pull those out.

Paul, do you have the updated figures?

Mr Paul Grocott (Department for the Economy): Yes. That is the figure, Minister. Those 1.5 million requests include some duplicates. Of that figure, we have issued one million links as of 9.00 am today. The rate at which this is increasing is remarkable. We mow those duplicates down as soon as we can and advise that they are out of date. That gives you a sense of the current position.

Mr Lyons: So, there were duplicates and other issues that needed to be taken care of. Again, it shows the popularity of the scheme and people's eagerness to make sure that they are signed up.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): The officials who were here before you were talking about October monitoring. They indicated that £21 million is being set aside for potential overspend on the high street voucher scheme. From my crude understanding of it, approximately £10 million of that may be due to increased population, compared with what was expected when it was being modelled. They also mentioned that there was some potential for increased contractual charges. Can you explain that to the Committee, because we were not under the impression that there would be any increased contract charges? In fact, Mr Nesbitt read from the Hansard report of our briefing at the end of August with officials about the potential margin of error in the cost of the scheme. Can you explain a wee bit about that?

Mr Lyons: We have set aside and allocated £145 million for the high street scheme. That is the budget for that, but, obviously, we wanted to make sure that a contingency was in place. The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) increased its population estimates, so we needed to keep a bit of latitude there. With those being estimates, we wanted to leave a little bit of leeway. The additional contractual costs come in because the more cards that you have to issue, the more costs that there are. We had to take things into consideration. Yes, we have our budget for it, but we wanted to build in a contingency. You might think that that it is quite a contingency to build in, but we want to make sure that that is covered, that we have that set aside and that that confidence is there. That money can be redirected if the population estimates turn out to be an overestimation. My officials are exploring what other programmes that money could go into to help with economic recovery. You are probably thinking that that is quite a wide envelope, but it is taking into consideration the population estimates and the additional costs that would come from procuring and sending out the cards, the use of the cards etc.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): OK. My understanding was that the initial admin and contract work would cost in and around £5 million. It seems like that is almost doubling and you could be looking at the same again to amend the scheme to take in, potentially, another 100,000 people. Is there a reason for that?

Mr Lyons: It is for the additional people and the additional costs that come with that, but the extra funding is not entirely for contractual costs. Paul, maybe you can explain a little bit more around precisely where that allocation will go.

Mr Grocott: Certainly, Minister. To add to the detail that you provided, specifically on the contracts, it is worth referencing that the scheme was structured with a £140 million allocation for the £100 cards to be received and £5 million, as you mentioned, Chair, for the delivery scheme costs. Those estimates were some time ago now, and, obviously, the nature of the scheme has developed. The contractual requirements for us to deliver the scheme, and the way that we have had to deliver it, have changed, as a result of having access to data sets. We have had to bring in more partners to deliver the scheme. For example, the development of a portal was not anticipated at the start when we estimated £5 million. The telephone service, which you also mentioned, Chair, goes live on Monday week. We have had to include additional contract costs and establish an upper estimate.

The Minister mentioned that this is a contingency. While we do not expect to have to use that full contingency envelope, it is prudent for us to hold it and inform Executive colleagues of our intention to hold it, which the Minister has done. If the contract costs are lower than the maximum contingency envelope, there are options available for us to use that. In addition, through engagement with colleagues in Jersey, further work has been done on a wider assessment of fraud and error. While the Department has zero tolerance for fraud and error, the risk remains there. At this stage, it is prudent for us to include that within our project estimates. That also partly explains the funding element being increased.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): Thanks, Paul. That is useful for us. It might be useful for the Committee to get a written briefing on the breakdown, if that could be arranged.

Mr Grocott: I am very happy to write to you, Chair.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): Thanks, Paul.

This is my final point. Paul mentioned that the envelope might not be required. The Committee has made significant representation about consideration being given to including 16- and 17-year-olds in the scheme. Are you at all open to doing that as part of meeting the policy objective of the scheme, which is to get people back into our shops and to support our local businesses? That is another cohort that could help to deliver on that objective.

Mr Lyons: Yes, it is. I have outlined, certainly in the Chamber, some of the challenges that we have faced with that. As I said, I am open to finding ways around those challenges.

There are a number of issues. First, there is a difficulty in verifying the identity of some 16- and 17-year-olds. Look at the databases that we will be using. Very few 17-year-olds are on the electoral register — although some are in the lead-up to their eighteenth birthdays — so it would be almost entirely out for verification purposes. The electoral register should catch about 70% to 80% of adults, but that would be gone almost entirely. The next stage is the driving licence database. Again, very few 16- and 17-year-olds would be able to have their identities verified in that way. With some of the other ways in which we can verify identities, it would be even more difficult. On top of that, there are additional regulatory and GDPR issues. The Executive gave me a mandate to extend the scheme to adults — everybody over the age of 18. Certainly, those were not hurdles that I thought that we would be able to overcome when the issue was first raised. However, those issues would need to be overcome.

I go back to the policy objective of the scheme and to what we are trying to do. First and foremost, we are trying to support businesses that had to close during the pandemic or whose economic recovery was harmed by the prolonged nature of the pandemic. If we were to look at it again and do another scheme, we would need to see whether there was a sound reason for doing it and there was still a need for that extra support for businesses, or whether there were better options to help to stimulate the economy. I do not like to close down any options, but those issues would need to be addressed.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): I appreciate that you have not closed down that option. That is welcome for the Committee to hear. I am sure that other members will address this in more detail but I reiterate the point about the policy objective of the scheme, part of which is a change in behaviour and getting people back onto our high streets. Obviously, our younger cohorts are particularly prone to doing things online, so that may help to change their behaviours.

Mr Weir: Minister, thank you for being here. You mentioned that it is a journey. If it is a journey like on 'The X Factor', I do not know whether this is the judges' houses round. *[Laughter.]* You may be happy to take a break from Simon Cowell asking you questions from the top of the table.

Mr Lyons: And you are Louis Walsh; is that it?

Mr Weir: Either him or Dannii Minogue. *[Laughter.]* There is an issue of self-identification in that regard.

Before I get into the issues that I want to explore, I want to mention the high street voucher scheme. The processing statistics that you revealed this morning are remarkable. I know that some of us will have had little bits of frustration trying to get onto the website, but, to put it in context, we are talking about 560,000 online applications in the space of 48 hours. Electoral registration campaigns could roll on for months before achieving those sorts of figures. Even applications for free school meals, which, roughly speaking, impact on 100,000 children, some of whom are drawn from the same families, take place over a longer period. The processing of that volume of applications in that timescale must be the greatest level of processing of online applications in the history of Northern Ireland, which is to be very much welcomed.

I want to probe two interrelated aspects of economic recovery. On the spend, the bulk of the economic recovery money will come from the COVID consequential, so there is a requirement for it to be spent in-year. Naturally, people will focus on the short- to medium-term measures, which are highly important. However, underpinning the economic recovery, we need to create the building blocks to make sure that we have an economic recovery programme in the years and, indeed, decades ahead, so that we can build a strong economy in Northern Ireland.

We have seen from the pandemic the need for jobs flexibility. Thankfully, the economy has, in many ways, bounced back quicker and better than we probably anticipated a year ago. However, the pandemic has highlighted the need to ensure that we have a system that is fit for purpose, particularly as we look towards careers for young people. The issue predated the pandemic. We need, effectively, to restructure and update where we are with the Careers Service and ensure that there is cooperation on that. Can you outline where we are on that? When you have answered that one, I will go on to the wider context of young people and the 14-19 strategy. Can you deal, first, with the careers issue?

Mr Lyons: Yes, no problem. I will just comment, first, on what you said about the high street scheme. It is incredible, in the first instance, that so many people wanted to apply, and, then, that so many were processed so quickly. I remember hearing recently that, during the 2019 Westminster election campaign, 90,000 people applied to go onto the electoral register over six weeks and that that had been almost overwhelming for the Electoral Office. We have been able to process 500,000 applications in two days. That speaks a little bit to both the popularity of the scheme and the way in which we have been able to process those people. It has been a good news story.

The member is also absolutely right in what he says about the building blocks that we need for the healthy economy that we all want to see. Skills are a vital part of that. I have seen that over the past number of weeks when I have been with foreign direct investors and other job creators. Nearly every single one of them has told me that most important to them are the skills and talent of young people here and the support that we are able to provide, such as through Assured Skills academies, that helps to build up those skills. It is incredibly important that we get this right. That work must begin now, because we need those skills to be in the pipeline when they are necessary in future years.

Of particular importance is a digital spine, which you will see in the 10X economic vision. We are in a changing world. It is very different even from when I was at school, never mind when you were at school, Peter. *[Laughter.]* Digital skills are increasingly important. Most jobs now require basic digital literacy. Over the course of the pandemic, we have also seen the importance of those skills for social reasons. This is one of our core sectors. We need to have those ICT skills. It is important that we look at the skills pipeline and ensure that we have people with the skills that they need to compete and get the jobs that are becoming available in Northern Ireland.

It is really important for us to go a little bit further back into primary- and secondary-level education, look at how we provide ICT skills, and ensure that young people have the qualifications. To that end, I strongly support making ICT a compulsory subject at GCSE. If you do that, you set in young people's minds at an earlier stage the importance of those skills, and open up their minds to the possibilities of how they can use those skills in their futures and in the jobs that might be available to them.

It is important that we look at ICT but also at careers more widely. Things are so different from a number of years ago. I have gone round and spoken to many parents and industry about this. We need to think about how we deliver careers advice and the independence of that advice. We are in a rapidly changing economic environment. We need to ensure that young people are looking not just to the next stage of their education but beyond that to the jobs and opportunities that are available. Working back, we must ensure that they have the skills that will make them competitive.

Mr Weir: That is very important.

On the figures, you mentioned the Electoral Office. The Finance Minister indicated, possibly slightly erroneously in his interpretation, that you needed to be on the new electoral register to be able to register for the £100 voucher scheme. The Electoral Office indicated that there were 81,000 applications within 24 hours, which compared to a very similar number over a number of weeks in the election campaign. However, even 81,000 is one seventh of what the Department has processed in two days.

I will finish on the broader issue of education, skills and careers and what happens directly in the education system with ICT and STEM. As you said, there is a careers pipeline. I will draw the analogy that it is possibly about what direction you point the pipeline in or what you facilitate within it. Key to that will be the work that has been happening for a number of years to try to get this piece together, and specifically the 14-19 strategy. That work is cross-cutting between Economy and Education. The 14-19 strategy specifically is cross-cutting between secondary education, further education and higher education. Can you update us on where the 14-19 strategy stands and what we can anticipate seeing on that in the rest of the mandate?

Mr Lyons: You obviously worked on the 14-19 strategy in a previous role. It is really important that that project reflects where we are in our economy, and that there is joined-up and collaborative work on the issue. As I outlined, that is essential to ensuring that we have the right skills and that, like you said, we put those in the pipeline. I have worked closely with the Education Minister. As you are aware, there has been a huge degree of collaboration and cooperation at official level. Unfortunately, I do not have a date for you at this moment in time, but I will be happy to keep you updated.

Mr Weir: But you do anticipate making progress on that?

Mr Lyons: Absolutely, yes.

Mr K Buchanan: Thanks for coming along, Minister.

We hear about the overwhelming success of the roll-out of the high street voucher scheme. Some are trying to belittle that success, but I will not go there. To be fair, it is disappointing that this Committee has not unanimously agreed the SR for that. Any business or anybody in hospitality would be disappointed listening to the negativity of some in the Committee. I will move on. We have touched on that enough.

Furlough is ending in a few days. No doubt others will know, from their constituencies, that there are jobs in nearly every sector. There is a pool of work out there. You will get commentary from some people that, given the current state, if anybody wants to work, there is no reason that they cannot work. What are your thoughts on furlough ending, on the whole labour pool and on the shortage of labour in conjunction with furlough? Approximately 36,000 or 37,000 people are furloughed. Where are they furloughed from? That seems a very high figure.

Mr Lyons: Furlough is one of many support mechanisms that were put in place as a result of the pandemic. Those mechanisms were put in place because businesses could not open or there were restrictions on businesses. That is why we had furlough, flexible furlough for part-time workers and all the rest of it. Furlough is now coming to an end. It will end by the end of this week. We will go from having 36,000 people on furlough to having nobody on furlough. That is a particular cause for concern because we have not yet opened up in the way that other parts of the UK have. The biggest area in

which people are furloughed is retail. About 6,500 people are furloughed in retail and wholesale, around 6,000 people are furloughed in hospitality, and around 1,500 people are furloughed in arts, entertainment and leisure. In and around 14,000 of the 36,000 have been furloughed in that way. There are so many other jobs that service, or provide for, those jobs.

It is a concern, which is why I have been pushing for the full and uninterrupted reopening of the economy. That is what we have been working towards. I am disappointed that we have still to make further decisions on relaxations in hospitality, in particular. That is clearly a decision for the Executive to make. The end of furlough will create difficulties there. We have called for sector-specific furlough for particular industries, such as aerospace, that will take a little while longer to recover. Clearly, however, there will be changes by the end of this week.

Mr K Buchanan: Thank you for that, Minister. A Danish delegation visited the Assembly yesterday, and I and Members from other parties met them for lunch. It was good to hear then, and again today, that some parties now realise that the protocol is not working. The calls for the implementation of the protocol in full, which we heard being drummed and drummed and drummed several months ago in the Assembly, are now changing. In the past, some people were in COVID bubbles but, now, some people are in a protocol bubble. I do not know whether they go out in their community or their constituency and listen to real business. I do not know how they are not listening to that message. What message did you receive from those 100 businesses that you met?

Mr Lyons: The first thing to say is that I was not asking. I was not saying, "Dish the dirt; tell me all about the protocol". It was not like that. The information was volunteered very easily, because the effect on so many businesses is so clear to them and so critical. It is depressing and disheartening to see people who have been running their businesses for so long struggling in that way. Some of the most frustrating examples came from people who said, "This is something that I have done for 20 or 30 years. I have brought this product into Northern Ireland. There is zero risk of it going into the European Union, yet we now have all of this additional paperwork. I am staying up all night filling in forms, not sure if anybody is ever going to read them. I am spending time trying to get advice". This is all, of course, with hundreds of millions of pounds of government support to try to make it easy, but it still requires businesses taking on additional people and filling out additional paperwork.

Let us leave previous debates and arguments and all the rest of it behind. Let us accept that there are problems. If we can accept that there are problems, how do we deal with those and get a solution to them? That has been lacking from many over the past number of months, but I think that we are starting to see a bit of realism now. I think that people are starting to recognise that there is a problem and, importantly, that it is not sustainable and cannot go on. I hope that other people will continue to move into that space.

Mr K Buchanan: I have one final quick question on the threat of lockdowns. We have had numerous lockdowns throughout the pandemic. It causes nervousness in business. Are you picking up on people saying, "Oh, there could be a lockdown in October"? Is that squeezing and controlling businesses? Is that overarching for them and casting a shadow over them?

Mr Lyons: Potentially in the hospitality industry. It is yet to fully reopen and, as I said, 6,000 people in that sector are still on furlough. When furlough ends, what will those people do? Will they say, "There is still too much uncertainty in the sector, so I am not going to go back in"? It is really unhelpful when people speculate like that. We need to look at the facts of where we are. We are very close to having 90% of the adult population vaccinated or, at least, having had their first dose. That is incredible. Back in January, we were not looking at anything near that. In fact, some of the advisers said that getting to 70% or 80% would be enough to allow us to ease restrictions. I understand that the delta variant and other issues have come into play since then but, even at that, having 90% vaccinated is incredible. The daily rate has gone down from where it was a few weeks ago. Yesterday, we were under 400 cases per 100,000 for the first time in many weeks. Things are all heading in the right direction. What is continually going up is the number of people who are getting vaccinated. That is why we have reasons to be hopeful that we can leave the pandemic behind.

Mr K Buchanan: Thanks, Minister.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): I listened with interest to what you said about furlough. I do not have the figures in front of me, but I think that 5,000 are still furloughed in manufacturing and 5,000 in construction. Obviously, that involves issues beyond the control of the Executive. It is important that we have at least a sector-specific approach to the extension of furlough. I welcome your comments in

respect of that, because it is going to push more people on to universal credit, which is deeply inadequate at this time.

Mr Dunne: Thank you, Minister, for your attendance and your detailed answers so far. I concur with the warm welcome for the Spend Local card. I visited a number of local businesses across my constituency of North Down in recent weeks and as recently as yesterday. There is a real appetite among those traders and local businesspeople to get the cards out. The incredibly impressive number of applications is testament to that. Certainly, there is a real appetite across the public, as you say, to get out and support businesses in a wide range of sectors, not only in retail and hospitality but across Northern Ireland in villages, rural areas, towns and city centres.

The phone line was mentioned. I look forward to that commencing. It is great, obviously, to see people using online access as much as possible, but there is still a role for phone lines, and I welcome that and look forward to it.

There is another positive scheme, which some sectors and the public are looking forward to: the holiday at home voucher scheme. It is another innovative and exciting project in your Department. Will you touch briefly on that, Minister. We are now in the run-up to Christmas, and we have the high street scheme. What is the optimum time to push the holiday at home scheme?

I have a couple of other questions, which I will run through quickly. Confidence in town and city centres remains a key challenge. It links in with the message of working from home where possible. That still exists, particularly in the public sector. There are many advantages to it, but it has an impact on footfall, particularly in town and city centres. How do you feel that we can get back that confidence? With people working from home, the lack of footfall affects cafes and the hospitality sector — coffee shops and all sorts of small independent traders. I would be grateful if you could touch on that.

I want to ask about air connectivity. That is vital to our three local airports and to economic recovery. The pandemic has had a significant impact on that sector. Passenger numbers are well down. This is a global issue and is not particular to Northern Ireland, but it certainly has had an impact. You mentioned the domestic aviation kickstart scheme, which was announced in May this year, and it is welcome. What more can be done to boost confidence and get numbers up in airports, increase air connectivity and bring it closer to pre-COVID levels?

While I am asking about the aerospace sector, I want to link it to the protocol. The Committee had a useful meeting in early July with key players in the aerospace sector. I found it interesting that they highlighted the real problems that they face with the protocol. It is noteworthy that that did not come from politicians or other sources but directly from industry experts. They made clear to us that they faced problems with the protocol.

I would appreciate any updates that you can give. I am asking quite a lot, but I would be grateful if you could touch on some of those issues.

Mr Lyons: You have certainly got your money's worth for questions, Stephen. I thank you for the work that you have done in your constituency in helping local businesses to be aware of the Spend Local scheme. It is important that people understand that the prepaid card is not just for one sector but for retail, hospitality, entertainment, leisure — I could go on. That is really important. I know that you have been involved with businesses across all those sectors. I thank all members for their work to help to inform the public and businesses. A lot of work has gone on over the past couple of months, and that will help to make the scheme a success.

The first question was on the holiday at home scheme. That scheme will be best if it is done at the right time. We spent an awful lot of time and work making sure that we got the high street scheme at just the right time, and I was pleased that, when I launched it, the representatives of retail organisations said to me that this could not have come at a better time. I want to make sure that we do the same for the holiday at home scheme. To that end, it is probably best not to do that at the same time as the high street scheme because that overlap may not be helpful. We continue to work with industry to work out when the best time might be. Of course, we will keep the Committee updated on that.

The next question was on confidence in town and city centres. This is where I hope that the high street scheme will be good for a short-term boost but that, in the long term, people will be able to go into the high streets again. That is about people realising that it is safe to do so, and many of our businesses have gone to great lengths to ensure that the shopping and hospitality experience is safe and gives

people confidence. It is also about people seeing what is on offer and wanting to come back again and reorientating that spend.

You touched on an important point on getting workers back into our town and city centres. That is where I would like to see the "working from home" messaging moved on, both in the private sector and the public sector. The Executive's guidance currently states that people should work from home where they can. Many businesses have contacted me and said that they want to be able to get their workers back but that they do not want to be seen to be going against Executive guidance. I do not think that anybody who is currently in that environment intends to bring back 100% of their employees 100% of the time. Hybrid working is here to stay in one form or another, but, if people want to be able to come back and want to plan for that and to put contingency measures in place, they should be able to do that. That will be an additional boost to our high streets.

You mentioned air connectivity and recognised NIDAKS, which has been very successful and well received by the industry — by airlines and airports. We will see more work done on that, measuring its impact and success. It has been particularly important in this key period when we have not been able to open up again fully and when there are still restrictions on travel and on the economy in general. Helping airlines and airports to get through that period was really important, but now we need to move to the next stage and consider how we can help air connectivity. One way that we can do that is by encouraging people to visit Northern Ireland. What will be really helpful is the £5 million campaign that we launched, encouraging visitors in Great Britain to come to Northern Ireland. We have got into the way of staycations domestically in the UK, and, hopefully, that campaign will help to bring not only more visitors and travellers but business travellers. We had a great reputation for hosting conferences and we have now opened that up again, so let us get more people into Northern Ireland. That is a great way of supporting what we have and then encouraging and facilitating further air connectivity. More than anything else, what would be most helpful would be the scrapping of air passenger duty (APD). I have made representations to the Government about that. I have spoken to Sir Peter Hendy, who is conducting the Union connectivity review. It could be a game changer for the levels of connectivity that we can have and making it easier for people to travel internally in the UK. We do not have those rail or road links, we do not have alternative options for that, and we are in competition with airports, specifically Dublin Airport. If we want to improve air connectivity, let us get more people — let us have additional people coming in and out — but air passenger duty is a big one, in addition to the support that we as a Department have given.

The member touched on the protocol. It will come as no surprise to him to know that what he is hearing is what I have been hearing. You would have to be living under a rock not to understand the concerns that businesses have been having and the difficulty that the protocol has been causing. Some sectors have been affected by that more than anything. That is why, when you look at our supply chains and economy, you see that it does not make sense for there to be a border down the Irish Sea. Look at the volume of trade and all the issues involved in that. It does not make sense, so it needs to go, and we need to find solutions to the situation. That will require political will.

Mr Nesbitt: Minister, I will try you on sport in a minute, but, first, I will go back to the high street scheme. When your officials briefed us on 25 August, NISRA had already increased its estimate of eligibility from 1.4 million to 1.5 million, so your officials were modelling on 1.5 million, an uptake of 95% to 97% and an average spend of £98 out of the £100. On that model, we were told that the likely overspend would be £2 million to £3 million — 1% to 2%. I am still unclear what has happened since then for your Department to set aside £21 million — 15% — as a contingency.

Mr Lyons: The member is accusing us of being too careful. That is OK.

Mr Nesbitt: I am simply seeking clarification.

Mr Lyons: OK. I understand. We want to make sure that we have the capacity and the contingency. As you said, those figures were based on a 95% to 97% uptake. What if it is higher? What if the average spend is maxed out? What if it goes beyond the NISRA estimate figures that we were given and the associated cost? I am happy to bring in Paul again if you would like further clarification, but that is my understanding.

Mr Nesbitt: Paul is writing to us, Minister. I am happy. The voucher is clearly intended for a high street spend, not online spend. What is to stop somebody walking into Tesco at Knocknagoney and buying a £100 Amazon voucher and spending it online?

Mr Lyons: The coding may well allow that, but we can block people from spending on certain things — for example, gambling and financial services. It has been easy for us to stop that. We have not been able to stop some of those things. Yes, technically, it may be possible for someone to do that. That is not a major concern for me. There are a number of reasons for that. First, the research that we have been given demonstrates that people want to spend the voucher supporting businesses, and they want to support independent retailers. They see the good and the policy objective, and they want to help those who have suffered most. Nobody has come to me and said, "I want to support Amazon during this difficult time". I have not heard that from anyone. The initial intention of most people is to spend it locally. Secondly, we have an advertising campaign encouraging people to spend local, and we will push that message. Thirdly, local businesses will give incentives. Local businesses that I have spoken to have said that they are encouraging people to spend their card locally, and, if they do, they might give an extra 10% off, or, if it is in hospitality, they might get a free drink, coffee or whatever else. There will be those incentive schemes as well. Those factors, in the round, will cover the majority of people.

Mr Nesbitt: Next year sees the 100th anniversary of the Ulster Grand Prix. There are plans around the British Superbikes and, of course, the North West 200. Are you in a position to support those events, which generate some £20 million for the economy?

Mr Lyons: We are looking at a number of major events to see what support the Department and its agencies can provide. I look back over the last decade and see a number of major events. I fully recognise the economic opportunities that those events bring and the jobs that they can sustain. The Open in particular has been a major draw, bringing people into Northern Ireland. Incredible economic benefits can come from our holding major events.

We are looking at a number of major events. I hope that you will understand if I do not go into the details of where they all are, but I can certainly say that the Department and its bodies want to support those where it is possible, where there is a business case and where there is value for money.

Mr Nesbitt: Will you consider supporting the Northern Ireland senior women's team at the Euros in England next year? It is only the fifth time that a senior team has qualified for a major final. I am old enough to remember the second time, which was Spain in 1982. The late Harold McCusker got very exercised about the fact that the Tourist Board and what was probably the Industrial Development Board (IDB) — now Invest NI — were not at the team hotel with a stall promoting Northern Ireland. That opportunity could be considered with the women's team in England next summer.

Mr Lyons: I do not have any memory of that event in 1982. I have no memory of 1982. I am certainly not aware of anything coming into the Department, but I would be more than happy to look at how we can support any request that comes in.

Mr Nesbitt: Thank you.

Mr O'Dowd: Thank you for attending today's meeting, Minister. Do any of the 100 businesses that you met, and that expressed concerns about the protocol, support your party's proposal to collapse the Assembly and to set preconditions that, I believe, cannot be met by the British Government or the European Commission and that even your colleagues in the other parties of the Assembly cannot help you with? Did any of those businesses support that?

Mr Lyons: Many of the businesses that I spoke to are absolutely in tune with the need to address the protocol. They recognise that the border in the Irish Sea is not helping stability and that it is not helping to create the conditions, trading links and lack of friction that is needed to do what they have been doing for so long and to get us to the place that we need to get to. They have expressed legitimate concerns. I see it and I think that most people understand and see the problems that businesses face as a result of the protocol, and I want to make sure that those problems are addressed.

Mr O'Dowd: Yes, I accept that there are legitimate concerns, but I take it from your answer that none of the businesses supports your party's proposal to collapse the Assembly.

Mr Lyons: No, that is certainly not what I said. I met a lot of those businesses before the announcements had been made, but they were very strong with me about the need to get this issue sorted out. You have to understand what some of those businesses are going through and the difficulties that they face. You need to understand the pressure that they find themselves under and

the additional workload that has been placed on them. You have to understand that employees have had to be diverted to deal with some of those issues and that, in some cases, employees have had to be let go because they are not able to operate parts of their businesses. You will have heard that as well, John. There is no way that you could not have heard about the challenges that are coming. This is not a unionist issue. This affects businesses across Northern Ireland, especially those that depend on getting goods from GB. The difficulties that the protocol is causing will not be a surprise to you.

Mr O'Dowd: Businesses have approached me and engaged with me about the challenges that they face in relation to Brexit/the protocol. They expect politicians to work out those problems. I have also engaged with businesses that are creating jobs and prosperity as a result of the protection that the protocol offers them. My concern is that your Department is blind to that and that we will miss opportunities to create jobs in all our constituencies and prosperity for the people whom we represent because your Department has turned a blind eye to those issues?

Mr Lyons: I strongly disagree with that. First, the protocol is what is causing greatest economic harm, and that needs to be dealt with. Secondly, I have not had a great stampede or any number of people coming to me to say, "Look at the opportunities that we have here". I am not getting that. We have created over 4,000 new jobs in Northern Ireland since January 2020. The protocol is not the reason that those jobs have come here. It is because of the talent and skills of our people.

While we are talking about it, let us address the notion of dual market access. We do not have dual market access in Northern Ireland. If you have access to a market, you are able to import and export. We do not have dual market access here, because we cannot get that access from Great Britain into Northern Ireland. That is what is causing the issues. A lot of companies are not able to source goods from GB without an awful lot of hassle.

Mr O'Dowd: I do not have the exact words in front of me, but recent comments from Invest NI suggest to me that it is being approached by businesses about the access we have and the opportunities created under the protocol.

Mr Lyons: It may well have been approached about that, but, of course, it does not take long for someone to look through the protocol, see what it means and recognise that there are difficulties. It is not dual market access. Let us knock that on the head. It is partial between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and that causes a huge problem.

Mr O'Dowd: I do not want to labour this too much, but, if I were Minister for the Economy and I were not being approached by businesses to discuss it, I would be seriously concerned, because MLAs are being approached.

Mr Lyons: That is maybe because you have bought into the line that dual market access is in place, but it is not.

Mr O'Dowd: Or they believe that they have a Minister who would be hostile to their proposals.

Mr Lyons: It is simply not the case that we have that dual market access.

Mr O'Dowd: Is your office open to businesses that believe that they can create jobs and prosperity as a result of the protocol?

Mr Lyons: If someone wants to come here and create jobs and prosperity — absolutely. However, our evidence has shown that that would not be the case because of the protocol. From where are we getting our success? We are getting our success right now because of the skills of our people or the support that we have been able to give them to upskill. It is fairly straightforward. That is where the investment is right now. Regardless of that, our focus needs to be on improving the situation that we find ourselves in and addressing the difficulties caused by the protocol and the east-west trade issue.

Mr O'Dowd: OK. We will agree to disagree on some of that.

Mr Lyons: There is a lot of that today, is there not?

Mr O'Dowd: There is, but that is politics, I suppose. It is better to be in here debating it than for all of us to be out of here because the conditions that your party has set for the restoration of the institutions are unachievable. You may get an election, but what happens after the election? We will not be in rooms like this interrogating one another or promoting, and you as Minister will not be able to deliver the change programmes that you want, because the conditions that you have set are unachievable.

Mr Lyons: If there is political will, of course they are achievable. What we are proposing is in no way unattainable. We want to make sure that we have that ease of access between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Regardless of your constitutional position, we should surely want that ease of access between our biggest market and us. As I say, we may not agree on everything.

Mr O'Dowd: I want to move on to the economic recovery action plan. The high street/Shop Local scheme is hugely popular. Why would it not be, with hard-pressed families and businesses receiving financial support from the Executive? It is a great initiative, which I fully support. However, I have a concern that it is the cornerstone of your economic recovery action plan, on the basis that, if you give everybody £100, it will be the way forward for economic recovery. I think that you are overselling it in that way. It is a good idea. It is a good, worthwhile scheme, but it will not lead to the economic recovery of our society.

Mr Lyons: I have never claimed that it will be the only tool in our toolbox. Look at it this way: these are businesses that have suffered incredibly over the past 18 months and, in many cases, had to dig very deep into their savings to survive. We want to get them beyond that survival mode and help them to get back to where they were. That is important for a short-term economic boost and to help people who were very badly affected by the restrictions, but I believe that there is a longer-term economic impact. It is not just an immediate shot in the arm; it is about reorientation of spend back into local businesses and offline shopping. That is entirely the proper and right way to do it.

I have been around a lot of businesses in Northern Ireland. I did not know how much we had on offer or the quality of some of what we had to offer. I hope that others, when thinking about how they will spend their card, will think the same and spend not only that £100 but a little more and will keep coming back when they see the customer service and the ease with which they can shop.

The voucher scheme is certainly the highest-profile part of the economic recovery action plan. It is the part that everybody knows about. It is the part that I think will have by far the biggest immediate economic impact, although it will have a longer-term impact as well. However, it is just one tool in our toolbox. We have really good schemes in place that help with innovation, help with upskilling, help people to trade in different ways and to export to places that they have not been in before, and they help to increase the skills and ability of our people. The scheme is a large part of the overall budget. There will be an immediate impact, yes, but those other parts are also important.

Mr O'Dowd: You have given yourselves an additional £21 million, which is an astonishing amount — it is 15% leeway. I cannot see how, if that were to go through the usual business case process, it would stack up. It means that over 50% of your economic recovery action plan spend is based on the voucher scheme.

Mr Lyons: We are not allocating that to the scheme; we are holding it back. There is that contingency in place. Yes, I make no bones about it: we have a one-year budget, and we have to spend it in-year. I am glad that we can target it in this way to give immediate help to those who have had so many difficulties during the pandemic because of the restrictions. It is right to give them that economic boost. We could have given it directly to businesses, but we are instead using consumers as a conduit to filter that through to them. I think that that is the right approach, but I want to see this go on beyond the next financial year. Things like helping to upskill, helping to promote innovation and helping our businesses to export into new markets can continue.

Mr O'Dowd: I will end on this point, Chair, because I know that there is at least one more member to come in. I have had the frustrating experience, Minister, of trying to get public money spent. In particular, I can assure you that, if you have an unplanned programme of spend — say, £20 million — and you try to spend that in the last quarter of the financial year, it will be very difficult to spend it. Therefore, you need to be doubly sure that the decision to hold back such a significant amount is the right one.

Mr Lyons: We are looking at the other options. We have rolled out some very successful programmes under ERAP, and we can put out second, third and, in some cases, fourth calls to those. Officials are looking at that, and, as I said, I am more than happy to keep the Committee updated.

Mr O'Dowd: OK. Thank you, Minister.

Ms Sugden: Thank you, Minister, and welcome to the Committee. Members have mentioned some of the things that I will raise, but there may be elements that have not been asked about. I will start with the holiday at home scheme. I asked an Assembly question about that recently, and the response was that it will be facilitated on a "first come, first served basis". I shared that response with my constituents, and a number of people came back and said that it is not legal. I appreciate that there is still some way to go in developing that, so you might want to look into that. It seems a bit odd that a public-sector scheme would be on a first-come, first-served basis. I imagine that that would give rise to some forms of discrimination. You might want to consider that.

With the high street voucher scheme, there seem to be issues with specific email types. I applied for the scheme with a particular type of email and still have not had a bounce-back email. I since applied with a different type of email and got a reply straight away. Again, you might want to look into that and maybe even put a bit of information out to the general public. People are telling me, "Claire, I have been waiting for 48 hours". They will keep doing that until someone tells them that they need to resubmit their application.

Re the uptake of the scheme, many people do not even have email addresses. You might want to consider that as well. I will apply on behalf of my parents because they do not have email addresses. They do not need to use the telephone line because they have a daughter who can do those things for them. Will I be able to use the same email address as I used to be sent the link to apply for them? Last night, I submitted my email address, got the link and was able to use that link to input my details. I am conscious of the conversation about duplicates. That could be where duplicates are happening. Maybe a daughter, or whoever else, is applying on behalf of a number of people. Are they able to use one email address? You need to look at that.

Earlier, I asked the Chair to ask the Department a question about scams. The scheme has a considerable safety net. I sincerely hope that that is not necessarily there to cover payments made in error or payments sought fraudulently. I appreciate that fraud will always happen and that there will always be people who take advantage of these types of schemes, but I hope that the Department has a robust enough process in place to ensure that as many people as possible are not fraudulently applying and that duplicate payments are not made in error. During the past year, there have been cases of that in other schemes, and I am keen to know what your Department is doing about that and about scamming generally. I am aware of a lot of people receiving text messages asking for confirmation. It might be useful for the Department to explain what will not happen as much as what will happen. My understanding is that you put your email address in, you click the link and go through. Some people may think that they will get a text message — the Department has their mobile number, which they had to provide — and that might give rise to scams through people following a link in that text message.

My next question is about the shortage of HGV drivers. I have been raising that for a while. I do not think that it is a direct consequence of the protocol; it is probably a consequence of Theresa May's changes to immigration policy in 2011. I also think that the pandemic expedited a lot of people going home, so a lot of those HGV driving skills have been lost. Via your special adviser, I asked your predecessor about the potential of an Assured Skills course in HGV driving, but his response was that a licensing issue or some sort of technicality means that the Department could not necessarily facilitate that. I am keen to get a bit more detail on that because the HGV driver shortage is significant. I am also aware of councils having a potential opportunity to provide HGV-type skills. I would like to see more councils utilising that. Belfast City Council has, to its credit, utilised those types of courses. I proposed that to the council in my area. It did not seem interested, but maybe it requires more support to do that.

My last question is about the domestic use of COVID vaccination certificates. I have received an awful lot of messages from students from Northern Ireland who are studying in Scotland and have been told that they cannot go into hospitality or other places because, despite being doubly vaccinated, they do not have confirmation of that. I wrote to the Minister of Health about that a number of months ago, and he suggested that the regions of the United Kingdom were working together on some sort of double vaccination certification for domestic use. I appreciate that that is not your direct responsibility, but it is affecting students, particularly those who are going to Scotland, where COVID certificates are

required. What are the Northern Ireland Executive doing for people from Northern Ireland? Specifically in your remit, what is the Department for the Economy doing to provide that confirmation for those who are doubly vaccinated?

Mr Lyons: Is there anything else? *[Laughter.]*

Ms Sugden: No, that is it. Well, there is plenty more, but I will leave that until the next time.

Mr Lyons: OK. I think that I got all those questions. The first was about the holiday at home scheme. As I said to Mr Dunne, we are trying to work with the industry to make sure that we do that at the right time. I will bring Paul in on that and the fraud/scam issue at the end. I just want to give Paul a heads-up with regard to the legality of the first come, first served issue.

Turning to the issue of the different types of email addresses, I had been alerted to that by constituents, and I got an answer just before I came in. It seems to be the case that certain email providers had held the emails as spam, doing some sort of checks on them before they eventually went into people's inboxes. I am not over all the technical details of it, but it is being worked through. There is a bit of a backlog, which is why the emails have gone straight through to certain email addresses and not to others. It was not because of a delay at our end.

Ms Sugden: For your information, the emails are not going to spam either. They are being locked before they even get to the recipient.

Mr Lyons: Yes, the email is locked before it gets anywhere near people's accounts. That is my understanding. That is being worked on with the email providers, and the backlog is being worked through. People do not need to apply again; everything seems to be OK. Paul may be able to give us a little more of the technical detail.

If applying on someone else's behalf, you should apply for yourself first, and the link will be sent to you. You fill out your application, and you then start the process again. You will be able to do that four times. However, you will need to complete your application and then do the others one at a time. That is how that will go.

I totally understand the concerns around scams. I have tried very hard to alert people to the fact that many out there will be trying to take advantage of the scheme. We will never ask for your details, and I urge people to be careful and vigilant, especially on behalf of those in your family or community who might be a little vulnerable to this sort of scam. Paul will go into a little more detail on our fraud unit and how that works.

As I outlined to other members, the big thing that can take the pressure off the HGV driver shortage is getting testing happening again.

Ms Sugden: Minister, I have raised that with the Minister for Infrastructure, and she says that testing is not the issue.

Mr Lyons: Right, well, it is certainly the case that high numbers of people were being tested back in 2019, and testing has not caught up again. I am happy to take that up with Executive colleagues as well.

Ms Sugden: I had a query this morning from a constituent who said that the UK Government were offering a free HGV course. That is why I raised the Assured Skills programme. I speak to hauliers all the time, and they tell me that people who are trained in that area are like hen's teeth. I appreciate that testing may be one aspect of the shortage. Providing opportunities to upskill is part of your remit.

Mr Lyons: Absolutely. The public and businesses are starting to value and understand the importance of people in that industry. We need to follow through on that. I am happy to explore the options that we have in relation to that, although I understand that there may be some difficulties around it.

Re domestic COVID vaccination certificates, although it may be the case that they are asked for in some parts of the UK, that has to be an Executive policy decision: what would certification for Northern Ireland residents to use in other parts of the UK look like? I have to be honest with you and say that that is an issue for the Executive as a whole to decide on.

Ms Sugden: As a member of the Executive, will you take that concern back — that students from Northern Ireland who are studying in Scotland, where a double vaccination is required for entry to hospitality, are not able to provide that proof? We have a mechanism whereby a COVID cert app is being used for international travel, but this is not about what is required in Northern Ireland necessarily. This is about how people can confirm what they have. If they have the double vaccination, how can they prove that in jurisdictions where it is required?

Mr Lyons: I understand that, and the Executive will discuss it. I will ask Paul to give a bit more technical detail on the emails, the holiday at home scheme and the fraud issue.

Mr Grocott: Yes, absolutely. As the Minister explained, we are working closely with colleagues in Tourism Northern Ireland to prepare advice, which we will present to the Minister shortly. We can ensure that the advice reflects that issue, Claire. From our perspective, it would be helpful if you could write to us with a bit more detail on the specific legalities that you are talking about. We could ensure that we have thought about them and give you a response on how we are managing the issue.

You mentioned the types of email accounts. There was an issue with certain domain names earlier on, because a particular domain host was flagging the emails as spam. It was therefore holding emails back from applicants. We have now resolved that issue, so no difference should be noticed between the domain name used, whether it is Gmail, Hotmail, Outlook or Yahoo. As the Minister said, there is a small backlog, which is because of the way in which the system operates, but we are working through that and expect it to be cleared relatively quickly.

You mentioned using the same email address to apply on someone else's behalf. At the start, there was an issue with the sheer volume of applications coming through, which meant that we had to put a hold on a number of them. We will have to go back to them to clear that backlog. As of now, though, people should be able to type in the same email address, Claire, to access the portal and apply on behalf of their parents. They are able to do that three times: that is, a total of four applications. Someone will be able to get on to the portal four times before it is flagged as being a fraud risk.

You rightly mentioned scams. I am sure that you all follow the Department's Twitter. There have been intensive communications to try to make people as aware as possible of exactly what the application process is and, importantly, what the Department will not do: for example, it will not ask for bank details. It is great to have the support of third-sector organisations in Northern Ireland to get that message out. Listening to the radio yesterday morning, I heard the PSNI's message about exactly what people need to do if they become aware of scams. We would welcome Committee members' support in ensuring that the message is out there, particularly, as the Minister mentioned, so that we reach vulnerable members of our society, who, unfortunately, are targeted by those individuals.

Anti-fraud measures are built into the process at every stage. All our partners and contractors are actively trying, through their systems, to mitigate the risk of fraud. Moreover, the Department has a responsibility to assess and take action against fraud when it becomes known. That is a significant work stream in the project.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): Minister, —

Mr Grocott: Sorry. Does that answer all your questions, Claire? I hope that I have not missed anything.

Ms Sugden: Yes.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): I know that you are a little pushed for time, but Sinead has a question.

Mr Lyons: That is OK.

Ms McLaughlin: Thank you very much, Minister. It has been a long morning for you.

First, I want to say that I have had a career in business representation here in the north-west, and I can absolutely assure you that I have never met any business that has pushed for the Administration or the institutions of government to be pulled down. Businesses need certainty in the marketplace, and

pulling down the bricks and institutions of government would certainly not help them or investors at all. I want to put that on the record.

Leaving that aside, Minister, I presume that you concur that Brexit, not the protocol, is responsible for our losing some of our skilled EU workers. Therefore, there is a bit of hypocrisy in Ministers crying over spilt milk, because it was entirely predictable. What preparations have you and your predecessors made to plan for the skills shortages that we are experiencing? That is the first question.

I will give you my other two questions now, because I know that you are pushed for time, Minister, I hear an awful lot about the problems of the protocol. I agree that there are difficulties with the protocol, but it is there because of Brexit. We need to overcome the difficulties. There are also opportunities from the protocol. Your Department and, indeed, Invest NI have a role to promote protocol opportunities. To me, it feels a bit like how it is with Voldemort: dare we speak of opportunities? It is important that, at this time, when the economy has many challenges, we use every lever that we have to push the opportunities for investors and businesses in Northern Ireland. I would like to think that neither you nor your Department would be a barrier to any of that. What specific opportunities are you promoting that give us a unique position?

Finally, we need to ensure that the economy is levelling up in every place in Northern Ireland. This year, 1,621 jobs have been announced in Belfast. How many jobs have been announced in Derry since January?

Mr Lyons: Sinead, thanks very much for your questions. The first relates to the skills shortage. Clearly, I am aware of that and taking action on it. That is why, first, at UK Government level, I made representations to ensure that we have that flexible migration system in place, so that, if we have an immediate skills deficit, we have the ability to source those skills from elsewhere. I hope that you are familiar with the skills strategy that my Department put out for consultation. That has been really well received by stakeholders. That is where our focus needs to be in the longer term to ensure that people have the skills that they need for the opportunities that will be there for them. I have said that I want a healthy economy that works for everyone, no matter where they are from or their background. I want us to ensure that the skills opportunities are in place so that they can take advantage of them.

Like others around the table, I do not think that we will find common ground on the protocol. Certainly, I have heard much about the potential benefits from it. However, that has not been my experience. I go back to the issue that the big benefit that has been touted about the protocol is dual market access. That is simply not the case. Many manufacturers, in particular, even if they want to export to the EU, which, of course, many of them do, find that difficulties arise when they source component parts from the rest of Great Britain. What I want to do, and what my focus is, is to ensure that we find solutions and that the Government and the EU step up and actually deliver what they promised they would deliver for Northern Ireland.

Finally, the member talked about regional balance and levelling up. I have already said that I want to ensure that we have a healthy economy that works for everyone, no matter where you come from or your geographical location. I hope that I have, in some way, demonstrated my commitment to serving everybody in all parts of Northern Ireland. One of my first visits was to the north-west. I was able to see the progress that had been made on the medical school. I was able to see what has taken place at Seagate Technology and the incredible opportunities that are being created there. Yesterday, I was at Catalyst, which now has a site in Londonderry, and there are incredible opportunities there. Many exciting, energising and engaging projects will come from the city deal as well. That is where my focus will be.

I do not have the specific numbers that the member requested for her constituency. That said, many of the jobs that have been created will allow people to work from home. It is good for local towns that we still have hybrid working. That allows people who might previously not have taken advantage of those opportunities because of a daily drive to another town or city to now be able to do so. My Department, Invest NI and I all stand ready to help where we can and do what we can to ensure that we can all benefit from the opportunities that we have in Northern Ireland, because our skills, our talent and our people are from all over Northern Ireland, and I want to see that reflected in the jobs here. That is why I, along with other stakeholders, am fully supportive of the vision in 'A 10X Economy' and why we are bringing in the other supporting documents, be it the skills strategy, the energy plan, the associated documents on tourism or whatever else it might be. I want everyone, regardless of who they are and where they are from, to benefit from the strong fundamentals in our economy and the opportunities that can come from them.

Ms McLaughlin: Minister, thank you very much for that answer. You will always be welcome in my home town of Derry, but, with the greatest respect, it is not visits that we want; it is jobs. Two weeks ago, you announced 100 jobs with Agio. Yesterday, you announced another 180 jobs in Belfast. Last month, it was 120 jobs in Tribe Tech. In June, it was 771 jobs at PricewaterhouseCoopers and 180 jobs at Version 1 in Belfast. In February, it was 200 jobs with KPMG in Belfast. In January, it was 70 jobs with EverQuote. That adds up to about 1,621 jobs in Belfast, and that is not even all of them. Derry has not been mentioned since the beginning of the year. What is wrong? We welcome your visits, but it is the jobs that we want, to be perfectly honest. We cannot level up and deal with regional disparity and subregional inequalities unless you take the decision to make a policy choice in your Department and direct Invest NI to do so as well. You have not done it. Your predecessors did not do it. With all the goodwill in the world, you cannot talk about economic recovery when we will be excluded from any type of economic recovery until you deal with the foundation stones of what that means in this region.

Mr Lyons: I am pleased that, despite what the member said, I am still welcome to visit her in her constituency, and I will be happy to do that at any time. We will continue, through Invest NI and whatever other opportunities we have, to point people to where there are opportunities, and I will not be behind in doing that. I want to make sure that there are opportunities and that jobs are created right across Northern Ireland. It is positive, though, that, with some of the jobs that you mentioned, although the businesses may be headquartered in Belfast, there is still the working from home aspect, which means that it will be easier for people across Northern Ireland, regardless of their location, to apply for jobs that would not previously have been available to them. I always stand ready to help. As a Committee, it is your job to advise and assist me in policy formulation, and, if you have specific requests, and there are changes that you think that we can make, my door will always be open to hear those ideas and receive that help from you, because it is my goal to help everyone in all areas of Northern Ireland, regardless of geographical location.

Ms McLaughlin: Well, I have lots of ideas, so I will be knocking on your door on Monday. They are not [*Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.*] I regularly state what needs to be done to develop the economy of the north-west. I will take you up on your offer. Expect a phone call.

Mr Lyons: OK.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): Minister, thank you very much for your time. I am sure that we will have you back soon, probably to debate the protocol and Brexit again.

Mr Lyons: I cannot wait.

Mr O'Dowd: If you are still a Minister.

Mr Lyons: I hope that I will be able to convince you.

Mr O'Dowd: Or if there are any Ministers.

The Chairperson (Dr Archibald): Minister, thanks for your time. Apologies for keeping you slightly over time.