Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for Finance

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Non-domestic Rates Valuations (Coronavirus) Bill: Hospitality Ulster; Northern Ireland Hotels Federation

6 December 2021

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:
Mr Keith Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Pat Catney
Ms Jemma Dolan
Mr Philip McGuigan
Mr Maolíosa McHugh
Mr Matthew O'Toole
Mr Jim Wells

Witnesses:

Mr Colin Neill	Hospitality Ulster
Ms Janice Gault	Northern Ireland Hotels Federation

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr K Buchanan): The Committee will now receive evidence from Colin Neill from Hospitality Ulster and Janice Gault from the Northern Ireland Hotels Federation. The session will be reported by Hansard.

Colin and Janice, you are very welcome to the Committee for Finance. We invited you to the meeting to hear your views on the Non-domestic Rates Valuations (Coronavirus) Bill. The Bill will remove largely anything that relates to the pandemic as the basis of appeals for business rates valuations. That will be backdated to 1 April 2020.

Please take the next 15 minutes or so between you to tell us what you like or dislike about the Bill. Perhaps you could tell us how you would like to see it amended, or any supporting finance from the Department being spent. Shall we begin with Mr Neill and then go to Ms Gault? Are you happy enough, Colin?

Mr Colin Neill (Hospitality Ulster): Thank you, Chair. I will keep it brief. I realise that similar Bills have passed in other jurisdictions around the United Kingdom, and I appreciate the fact that the Government need to secure and protect their income from the rates base. Where we run aground on that is on who is protecting the income of the hospitality industry. We have seen and are likely to continue to see a huge drop in revenue streams and will then be expected to pay full rates.

Very briefly, I would like a fund to be set aside as part of the Bill to provide targeted support for industries that are particularly impacted by COVID. The hospitality industry has been, is and will be one of those industries.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr K Buchanan): Thank you, Colin. Janice.

Ms Janice Gault (Northern Ireland Hotels Federation): Colin's points are well made. If you go back to Reval2020, of the 145 hotels on the register, 113 received a massive increase in their net annual value (NAV). If the Bill passes, we are concerned about what exactly a coronavirus mitigation would be considered to be and whether the Bill would stop anybody appealing in the short term. Our bigger worry is that we are moving into 2022-23 with a large degree of uncertainty.

An amendment to the Bill could be that there is an agreed scale of discounts offered to people who can demonstrate that they were adversely affected over the past two to three years. Markedly, we are likely to drop 30 percentage points on our normal occupancy figures. That does not take account of other income streams that were taken away.

It is a little worrying to read previous evidence that suggests that, even with consultation, the same position would have been reached. It is very concerning for us to have a predetermined position on the issue. I accept that many people may feel the need to appeal their NAV. Surely the way to look at it would be to look at *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]* 2023 *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]* as an exceptional year *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.]*

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr K Buchanan): Janice, can I interrupt you? We have a bad connection. If you do not mind, could you turn off your video to see if it improves the connection? At least we will be able to hear you. We will try to persevere —

Ms Gault: Can you hear me better now?

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr K Buchanan): Yes. Go ahead. That is fine. Thanks.

Ms Gault: There will be a Reval in 2023. That will give people the opportunity to address things under a fair and sustainable principle. That would be a much better way of doing it.

We understand that the Finance Minister tasked Ulster University's Economic Policy Centre to look at the effects on our industry. It would be better, and there would be a lot more comfort for the sector, if that were dealt with prior to or as part of the passing of the Bill.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr K Buchanan): OK. I have a couple of questions. I will bring in Philip after that. My questions are to Colin and Janice. Am I right in saying that the sectors that you represent got the full two-year rates holiday — we will call it that — in that there will be no rates to pay until next year? Am I correct in saying that about anyone whom you represent? Is that the case?

Mr Neill: Yes, that is the case, although it is worth noting that the sector has been pretty much under restrictions all year. Compare that with our counterparts in GB, who were able to trade pretty much normally.

Ms Gault: We are in the same position as Colin. All hotels were in receipt of the rates holiday, but they were closed, effectively, for 305 days and have had no trading without restrictions since April 2020.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr K Buchanan): I do not want to know about individual cases, but what is your understanding about individuals who are appealing their business rates and using coronavirus as the argument? Obviously, it is an argument. What is your understanding of what they are appealing to do? Are they appealing to try to reduce their NAV? What are they appealing?

Mr Neill: Appeals are not happening now. Obviously, the legislation will affect our rates from next year when we will pay them. That is the key area. It will refuse any opportunity to appeal, regardless of what state we come out of this year and what state we go into next year.

The important thing to remember is that the rates of pubs and hotels are based on their turnover. From that, a rental value is worked out. The turnover figures will not represent what they are capable of doing.

Ms Gault: My understanding is the same as Colin's. People will want to appeal against their 2022-23 NAV. That is why we said that it would be better to agree a scale of payment for the coming year instead of having to deal with a raft of appeals.

Setting turnover aside, there has been a considerable increase in the level of costs that the current rating system will not consider. If we are dealing under the current restrictions and the restrictions that we have had in the past, there is a cost to doing business. You are doing less business and are doing it at a much higher cost. For us, it really is about the coming year. If, for example, this was to continue after Reval2023, we would not be able to appeal for 2023-24 onwards. That seems slightly strange, in that the rateable value is based on what the business would be rented for in normal circumstances. If there is a decimation of certain areas, the rent would automatically fall, and COVID would be the reason for that. We would also query what a COVID effect is. You could put it down as something completely different; it would be in the semantics of it. That is one of the real concerns about the wording of the Bill.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr K Buchanan): Am I right, Colin and Janice, in picking up that you are not so much concerned about going backwards from today but about going forward?

Mr Neill: Yes.

Ms Gault: Yes.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr K Buchanan): If the Bill came into being, your sector would, effectively, not be fit to appeal? You are not so much concerned about today and working backwards but about going forward and in future?

Mr Neill: Yes.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr K Buchanan): OK, that is me for now. I will bring in Philip.

Mr McGuigan: Thank you, Chair. You covered one of the points that I was going to make. In his evidence, Colin talked about the necessity of some kind of support fund, should the legislation come in. The Minister has said that — I presume that Colin and Janice are aware — if the Bill is passed, a £50 million fund will be coming this way as a result of a Barnett consequential. He has said that that will be made available and will be ring-fenced in order to support businesses. I take it that that was what Colin was indicating was necessary. I will ask both of you: how vital will a fund like that be in supporting businesses?

Mr Neill: The fund will be similar to that, but we have not seen the criteria or how it would be targeted. Obviously, £50 million spread across any businesses that have seen any impact would pretty much run out very quickly, because every sector has been affected. We need something that is bespoke for hospitality, given that we have traded under severe restrictions and are still trading under new restrictions that started last Monday on proof of COVID vaccination for access to venues. It is really important that there is a bespoke, targeted fund, with terms of reference. It is not just about having £50 million and saying, "We will use that if somebody gets in trouble during COVID".

Ms Gault: There are 74,000 businesses in the rates issue, so £50 million is a large sum at the moment, but, as Colin says, that is without working out where we are. A lot of businesses are very concerned about the coming year. Rates constitute one of their biggest bills, and they would like to have seen that pinned down before the Bill was brought forward. For us, it is very much about going forward and where we find ourselves. We could be in a position where we are damaged by this situation for a number of years to come. It is important that businesses are allowed to remain sustainable and viable and that the burden of rates is addressed in an efficient manner. It would have been a good idea to see how that money is going to be spent, what the criteria are and what sectors will be able to benefit from it.

Mr Neill: We have pointed out to the Department of Finance that our counterparts in England will see a 50% rates reduction next year and that there has been a Barnett consequential of that. It was pointed out to us that, unlike them, we have had 100% rate relief this year, and they did not. That said, they have been trading pretty much all year without restrictions: the big difference is that we have not.

Mr McGuigan: I just want to clear that up. Essentially, businesses here have not been paying rates for the past two years, while that has not been the case across the water. Am I right in saying that the business grants have been more generous here than they were, perhaps, in the likes of England?

Mr Neill: Yes, that is correct. Again, however, I would make the case that our restrictions have been more severe and lasted much longer. Our nightclubs spent months and months without any assistance when all the grants ended here and have, effectively, been closed. They have only now been open for a matter of weeks.

Mr McGuigan: It is important to point out that this issue is specific to rates, because it is a specific issue for the Department of Finance. Ongoing business support, which I would like to see, is a matter for the Department for the Economy.

Mr Neill: I am willing to accept that, but I am just making the comparison. When we talk about rate relief next year, what is fed back to us is, "You've had more rate relief this year".

Mr McGuigan: Thank you, Colin.

Mr Wells: Colin, you are the voice of the sector. You are on 'The Nolan Show' more times than I am, and that is saying something. I heard you speaking on the media yet again this morning. That is your role, but do you accept that the Department of Finance and the Department for the Economy were exceptionally generous in their support for small business, including hospitality, over the past 19 months?

Mr Neill: Absolutely; totally; 100%. It has been really welcome. It has saved thousands of businesses and tens of thousands of jobs.

Mr Wells: Good, because businesses that I have dealt with in south Down have said to me that they have found both Departments to be flexible and approachable and that they delivered enough for the businesses to keep their heads above water. Given that your members had complete rate relief over the past two financial years, is the Department being unreasonable in saying that they cannot then use existing legislation to appeal the valuation on the basis of coronavirus?

Mr Neill: COVID is not over. The trading conditions for us are likely to be very difficult. There is no point in giving a person a lifeboat, rowing it within sight of shore and then sinking it.

Mr Wells: I loved your line about whack-a-mole: that the only moles were the hospitality industry. I wish that I had thought of that line, because it was a good one.

We are in a difficult position. This is not black and white; both sides have a clear argument. If the Department gives in to one of your members — a pub or restaurant — it has to apply that right across the sector, and there are huge numbers involved. If the appeals are successful on the basis of coronavirus, there is £600 million at stake. If there is a reduction in the rateable income, other sectors — roads, housing, hospitals — will, unfortunately, have to suffer. Why do you think that the Department is being unreasonable, particularly when it has set aside £50 million to target those who are adversely affected? The public will think that the Department is trying its best.

Mr Neill: I will answer, Jim, and then let Janice come in. As I said in my opening statement, I realise that the Government need their money to do their work. In a sector like hospitality, however, which has been particularly and specifically affected by COVID, if you do not have the money to pay that rates bill and you cannot appeal, it will not be paid anyway because you do not have it. You will go bust, the Government will not get their money and, moreover, a viable business will be lost along with the jobs that it created. That is why I said that it is about having some sort of fund or about putting a time limit on rate relief and saying what, during that time limit, the rates for certain sectors will be. If it is a fund, however, we need to see terms of reference, because we do not know whether it will be applicable.

Mr Wells: When did you, as an organisation, first become aware that the Bill was coming your way — in Northern Ireland, that is?

Mr Neill: A number of weeks ago, when we had notification — I honestly cannot remember whether it was from the Department — saying that there was an intention to have a Bill with accelerated passage.

Mr Wells: I know that you have been incredibly busy over the past few months. Can you remember roughly when you, as an organisation, became aware that this was on the horizon?

Mr Neill: I am guessing, to be honest. It was probably roughly four weeks.

Mr Wells: Four weeks ago? Right — but you were aware, of course, that parallel legislation was going through in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Mr Neill: Not until this cropped up. Then I sat up and looked elsewhere.

Mr Wells: Surely you must be affiliated to a UK-wide organisation somewhere.

Mr Neill: Yes, we are indeed —

Mr Wells: You are not entirely on your own in Northern Ireland.

Mr Neill: — but it did not come up on the agenda. I meet our UK counterparts every week.

Mr Wells: Did you see the interesting and very honest presentation by the chief executive of Land and Property Services (LPS) to the Committee? He verified what you said: that you were not informed or, rather, that you were informed only at, more or less, the same time as we were, but that there was no sense in informing you because the Department was not going to change its mind. How did you react to that comment?

Mr Neill: I must admit, if I am being honest, it is why you do not have a paper in front of you, because it is very hard to write a paper when you think that you are arguing on a done deal.

Mr Wells: Do you think that we as a Committee and we as an Assembly could find the resources to give you what you want?

Mr Neill: It is a false economy if you think, "We'll just charge all the rates", because, if people do not have the money to pay them, you do not get them. We have to be realistic on both sides. I am realistic that the Government want to maximise the rates because they need them to do all the good things that they do. However, if people cannot pay them, it is an accounting exercise.

Mr Wells: Have you had any chance to consult your members about the jobs and business impacts if we cannot meet your concerns on this issue? Have you any thoughts on what the long-term implications are for the industry?

Mr Neill: As Janice said, we survey the industry regularly. We are trading well below where we should be trading. We have seen all the Christmas trade disappear because of most of the messaging coming out of the Government. We normally take a third of the year's turnover at Christmas. Without that, there is no reserve even to help to pay rates and stuff when they come back, and what will trade be like next year? At the minute, it is scary.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr K Buchanan): I have another question, Colin and Janice. The antecedent date was 1 October 2021. Your members will have received documentation from LPS to fill in your rent value. Do you see that figure being different than at the previous antecedent date, and why?

Colin, you said that hospitality was based on footfall. I am not saying that you are incorrect. My understanding is it was purely down to size and rental value.

Mr Neill: No. In hospitality, we are based on an income receipts model: what premises buy in, what money they bring in, looking at the theoretical profit, dividing that in two, and half of that becomes our rates.

A good example of that, and one that I am allowed to use, is a public house called Horatio Todd's, which is a food establishment. It competes with the seven licensed restaurants around it. Horatio Todd's rates NAV is double the sum total of the other seven, so you can see how the model throws it off significantly.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr K Buchanan): What do you see that figure being if the individual who owns that property were filling in that antecedent document today based on coronavirus and, let us say, the last time he or she did that? What would that figure be? What percentage, roughly, Colin, if you understand where I am coming from?

Mr Neill: Unfortunately, the period that will be taken into account is pre COVID, so their rates will be judged on when they were doing normal trade. They will take no account of COVID whatsoever.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr K Buchanan): Janice, do you want to come in on that, or are you happy enough?

Ms Gault: Hotels operate on a slightly different model. We take different income streams, and a percentage of those is calculated. We would have liked to have had an opportunity to look at this year and the year before as two stand-alones. We get independent figures from Smith Travel Research, which is a global organisation, and they reflect our benchmarking figures.

So, for us, it will be 2018-19, 2019-2020 and 2020-21. We pointed out that you are taking figures that are completely irrelevant. What you did in 2018 and 2019 bears no resemblance to what you are doing in 2021 and 2022.

We would normally trade at around 71% or 72% of hotel bedroom occupancy. This year, that is likely to be around 45%. We thought that it might have ended up slightly higher, but the current situation has meant that business has *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]* quite considerably over the past number of weeks.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr K Buchanan): Finally from me, will any businesses under your organisations, Janice and Colin, be particularly hit by this, or is it a broad brush in that all business will be hit?

Ms Gault: This is an equitable disadvantage to everybody. There are a considerable number of businesses, and this is a large chunk of money to find. For them, we would very much like this to be settled before 1 April so that they can budget accordingly. I think that they recognise and really appreciate the support that they have had, and they would like to be in a position to make a meaningful contribution but one that attributes something to the difficulties that they have been through.

Mr O'Toole: Thank you, Colin and Janice, for coming to the Committee and giving evidence. I appreciate that you are doing it at relatively short notice and that you both have a lot of other things on at the minute. Apologies; I missed the first quarter of an hour of the session. The Bill retrospectively changes the law so that your members and other businesses cannot appeal their NAV valuations. It is not, as it were, asking them for any more money. Is your objection to the principle of this, or is it to the fact that the economic conditions mean that you would rather that your firms were not having to pay full rates for the next year or two? I hope that I have asked that question succinctly. Is it the principle or the practice? I suppose that that is the question.

Ms Gault: I will go first. It is both the principle and the practice. The principle is of deciding to do this and then saying, "We will not necessarily consult because we have already worked out what the answer will be". Will that be applied in the future? We also have no idea how much longer COVID will go on for, so that *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]* present a problem. The coming year of 2022-23 could be as difficult as the two previous years. Our argument is that, instead of risking the appeals, given that there is a fund of £50 million, would it not be possible at this stage to put forward something in principle, outlining how the moneys are to be distributed for businesses that face hardship? That is our position *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.]*

Mr O'Toole: So that I understand that, Janice, you are saying that, in order to soften the blow or sweeten the pill of the Bill, you would like the Minister to give clarity on how the £50 million will be disbursed.

Ms Gault: Softening it or sweetening is *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]* of our normal business. Our rates should be reflective of that, so it would be pertinent to do that *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.]* Our idea is *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]* and the necessity to go to

appeal and the amount of work that that will take by putting in place a framework that will encourage people and allow them to budget accordingly and, therefore, pay, whatever the decision is. For us, the important part is an outline of what the fund will entail.

Mr O'Toole: Unfortunately, Janice, it may be the haphazard Wi-Fi in Parliament Buildings that is causing you to break up. I think that I get the gist of what you are saying, which is that you do not like the Bill and that you would rather it were not happening but that your priority and particular concern is that your members have clarity on the £50 million of support.

Ms Gault: Yes, we need clarity. Is it £50 million, is there a larger fund and how will it be addressed? That is our priority.

Mr O'Toole: Colin, do you want to add to that?

Mr Neill: Yes. Our objection is based in reality. While I totally respect the fact that the Government need to raise money and, if you like, protect their income, who is protecting the income of the hospitality businesses? If you set off to take £10 from me and I have only £5, you get only £5. You may have a nice flow chart that says what is coming in, but you ain't getting it if it is not there. I think that we need to have a system in place. The legislation needs to have a sunset clause so that it is time-bound because no one can tell what the future holds, and this may need to be revisited. There needs to be a fund now, before the Bill passes or as part of the Bill, with terms of reference. The hospitality industry has been and continues to be particularly badly hit, and we fear further restrictions. The industry is already operating below profitability and will need some assistance or some way to go back and prove that it needs that assistance. Removing any ability to prove that means that there has to be something upfront.

Mr O'Toole: I cannot speak for the Minister, and I am fairly sure that he would not want me to, but I suppose that he would say that the sunset clause is the fact that, because there will be another revaluation in the next year or two, the Bill removes one potential area for appeal. Obviously, what the Bill does is pretty dramatic, but, from the Minister's perspective, he would say that, given that the Bill removes that one aspect of appeal but gives £50 million of compensation, although there is no detail on that yet, added to which you will have another revaluation in the next couple of years, is that not a sunset clause? The Bill does not say that this will be the NAV of premises for forever and a day; it says only that you cannot appeal the one that you got in 2020.

Mr Neill: My understanding is that the Reval that is taking place does not come into effect on 1 April next year, which is when we will be expected to pay the rates. I think that it will be another year at least, if not further down the line, before it comes into effect. By that time, if you have been trying to make people pay, who do not have the money — if you have taken them to court, with the result that they are broke — it will be no use saying, "Well, your Reval the following year would have been better".

Ms Gault: *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]* Reval2023, there is only *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]* for a short period of the actual COVID trading times. The LPS wants figures up to the last year end — October 2020 — which means that many people will put in figures from 2018, 2019 and 2020, which is really only nine months of COVID trading, when, in fact, we have had double that. That is the issue with the current *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.]* We may not get an NAV that is reflective of the whole COVID position until, maybe, Reval2025 or Reval2026.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr K Buchanan): Before I bring in Maolíosa, I have a question on that. Janice, you talked about the revaluation. If you look at the previous Reval, whatever that was, and the new revaluation in April 2020, by what percentage did the sector go up from the previous Reval to the latest one?

Ms Gault: Overall, our Reval increased by about 47%.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr K Buchanan): It increased by 47% from the previous one to the latest one. It may be a guesstimate, but, on the basis of those two figures, what do your anticipate that your revaluation will be this time round?

Ms Gault: It depends on how we can try to meaningfully *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.]* We need to work with LPS to go through the details. When the last Reval was done, there were, I think,

143 hotels in the system. Of those, 113 had a double-digit rise in their NAV. If, however, you take the years 2018 and 2019 into account in the new Reval, you may see an increase again, because, if you work on the calendar year 2021, you will not be *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]* that full year of trading into the Reval *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality.]* We need to work our way round that *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]* giving full figures. The way in which the Reval works is that it is based on the three previous years. The Reval will be done, the figures will be sent out, and the calculation will be made with a view to printing the list, I understand, at some stage in late 2022 to allow people to calculate what the rate poundage will be. For us, that means that we will pay a rate poundage, a rate and an NAV that are based on a time of trading in normal circumstances, not those that were affected by COVID-19.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr K Buchanan): OK. Your line is breaking up a bit, but I got the gist of that. Do you want to add anything to that, Colin, or are you happy enough?

Mr Neill: Again, as we have thousands of businesses across the spectrum of the hospitality industry, it is a mixed picture from the last Reval. We have seen increases of 100%, 200% or 300% at the extreme end and very small reductions at the other end.

Mr McHugh: The Minister has said that there will be £50 million in support for rates next year, and the revaluation does not come into effect until 2023. Do you agree that there will be no impact in the year ahead? We are now in the 2021-22 financial year, and there is no impact. You seem to fear that this will all happen retrospectively and that, as a result, there will be an impact on hospitality. Given, however, that the revaluation list does not come into effect until 2023 and that £500 million is available for rates support next year, there should be no impact.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr K Buchanan): It is £50 million.

Mr Wells: If it were £500 million, we could all go home.

Mr McHugh: My apologies.

Mr Neill: Again, I appreciate the purpose of the Bill: it is to give reassurance to the Government about the rate base and what their income will be. With that reassurance, however, you have to reassure the people who have to pay that, if they cannot pay, there will be support or reductions in their rate bills for this period next year.

Ms Gault: There are 74,000 businesses, and our question is this: what are the terms and conditions for the £50 million, and who will be able to avail themselves of it? That question goes in tandem with the Bill. If there are 74,000 businesses, and there is £50 million, there is, by my calculation, £675 per business, if it is distributed equally. I hope that the calculation will be based on helping those who have suffered most, but we do not know that, and therein lies the issue.

Mr McHugh: Consider the potential impact on public finances in the event of a £250 million loss to the Executive over a three-year period if the Bill is not passed. This money is needed by councils to provide public services, but that is not to say that, if councils provide the public services, the money disappears, because that same money sustains local populations who, in turn, sustain the hospitality industry. How do you feel about that? In what other way can we protect public services and provide income to communities who, in many ways, will sustain your industry?

Mr Neill: I recognise and understand that the Government want to protect their income and services, but if businesses cannot pay it, the Government cannot collect, and if the Government believe that that money will come, that is false accounting.

Mr Catney: Hello, Colin. How are you? It would be remiss of me not to bring up something that reflects on the rates and when they come in. The businesses that I have been talking to are struggling. They are finding it so difficult that it is a case of trying as best they can to keep their doors open. I was impressed, when I was out during the day on Thursday and Friday, to see crowds moving back into the city of Lisburn and the opening of a new pub, The Lark.

There is a lot of fear out there, and it is only fair for me, if you will indulge me, Chair, to try to get to the issue of income. That is where the rates bill is paid from. I know of businesses that, only this weekend, because they asked to see a COVID certificate, had their windows broken and received all sorts of

threats. That is important to me, and I wrote a letter to you about it this morning. Are you aware of what the Department for the Economy is doing to help our businesses — your businesses and the business owners who make up your federation — to alleviate that fear? It is real, and it is happening in real time. Meanwhile, they are being tugged at every quarter to keep their doors open, and I know, as you do and can, maybe, express better than I can, that it is real-life fear that they will not have a business. Will you elaborate on the help that you get? The rate Reval will come at the end of this, and you cannot get blood out of a stone.

Mr Neill: As I said, we are really grateful for all the help and assistance that the Northern Ireland Executive and, indeed, Westminster have provided. That saved thousands of businesses. Combined with the furlough scheme, it has saved tens of thousands of jobs. We are again in a period of there being very little help. The rates holiday is still there, but furlough and all other assistance have gone. Trading figures are plummeting. I liken it to an avalanche of cancellations and footfall dropping. Like you, I have seen threats towards staff — I have had texts about that again today — for trying to enforce the proof of COVID certification, which we are legally required to do. If I may say this, and if you will indulge me, it is strange that small independent businesses are legally required to enforce COVID rules when organisations such as Translink are not.

That having been said, at the minute, we face a situation in which, at the end of the financial year, rental protection and insolvency protection will end, it is likely that VAT will go back to 20%, and, from what we can see, it is likely that rates will come back. The money is not coming in. We need to trade at about 75% capacity just to break even. Indeed, in this period, we need to trade at 100% to pay the bills in January and February alone. People are desperate again. They are worse now than when previously locked down, because, at least, at that time, the banks and the landlords could not touch them, and they had some grants. Now, they are in free fall.

Mr Catney: Thank you.

Mr McGuigan: I have one last point, which relates to a point that Colin raised. It is about the difference between the £50 million here and what is being done in England. It is important to say that businesses in England do not get a straightforward 50% relief; it is a capped relief, and it is per business rather than per property. I want to put that on the record.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr K Buchanan): No other members have indicated that they have questions. I thank Colin and Janice. I appreciate your coming along — well, not coming along, I should say — and enlightening us with information. I appreciate your answers. We will, no doubt, be in touch in the future. In the meantime, thank you.

Mr Neill: Thank you.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr K Buchanan): Thank you very much.

Ms Gault: Thank you.