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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 1 December 2020

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Matter of the Day

Public Inquiry into the Murder of Human Rights Solicitor Pat Finucane

Mr Speaker: Mr John O'Dowd has been given leave to make a statement, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24, on the public inquiry into the murder of human rights solicitor Pat Finucane. If other Members wish to be called, they should indicate that by rising in their places and continuing to do so. All Members who are called will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject. I remind Members that I will not take points of order on this or any other matter until this item of business has finished.

Mr O'Dowd: I rise to speak on yesterday's decision by the British Government not to hold a full public inquiry into the murder of human rights lawyer Pat Finucane. I want to start by paying tribute to the resilience, courage and, indeed, dignity of Geraldine Finucane and the Finucane family in their 31-year campaign for the truth about Pat's killing.

I am conscious that, when such events and stories hit the news headlines, many victims out there reflect on the loss of their loved ones, and many victims also seek justice for their loved ones. What makes Pat Finucane's case stand out? It is this: there have been several investigations into his murder, and most of them — indeed, the most high-profile of them — have concluded, and the then British Prime Minister stated, that there were high levels of collusion by the state in his murder. What does that mean? It means that those who were tasked with, first of all, protecting Pat Finucane and his family were involved in his murder, and those who were tasked with investigating the murder of Pat Finucane were involved in his murder. How can those who were tasked with protecting him and who failed him, and those who were tasked with investigating his murder but were involved in his murder, in any real terms investigate his murder? Hence the need for a full public inquiry into his murder. Indeed, in

2001, the British Government committed themselves to an inquiry into his murder, such were the levels of concern around the collusion in this case.

Those who say — some say it in a dignified manner, others are just brutally ignorant in their response — that there are other victims out there are quite correct. However, what stands out about Pat's case is that the state was involved in his murder. In what other circumstances would this House divide or say, "Well, perhaps the British Government are correct. There should not be an inquiry"? The allegation sits. The facts sit: the state was involved in the murder of a solicitor in this society. That should concern everyone in the House, regardless of your political allegiance or your views on the conflict of the past. The state, the people who told us that they were protecting us, and the security forces, who told us that they were there for our security, plotted, planned and carried out the murder of a solicitor.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr O'Dowd: The state has now refused to carry out an inquiry into that. The state has a duty to carry out an inquiry into that.

Mr Givan: Of course the murder of Pat Finucane was wrong. I acknowledge the barbaric nature of it, as he was murdered in front of his family. One can only imagine the trauma that that has caused, and it is clearly evident to this day, 31 years later. That pain is felt by thousands of people right across Northern Ireland. I think of La Mon. I think of Bloody Friday. I think of Enniskillen and Narrow Water. The list goes on of thousands of people who suffer as a result of the terrorist campaign of over 30 years in this country. Many of those families have had but a mere desktop exercise carried out by the Historical Enquiries Team (HET). When I think of the Finucane investigations, I think of Lord Stevens, Justice Peter Cory and Sir Desmond de Silva. I think of an inquiry, which was going to be set up under

the 2005 Inquiries Act, that was rejected. I also think of the criminal conviction that was secured in the murder of Pat Finucane, which attracted a 22-year custodial sentence. Thousands of victims of terrorism could only wish for the same level of interrogation to have taken place into the murder of their loved ones.

Victims have heard loudly the special status being afforded to the Finucane family by a range of political parties in this House and, indeed, by other international political figures. When I think of those international obligations, I think of the Smithwick tribunal that found the collusion of an Garda Síochána officers with the provisional IRA in the murder of Harry Breen and Bob Buchanan. Where is the public inquiry into that collusion of the state? I think of the safe haven afforded to republican terrorism by the Republic of Ireland for decades. Where is the public inquiry into the actions of the Republic of Ireland? I think of the evidence to that tribunal linking to the Provisional IRA and of the lack of engagement and evidence provided to that tribunal. I think of members of Sinn Féin who have taken their criminal acts to the grave and denied truth and justice to the victims of IRA terrorism. I think of the United States of America and the financing and arming of the Provisional IRA. Where is the congressional inquiry into those activities?

So, yes, everyone ought to be treated equally. Everybody ought to have truth and justice. When are we going to see it from all the other actors in the terrorist campaign that took place for 30 years?

Mr Allister: The murder of Pat Finucane was terrorist, brutal and extremely shocking, just like over 3,000 other murders; yet, compare and contrast the attention and the demands in respect of those.

Look at the Finucane case: it has had Weston Park; the Cory inquiry; the de Silva report; the offer of a public inquiry; legislation especially drafted to deliver that inquiry; and a criminal trial and a conviction. When I contrast that with all the rest, the deficit is staggering. Compare that with those who were burned alive at La Mon, those who smothered under the rubble of Enniskillen and those who were butchered at Kingsmills.

If we want to talk about collusion, we need to talk about all the collusion. That would include the collusion of some who have sat on Benches in the House, who were leaders of the IRA and who doubtless colluded in multiple murders. What did Martin McGuinness know about the Enniskillen bombing? What did he know about

the murder of Pat Gillespie? What did he know about countless other murders? If you want to talk about collusion, talk about it across the board. If there are those who colluded, it is not a one-way street. Anyone involved in criminality deserves the rigours of the law. There should be no exemptions for Sinn Féin or anyone else. That should be the starting principle.

What we have is a hierarchy — a Finucane elite — who think that they can demand what no one else gets. Even when they were offered a public inquiry, they said, "No. We need an international judicial inquiry". Such is the elitism attaching to the matter. Of course, the bottom line is that it is all about insatiability. They are insatiable; they will never be satisfied. They would not have been satisfied with a public inquiry unless they had got to write its outcome. That is the plain truth. When they dismissed the very idea of prosecutions, it was clear that they are not interested in justice. They are interested in maximising the rewriting of history, which is why, of course, this continues to be a boil that needs to be lanced and should have been —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Allister: — properly lanced yesterday by the refusal, at any stage, of —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Allister: — a public inquiry.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Matter of the Day. As a child growing up, I was always taught that two wrongs do not make a right. It is very unseemly that we are turning the murder of one person into a green and orange issue. All of us in the House should be concerned about finding truth and justice for all victims, regardless of the perpetrators.

It is astonishing that some Members would hold the British Government and their agents to the same standards as terrorist organisations. Surely we should all expect the Government to have a higher standard than any other and to protect all their citizens.

It is a fact that the murder of Pat Finucane was supported by elements in the British establishment. The family have called for the inquiry, and I find it disingenuous for people to say that they were offered a public inquiry. Members know that the 2005 Act was brought into effect quickly to give the Secretary of State undue influence and the ability to interfere in any public inquiry and the matters and facts that

might be brought before an independent inquiry tribunal. Stop messing about.

Today and last night, we saw how the British Government treat the widows and children of murdered victims in the North. They treat them with disdain. They cancelled a meeting for which the family had waited almost two years with 10 minutes' notice. That was pretty damning.

All victims deserve truth and justice. All families deserve to know what happened to their loved ones. The SDLP has always stood four-square with all those victims. I pay tribute to Geraldine Finucane and her family and all families who have had to carry that burden from the day and hour that their loved ones were murdered.

I am always in awe of their determination and of how their lives have been put on hold in their search for truth and justice. It does not end with the partner or the child of the family affected; it is trans-generational. If we are to build reconciliation in this society, we must deal properly with legacy. Yesterday, the British Government failed miserably. They failed not only the Finucane family but all families who are searching for truth and justice as they deal with the legacy of our troubled past. The clear message was that we are not to get truth and justice or the legacy institutions that families deserve and need.

10.45 am

Mr Beattie: I start by condemning the callous and brutal murder of Pat Finucane. It is truly a stain on our shared past. This should be a sombre Matter of the Day; it should not be used as an opportunity to hurl insults across the Chamber or to use victims to score political points. There are no winners or losers here. Hundreds if not thousands of victims across the United Kingdom, Ireland and further afield still wait for truth and justice, including my family. Nobody is looking at their case. Nobody is promoting the small man: the one who was murdered, is long forgotten and whose name does not slip off your tongue.

We have failed victims. Every one of us in the Chamber has failed victims. The Westminster Government have failed victims. The Irish Government have failed victims. We did not consult or speak to victims. We did not get them to join us when we tried to come up with a legacy mechanism, which they do not support. The Stormont House Agreement is failing because the victims do not support it. Many will scream at me and say, "Well, you are saying

that because you are a unionist", and I will throw back at them that there is a Bloody Sunday family member who does not support the Stormont House Agreement's legacy mechanisms. Go to her, and tell her that she is wrong.

We need to come together and come up with something that works. It must be victim-centred. To be victim-centred, it must include the victims. We cannot deal with legacy one public inquiry at a time. Victims from across this country and these islands look at us and ask, "When will somebody help me to get justice and truth for my family member?". The reality is that nobody is even talking about them.

Mr Blair: It should go without saying that it is a sad set of circumstances that brings us here today, but it is probably worth repeating that in order to bring balance and measure to the discussion.

The announcement yesterday evening by the Secretary of State appears, to some of us at least, to be further foot-dragging and yet another diversion from the discovery of the facts. The failure of the UK Government to establish a public inquiry into the murder of Pat Finucane falls short of the Supreme Court ruling requiring an article 2-compliant investigation. It is a failure that brings delay to the Finucane family, who have shown great dignity in their pursuit of an outcome. Today, to Geraldine Finucane and her family, we can say only that our initial reaction is that we share their frustration and offer our sympathy.

The frustration and anger at the UK Government's decision will be shared more widely, and that is because it is difficult to see how this outcome can be regarded as in any way consistent with the 2019 ruling by the UK Supreme Court. Today, we can see that yesterday's announcement is unlikely to be the end of the matter, and the family, with others, will continue their campaign for truth. The UK Government had already accepted that collusion was apparent in this case, and they have done so again.

They have apologised again. That foot-dragging, as I have called it, around the decision leading directly to an article 2-compliant investigation suggests institutional resistance to full discovery of the facts. That further delay, with talk of review upon review — a legacy review, an ombudsman review and a policing review — adds yet further elements to a process that is now decades old. We could refer to those further processes or reviews as bringing their own resource issues or demands.

We could guess as to the additional time that they will take and the additional stresses that they will bring.

There are other, more relevant factors in all of this, however. There remains in place the existing Supreme Court ruling. There remain, more importantly, the needs of victims. In the past 24 hours, we have had a stark reminder of Government outcomes falling far short of the needs of victims and a stark reminder that there are thousands of Troubles victims who seek truth and deserve justice. In this most recent case, a public inquiry is necessary owing to public-interest issues, which were highlighted by the Supreme Court. As well as stepping up urgently to address their failings of yesterday, the UK Government must now act to honour the commitments that were made in the Stormont House Agreement to implement a comprehensive process to deal with the past in Northern Ireland, a process through which most legacy issues could be addressed. That remains the most viable and achievable option for victims who are waiting, especially for those for whom time is running out.

Mr Carroll: The decision not to grant a public inquiry into the killing of Pat Finucane is a shameful and despicable one. The Finucane family have already waited for far too long for truth. Yesterday's decision will only prolong their struggle and pain. The evidence regarding the murder of Pat Finucane points to state murder and an appalling level of collusion at the very heart of the British Establishment. This calculated move to block an inquiry begs the question: how far are they willing to go to cover up that collusion and state murder, carried out with impunity?

We should not, however, be surprised by that callous move. The British Empire was one where the sun never set and the blood never dried. Today, the British Government continue to try to cover up their crimes in Ireland and in the North, perhaps because the same Establishment continues to collude in murder in other parts of the world. For over 30 years, British Governments have dragged their feet and tried to cover up the collusion at the heart of this case, but this is the ultimate insult to Pat Finucane's family and other victims of collusion. I will add that former Prime Minister David Cameron effectively confirmed that collusion took place in this case.

We need more than polite words from the Irish Government. I call directly on the Taoiseach, Micheál Martin, to take a stand against this outrageous decision, because the refusal by Johnson and the Tories to hold a public inquiry

should not be accepted. Just as they tried to stop justice for the Bloody Sunday victims, they are trying to stop justice for Pat and his family. Just as they failed then, they will fail again. We must show our solidarity with the Finucane family, their campaign and the campaigns of all victims of violence and state violence. It is in our interests to stand with them for as long as their fight continues.

In the past 24 hours, some have asked, "But what about other victims?". Indeed, but it is not as though shutting the door on the killing of a human rights solicitor and denying proper answers about what happened will do anything for any other victim of the state, state agents or paramilitaries. It is a real shame that some in the House are willing to defend the horrible record of the British Government in that regard, but it is hardly surprising.

Mr Speaker: No other Members have indicated that they wish to speak on the Matter of the Day.

Ministerial Statement

The Procurement Board

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Finance that he wishes to make a statement. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members that, in the light of social distancing being observed by the parties, the Speaker's ruling that Members must be in the Chamber to hear a statement if they wish to ask a question has been relaxed. Members still have to make sure that their name is on the speaking list if they wish to be called, but they can do that by rising in their place, as well as by notifying the Business Office or the Speaker's Table directly. I remind Members to be concise in asking their question.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I wish to provide Members with an update on the Procurement Board. Procurement expenditure accounts for some £3 billion annually, representing one quarter of the Executive's Budget. That makes the Executive a hugely significant buyer of goods, services and construction work, and there is tremendous potential to use that spending power for good.

Procurement policy is overseen by the Procurement Board, which I chair as Finance Minister.

(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Stalford] in the Chair)

As with many areas of work, the restoration of the Procurement Board has been delayed by the pandemic. The procurement team in my Department has been focused on the response to COVID, and I thank the team for assisting in the procurement of essential PPE for our public services. In particular, working with the Department of Health and the Executive Office, it secured a £60 million order of PPE from China. In a competitive global market, that was a remarkable achievement for a small regional Government.

Today, I can announce the restoration of the Procurement Board, which will meet on 16 December. I would also like to update Members on how, with the agreement of the Executive, I decided to restructure the Procurement Board. I have completely changed the make-up of the board. Previously, almost 20 people attended the Procurement Board. That was too large a group, and I have reduced the membership by half. That will allow the group to meet more regularly and to drive forward reform.

Previously, the Procurement Board was staffed by permanent secretaries. As accounting officers, permanent secretaries have a significant interest and role in procurement, but I believe that the board should be made up of the experts who actually design and manage procurement exercises. I am therefore replacing the permanent secretaries with four procurement practitioners. From the health sector, I am appointing Peter Wilson, interim director of operations in the Business Services Organisation (BSO), who is responsible for procurement and logistics. To provide expertise in the delivery of infrastructure, I am appointing John Irvine, director of major projects and procurement in the Department for Infrastructure. Sharon Smyth, commercial director in the Department of Finance, will also be appointed, as she has extensive experience in procuring a wide range of supplies and services for Departments. From the Strategic Investment Board (SIB), which is responsible for the Buy Social policy, I am appointing Brett Hannam. The people who design and manage public contracts will, therefore, be at the core of procurement policy.

It is also important that procurement policy benefits from the expertise of the sectors that tender for and deliver public contracts on behalf of the public sector. I have therefore appointed five representatives from key sectors of the economy. From the construction industry, I have appointed Mark Spence, managing director of the Construction Employers Federation (CEF), and Denise McMahon, chair of the Northern Ireland Construction Group. To represent the manufacturing sector, I have appointed Mary Meehan, deputy chief executive of Manufacturing NI. To speak on behalf of small and medium enterprises, I have appointed Ian McClelland, director of LM Services, which is a mechanical and electrical engineering company, and a member of the Procurement Board forum for small businesses. To champion the interests of social enterprises, I have appointed Colin Jess, director of Social Enterprise NI. Those representatives will be asked to engage with their respective sectors in order to bring their views and experiences to the Procurement Board.

I thank the outgoing members for their time and commitment during the term of the previous board.

To date, procurement policy has been approved by the Procurement Board and circulated throughout the public sector through guidance notes. Compliance with that guidance has not been entirely consistent. It is, therefore,

important to elevate the status of procurement policy. From now on, procurement guidance notes will go to the Executive for approval. Procurement policy will, therefore, carry the authority of Ministers, who are accountable to the public, and their accounting officers, who are legally responsible for ensuring that public expenditure provides value for money.

The new members of the board will be asked to identify problems, quickly develop solutions and bring fresh thinking to procurement policy and practice. However, I want to finish my statement by highlighting some of the immediate priorities that I will ask the board to progress.

One of those priorities is social value. I am aware that that is something that the all-party group on social enterprise chaired by Mr Stewart Dickson is also passionate about. It is important to point out that social value is not only a concern of social enterprise: there are many private sector businesses that want to contribute to social good, for example, by lowering carbon emissions or paying their staff a living wage. Those social benefits are not factored in to tenders that score only on price and quality. Therefore, I intend to bring a new policy on social value to the first meeting of the Procurement Board. With that policy, social value will be a mandatory component of procurement exercises rather than an optional add-on.

Another policy priority is security of supply. The COVID pandemic triggered a global scramble for PPE and other essential supplies. We do not want to be in that position again. It would be much better if we could source vital supplies locally rather than worrying about supply routes by air and sea. The need for secure supply routes is also heightened by Brexit, which is likely to disrupt trading relationships, particularly if the British Government fail to agree a trade deal with the European Union. A stronger focus on security of supply will, of course, benefit local businesses and help increase employment levels, so I will ask the Procurement Board to develop policy in that area.

There are many other policies that I would like the board to consider, and I would welcome Members' views on what other procurement issues they would like brought to the table.

The new structure of the Procurement Board will mean that procurement policy is co-designed by those who manage and those who deliver government contracts. That will mean that procurement policy carries the authority of Executive approval.

I believe that the changes will help to maximise the social, economic and environmental impact of the Executive's £3 billion annual spend on procurement. I welcome Members' views on the new Procurement Board and the issues that it should focus on.

11.00 am

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): I thank the Minister for his remarks and for meeting me earlier today.

As the Minister is aware, the Committee wrote to him in March about the formation of the board, and, despite the delay, we welcome his statement today. There is much detail on the formation of the board, and the Committee will want to take the time to scrutinise it closely.

We have a few initial questions that we would like you to answer. First, is forming a board under your chairmanship that will seek to control and manage £3 billion — approximately a quarter of our Executive's budget, I think — appropriate, given the other instruments that are being set up through New Decade, New Approach, particularly the fiscal council? When should we expect the fiscal council to be in position?

Where are the terms of reference? Who will have primacy in the procurement process? Is the role entirely to provide policy, or is it to direct cross-Executive procurement spending? How does the Procurement Board interrelate with the services sector? Since a lot of government expenditure seems to go to the likes of PwC, Deloitte and other consultancy services, will there be a representative of the services sector on the Procurement Board?

There will be significant procurement issues, and I notice that you talk in your statement, Minister, about the importance of making sure that the Northern Ireland supply chain is given primacy. You will be aware, if we ever get any details out of the Joint Committee or the Specialised Committee, that we will still have to apply EU procurement rules and may not be able to do what, you said, you wish to do with procurement in your statement. We need some guidance on that.

Bringing outside experts into the process is welcome. I cannot think of any Member who does not welcome the external expertise. However, would you consider having an independent chairman of the board? If you are chair of the board of a procurement process that looks at significant government spending, it may seem that the best will, guidance and

advice from external sectors are not being utilised appropriately to get us the best out of our procurement spend.

The Committee looks forward to getting more details on this and to your talking to us about the Procurement Board at the earliest convenience.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Not only did the Chairman of the Committee go up to the line with that series of questions, but the line is somewhere in the distance. The Minister is under no obligation to answer all the questions — I think that there were six — but I am sure that he can try.

Mr Murphy: I also identified six questions and will attempt to answer them.

In relation to the fiscal council, as with the Procurement Board, COVID-19 has impacted on the speed at which we have been able to deliver on that New Decade, New Approach commitment. However, we are at an advanced stage, and I hope to bring proposals to the Executive in relation to that very soon. The terms of reference will be signed off in the next day or two, and we will ensure that the Committee is informed of them.

On the role of the board and the chairing of it, one of the consistent complaints has been about a lack of consistency, in that procurement policy and guidance have been the property of the Procurement Board but have not necessarily filtered down through Departments and into arm's-length bodies and agencies. To ensure consistency of delivery, authority is being given to the Executive because they will pass the procurement guidance notes and will be responsible for authorising them. My role in chairing the board, as an Executive Minister, will be to ensure continuity through to the Executive and for that Executive authority to flow down through Departments, through permanent secretaries and Ministers, to make sure that there is follow-through.

There have been good procurement policies and guidance notes, but they have somewhat slowed as they have moved down the chain through Departments and not necessarily been reflected in output.

We want to ensure that this is not just an organisation or a board that produces policies for the sake of having documents, but one that changes the way that business is done.

The consultancy sector is a varied one, as the Member knows, as is the service sector. We have looked for sectors that have groups that represent the broad sector from which to draw expertise. If other sectors are identified where there is a gap, I will be happy to look at that again to see whether that sector can come together and whether there is an organisation that might represent it and make someone available from it.

On the question of supplies, as a response to the pandemic, we did have local businesses and manufacturers that stepped up and repurposed their output. I am thinking of firms such as O'Neills, which supplied scrubs, and Bloc Blinds and Huhtamaki, which produced PPE gear. They were very effective and very successful, and the issue of security of supply is something that, increasingly, all governments across the world will be looking to. Clearly, the experience during the pandemic was around the difficulty in accessing that critical supply that was needed very quickly by the health service. We need to look at that, and it is doable within whatever arrangements we have with Europe beyond 1 January. We need to ensure that, if local manufacturers are going to repurpose, they have a guarantee, or at least a huge degree of certainty, about an ongoing contract and ongoing demand for the goods that they might supply.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for his statement. I can certainly tell that he is hungry — hopefully, hungry for reform. I want to pay tribute to my colleague William Humphrey, the Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee, who has been pushing for some time now for private-sector influence on the Procurement Board. The Minister said that compliance with the guidance had not been entirely consistent in the past. Can he outline to the House what he means by that? Also, he told us that procurement guidance notes will now go to the Executive for approval. How were they approved before?

Mr Murphy: The lack of consistency is reflected in the fact that some policies and guidance that the Procurement Board brought forward, particularly in relation to social value, were seen as optional add-ons rather than being essential. We want to give the board more expertise to develop better policies in a quicker way by having key people involved. That is not to disregard the permanent secretaries, but there would be duplication if a policy went through the permanent secretaries and ended up in the Executive, and then the Executive gave it the authority. Previously, the guidance notes were approved by the board itself, and that was the

extent of their status. This time, the guidance notes will be approved by the Executive, and there is then a responsibility on Executive Ministers, and on their accounting officers, to make sure that those guidance notes are followed through by their own Departments, arm's-length bodies and agencies.

The guidance and policies that are produced will have more teeth and more enforceability, which, in turn, gives them more consistency. Depending on the attitude of a permanent secretary, it may have been that some Departments were keen on pursuing and promoting the issues, while others, perhaps, were not. We want to get consistency across the board and we want to ensure that there is a level of expertise within the board to get the best possible policies and guidance notes.

Ms Anderson: I welcome the Minister's statement. For far too long, the social component of procurement contracts was the least enforced. Those who are further away from the labour market, particularly the brokers, have found it very difficult to get access. Will the Minister ensure that the more robust monitoring and enforcement that he mentioned in his statement will mean that the £3 billion of public money that is spent yearly on this process will result in training and job opportunities for those in greatest need in the most deprived areas, such as Derry city and beyond?

Mr Murphy: Yes, that is the intention. On the social value end, we have brought in the Strategic Investment Board (SIB), which was largely responsible for the Buy Social policy. When it comes to the other issues of employment, apprentices and the long-term unemployed, we want to ensure that that consistency travels down through. That is why the involvement of the construction industry on the board itself gives us that interface so that we can see what the issues are from the other side. It is one thing to produce policies through civil servants and public representatives but another to engage with the sector that has to implement them.

We had a useful discussion with people in the Derry area in relation to how some of this had not made its way onto the ground. Those are the sorts of issues that we want to correct through our engagement with the board. We want to ensure that it is effective, that there is a clear understanding of where the policy becomes unstuck in its practice and that we fix those things to make sure that the desired outcomes are achieved.

Mr O'Toole: I want to ask the Minister more about the process of procurement policy, specifically guidance notes going back to the Executive. It is fair to say that, this year, the Executive have not always covered themselves in glory with regard to the timing of their decision-making, notwithstanding the unique circumstances. Will the Minister assure us that the notes that go back to the Executive will not gum up the process of procurement, jeopardise the inclusion of actual, real social value aims or allow this simply to be another tool for divvying up favours between certain parties in the Executive?

Mr Murphy: I cannot, in turn, ask the Member to explain. His point that procurement policy is used for "divvying up favours between parties" in the Executive requires some explanation. That is an outrageous statement. I ask the Member to justify it in some other place. He is accusing people of corruption — of divvying up procurement favours in the Executive.

His party has a member on the Executive. The Executive have had plenty of well-documented disagreements over key issues. They have also produced a range of agreements on a multitude of issues, and I do not see those issues becoming of significance. I brought the proposal for a reconstitution of the board to the Executive, and no dissenting voices were raised. I outlined my ambition to have a more effective social value policy and procurement and more consistency in the application of policies. All of that was agreed by the Executive, so I do not anticipate any difficulty in that regard.

I am not sure how the Member intends to stand over the last remark of his contribution. I know that he has the cover of this institution for such remarks, but, if he is making an insinuation that there is divvying up in procurement among Executive parties, he has an obligation to stack that up or withdraw it.

Mr O'Toole: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I want to make clear that, when I talked about divvying up, there was no suggestion that I was talking about the procurement of individual contracts. I did not say that. The Minister has read too much into what I said. I said that there is an issue around things going to the Executive and becoming part of the political bartering. That was the point that I was making. I think that it was fairly clear in my remarks, and I stand by them.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Strictly speaking, I do not think that that was a point of

order, but the Member has put on the record his intention. It is important that, at all times, Members speak to each other with moderation and tolerance. I suppose that "tolerance" is as good a word as any. However, I understand that Members have strong views. The Member's remarks are on the record and clarification given.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for his statement. Procurement will play a vital role in the economic recovery that we will need in the years following COVID-19. One of the key issues, which the Minister will be aware of, is an infrastructure commission. Proposals have been circulated in relation to that. Will the Minister provide an update on his views on those proposals and how it would interact with what has been announced today?

Mr Murphy: There is a range of reasons why we want to see the most effective use of significant amounts of capital money for infrastructure. We want to see it being spent well, we want to see maximum value and return for it and we want to see the maximum contribution to the local economy as a consequence of that spend. Construction is a key component of our local economic activity, and, where possible, we want to see local construction companies benefit. Having the Construction Employers Federation, as well as the person responsible for procurement policy in the Department for Infrastructure, represented on the procurement board, brings a new level of expertise in that regard. I hope that that will see better outcomes in procurement, which is something that we all want to achieve.

Mr Storey: I welcome the statement. The Minister will be aware that I, as a former Finance Minister, raised concerns about procurement in the past. I trust that today's announcement is about more than a name change, as was the case previously. We had the famous change from CPD to CPD. *[Laughter.]* I have to say that that was a surreal moment in the Civil Service. I trust that we will see real progress. I welcome the fact that the construction industry is now involved.

11.15 am

I seek clarification from the Minister on two things, although I could be wrong about them. First, with regard to the involvement of the Department of Education — I declare an interest as a governor of two schools in my constituency — the procurement processes in that Department are woeful. We are being done over in that process at a cost to the public

purse. Secondly, will the Minister explain what the relationship will be between the board, as reconstituted, and CPD, because many are still sceptical as to whether we can get delivery on procurement?

Mr Murphy: I thank the Member for his questions. He has raised those issues in the past. I am not sure whether the dramatic change from CPD to CPD did not happen under his watch *[Laughter.]* However, there is a clear intention. This is not just a name change for the board; it is a change of personnel. Procurement is being taken out of the hands of permanent secretaries. That is not to cast any aspersions on the people who served on the board; I thank them for their service. It is to bring in, as the Member says, expertise from various sectors. Among the people on the board, we want departmental representatives who deal with procurement. I know that Education is a gap, but that does not mean that there is no ongoing consultation with Departments. Sharon Smyth of the Department of Finance will have responsibility for engaging with Departments that are not represented on the board. Education is a significant spender of public money in public contracts, so there will be that read-across.

The clear intention is for a new start. It is a reconstituted board that comes from a different place as regards who is involved. We want people who represent industry — construction or SMEs — and for them to engage with their sectors in order to bring forward their views. The intention is to create a facility so that people can give information privately on any complaints. Previously, people might have felt that, if they made a genuine, legitimate complaint publicly about the main contractor, that might be detrimental to their ability to do future work. We want to create a facility in which people have an opportunity to register issues with the board in a way that protects them from any blowback, if that were the case with relationships in contracts.

This is a genuine attempt to do things differently. We will have to test that as we go along, but I hope that, in the not too distant future, the Member will recognise that there is a different way to do things.

Mr Storey: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. It seems that Members can clarify things that they have said. May I clarify that the name change did not happen under my watch? However, it happened during a suspension of the Assembly, so perhaps the Finance Minister and his party should take responsibility for it *[Laughter.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I do not think that I need to rule on that [*Laughter.*]

Mr O'Dowd: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I wish to clarify whether points of order are allowed during a ministerial statement and the questions that follow? [*Laughter.*] I believe that they are not.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That is a legitimate point of order and is, therefore, unique this morning. The Member is, of course, correct.

Mr McHugh: Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil leis an Aire as a ráiteas. I thank the Minister for his statement. This is a good opportunity for change. I will be more specific. In order to ensure that social value is incorporated into procurement contracts, will the board consider a minimum score for social value alongside price and quality?

Mr Murphy: That would be an effective way to achieve that. If the focus is just on price and quality, we lose the ability to give proper consideration to social value. Social value is about many things. It can be about a more green approach to construction, as well as having social outcomes in employment by ensuring that there is spend in certain areas and access for people from communities and social enterprises that can provide services. There is a whole range of measures. Scoring contracts in a way that guarantees that social value is a component part of procurement is an effective way to do that.

Mr O'Dowd: Perhaps, if guidance is to be approved by the Executive, that will lessen the litigation against contracts. Given the scale of the contracts awarded at times, it is unsurprising that judicial reviews (JRs) etc are brought, but we have to reduce those. Will the Minister ensure that the Procurement Board looks at how legal action can be minimised? Several weeks ago, the Economy Committee received a presentation from the Law Society on mediation in such matters. Will the Minister ask the Procurement Board to look at that process as well?

Mr Murphy: Yes, as I referenced in my response to Mr Storey, litigation is really the end point. It happens when someone is dissatisfied with how a contract has been awarded. Litigation holds up capital projects in particular and can have a significant and detrimental impact on economic activity generally. That is not to say that people are not entitled to go to court if they feel strongly that

they have a case to make, and we would not deny them that. However, there is an opportunity to have some kind of mitigation process at an earlier stage, which is why I will ask the board to consider an alternative service to allow suppliers to raise their concerns and, in some instances, to provide a private opportunity for them to do so. Business relationships are at the heart of procurement, and people are often reluctant to speak out in case damage is caused to those relationships as a consequence. We want an alternative measure that enables suppliers to raise concerns confidentially, and we want the matter to be independently reviewed. That will be a key part of it, and, hopefully, it will have the effect of offsetting the possibility of people going to court. While people are entitled to go to court, it undoubtedly holds up processes and has an impact on budgetary spending.

Mr Catney: Minister, your statement says:

"Compliance with this guidance has not been entirely consistent."

How will that be measured by the new Procurement Board? How will it measure success?

Mr Murphy: Success will be measured by the consistent application of policy and guidance notes. In the past, we have found that, sometimes, consistency did not filter down through Departments. The approval of guidance notes and procurement policy by the Executive gives them a strength that they did not have. There is an obligation on Executive Ministers and accounting officers in Departments to follow through on that. Monitoring by the board will ensure compliance and find where that is not happening. As outlined, we will have representatives from the sector. If the board finds that the policies are not coming through at the bottom end or that compliance is not the practical experience of people applying for contracts and engaging in the provision of services, we will quickly hear about that. It is the board's responsibility to challenge that where necessary.

Mr Nesbitt: I am still trying to get my head around the fact that Mr O'Dowd used a point of order to make it clear that points of order are out of order at this time.

I thank the Minister for his statement. I particularly welcome the appointment of Colin Jess to represent the social enterprise sector. It is also reassuring that the Minister of Finance's grasp of mathematics is sound enough to be

able to identify how many questions the Committee Chair squeezed into his remarks.

Minister, you talked about social value and included the private sector. Will you expand your definition of social value and advise whether you intend to legislate and include that in a social value Act?

Mr Murphy: I thank the Member for his question. He squeezed in a few questions there himself [*Laughter.*] I have to say that, in my experience, Mr O'Dowd's contribution was not the most surreal thing ever to have happened in the Chamber — not by a long shot [*Laughter.*] Social value includes a range of things, such as a greener approach to doing business or paying the minimum wage, and many private sector companies wish to engage in that. If that was a part of the scoring for the award of contracts, many in the private sector would embrace it and not see it as a burden. I am sure that the Member has had the same experience of speaking to the many people who want to deliver better outcomes for society as well as securing contracts and improving their business.

Clearly, any social value policy is much stronger when underpinned by legislation. The Department's procurement side has been very much involved in assisting other Departments to get supplies over the COVID period, and I am not certain whether there is enough time left in the mandate to legislate. We have asked officials to explore the possibility. If there is an opportunity to do social value legislation in the time left, I will be happy to do it.

Ms Dolan: Minister, thank you for your statement. Many school principals ask for more flexibility for minor procurements. Will the Procurement Board consider that?

Mr Murphy: Yes. We need to get that balance right. At Question Time last week, I said that many elected representatives can give examples of where things are procured for significantly higher prices than they can be got for locally. There is a balance to be struck between ensuring that there is transparency and accountability in buying arrangements — public money is being spent — and making sure that there is flexibility at a local level to get supplies for the best price that they can be got for locally, while contributing to the local economy. The Procurement Board will therefore undertake to strike the right balance.

Mr Dickson: Minister, I warmly welcome your statement and, indeed, your reference to the

all-party group on social enterprise, which has been lobbying for a lot of what you are proposing today for some eight years. Following on from Mr Nesbitt's question, you already have on-the-shelf legislation ready to run to deliver a social value Act for Northern Ireland. We will, in many ways, be playing catch-up with the other four nations of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, where social value legislation is well embedded. It is slightly disappointing to hear that that may not be achieved in this mandate. In your statement, Minister, you said:

"social value will be a mandatory component of procurement exercises".

How will that work in Northern Ireland?

Mr Murphy: First, if I can legislate in this mandate, I will — I give the Member that assurance — but I want to ensure that we have sufficient time to do that. He will know that, if we start a legislative process and it does not conclude, it falls off the shelf at the end of the mandate and we have to start all over again in a new mandate, with whomever might be in the post. Since I came into the Department, it has been my intention to do that, but other priorities, such as responding to the pandemic, took over.

In my view, if the policies and guidance notes that the Procurement Board send to the Executive are approved, they will have Executive approval as a policy. Each Department — the permanent secretary and staff — will then be obliged to follow through on that, as will arm's-length bodies and the agencies. As I say, because we now have people from various sectors on the Procurement Board, they can see whether that filters down to where it is supposed to achieve an outcome on the ground. We want to hear from people in the social enterprise sector and in all the other sectors to ensure that those policies are followed through on. If there is an opportunity to legislate — I would like to do it — I certainly will.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his statement. Minister, you will be aware that international contractors win some of the biggest contracts and then subcontract and subcontract until most of the money is sliced off for management rather than for the product. How can you legislate to prevent such occurrences?

Mr Murphy: You tend to find that, depending on the size of the contract, it can attract more international attention, and contracts can be

framed in such a way as to be broken up for the various sectors, which perhaps makes them more within the range of local employers and local companies. Of course, you have to do that in a way that is correct under the guidelines and rules, and we are still not sure what the hangover from the exit from Europe will mean for state aid and all those rules. Even within those guidelines and rules, there are ways of doing procurement that can support local companies as much as possible. As it stands, local companies get about four out of every five contracts, but, of course, it is the quality and size of those contracts that needs to be measured. Where that can be achieved, it is a desirable outcome. It has to be done within regulations, but we need to do procurement in a way that provides maximum support to the local economy.

11.30 am

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for his statement. On Mr Aiken's comment about an independent chairman, an independent chairwoman would be good too.

The Minister will be aware that we have an opportunity not only to build back better from COVID but to tackle our climate emergency through a just transition. What consideration will be given to a green, sustainable procurement by the board? Can it be mandatory? What role will there be for cooperative models in procurement, focusing on community wealth building and working with councils? Perhaps I can also ask what he means by the reference to "living wage" on page 5 of his statement.

Mr Murphy: Firstly, yes. The Executive have targets on green outcomes and carbon-emission reduction. I would like to see those reflected, as they should be, in our procurement policy, because the Executive cannot just argue for those things and then spend £3 billion and not try to use it to effect the outcome of their own policies. I think that that will be a key component in procurement. The Living Wage Foundation has outlined the definition of a living wage, and that is the definition that I work to.

Mr Allister: Can I bring the Minister back to the point that Ms Dolan raised about the lower end of the procurement market and her example of schools? Hitherto, if a school had a broken window, it would bring in a local handyman and have it fixed for very little. Today, the school reports it to Armagh or wherever, someone comes and looks at it, someone comes back and somebody comes out again, and the cost is phenomenal. Will the Minister consider bringing

to the table of the board a proposition that there should be an exemption threshold below which local service needs can be met by the local management in the way that, formerly, it was done?

Mr Murphy: It is interesting that people in procurement will not have heard the stories that all of us, as elected representatives, hear in conversations with school principals, who say, "I could get a local guy or woman to fix something, and it would cost a tenth of the price". There is a threshold, but I think that we need to examine it to see whether it is sufficient in its application.

As I said to Jemma Dolan, there is a balance to be found between transparency and accountability, with people not giving contracts in schools or any other public-sector procurement operation to their brothers-in-law or cousins, and value for money. Procurement is about value for money. One of its primary functions is to ensure that public spend gets value for money, so, where practices at a local level clearly do not give value for money, we have to look at that, but we also have to make sure that we have that transparency and accountability built in.

Mr Beggs: The Minister just mentioned value for money. Will he ensure that when the Procurement Board meets it recognises that big is not always beautiful and that that sometimes limits competition and results in significant subcontracting, where the control is lost? For example, painting a classroom can cost two or three times more than getting a local painter.

Mr Murphy: That speaks to the previous conversations that we have been having on all that. I think that it is about finding a balance between ensuring that you get transparency and accountability and value for money at a local level with small contracts. As I said, four out of five contracts are won locally, but that, obviously, depends on their value. That is why there is value in having people in from the various sectors. You then have people who are practitioners of how procurement works. It is one thing having a very good policy that we can all support, but it is another thing to see how the experience of that impacts on the ground and how it works in practice rather than in theory on the paper that it is developed on. I think that that will be the value of having those various sectors, and they in turn represent the voice of the industries and the sectors that they come from. Also, we have that function of hearing confidentially from people out in the world where people procure and enact these

contracts. That will all be valuable, but, on local spend, it is about getting the balance and the threshold right on that.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: No other Member is rising in their place or indicating to me, so that concludes questions on the statement. Before I move on to the next item, I will say to Members that, during questions to the Minister, I reviewed my copy of Standing Orders. Standing Order 19 relates to questions, and (2)(b) of that Standing Order states that questions should not contain "arguments, inferences or imputations". The use of the words "divvying up" has an imputation attached to it. I would never wish to curtail debate or free expression, but I remind Members of their obligations under the rules of the House. Members, please take your ease while we move to the next item of business.

Executive Committee Business

The Harbours (Grants and Loans Limit) Bill: Accelerated Passage

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): I beg to move

That the Harbours (Grants and Loans Limit) Bill [NIA Bill 12/17-22] proceed under the accelerated passage procedure.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on this debate. I call the Minister for Infrastructure to open the debate on the motion.

Ms Mallon: I welcome the opportunity to address the Assembly on the motion. This is a key time for our maritime sector as it aspires to thrive and strengthen. Unfortunately, the sector, like others, has faced financial challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Members will agree how important it is, at this time, that our key gateway seaports have sufficient capacity to facilitate future economic growth, adapt how they do business to respond to current challenges, and are connected to key destinations and markets. Accelerated passage is not to be sought routinely; nor is it something that I do lightly. My preference, when taking forward legislation, is to have a full Committee procedure, enabling clause-by-clause scrutiny and the resolution of any issues, there and then, to the satisfaction of the Committee.

I will now explain to the Assembly, as required under Standing Order 42(4), why I am seeking accelerated passage, the consequences of its not being granted, and how I will minimise the future use of that mechanism.

I believe that there are compelling grounds for the use of the accelerated passage procedure in the case of this proposed legislation, which is a short and concise Bill to increase the total amount of grants and loans that my Department can provide to ports. The existing total limit of £35 million was set in 1989, and, working with colleagues in the Department of Finance, a new grants and loans limit of £90 million has been agreed. That will enable my Department to react appropriately to the current and future challenges faced by the ports. The total amount of loans and grants made by my Department to the ports over the years counts against the total limit indefinitely. It does not decrease in line with depreciation nor with loan repayments, and

the total currently stands at £34.3 million. If all the potential future loans, identified by the ports to date, were to materialise over the next five years, it will require a further £27 million, making the total £61.3 million.

These figures do not take into account any additional grants or loans that may need to be provided to the ports because of the additional financial pressures being placed on them as a result of COVID-19 or to facilitate future developments in a post-Brexit world.

I turn now to the consequences of accelerated passage not being granted. As the North's ports continue to develop their port operations and to diversify their business, they will continue to make loan applications to my Department over the next few years. If accelerated passage is not granted, my proposed legislation will not be in place in time to be able to continue to provide financial assistance to the ports, particularly in the short term. That could have dire consequences for the ports and for the local economy. It would be a poor reflection on the functioning of the Executive and the Assembly if we did not move quickly to address a potential risk to our crucial gateways for trade. The North's main commercial ports have all agreed that there is a need for the increased loan and grant limit.

With regard to minimising the use of the accelerated passage procedure in the future, I have already mentioned my full commitment to clause-by-clause scrutiny at Committee Stage under normal circumstances, but we are not in normal times. I will continue to take any necessary steps to ensure that the accelerated passage procedure is not unnecessarily sought by my Department. In accordance with Standing Order 42(3) of the Northern Ireland Assembly, I appeared before the Committee for Infrastructure on 23 September to explain the need for accelerated passage for the Bill and to outline the consequences of its not being granted. I thank the Chair and members of the Committee for their recognition of the need to expedite the Bill and for their support in seeking Assembly approval for accelerated passage.

Members will have an opportunity to raise issues on the detail of the Bill during its Second Stage debate. In the interim, I seek the support of the House for use of the accelerated passage procedure and look forward to hearing Members' comments.

Miss McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure): The proposal for accelerated passage of the Bill does not sit well with the Committee for Infrastructure. Like most Members, the Committee believes

wholeheartedly that legislation should be afforded the full scrutiny of the Assembly processes, which includes Committee scrutiny. I welcome the Minister's acknowledgment of that today.

The Committee was notified at the start of September about the proposal for this Bill and discussed it during its strategic planning meeting on 9 September. The Committee asked the Minister to brief it on the Bill, and during that briefing on 23 September the Committee sought clarity on three aspects: what the Bill is expected to do; whether it does it; and why the Minister is seeking accelerated passage.

During the briefing, the Minister and her officials explained that Northern Ireland's ports are governed by the Harbours Act (Northern Ireland) 1970, and that this includes funding. Under the 1970 Act, ports are expected to fund their own capital investment, while the Department is able to make loans and grants to assist with major developments. However, this assistance from the Department is limited under the 1970 Act and shall not exceed £35 million. The Minister explained that, given future uncertainties, the need to build additional infrastructure and the added issue of the financial difficulties resulting from the reduction in freight and shipping volumes through ports as a result of the pandemic, there is a need to raise this existing total limit of £35 million. Therefore, the Committee accepts the what and the how behind the Bill.

However, the Committee has been less willing to accept the need for accelerated passage. In the course of the briefing it was established that the 1970 Act, which governs the funding, was last amended to raise the amount that the Department could provide to the ports by way of grants or loans in 1989, some 31 years ago. Therefore, this is legislation being rushed through by accelerated passage — an emergency measure — when there have been 31 years to plan for an increase in the funding limit. On questioning, even the Minister said:

"It seemed strange to me that we had not looked at the issue and that it had not come up before."

The Committee recognises that the increase is required in the circumstances to ensure the smoothest possible working of our ports in these difficult times. However, surely there must have been someone in the Department with the foresight to see this coming and raise this matter earlier. That would have avoided the need for accelerated passage and given this

House its place in properly scrutinising the legislation it signs into law.

11.45 am

The Committee reluctantly accepts that, at this moment, accelerated passage is required. The Committee for Infrastructure therefore agrees to there being accelerated passage of the Harbours Bill. However, it would like to be very clear that, in this case, accelerated passage has only become necessary because of the inaction of the Department; it is not because of events. The Committee for Infrastructure therefore supports the motion that the Bill proceed under the accelerated passage procedure.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the Minister's presentation of the legislation today, even though it is by accelerated passage. The Minister made it very clear that that is not, and never will be, her favoured route, but necessity has enforced this action. I think that the majority of parties in the House have held that departmental portfolio and have therefore had responsibility for the ports. This is fairly straightforward legislation that will enable the ports to meet the challenges of not only COVID but Brexit. I therefore support the Minister's legislation before the House.

Ms Anderson: I thank the Minister for being here and for introducing the legislation. As the Chair said, we, as a Committee, have scrutinised the legislation and the need for accelerated passage. This is not how any of us want to do business. Like other Ministers, the Minister has said that she is dissatisfied with taking forward legislation in that way. I do not think that there is one Minister who likes the accelerated passage process.

Given that we are on an island, it goes without saying that ports are a vital part of our economy. Foyle port in Derry, for example, is a key marine entry point into the north-west. Foyle port handles 2 million tons of cargo per year and supports 1,000 jobs. A data centre is also located there, and that has resulted in more inward investment coming in to boost the local economy. It is therefore a vital gateway for the north-west economy and has allowed capacity to grow as we move forward. COVID has brought additional challenges to a sector that was already dealing with the looming uncertainty of Brexit, and that is mentioned in the clause.

I understand that the loans and grants issued by the Department were, in the past, used for

developments such as the renewable energy project at Foyle port, as well as purchasing new tugboats and cranes. While we have been told that the loans and grants are not expected to be used for sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) checks, they may be used for other measures relating to Brexit preparation — again, that is mentioned in the clause — and to help ports to grow their business in the post-Brexit environment. As the Minister and the Committee Chair said, the limit has not been increased since 1989, and the increase to £90 million is based on inflation, therefore I believe that it is a reasonable move to assist the ports in moving forward, particularly given that the Department stated that, if all the future loans identified by the ports were to materialise over the next five years, it would require a further £22.5 million.

I would like to take a moment to comment on the current position that the ports find themselves in — this is in relation to what the clause mentions at the end — with regard to Brexit. The British Government and Minister Poots have been somewhat lethargic, to say the least, in their efforts to prepare our ports for 1 January. We have talked about that extensively in Committee. Given that DAERA officials have been working very hard around the clock, and we need to acknowledge that, to make sure that the readiness plan is feasible, it is a pity that their efforts have been somewhat hamstrung.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Are we discussing accelerated passage, or are we discussing the merits of the Bill? From listening to the current speaker, I think that she has jumped the gun and moved to Second Stage.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member is correct. The Member for Foyle will have the opportunity at Second Stage to raise all the issues to which she is presently talking, but Mr Allister is correct: this section of business is about the use of accelerated passage. I am loath to interrupt you, but, if you wish to wind, there will be an opportunity at Second Stage.

Ms Anderson: I will wind on that point. It is related; we know about the relationship between accelerated passage, COVID and Brexit. The ports are dealing with those things. We recognise that giving accelerated passage to the Bill will have implications for COVID and Brexit, what is happening and what we are facing. That is why the Committee, after taking that into consideration, agreed to accelerated passage somewhat reluctantly, as did the

Minister. I will make the rest of my comments at the next stage.

Mr Beggs: Accelerated passage should be sought only in exceptional circumstances. Exceptional circumstances are coming in about a month's time; we are coming to the end of the EU transition period, and, as of yet, there is no clarity about the implications of that. There may be complications with marshalling, inspecting and other emergency activity that needs to occur, so it is important that we create a little bit of headroom space by proceeding with accelerated passage. There is also COVID. Our ports are vital to trade and our businesses. They have been operating at a reduced schedule, and yet perishable goods move in both directions, so it is essential that there are still good ongoing connections. It is important to support our ports for that reason. However, both those issues could have been predicted at the start of the year. Why was permission to increase not sought much earlier, in which case the Bill could have proceeded via normal passage? Nevertheless, I recognise that we are where we are and that there is a need to create that headroom and an ability to assist if necessary. For that reason, the Ulster Unionist Party and I support accelerated passage.

Mr Muir: The Alliance Party regrets that the Bill is coming through accelerated passage. As an MLA, I have quickly become all too well aware of the shortcomings of the procedure. We appreciate the fact that the lack of devolved government for three years and Brexit preparations have meant that the need for this legislation has become urgent. However, we struggle to understand why the legislation was not brought forward some years ago.

In evidence to the Committee, departmental officials stated that the original plan was for the limit to be raised as part of a more holistic governance review. We assume that that review will still take place at some point; perhaps there will be an opportunity for the Committee to consider how the limit is managed on a long-term basis. I would like to hear more about the prospects of that review from the Minister in her closing remarks. That said, I am satisfied that the need for this legislation is urgent, as Mr Beggs outlined, and that the Bill seems relatively straightforward. Based on the briefings to date, it seems that no additional serious complications need to be considered, and, on that basis, we are prepared to support accelerated passage.

Mr Allister: Accelerated passage should be utterly alien to the House. Sadly, it is becoming

far too familiar to the House. It should be alien because it is the role of a legislative Assembly to sift, test and interrogate legislation. Accelerated passage strips out all that; it removes the critical Committee Stage, during which matters can be sifted, tested and interrogated, and it takes the shortcut of simply legislating on the back of Second Stage and further debates. That should be alien to a legislative Assembly. It should be particularly alien to a legislative Assembly in which you have an all-party Executive because, without an Opposition, there is no other opportunity to interrogate the issues.

Therefore, the drift, step by step, whereby the Assembly is always finding excuses to dispense with normal procedures when matters such as this are raised, is alarming. There is not much point in Members saying that they are uncomfortable with this and offering various platitudes such as, "We do not like doing it" or "It is not the way that we would do business but we are going to do it". It is either right or wrong. Further to this, the point has been made that we had 31 years to do it, but no one bothered. Since January, there has been an opportunity to do it, but it was not done.

Over two months ago, on 23 September, the Minister went to the Infrastructure Committee about this issue, and, over two months later, we are here. Two months, which could have been spent on scrutiny in the Committee had the Bill been brought to the House then, were wasted. Who was running down the clock to get to December and say, "Oh, poor us. We must have accelerated passage"?

We could have had the Bill much earlier in the year, and I protest, most vigorously, at the erosion of the powers of the House and at the easy option of accelerated passage being taken. It is not good enough. It should not be the easy passage that it is. I, for one, want to record my dissent from the slippage into repeated accelerated passage.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: No other Members have indicated that they wish to speak. I therefore call the Minister for Infrastructure, Ms Nicola Mallon to conclude and wind on the debate.

Ms Mallon: Again, I thank the Committee for its support on this matter. I recognise and share the concerns expressed by Members about the use of accelerated passage. That is why my speaking notes were very specific on the matter and why, when I appeared before the

Committee, I clearly said that this was not the way to do business.

Given that a number of Members asked why it took so long, it may be helpful to outline the timeline. The loan and grant threshold was last raised in 1989 — 31 years ago. I cannot speak for other Ministers, but I wrote to the Executive on 6 July to raise the issue of the Bill. On 5 November, the Executive agreed to its introduction.

The Department for Infrastructure writes to the ports twice yearly to ask them to identify their loan requirements for the next five-year period. No one could have predicted the impact of COVID or the financial and resilience challenges that it would present to our ports. There are clear indications that my Department will receive a new request for assistance before the end of the year. Those are the circumstances under which the Bill is being brought forward in this way to the House.

Does the Member wish to comment?

Mr Allister: Yes, please. So that we are clear on this, I will say that part of the cause of the total disrespect of the processes of the House is the indolence of the Executive in addressing this issue. It took from July to November to approve what is, effectively, a two-page Bill. Really? Is that the standard of misgovernment that we have reached in the House? Then, of course, there is the ready reliance on accelerated passage. It is a situation of the Government's own making.

Ms Mallon: All I can do is set out the factual timeline.

I thank all of the other Members for their comments. I thank Mrs Kelly for supporting the intention of the Bill. However, like other Members, she is concerned about the use of accelerated passage.

Ms Anderson raised a number of important points, and I will be happy to address those at Second Stage.

12.00 noon

Mr Beggs raised the issue of the strategic importance of ports for trade. I agree with that absolutely. That is why they need to be supported during this difficult time, particularly in the face of COVID. Mr Muir asked about the governance review. Yes, that review is planned, and I am happy to engage with the Committee on it.

I thank all who contributed to the debate, and I ask for the Assembly's support for the position that the motion be adopted.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Minister. Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Harbours (Grants and Loans Limit) Bill [NIA Bill 12/17-22] proceed under the accelerated passage procedure.

The Harbours (Grants and Loans Limit) Bill: Second Stage

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Harbours (Grants and Loans Limit) Bill [NIA Bill 12/17-22] be agreed.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before we begin, I have to place on the record for Hansard that cross-community consent was achieved, because I saw and heard Ayes from all sides of the House.

In accordance with convention, the Business Committee has not allocated a time limit to the debate.

Ms Mallon: I am sure that Members will agree that, as an island economy, it is critically important that our ports are able to meet existing and future challenges. The importance of the ports' role in the supply of goods into and out of Northern Ireland has never been more clearly illustrated than during the COVID-19 crisis.

All of Northern Ireland's ports are governed by my Department's harbours legislation for the provision of grants and loans. Although the trust ports at Belfast harbour, Coleraine harbour, Foyle port and Warrenpoint port, and the privately owned port of Larne, fund their own capital investment and are expected to be commercially self-supporting, my Department can provide assistance for developments of a major nature. That assistance can be by way of a loan or a grant.

On the overall limit to loans and grants, the Harbours Act states that the aggregate amount of grants and loans together shall not exceed £35 million. The original £6 million limit has been adjusted on four previous occasions, gradually rising to the current £35 million level. The last rise was made in 1989. The total grants and loans made stands at £34.3 million. The Harbours (Grants and Loans Limit) Bill is straightforward. It is a short Bill with a single purpose: to raise the existing total loan and grant limit from £35 million to £90 million. The new limit was identified, in liaison with colleagues in the Department of Finance, as an appropriate uplift in line with inflation. That will enable the Department to continue to provide loans and grants to our ports. The existing limit has been almost reached, and the ports face major challenges at this time, particularly as a result of the COVID-19 crisis and the need to grow business post-Brexit.

For the costs to be incurred by ports in implementing the Ireland protocol, it is important to note that DAERA will take forward any necessary EU works at the ports. The British Government have also committed to funding that work. I have to be clear that I do not anticipate the legislation being used to enable construction of sanitary and phytosanitary-related (SPS) infrastructure, nor is that a matter for DFI.

The region's main commercial ports have all agreed with the need for the increase to the loan and grant limit. The Executive also support the increase and agree that the legislation can be done by accelerated passage. The grants and loans made under the Bill increase a charge on the Consolidated Fund, so Minister Murphy has confirmed to me that he is content to recommend the Bill, as required under section 63 of the Northern Ireland Act. I commend the Bill to the Assembly.

Miss McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure): The Committee was notified of the proposal for the Harbours (Grants and Loans Limit) Bill at the start of September this year and discussed it during its strategic planning meeting on 9 September. The Committee asked the Minister to brief the Committee on the Bill, and, on 23 September, the Committee received that briefing.

During the briefing, the Minister and her officials explained to the Committee that Northern Ireland's ports are governed by the Harbours Act (Northern Ireland) 1970, which includes funding. Under that Act, the ports are expected to fund their own capital investment, while the

Department is able to make loans and grants to assist with major developments. That assistance from the Department is, however, limited under the Act, which states that it should "not exceed £35 million". Given future uncertainties, the need to build additional infrastructure and the added financial difficulties resulting from the reduction in freight and shipping volumes through the ports as a result of the pandemic, the Committee is aware of the need to raise the existing total limit of £35 million that the Department can provide by means of loans and grants to a more substantial £90 million, as set out in the proposed legislation that is before us.

The Committee for Infrastructure had already met, on 1 July this year, representatives of the seaports, who are eager to grow and strengthen their business after EU exit. However, the Committee notes that the impacts of COVID have removed the financial certainty that they would like in order to invest in and develop their business. This is an issue not just for them, as the ports have taken on a more strategically important role for our economy in the post-Brexit era. The Committee is aware that it is vital that our ports are ready for the challenges and opportunities facing them. The uncertainty of COVID has come at the worst possible time, a time when the ports were meant to be pushing forward with expansion and plans to build on the new opportunities that are opening up to them. Instead, they are now batten down the hatches and weathering the storm. The Committee appreciates the need for the Department to provide adequate support in order that, for the benefit of our economy, the port can develop the infrastructure that is required.

In its discussion with the Minister and her officials, the Committee sought assurances about the narrow scope of the Bill, that the sole purpose of the Bill is to raise the loan and grant limit and that there would be no other consequences. The Minister gave the Committee those assurances, noting that it is a very short and concise Bill. As Members will note, there are only three clauses: the commencement; the title; and a single line to increase the port funding limit. The Committee also asked for information about the consultation that had taken place with the Executive and the sector. The Minister advised the Committee that one issue was raised by the Executive, which was her proposal to include in the Bill the ability for the Department to increase the loan and grant limit at a future date through secondary legislation. She pointed out that, after objection from the Department of Finance about a lack of scrutiny, that was taken

out. She confirmed that there were no objections to the purpose of the Bill.

The Minister was content that she had consulted with the ports and that they were in support of this proposed legislation. The Minister was asked about some of the financial challenges facing the ports, and she advised that those include the likes of urgent quayside repairs, which would be aided by the grant mechanism that is proposed by the Bill. Clarity was also sought on whether checks and balances were in place, what the loan can be used for and the need for that to be addressed in the Bill. The Minister gave an assurance that the Bill was purely for grants and loans and to increase the limit from £35 million. Given that assurance, I understand that the Committee is satisfied. While my preference was to have a Committee Stage, I am content to support the Bill at Second Stage.

Mr Boylan: Ba mhaith liom labhairt i bhfabhar an Bhille seo. I will speak in favour of the Bill. I am content that we can speak at its Second Stage. Before I make my remarks, while it is in my head, I ask the Minister to indicate when the harbours and ports will be able to access the funding. I ask that that happen at the earliest stage because we are leading into Brexit and everything else, and I am sure that there is a piece of work to be done by the ports.

Our seaports are an essential part of the economy. Moving forward, they need to be able to grow and continue to play their vital role in trade, connectivity and employment. This year, our ports have faced considerable challenges. When they were trying to prepare for Brexit as best they could with the limited information that they had, the coronavirus pandemic introduced another unwanted burden to the sector.

The ports all fund their capital investment; however, the Department can make loans and grants to them under the Harbours Act. The original limit was set at £6 million, but that was changed on multiple occasions in the past and gradually rose to the current limit of £35 million in 1989. Since then, it has not increased. It is also worth noting that, as stated by the Minister, the total amount of any loans granted by the Department does not decrease in line with depreciation or loan repayments. The total amount of grants and loans made to the ports stands at £34.3 million: you do not need a calculator to tell you that that is very near the current limit.

Furthermore, the Department has informed us that if all the future loans that have been identified by the ports were to materialise over

the next five years, it would require a further £22.5 million. I think that the Minister might have said £27 million; perhaps she will clarify that point. That does not take account of any additional grants that may be provided to the ports in response to COVID-19. Although DAERA is leading on Brexit preparations at the ports, the Department has stated that the legislation could be used to make grants to the ports for other Brexit preparation measures.

Considering those factors, it has been proposed to raise the current limit of £35 million to £90 million. That figure is based on inflation. Applying the retail price index provided a new limit of around £88 million, which has been rounded up to £90 million. The new limit will help to ensure that the Department can assist the ports during the COVID-19 crisis and enable the consideration of any additional funding needed as a result of Brexit.

The Department stated that ports would be at a disadvantage if the proposed amendments were not made, as they would lose out on the opportunity to access additional funding. In the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department informed us that it is aware of at least one port facing financial challenges in maintaining and operating its services.

A new loan limit of £90 million has been proposed. Although the Bill is to go through accelerated passage — we had the previous debate — I think that Members will understand the necessity of using such a procedure. I support the Second Stage of the Bill.

Mrs D Kelly: On behalf of the SDLP, I support the Bill. I thank the Chair of the Committee for setting out clearly the Committee's consideration of the Bill and the rationale behind our decisions to support it and its accelerated passage.

On Mr Allister's earlier comments, I declare an interest as a member of the Business Committee. It has requested the Executive's legislative timetable for several weeks, and I want to assure him, although I see that he has left the Chamber, that there has been no slackness on our behalf.

I look forward to the development of the ports. Hopefully, the additional resource will give some surety to them in what, as others have said, are very uncertain times.

Mr Beggs: Essentially, this is a very straightforward Bill. There is one significant clause, which gives the power to increase the amount of loans or grants that can be passed to

ports that are included in the Harbours Act (Northern Ireland) 1970. The amount of the increase is £65 million, from £35 million to £90 million, which, as the Minister indicated, is in line with inflation and is not an exorbitant amount.

The Minister also indicated that she is aware that there are pressures on the ports. I am also aware of considerable pressures on our ports as a result of COVID-19. Manufacturing has reduced during the pandemic. Hopefully, it will pick up considerably; nevertheless, it will not be at the same level as before.

Another aspect of fundraising for our ports, and an important business for them, is the tourist trade. The "holiday at home" mantra that tourists in Northern Ireland have largely been practising — and, indeed, tourists in the rest of the United Kingdom — has obviously reduced the amount of traffic and income to airports. We want that to pick up again, and we want our ports to be able to service that industry again whenever we get through the current pandemic. Therefore, it is important that our ports are still able to operate and still have the commitment there of ships and infrastructure to service that.

12.15 pm

It is important that we maintain support for our ports so that tourists are able to come here. It is also so that we are able to ship our products, suppliers can quickly bring goods into Northern Ireland from Great Britain, and the perishable goods that we export can quickly get to market. Therefore, it is important that we have the ability to once more ramp up the services and to provide frequency, such as is provided from the port of Larne in my constituency, which is where we have the shortest, fastest journey to Cairnryan. I had to get that plug in. However, that is equally so for the ports of Belfast and Warrenpoint with their ro-ro facilities. It is important, in particular, for speed in the modern facilities that ro-ro traffic, which has been particularly affected by the pandemic, has the ability to ramp up again. On that basis, as I have said, I am content to support this increase, which is in line with inflation.

It is regrettable that this is also occurring at a time when a regulatory border is being created down the Irish Sea, as that will be a major impediment to our businesses and our region. It is something that I, and my party, warned others about the risks of doing. It is regrettable that, one month off, there is still not full clarity of the full implications. I have heard the Minister say that she is not planning to use this fund to support the ports with regard to the end of that

transition arrangement. It would be helpful if the Minister could advise whether there would be the flexibility here for her to assist our ports in the case that some sort of emergency arose and others did not step in.

Secondly, with regard to this additional money, the Bill does not speak of how that will be determined or how it will be carved up going forward. It would be helpful if the Minister could say a little about that. In particular, there is concern that Belfast City Airport and City of Derry Airport received airport funds, but our principal airport, which is also trading at a loss, has not received support from that —.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: I certainly will.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member acknowledge the fact that the Finance Minister gave a rates holiday of over £1 million to the airport in question, and that, from my understanding, it has been in discussions with the Finance and Economy Ministers, who have responsibility with regard to the funding for the airports? At least acknowledge where the responsibility lies.

Mr Beggs: The Member has rightly highlighted that there has been support for all three airports through other mechanisms, but I am conscious that only two of the three received support from Infrastructure. There needs to be clarity around how this is used going forward. I hope that they will all be appropriately supported.

The other aspect and question that I have about the Bill which I find quite strange — perhaps it is because it is having to be taken forward by the accelerated passage route; it would be helpful if the Minister could explain — is that we are essentially increasing the amount of funding in line with inflation. That is a very minor change to our legislation. It is something that, for instance, with regard to benefits, happens each year with a statutory rule. Why is this change not occurring with a statutory rule? The next time we adjust it, are we also going to require primary legislation, as happened here, to repeal this legislation — assuming it goes through — and to introduce the new figures as we go forward? Why is it not being adjusted using a statutory rule? As others have indicated, had there been proper scrutiny and time allowed for Committee discussion, that could have been pointed out, and an amendment could have been tabled to enable such a change to be made much more easily and efficiently. It would be helpful if the Minister

would explain why primary legislation was required.

That having been said, it is important that the Bill passes Second Stage. The Ulster Unionist Party will support it.

Mr Muir: I rise on behalf of the Alliance Party to support the Bill's passing Second Stage. Last week, I was here until 2.30 am debating the Consideration Stage of a Bill. Hopefully, we will not be here until that time again.

My party welcomes the legislation. The £35 million loan and grant limit in the Harbours Act (Northern Ireland) 1970 has not been amended since 1989. That was a long time ago. The current balance is only 2% short of the total limit. It is, therefore, right that the limit is updated to £90 million.

Ports are a vital part of Northern Ireland's infrastructure. They are important contributors to local growth. Warrenpoint harbour alone adds £9.6 million to the local economy. Ports bring in tourists and cruise ships — hopefully, they will be back some day soon — and allow people to make their journeys across the water to visit friends and family or to go to university. Perhaps, most importantly, they are the gateway for the vast majority of Northern Ireland's imports and exports. They allow our fantastic local businesses to bring in parts and to export their products across the world. They also keep the food on the shelves, which we take for granted.

At Committee, the Minister stated that the ports fund their own capital investment and are commercially self-supporting, but loans and grants can be provided by the Department for developments of a major nature. The distinction between "capital investment" and "developments of a major nature" seems vague. We would have liked to have teased that out in more detail at Committee Stage. I would like to better understand whether the ports are expected to exhaust their commercial borrowing options first before turning to public funding. Perhaps, the Minister can touch upon that in her remarks.

I am, however, satisfied that there is further clarity in the legislation with regard to public funds. There should be no risk of increasing the loan limit as long as the Department's credit processes remain sufficiently robust. Ports need to be able to invest so that they can continue to provide the service that their customers expect and to meet the challenges of today.

I wish to talk about the three main challenges. The first is carbonisation. It was the major strategic goal that was raised by the port authorities when they came to the Committee in July. Additional investment will help ports to turn away from coal and oil products to become a major player in the development of offshore renewable energy.

The second challenge is Brexit. There is not long left until the end of the transition period. While the impact of disruption at the ports is likely to be more keenly felt by consumers and haulage firms, port authorities still face major challenges in preparing for those new arrangements. In the short term, ports are working with DAERA and HMRC to build the new infrastructure that is necessary as a result of the hard Brexit that is being pursued by the current UK Government.

Finally, there is the challenge of COVID-19. Although the ports have experienced a significant drop in trade, particularly in the number of foot passengers travelling through Belfast and Larne, since the onset of the necessary travel restrictions as a result of the pandemic, the medium- to long-term impact of COVID-19 on their businesses remains unknown. However, it is clear that ports face major challenges in navigating the choppy waters ahead.

It is, therefore, critical that we are able to invest in ports' facilities to support long-term sustainability and growth. Public grants and loans can be used only for capital projects and not for resource expenditure to aid cash flow. The ports have estimated that they will require some £22.5 million in loans and grants over the next number of years, notwithstanding the additional financial pressures as a result of COVID. My party supports the Department in ensuring that the capacity exists to provide that funding. The Committee for Infrastructure will have a role in monitoring how that figure of £22.5 million compares with the reality of what is required in the environment in which we currently find ourselves.

I support the Bill because an increase in the loan limit is long overdue and ports need to be able to invest in the future for the sake of us all. I look forward to hearing other Members' contributions and the Minister's response.

I thank and pay tribute to all those who have continued to work in our ports throughout the pandemic. Their contribution has often gone unacknowledged in the crisis, but it is absolutely vital to the well-being of our society

during the most challenging of times. We owe them a great debt of gratitude.

Ms Ennis: I welcome the opportunity to speak to the Second Stage of the Harbours (Grants and Loans Limit) Bill. Like other Members, I acknowledge that our ports play a huge role in our island economy. The importance of keeping our supply chain secure and open has been acutely highlighted during the pandemic. However, like other sectors, ports have faced many difficulties during this period. It has, for example, meant that a lot of the roll-on roll-off — ro-ro — facilities encountered difficulties at the start of the pandemic, which impacted port income. Freight volume took a hit, as, of course, did passenger levels on ferry operations.

It is important that our ports continue to grow and play their essential role in our economy. Warrenpoint port, no doubt, plays a big role in that regard. In 2019, Warrenpoint port handled 3.5 million tons of cargo, and Ulster University estimated that, during 2019, the port put some £9.6 million back into the immediate local economy of Warrenpoint, Newry and beyond.

The total number of loans and grants issued by the Department currently stands at £34.3 million. As other Members said, that is very close to the max of £35 million. Also, between £22 million and £27 million in future loans have already been identified by the ports. That is without consideration of any other additional investment that may be needed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Those loans and grants are used to enable ports to commit to measures for future economic growth. In Warrenpoint harbour, for example, I understand that those grants were previously used to help to replace old infrastructure and to construct a deepwater quay.

While the Department and the Minister do not believe that the grants will be used for SPS checks, as that work is led by DAERA, they state that such grants and loans could be used for other measures related to Brexit preparations. Given the paramount importance of our ports, it is madness that checking facilities will not be ready in time for 31 December.

Although contingency measures have been put in place, the British Government and Minister Poots knew well ahead of time that they needed to upgrade the ports. Not only did they delay that needlessly but Minister Poots actively stepped in to obstruct preparations at a critical

time and relented only when he was told to do so by the British EFRA Minister.

Meanwhile, ports have worked tirelessly in their preparation efforts for Brexit. It is unacceptable that they find themselves in the current position with just weeks to go until the end of the transition period.

Sinn Féin wants our economy to grow, which means allowing our ports to respond successfully to all the emerging challenges that stand before them. The increase in the limit to £90 million will go some way to assist in that. I support the motion.

Ms Anderson: The last time that I stood to speak, I think that I strayed into Second Stage, but, sure, it would not be like me. I will take this opportunity again to say how wonderful Foyle port is in Derry, as people would expect me to say. It is a fantastic port that employs over 1,000 people.

Ports are vital to our economy. The particular clause in the Bill is quite striking, and many Members referred to the impact that COVID has had on ports and, of course, Brexit.

As my colleague has just stated, the British Government and Minister Poots have been somewhat lethargic, to say the least, in their efforts to try to prepare the ports for what is coming down the road at us on 1 January. Perhaps we will know this week or perhaps we will not. Who can tell? We are waiting on the outcome of the negotiations. However, the resources to build the necessary infrastructure are vital to ensure that ports are in a competitive position in the medium to long term.

When we reflect on EU exit and the impact that it will have on the economy and on ports, I would like to recall, for instance, Project Kelvin in Derry, which is an EU multimillion-pound/euro cable that was built to provide the island of Ireland with the first undersea network cable for the fastest transatlantic route directly to Ireland.

How does that relate to this clause? When we are talking about Brexit, that was one of the many things that we secured from the EU on infrastructure projects. It enabled the establishment of a data centre at the Foyle port in Derry, the Atlantic Hub, which is attracting interest from EU countries. It is clear that the funding cap increase in the clause — the Minister talked about it, and it is vital for the ports — needs to be coupled with a renewed call for the British Government and Minister Poots to clarify urgently what buildings and IT

systems will be in place. A clear plan and leadership are the best way of ensuring that the money is spent in the best way possible.

We urge both sides of the Joint Committees, as we head towards the end of the transition, having been kicked out of the EU against the democratically expressed wishes of the majority of the people in the North, who voted to remain —

12.30 pm

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Ms Anderson: Yes.

Mrs D Kelly: I want to correct the record. The Member said that we were being "kicked out" of the EU: "dragged out" would be more correct.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. For the past four years, politics has been dominated by the argument about whether leaving the EU is a good thing. There will be occasions to discuss that, but this is not one of them. I ask Members to return to the content of the Bill.

Ms Anderson: I will stick to the content of the Bill, particularly what it says as a result of the COVID-19 crisis and Brexit. I cannot answer the last contribution because of your ruling, but I am sure that the Member knows where I stand, which is that people did not vote for it.

In the context of EU exit, as referred to in the Bill, we urge the Joint Committee to work quickly on any aspects of checks that are within the remit of the spirit of compromise. It is vital that our ports can deal with the challenges that lie ahead. Raising the cap on loans and grants, as referred to in clause 1, is to be welcomed.

I give my support — somewhat reluctantly, because we do not like accelerated passage — to the Bill.

Mr Harvey: As already stated, the Bill will increase the existing limit placed on the Department with regard to the financial assistance that can be given to local harbours. The change in the limit from £35 million to £90 million is welcome, and I am pleased to see the Minister bringing the Bill to the Assembly. I am hopeful that the Bill will enable the Department to be much more flexible in responding to the needs of our ports, particularly as we reach the end of the transition period and emerge from COVID-19.

Our harbours act as one of our main gateways to the world. They provide the economic and social links that we rely on both within the United Kingdom and to the furthest parts of the globe. We must ensure that they receive the necessary government support to operate and compete on the world stage. The operational capacity and soundness of our main shipping ports have a direct economic impact on the ability of local companies to export their goods and on our access to key markets and destinations. Should our ports not be fit for purpose, the knock-on effect on other sectors of the economy would be significant.

The Department consulted all our main harbours, including Belfast, Larne, Foyle and Warrenpoint. Such targeted consultation is vital to ensuring that the sector is fully involved in all these decisions. At present, communication with our ports and haulage industry is vital, and I urge the Minister to keep those lines of communication open over the next few months in particular and to react, where needed, to support our harbours and our ports.

I note that the limit has not been updated since 1989. A lot has changed for our commercial ports and harbours since 1989. In the light of that, I call on the Minister to take time to consider any other areas in which her Department has a role, to ensure that all other mechanisms in her portfolio are up to date and provide fit-for-purpose state support to meet 2020 needs.

While the Bill is long overdue, I have some concerns about accelerated passage, given the lack of time for wider consultation, which, I note, has not been feasible on this occasion. I appreciate, however, given the limited scope of the Bill, that all the ports that stand to be impacted on have been involved in the consultation process. I am therefore happy to support the Bill.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: No other Members have indicated to me that they wish to speak. I call the Minister for Infrastructure, Ms Nichola Mallon, to conclude and wind up the debate on the motion.

Ms Mallon: I thank all the Members who have commented on the Bill at Second Stage. Some general issues have been raised, as well as several specific points, and I will try to deal with them. If I miss anything significant, I will get back to Members in writing once we have examined the Official Report. I reiterate my appreciation to the Chair of the Committee and its members for their support for increasing the threshold. I acknowledge the concerns around

the utilisation of accelerated passage, which I share.

The Chair of the Committee set out clearly the uncertainty of COVID, the challenges that it presents to our ports and the need for adequate support. She also set out the engagement that my Department has undertaken with the ports, the Finance Minister and other Executive colleagues. She set out the rationale for the Committee's support for the Bill and reiterated the its fervent support for our ports and the critical role that they play.

The Chair of the Committee also gave examples of how previous loans and grants had been used by the ports, and that is an important point. Loans and grants have been used for the Evermore renewable energy project at Foyle port; the expansion of the ro-ro facilities and the construction of a deepwater quay at Warrenpoint harbour; the purchase of new tugboats and cranes at Foyle port; and the replacement of old infrastructure and the construction of new bulk storage silos at Warrenpoint harbour. It is important that we take cognisance of the fact that that is how the grants and loans have been used and that we clearly understand that the next set of planned loans and grants will be expected to be used, as Members have said, to enhance the resilience of our ports and ensure that they have the financial capacity for future economic growth, including diversifying their business, land acquisition and building cruise ship infrastructure. Mr Muir and Mr Beggs talked about the importance of tourism. It is also anticipated that the money will be used for purchasing additional tugboats and replacement cranes and for quayside repairs.

Cathal Boylan sought clarity on a number of issues, and I am happy to provide it. He asked when the ports would be able to access the finance. The intention is that the operational date for the legislative amendment will be in January. He highlighted the fact that the current threshold has almost been reached and that real and pressing financial requirements face our ports: I agree, and that is why we tabled the legislation. He asked for confirmation of the value of future loans that have been identified by the ports over the next five years. I can confirm that the figure that I have been presented with is £27 million, as opposed to £22 million. Were those loans to materialise, that would bring the total up to £61.3 million.

Mrs Kelly spoke in support of the Bill's Second Stage and highlighted the strategic importance of our ports and the role that they play.

Mr Beggs talked about the increase being in line with inflation. He emphasised the importance of tourism and of ensuring that our ports are equipped to facilitate and service the industry. I share his concerns about the lack of clarity on implementation of the protocol. I have close engagement with our ports, and it is hugely difficult and challenging for them to prepare when it is not clear at all how they are meant to do so or what is required of them. Mr Beggs talked about Brexit and SPS checks. He will understand that that is a matter for DAERA. There is a clear commitment from the British Government that they will fund the work that is required for the implementation of the protocol. That is a commitment that, I think, all of us in the House support and want to see materialised and realised.

Mr Beggs also spoke about the importance not only of ports but of airports. He mentioned the International Airport. It is important to clarify — I think that it was Mrs Kelly who stated this — that rate relief has been provided by the Finance Minister to all three airports. That equated to £1.7 million in support for Belfast International Airport. The Economy Minister has secured £2 million for tourism. My understanding is that she is engaging with Belfast International Airport on two of its airlines. The Finance Minister is also preparing a paper to bring forward to the Executive on the provision of safety and security grants to all three airports. That will be funded from the remaining money that is sitting in the centre for our airports. I reassure Mr Beggs and all Members that, given that the statutory responsibility for airports is shared across the Minister for the Economy, the Minister of Finance and me, I am committed to working with my ministerial colleagues to ensure that we support our airports during this challenging time.

Mr Beggs also asked why we were not addressing the increase of the threshold at a later stage through secondary legislation. I think that it was the Chair who pointed out that that was one of the issues that I originally raised but the Finance Minister had had concerns about it. Therefore, in recognising the pressing nature of the Bill in ensuring that we can get financial support to our ports, I proceeded without that principle and objective. It is something that I hope to return to with my ministerial colleagues.

Mr Muir reiterated his support for increasing the threshold. He raised the issue of commercial borrowing. Our ports can borrow commercially, but very specific circumstances are set by Treasury, so it is important that they are able to access grants and loans from government. Mr

Muir paid tribute to the ports and all those who work in them and keep them going. I agree that we owe them a debt of gratitude.

Ms Ennis talked about the importance of our ports in keeping our supply chains open. We are very much reminded of that during COVID and of the fact that those who work in our ports, ships and haulage companies are critical key workers. She referenced Warrenpoint harbour in particular and the importance of that port to the local economy and the community that she represents. Very recently, I met again representatives of Warrenpoint harbour to understand better the challenges that they face and to reiterate my Department's support and commitment to continue to work with them.

Ms Ennis and Ms Anderson again raised concerns about the lack of clarity about Brexit and what that will mean for local businesses and communities and our ports in particular. They highlighted their concerns about the lack of clarity on SPS checks, the time that is left to prepare and all the challenges that come with that. Ms Anderson also spoke about Foyle port, which is a significant employer in her area. She referenced the many benefits to the north-west and to Northern Ireland of membership of the European Union.

Mr Harvey spoke about ports being the gateways to the world and to key markets and destinations. I agree with that. Importantly, he emphasised the need for ongoing communication with our ports. I reassure him that I will continue to engage and work closely with our ports to support them through this difficult time.

I hope that Members across the House support the Second Stage of the Bill, and I look forward to continued engagement with them as the Bill progresses through its stages.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Harbours (Grants and Loans Limit) Bill [NIA Bill 12/17-22] be agreed.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes the Second Stage of the Harbours (Grants and Loans Limit) Bill.

Given that it is 12.44 pm and that there is a very important debate to take place on COVID, I will, by leave of the House, suspend now, because the Business Committee is meeting at 1.00 pm.

Do not forget to clean your surfaces before you leave the Chamber.

The sitting was suspended at 12.44 pm.

2.00 pm

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

Oral Answers to Questions

Infrastructure

Driving Test Backlog

Mr Frew: Mr Speaker, I have just rushed from Committee, and I thank you for your latitude.

1. **Mr Frew** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on her plans to reduce the backlog of driving test appointments. (AQO 1229/17-22)

3. **Mr T Buchanan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the steps she has taken to address the backlog of applications for practical driving tests. (AQO 1231/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): Mr Speaker, with your permission, I propose to answer questions 1 and 3 together.

Driving instructors were included in the Executive's regulations on businesses that closed from 16 October until 20 November to help stop the spread of COVID-19. Following that Executive decision, driving tests also ceased over this period of increased restrictions based on public health and scientific advice. Driving tests resumed on 21 November but ceased again for two weeks from 27 November to 10 December inclusive, due to the circuit-breaker restrictions announced by the Executive. Motorcycle lessons and tests are not affected by those restrictions.

The Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) has opened up its booking system exclusively for customers whose tests were cancelled between 17 October and 20 November. Testing slots have been released for February, and additional booking slots have been made available in December and January, as the DVA increases capacity by recruiting additional examiners. The DVA is working on proposals to reopen the booking service next for customers impacted by the two-week circuit-breaker restrictions and, in due course, will issue further communications to customers through nirect and social media channels.

While testing resumes, the DVA will continue to offer driving tests on a Saturday and, following

consultation with key stakeholders, plans to offer driving tests for heavy goods vehicles on Sundays, where it is suitable to do so without compromising the integrity of the test. The DVA will also use overtime to rota off-shift dual-role driving examiners to provide additional capacity and to provide cover for scheduled driving tests where, due to a variety of unforeseen reasons such as sick absence or the requirement to self-isolate, driving examiners are unable to attend work.

I understand that this is a challenging time for new drivers and for the DVA, but I assure Members that officials are working hard to minimise the disruption caused by the impact of COVID-19.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for her answer. She is no doubt aware of the massive impact that this has had directly and indirectly because of the lockdown. It has massive implications throughout wider society for other reasons. The problem with driving test appointments affects the mobility issue, job applications, loneliness and mental health. Has an impact assessment been completed in the Department on the impacts of not testing during lockdowns?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question and understand the huge impact that this has on the multiple aspects that he has highlighted. Given that it is a public-facing service, the DVA and the driving test element of that have been severely impacted, as all public-facing services have been. We are mindful of that and constantly review the situation and do what we can to maximise capacity.

I assure the Member that we have 37 driving examiners and 40 dual-role examiners, who conduct both vehicle and driving tests. To increase the driving test capacity, we are in the process of recruiting an additional 27 temporary and permanent vehicle examiners. So far, 10 temporary examiners have started with the DVA; six have completed their training and been appointed to test centres; and four are currently undertaking training and are due to be in place by early January. We are also working at pace to recruit a further five temporary vehicle examiners. In addition to that, the recruitment of 12 permanent vehicle examiners and a further recruitment process for permanent driving examiners will be launched in the new year.

We are very mindful of the impact, and I assure the Member that we are doing what we can, in line with risk assessments, to maximise our capacity. We have also extended the validity of test pass certificates for learner drivers. We are

committed to doing what we can to minimise disruption and restore our services as quickly and safely as possible.

Mr T Buchanan: I thank the Minister for her response on the issue. We are open for business again on Friday 11 December.

Students who have booked to do their driving test will be coming in that day. They do not want to cancel the test again, as it will have been cancelled on a few occasions, and they may not have had a driving lesson for two, three or four weeks prior to the test. Will you engage with your Executive colleagues to allow those students a little flexibility so that they can have a final driving lesson on Thursday 10 December, the last day of lockdown, in preparation for their driving test without cancelling it for a third or fourth time?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He is correct: we will resume driving tests on 11 December. While driving instruction was suspended during the recent period of increased restrictions, it was still possible for learner drivers to practice their driving under supervision from someone in their household or support bubble. Candidates who are concerned that they will not be ready for their driving test when it is scheduled to take place should contact the DVA. We are open to offering refunds and rebooking tests, but I hope that, during the period of restrictions, our learner drivers were still able to practice safely on the road in line with the regulations.

Mr Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a freagraí. I thank the Minister for her answers. Many people are waiting for driving tests, Minister, and a lot of them depend on their car for essential travel. How many tests per week do the DVA anticipate doing when services resume? How long will it take for the backlog to be cleared?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. This is not a normal year, so assessing the current demand for driving tests is difficult. In order to book a practical driving test, a learner driver must first pass their theory test. As of 1 November, over 21,000 people held a valid theory test pass certificate, and, therefore, that is the maximum number of people that could apply for a driving test at that time. However, some of those learners will have already secured a slot and will have their test between now and the end of February.

I understand that learner drivers are hugely frustrated and really want to take their test, but

it is a close-contact service, so we have to undertake risk assessments and adapt our services accordingly. That is why, in response to a previous question, I wanted to emphasise that we have extended the theory test pass certificate period because we hope that that will go some way to mitigating the disruption caused to learner drivers. Of course, we are not in normal circumstances, and we will continue to do all that we can to increase capacity so that all the learner drivers who want a test can book it as quickly as possible.

Ms Hunter: Minister, I understand that the Executive's decision to impose the restrictions has affected the DVA service, and I welcome how quickly the Minister and her Department have responded. With regard to communicating with the public on COVID-19 and driving tests — you have touched on this already — will social media and nidirect be updated with guidance, as that is the usual route through which most people receive timely access to information?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. As we respond to and recover from COVID, it is really important that we communicate consistently, clearly and constantly with the public not just about the restrictions but about how services are affected as a consequence. As I said, DVA is dealing with a significant workload, and officials are working hard to keep drivers safely on the road and to adapt and support new learner drivers at this challenging time. I assure the Member that the DVA will continue to communicate the opening of general bookings to the Northern Ireland Approved Instructor Council and will write to all driving instructors to advise them when the booking service will be available. As the Member has rightly pointed out, social media is an important tool in communicating with the public, and we will continue to provide updated information on nidirect and ensure that any changes are communicated through all social media channels.

Ms Bradshaw: There was a system in place for a few months that gave priority to the essential workers whom Mr Sheehan mentioned. I have a constituent whose theory test was delayed and then delayed again. She has a low-wage job and has had to use her own money for taxis to get to a COVID test. There is discrimination against essential workers, and the whole system needs to be reviewed.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. She makes an important point. Following the reopening of the online booking

service, from 5 October, we moved to a full opening of the system because we were mindful that some people had their tests cancelled way back, and we have tried to manage that in as fair a way as possible. There was a process prior to that for critical workers based on a priority waiting system, and that looked at a combination of the applicant's role and whether a driving licence was needed for their job or for commuting to work. We are keeping that situation under review, but the approach that we have taken since is to open up the system to all applicants. If the Member has significant concerns, I am happy for her to write to me directly about them.

Mr Beggs: I put on record my thanks to the Minister and the DVA for facilitating driving tests for a number of key workers to enable them to carry out their duties. I am aware of ongoing problems with one constituent who applied in July and was given a date that was subsequently cancelled because of COVID. That person is still waiting.

The Minister mentioned that recruitment is still going on. It is disappointing that it has taken so long to recruit. Does she agree that the time taken for the recruitment process is excessive and that, given these exceptional circumstances, the process needs to be speeded up so that key workers, young people and members of the public who need a driving test can be facilitated by trained instructors in a timely manner?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question and for his kind words about the hard work of the officials. As I said, we are recruiting 27 permanent and temporary examiners. We are working off a merit list for a number of those, but we also have to make sure that all those who are recruited are fully trained. These driving examiners are taking pupils out, and we need to make absolutely sure that they are trained because this is a road safety issue. We are, of course, trying to do things as efficiently and effectively as we can, but it is always about balancing that with my statutory responsibility for ensuring road safety.

Mr Speaker: Questions 7 and 11 have been withdrawn.

A7: Upgrade Approval

2. **Mr Harvey** asked the Minister for Infrastructure when she plans to approve the upgrade of the A7 from Doran's Rock to Saintfield. (AQO 1230/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. The A7 Doran's Rock to Rowallane scheme is at an advanced stage of development, and the design work and an environmental assessment for the scheme are substantially complete. The next stage of development work will include taking the proposal through the statutory procedures, which will include a vesting order to secure the land required for the school from adjacent landowners. The A7 from Downpatrick to Belfast forms part of the strategic road network and is classed as a link corridor.

My Department is developing proposals for a new regional strategic transport network transport plan that will set out the priorities for future development of the main road and rail networks across Northern Ireland. I will consider proposals for improvements to the A7 as part of that process. This plan is still in development, but, once I have identified my preferred options and priorities, a draft document setting those out will be issued for public consultation, giving you an opportunity to support or challenge the proposals.

Mr Harvey: As you are aware, Minister, the short stretch of the A7 between Doran's Rock and Saintfield is a main route linking Downpatrick to Belfast. This is the final link in that road that needs to be upgraded. Given that this part of the district has seen little investment in infrastructure lately and given that no work has been carried out on the scheme for some 10 years now, I was seeking assurance from the Minister that she will look into this to see that it is completed soon. I got that assurance.

I will ask my supplementary question. Minister, while we are talking about roads and transport issues, have you given consideration to biennial MOT testing for motor vehicles when they reach four years of age as opposed to it being done annually as it is at present?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his questions. I think that I have addressed the first part of your question in saying that I will consider that as part of the wider strategic road network, and I am happy to hear your views on it at that stage.

I was keen to look at biennial testing, but events have somewhat overtaken us in terms of COVID and staffing resource. I am keen to move to a call for evidence on that issue at the earliest opportunity. It is an important area that we must examine thoroughly when deciding on next steps.

Ms Kimmins: The Minister will not be surprised to hear this, but another road that is in desperate need of upgrading is the A1, and, unfortunately, in the last number of weeks, we have seen yet another fatality there. I am sure that other Members saw the segment on the news last week about those who have been campaigning long and hard for improved safety on that road. Can the Minister state when, if next month's decision on the inspector's report is positive, construction is likely to begin?

2.15 pm

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. I am very aware of how important the A1 improvements are to the many people who have expressed their support for the scheme, especially those who have lost loved ones. I saw that segment on the news. My thoughts are with the family who lost their loved one in the collision on the A1 earlier this month.

As the Member will know, the inspector issued his report to the Department on 19 October. Officials will require some time to fully consider the inspector's proposals and recommendations. When I have been apprised of the findings, I will give them careful consideration before deciding on the next steps for this scheme. I assure the Member that I very much recognise the importance of these improvements. I hope to be in a position to publish the Department's response to the inspector's report towards the end of January 2021. I am committed to moving it forward at pace, if, as the Member indicated, upon the completion of all of those statutory processes, the decision is positive.

Mr McGrath: I welcome the assurances from the Minister about the A7, not least because it will enable people from Belfast to enjoy the delights of Downpatrick much more easily.

Another road that is due an upgrade is the ring road bypass around Ballynahinch. Can we get an update on that bypass and where we are with the project?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. In June, I announced my commitment to fund the continued development of a number of strategic road improvement schemes, including the Ballynahinch bypass, as part of my plan to aid economic recovery and community transformation while addressing regional imbalance. The Ballynahinch bypass scheme is now at an advanced stage of development, and preparatory work on contract documentation has been completed. I have

asked officials to complete the work necessary to allow me to make the direction order, and this includes a review of the environmental reports, which is nearing completion. Subject to the outcome of the review, I hope to be in a position to make the direction order for the scheme in the new year. I reaffirm my commitment to moving ahead with the Ballynahinch bypass while also promoting the opportunities for active travel in the town. I will be and am considering the next steps.

River Foyle: Flooding

4. **Ms Mullan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what measures her Department is taking to address flooding issues along the River Foyle. (AQO 1232/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. A feasibility study for Derry completed earlier this year by my Department recommended significant flood alleviation works to both banks of the River Foyle in the city centre to provide protection from coastal and river flooding. The associated business case has recently been approved, and it is anticipated that the Derry flood alleviation scheme, which is estimated to cost £17.3 million, will progress to the detailed design stage within the next few months. In conjunction with this work, and as part of the Living with Water Programme (LWWP), I have also recently allocated £130,000 from this year's budget to start the development of a Living with Water feasibility study in Derry.

Ms Mullan: I thank the Minister for her response and that update. That is very welcome, Minister. I ask that areas such as Foyle Road be included. I have written to you on this, and you responded yesterday. I will arrange a meeting locally with your office. Can you give assurances that your Department will effectively deal with the problem following our engagement, given that your Department has had to respond nine times in the past two years to flooding in the Foyle Road area?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. She has corresponded on the matter with me, and I have said that my officials are to meet with her on-site so that we can see what we can do to address the issue and to support the local community, which may be affected by any flooding in the area.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her action. Clearly, she is delivering on promises and making progress in the north-west. I was delighted to welcome her to Derry last week.

Can the Minister provide an update on the LWWP in Derry, please?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question and his kind words. I was pleased to visit Derry to mark the completion of works on the north-west transport hub. The Member will be aware that 'Living with Water in Belfast', an integrated plan for drainage and waste water management in greater Belfast, was published for consultation on 11 November.

The draft plan indicates that approximately £1.4 billion of investment is needed over the next 12 years to upgrade the drainage and waste water infrastructure in the greater Belfast area to protect against flooding, enhance the water environment and facilitate growth. The focus of the programme is on developing integrated catchment-based solutions to manage rainwater on the surface and, where possible, avoid hard-engineered drainage solutions that involve long-term operating and maintenance costs. It is my intention to bring the final plan to the Executive for approval in the spring of 2021, and, following the publication of the final Belfast plan, I intend to publish guidance on the development of integrated drainage investment plans across the rest of the North.

As I said, I have allocated £130,000 from this year's budget to start the development of a Living with Water feasibility study in Derry. The study will initially focus on working with the designers of the A2 Buncrana Road strategic improvement scheme to bring forward integrated drainage solutions locally. The study will examine opportunities to use blue-green spaces such as the linear park — Galliagh, is it? — to reduce naturally surface water flows in order to improve water quality in the rivers and reduce flood risk in the surrounding area.

Mrs Barton: Minister, following the recent peatbog slide at Meenbog, where a large quantity of peatbog land was displaced into the Mourne Beg river, do you accept that such bog slippage has endangered a pristine salmon river, releases captured carbon, reduces ponding and further increases the risk of flooding downstream? How will your Department limit the chance of that occurring in Northern Ireland?

Ms Mallon: The Member raises an important issue. That was a serious incident. My officials responded when they became aware of it, and the AERA Minister was on-site with his Southern counterpart. That incident demonstrates the need for joined-up working across the board. Planning can play a role in a

number of those situations, as can, as I referred to, blue-green infrastructure and natural catchments. There is a real opportunity to be more creative in dealing with such difficulties.

Road Safety

5. **Mr Middleton** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what steps her Department is taking to address road safety. (AQO 1233/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I take my responsibility very seriously to promote road safety. This has three strands: education, enforcement and engineering. We work with others, including the Department of Education, the PSNI, the Fire and Rescue Service and the Ambulance Service, and work to develop the new road safety strategy is ongoing. I want to do what I can to tackle drink-driving. On 9 November, I removed the so-called statutory option from legislation, making it harder for some drink drivers to evade justice. I will bring draft legislation to the Assembly early in the new year to increase the fine and penalty points for using a handheld mobile phone while driving and to close the gaps in a law that predates modern smartphone technology. I have also announced the road safety grant scheme for 2020-21, and a number of projects focusing on road safety and active travel will be rolled out across local communities in the coming weeks. I was delighted to allocate £2 million of funding to introduce part-time 20 mph speed limits at 100 schools by the end of this financial year, and I will introduce more as funding permits. My Department also has a rolling programme of educational activities, including the road safety public information campaigns. In recent times, those measures have included promoting the benefits of walking and cycling and doing so in a safe way, taking account of COVID. My Department will continue its engineering efforts, including undertaking general improvements to the network; providing facilities for users who are more vulnerable; introducing measures aimed at regulating traffic; and seeking to maintain the road network to ensure that it continues to be safe for us all.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Minister for her response and for the work that her Department has done. The most recent figures show that 54 people have been killed on our roads this year. That is up from the same period in 2018-19, despite the fact that we have had a lockdown and fewer drivers on the road. That is very concerning. As we approach a dangerous time of the year, what with the darker nights, will the

Minister ensure that her Department will do everything to continue to promote that message and work with organisations such as Life After that support those bereaved through road collisions?

Ms Mallon: I assure the Member of my commitment and the commitment of all my officials to doing all that we can to improve road safety. He is right to highlight the fact that we are coming into a period of much darker nights, where we will experience some challenges on the roads. I am committed to working with the PSNI, the fire service and a range of partners, particularly community groups, because they have a really important role to play in taking the road safety message to the heart of communities. I am aware of Life After, and I have already agreed to meet it.

Ms Flynn: To follow on from that, I will say that, unfortunately, I have lost two extremely close family members on the roads, both at the start of December, so I am well aware of the impact that losing someone in such a cruel way can have on families.

I know that the Minister will be aware of the new McDonald's restaurant that has opened on McKinstry Road in the Colin area of west Belfast. We met a team of her officials the other week and had a good site visit, but I have the same concerns and genuinely live with a fear that, with kids, young people and people of all ages crossing those four lanes, someone will be killed or really seriously injured. Can the Minister update us on progress or on a timeline for pedestrian safety measures?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question, and I offer my sincere condolences on the loss of her family members.

I am aware of the issue, and the Member, along with other colleagues, has written to me about it. There was a site meeting with officials, and signs have been erected, but we need to do so much more. I have asked my officials to work proactively with McDonald's so that we can get a more sustainable road safety solution there.

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister for her answers on road safety and for the detail given. Whilst I welcome the information on the further roll-out of 20 mph limits outside schools, will the Department pay particular attention to areas that have been raised with it separately, such as Maine Integrated Primary School in Randalstown, which I raised?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I want to do so much more in that area. Logistically, it is challenging to roll that limit out to 100 schools in this financial year, but it is something that I am committed to doing. I am also committed to seeing it rolled out further to many more of our schools. We have to use a matrix and criteria to do it fairly, but I assure the Member that I want to see 20 mph limits outside many more schools in coming years. I look forward to continuing to work with him as he advocates for that on his constituents' behalf.

NDNA Update

6. **Mr McGrath** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on her Department's commitments in 'New Decade, New Approach' (NDNA). (AQO 1234/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The commitments made by parties in 'New Decade, New Approach' will be transformational, and I am committed to doing all that I can to deliver on our shared promise to the people of the North. My Department is progressing Executive flagship projects on the A5 and A6 along with other key infrastructure projects including the A1 junction safety programme, the iconic Narrow Water bridge and York Street interchange. Work is also progressing to develop the design of the Newry southern relief road and other statutory requirements in advance of public consultation. 'New Decade, New Approach' also recognises that significant investment is required in our sewers, pumping stations and upgrades to our waste water treatment works. Progressing action on that, in November my Department launched a public consultation on Living with Water in Belfast, which is the strategic drainage infrastructure plan for Belfast.

Collaboration across our islands is key to ensuring the delivery of the commitments in NDNA, as the agreement also contains pledges from the Irish and British Governments. I have met and had useful discussions with the Irish Transport Minister, Minister Ryan, on how we can work in partnership to progress the shared commitments to improve the lives of all our citizens who share this island. The North/South infrastructure projects in 'New Decade, New Approach' were discussed at the October North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) transport sectoral meeting. At that meeting, I provided my counterparts with an update on my commitments and priorities, including enhancing the rail network to create a spine of connectivity on the island, the A5 project and the Narrow Water bridge. I look forward to continuing to work closely with Minister Ryan

and members of the British Government to realise those commitments.

Mr Speaker: With seconds left, I call Colin McGrath.

Mr McGrath: The Minister has made serious progress in delivering on the commitments of 'NDNA'; in particular, she has clearly set the standard for all-island partnership working and progressing delivery. With that in mind, will the Minister's work towards an infrastructure commission include a focused all-island element?

2.30 pm

Ms Mallon: The short answer to the Member's question is yes. We need only look at the climate emergency to realise that the issues facing our citizens are not restricted to boundaries or borders. I am committed to working with all partners across this island, and across these islands, as we tackle the challenges facing all our citizens. I believe that an infrastructure commission would play a critical role in delivering that.

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We move on to topical questions.

Procurement Board

T1. **Dr Aiken** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given that she will be aware that, this morning, the Finance Minister announced the reestablishment of the Procurement Board, to outline how that will effect her Department and how responsibility and accountability will be run within the new board. (AQT 761/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I welcome the Finance Minister's proposals to reconstitute the Procurement Board. The new Procurement Board announced today by Minister Murphy will, I believe, provide impetus to the development of public procurement policy to ensure that it delivers maximum social, economic and environmental impacts.

The Executive spend significant sums of public money annually on procurement, so it is only right that procurement policy is designed and developed by those who manage and deliver government contracts and that policies have Executive approval. I look forward to engaging with the Finance Minister to agree the roles and responsibilities of the new Procurement Board and on how any work will be referred to the

Executive. It is vital, as the Member points out, that Ministers have oversight, given our accountability.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Minister for her answer. As she will be aware, we have not yet seen the terms of reference for the Procurement Board, and a fiscal council has not yet been established. Bearing in mind those two issues, does the Minister have any concerns, given that her Department will be one of those most closely monitored by the new Procurement Board?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He will be aware that my party and I are supportive of a fiscal council, as we believe that it is an important tool for planning and for the future management of our finances. We need to be strategic in our investments. I believe that that is important work and that we all should be involved. I look forward to having an input on the terms of reference. I believe that our strategic, long-term approach to, and delivery of, services and projects right across all Departments needs to be much better. It was with that in mind that I set up the ministerial advisory panel on an infrastructure commission, which would have a key role to play in ensuring that we are strategic in our approach and in the delivery of projects to the maximum effect.

International Day of Persons with Disabilities

T2. **Mr Butler** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given that she will be aware that this Thursday, 3 December, is the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, when Parliament Buildings will be lit up in purple as an acknowledgement, to join with him to celebrate the day and to reaffirm the Executive's commitment to ensuring full equality for disabled people in Northern Ireland. (AQT 762/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He has been a long-standing champion of equality and of the rights of disabled people. I share his commitment and will do what I can. I am fully supportive of Parliament Buildings being lit up to mark International Day of Persons with Disabilities. However, as the Member says, we need to go much further than just lighting up buildings, and I want to assure him that I am committed to doing what I can in my Department.

We are working to ensure that DFI services are accessible and inclusive. For instance, more than 95% of Ulsterbus vehicles are wheelchair-

accessible, but they need to be 100% accessible. That is why all future bus and coach purchases will be wheelchair-accessible. My Department and Translink also work closely with the Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee, as it is important that disabled people are involved in shaping and designing services from the very beginning. I assure the Member that I am committed to that cause and that I, as Minister for Infrastructure, will continue to do what I can.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she provide an assurance that, in her vision to deliver sustainable and green transport strategies, disabled people will be central to every consultation and included in those strategies?

Ms Mallon: The Member makes a very important point. We bandy about the term "co-production", but what it should mean is that we are working with our citizens to shape services and to make sure that we have a society where everyone feels involved and where there is equal access. That is why, in the terms of reference for the ministerial advisory panel on the infrastructure commission, I specifically referenced the need for our infrastructure to be not just sustainable but inclusive.

I continue to engage with my Executive colleagues in the hope that we can take forward the recommendations of that panel and have sustainable and inclusive infrastructure right across our society.

Road Maintenance: Newry and Armagh

T3. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans she has to increase resources for the maintenance of B-class and minor roads in the Newry and Armagh constituency. (AQT 763/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He is an extremely active advocate for his constituency. I have made the point to him on a number of occasions about the need to be transformative and to get the basics right. I maintained the budget for road maintenance this year. I also established the rural roads fund, which is £10 million, so I am committed. I have also said that it is very important that we, as an Executive, do what we can individually and collectively to tackle regional imbalance. I am committed to doing more. Of course, what I would like to do is constrained somewhat by the financial envelope within which I have to

operate, but I will continue to make the case at the Executive to ensure that we get the funding required to invest in our infrastructure, particularly in our rural areas.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for her response. I am sure that she will accept that some of those minor roads are in a very bad state of repair, with large potholes. I had one lady in my office this morning who had wrecked her wheel on a pothole yesterday afternoon. She told me that the police car had hit the same pothole, also yesterday afternoon. Last year, there were claims of over £7,000 on one pothole. Does the Minister accept that more resources are required to deal with that situation?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I agree that we need to have more finances and that we need to improve our roads. I think it was the Barton report that identified independently that £140 million is required annually to ensure that our roads are maintained to a satisfactory standard. The Member will be aware of what took place when Danny Kennedy was the Minister for Regional Development. The Department has struggled to recover from that. I assure the Member that I will continue to make the case for greater investment in our infrastructure, because it is key to our communities and our economic growth.

Glider Service: South Belfast

T4. **Mr O'Toole** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given that she has talked at length and passionately about the need to use the COVID crisis as a step change towards more active travel and the better use of public transport, particularly in the city that they both represent, to provide an update on the delivery of phase 2 of the Glider service, specifically in relation to South Belfast. (AQT 764/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. All politics is local. DFI teams, along with consultants Atkins, are continuing to actively work remotely on the development of that project, which is also a Belfast region city deal infrastructure project. A feasibility and options appraisal is being developed, together with an associated interim outline business case. I hope to be in a position to consider an emerging preferred option later this year. COVID-19 restrictions may, however, have a bearing on that timeline. An interim outline business case for Belfast rapid transit 2 was forwarded to the Belfast region city deal executive board on 12 August 2020. My understanding is that it may be in a position

soon to indicate which projects have been successful and how much funding has been allocated.

Mr O'Toole: Thanks to the Minister for her answer. It would be really helpful if the Minister were able to meet me and people who are interested in the possibility of extending the Glider phase 2 to Carryduff, which is a part of the constituency that has not always been as well connected and funded as it should have been. Will she meet me to talk about the potential of extending the Glider phase 2 and broader possible public transport development in that part of the world?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. There is obviously great enthusiasm for the delivery of that project. There is huge interest in the routes that the Glider will take in both north and south Belfast. I assure the Member that I will consult on routes for phase 2 of the Glider project. I am, of course, more than happy to meet him to discuss the matter.

Planning Act (NI) 2011: Review

T5. **Mr Blair** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the timescale for the review of the Planning Act (NI) 2011, given that, when the Act came into force in 2015, DFI was required by law to conduct a review of it within three years, albeit that the review was delayed, with the absence of a functioning Assembly given as one of the reasons for that delay. (AQT 765/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He is right, there is a requirement to review the Act, and I have initiated that. My officials have attended the Committee, and I hope to be in a position, later this year, to be able to provide an update to the Committee and the House.

Mr Blair: I am keen to know whether the Minister can provide any information on the sectors, groups or organisations that she has consulted with on the review.

Ms Mallon: As part of the review, my officials have been engaging with key stakeholders. I recently met with the Northern Ireland Local Government Association, and that was one of the issues that it wanted to discuss with me. I reassured it that, given the critical role that councils play in our Planning Service and the delivery of a much-improved Planning Service, they will be central to the review and will be widely consulted. We will be engaging with

stakeholders, right across the board, on the review and as we work to identify what needs to change, from a legislative and non-legislative perspective, to improve our Planning Service.

Bus Services: West Belfast

T6. **Mr Carroll** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for a breakdown of the 500 extra bus services that were announced several months ago to deal with COVID and to state how they relate to his West Belfast constituency, including any extra buses. (AQT 766/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He is correct. To ensure the safety of passengers and staff, Translink provided 500 additional buses. I do not have at hand the specific breakdown of the information that he is seeking, but I am more than happy to write to him and provide that information.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for her reply. It is important, for her benefit, to emphasise that the Glider service, particularly in my constituency, is regularly full to the brim of people trying to get home from school or work. In those circumstances, I question whether it is possible to socially distance. Will the Minister commit to ensuring that extra buses will be placed on routes in my constituency, including buses that have more space and capacity than the Glider, to avoid a situation where students, workers and everybody are forced into potentially hazardous situations?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I am aware of occasions when there have been a substantial number of passengers on Glider services, making it difficult to be socially distanced. It is my understanding that Translink has been providing additional services along the routes where that is occurring. The challenge is that our young people, in particular, prefer to use the Glider, with its access to the internet, rather than use a standard bus. It is something that we are working on. We are working with Translink to engage with schools to reinforce the public safety message and the requirement to wear face coverings. There are a number of measures that Translink is taking to try to address the issue. I am happy to provide the Member with the information on the routes that he was speaking about.

Parking/Traffic Management: Derry

T7. **Ms Mullan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, while sticking with the theme that all politics is local, for an update on the plans for a residents' parking scheme and traffic management facilities in the Bogside and Bishop Street area of Derry. (AQT 767/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. One of the joys of being the Infrastructure Minister is that you get a whirlwind tour of all the constituencies and to hear about the important issues that are facing communities.

On the residents' parking scheme, the Member will be aware that officials are reviewing the analysis of the scheme that was carried out on Rugby Road. I have not been presented with the findings of that yet. However, I am very clear that, when we have those findings, we need to be learning lessons. I am mindful that, in your constituency and others across Northern Ireland, this is an issue of importance to communities and one that elective representatives would like to see delivered. I have committed to continue to work on it, and the Department will publish the findings of the review when I receive them.

Ms Mullan: Thank you for that response and the work that is ongoing for residents. It has been an issue for nearly 10 years and there have been many consultations. We would like to see an end to the consultation and something put in place. Could you expedite that work, please?

Ms Mallon: To reassure the Member, the work that my officials are undertaking is not further consultation. They are analysing the successes and the difficulties with the scheme that was devised and implemented in Belfast so that we can adapt that learning and ensure that new schemes that are rolled out are informed by the learning that has gone before to make sure that they are as effective as possible for communities.

Mr Speaker: Time is up, Members. Please take your ease.

2.45 pm

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Beggs] in the Chair)

Justice

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Prisons 2020

1. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Justice to outline her plans to replace the Prisons 2020 strategy. (AQO 1244/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): Since the publication of 'Prisons 2020: The Way Forward' in July 2018, the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) has driven a programme of continuous improvement across the organisation, with the aim of delivering better rehabilitation for people in our care.

During the first two years of the programme, we have seen significant progress made towards the strategic commitments across each strand of the programme: our people, our services, our infrastructure and our partnerships. Plans for the first two years of the programme detailed over 180 deliverables, which have resulted in significant improvements for staff and people in our care.

The programme has entered its third and final year, and consideration is being given to how we will maintain the drive for continuous improvement. In light of the achievements made in Prisons 2020, I am committed to implementing a consecutive programme to continue the next stage of our continuous improvement journey. The process to develop our strategic commitments for the next three years will involve analysis of the outcomes of the Prisons 2020 programme, consideration of our recent Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) inspection reports and consultation with our staff, partner organisations and wider stakeholders.

Members will recognise, however, that prisons are a complex and challenging environment, which has been impacted by the pandemic. Those pressures and restrictions have delayed the development stage of the next programme. However, I will be progressing that with the director general once it is deemed safe to do so, and I aim to have the next plan in place during 2021.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Minister for her answer. Minister, you will be aware that, despite some real improvements in our prisons, several inspections, including at Magilligan and Maghaberry, have reported worse outcomes for prisoners from disadvantaged communities, particularly those in the Catholic community. What work has been undertaken by the Department of Justice to identify the causes of that disparity and to develop effective responses?

Mrs Long: The reasons for people being inside the prison system are multifaceted and complex. The prison system does not have control over the disparity in the number of people within the system. People are committed to our care by the judiciary and the courts. However, supporting vulnerable people in prison is a priority area for the Prison Service. That was clear in Prisons 2020 and will continue to be a focus in the next phase of continuous improvement.

What people have seen in the reviews of and reports on prisons is a significant improvement since the introduction of the supporting prisoners at risk (SPAR) Evolution programme — a person-centred approach in care planning that focuses on supporting the individual. It also aims to support individual needs for people in crisis or distress, addressing the root causes while supporting them through that period in a way that is right for them. As with all prisoners, of course, the focus is on rehabilitation and successful re-entry into the wider community.

Ms S Bradley: I note that the strategy was to run until March 2021. Does the Minister intend to publish a final report following the final quarterly submission from the Prison Service management board, which provided the oversight arrangements for the programme?

Mrs Long: Yes, it is our intention to produce a final report because that will also be the basis on which we will plan for any other continuous improvement programme that will be issued consecutive and subsequent to the completion of Prisons 2020. I had hoped to be in a position to have more development work done on that this year, but, given the extent of the impact of COVID-19 on prisons, it simply has not been possible. However, we are hopeful that we will be able to do that during 2021.

Mr Beattie: It is good to hear the Minister say that people are one of her priorities; quite rightly so. Although not a statutory responsibility of the Prisoner Ombudsman, will the Minister support the ombudsman's request to look at the staffing

level of night custody officers at Her Majesty's Prison Maghaberry?

Mrs Long: The Member continues to return to this issue despite the fact that the director general for prisons has been very clear that our prisons are properly and adequately staffed. We will, of course, consider any request from the Prisoner Ombudsman to look at any aspect of the Prison Service. However, I ask the Member to reflect on the information that the director general has provided, on a number of occasions, on the management of night and daytime custody.

Mr Allister: Given the very clear connection between our prisons and our criminal justice system, does the Minister think it appropriate to join in a tribute to Lord Kerr, who sadly passed away suddenly this morning? Lord Kerr was a man whom I knew throughout my professional life, first as a member of the Bar and then as he progressed through the various tiers of the judiciary. He served with distinction at a time when many judges were under serious threat, and some were murdered by the IRA. Of course, he became our Lord Chief Justice and went on to be our representative in the Supreme Court until just three months ago. Will the Minister join in a tribute to him and in extending condolences to his wife, Gillian, and family?

Mrs Long: Very much so. As the Member indicated, very sadly, the former Lord Chief Justice of Northern Ireland Brian Kerr passed away today. He served as a member of the Supreme Court from 2009, when it was reconstituted in its modern format, until his retirement only months ago. Indeed, on his retirement, he was the only serving member who had been there when the court was constituted. He distinguished himself in his service to Northern Ireland, and in particular the judiciary, but it goes much wider than that. It goes to the rule of law and to our expectations of fairness and justice. He also distinguished himself in the Supreme Court by standing up for people's rights, which he spoke about often and with passion, and we are all very grateful to him for that. I join Mr Allister in extending my condolences to his wife and children.

Hate Crime Legislation

3. **Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the independent review of hate crime legislation in Northern Ireland. (AQO 1246/17-22)

12. **Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Justice whether legislation resulting from the recommendations of the independent review of hate crime will be accompanied by an implementation plan. (AQO 1255/17-22)

Mrs Long: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 3 and 12 together.

I received the final report from Judge Marrinan's independent review of hate crime legislation yesterday. A substantial work of four volumes, it runs to approximately 885 pages and includes 34 recommendations. It is very commendable that he has been able to undertake such a thorough piece of work on this important issue. Colleagues will appreciate, of course, that, having just received the report, I will need to take some time to carefully consider all the recommendations that he has made and the context that he has set out for them.

The next steps will include my officials working to develop an implementation plan that takes account of the recommendations contained in the report. Whilst Judge Marrinan's report is wide-ranging, the primary purpose of the review was to consider the legislation associated with hate crime, so I will want to give particular consideration to any legislative recommendations emanating from it. Any legislative changes will need to be scheduled into the Department's legislative programme in due course.

I have written to Judge Marrinan, and met him today, to thank him for undertaking the review of hate crime legislation. I place on record my thanks to him and his team for their hard work on what was a very complex review in what, at times, were very challenging circumstances, particularly in light of the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. I also pay tribute to those victims of hate crime who spoke with such candour to Judge Marrinan and allowed him to see the impact of hate crime on our community. They have advised us very fulsomely on the way to tackle any deficiencies in the current system.

Miss McIlveen: I appreciate the Minister's response. Obviously, when I submitted the question, I did not anticipate it being quite so timely. I commend Judge Marrinan and his team for the comprehensive report that they have compiled. I appreciate that the Minister has just received it, and it is lengthy, but can she assure us that, in her consideration of the report and in the proposed legislation that she will ultimately bring to the Chamber, she will ensure that private conversations in the home will continue not to be subject to criminal law?

Mrs Long: There are a number of things that have been said. I know that Judge Marrinan reflected on freedom of speech when it came to his report, and we need to read and consider very carefully the balance that he has struck. We also need to consider that there are conversations that happen in the home that would be captured by, for example, our domestic abuse offence, legislation on which we are about to pass in the Chamber. We therefore have to be conscious that there are limitations even in the home as to what is deemed appropriate and what is deemed inappropriate. If, for example, someone is engaged in threatening conduct in the home as part of a conversation, that is not acceptable. That is abuse. I therefore would not want to give a blanket confirmation of my position on that. We need to look carefully at the report and at having a balance between issues around hate crime and the ability to speak freely. We need to look at all of that in the round, so I am not willing to give such a commitment today, because it would be premature and cut through some of the other work that we are doing on domestic abuse.

Ms Anderson: Minister, as you know, 600 racist hate crimes were reported to the PSNI last year, and only 13% to 14% received prosecutions. That is a shockingly low figure, as, I am sure, you will agree, particularly for the victims who reported and endured those hate crimes.

It is something that we heard very clearly during the Black Lives Matter protests. Minister, I know that you are working your way through all the recommendations, given that you received the Marrinan report only last night, but what do you intend to do to try to ensure that people continue to report such crimes to the PSNI, despite the low uptake of prosecutions? Moreover, what do you intend to do to increase the number of prosecutions for those people who have reported racist hate crimes?

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for her question. There are a number of things that we can all do to encourage people to have the confidence to come forward and report hate crime when it occurs and to ensure that those with whom they are working in the justice system are fully apprised of it. One of the benefits of having the review take place over recent months has been the increased debate and focus on the issue of hate crime and its impact on the wider community. Raising awareness will therefore also help. Undoubtedly, however, when people come to the justice system after finding the courage to step forward and tell someone of their concerns, we want to ensure that the

justice system responds effectively and efficiently. Judge Marrinan's report provides a basis for us to ensure that that is the case. It is not the only reported crime that has very low rates of prosecution, as well as very high rates of attrition of victims and witnesses. We experience the same thing with domestic abuse and sexual offences. One of the things that I am looking at very actively is having a victims of crime commissioner: someone who can advocate for and support victims who are going through the process so that we ensure that the justice system is responsive to their individual needs.

Mr McCrossan: Minister, the public consultation that was led by Judge Desmond Marrinan reports having received over 1,000 submissions. Notably, 80% of those were described as "online submissions". Does the Minister agree with me that any legislation deriving from the review must take serious account of the growing level of hate crime that is evident online?

Mrs Long: Absolutely. It is something that is fully referenced in the report and the recommendations. As Members will be aware, online hate crime and general online crime is a reserved matter for Westminster. I have, however, already been in touch with the Home Office and spoken with Priti Patel and some of her colleagues, as well as with colleagues in DCMS who are taking forward a White Paper on online hate crime. We want to ensure that they take forward that work on online harms or that they will consider giving the Assembly the power to take forward local resolutions. In this instance, it is probably best dealt with at Westminster level, because I believe that the level of clout that we have with organisations such as Facebook and Twitter is much greater at that level, or, indeed, at a pan-European level, where we have some leverage over what their community standards are. Having seen some of the hate speech that is regularly published on Twitter, Facebook and a number of other similar platforms, I think that, if it were to be published in any normal newspaper, the newspaper would simply not exist. The fact that it is allowed to be posted on those platforms from untraceable anonymous sources in order to pester, threaten and intimidate people, spread hate and incite violence is unacceptable. At times, I wonder what the community standards could be of any organisation that does not find some of those comments to be in defiance of those standards.

3.00 pm

Dr Aiken: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. Does she believe that the term "hate crime" should now also encompass the term "sectarian"?

Mrs Long: That was the first recommendation that Judge Marrinan made in his report. There is huge merit in what he asked for in that he recognises that there are crimes that are motivated by sectarian hatred in society. It is an aggravating factor in those crimes. The way that he suggests that those crimes and, indeed, all hate crimes be dealt with is as an aggravating factor to an existing crime. For example, assault that is motivated by hate, whether that be sectarian or based on someone's sexual identity or race, then has a factor attached that would lead to a higher penalty when it comes to sentencing. It is appropriate that sectarianism be included in that mix, because, undoubtedly, there are areas where we see the impact of hate crime and the chill factor, threat, intimidation and violence that goes with it. We also see the stuff that is perhaps more pervasive and that puts people in their place and lets them know who is in control. If we are not in favour of coercive control through domestic abuse in the home, we certainly should not accept coercive control in our communities.

Ms Bradshaw: One of the recommendations was that the definition of hate crime should be extended to include gender-motivated offences. Does the Minister have any initial thoughts on that?

Mrs Long: There are a number of additional areas to that. In addition to looking at sectarianism as a particular form of hate crime, age, sex, gender and variations in gender characteristics or identity could also be added to the list of hate crimes. Again, my Department wants to look at that very carefully through the overall context of the report. However, in the light of what we have seen, even in recent days, with multiple attacks on women during a short period in our own city, there is certainly merit in looking at whether the motivation for an attack is the gender of the person who has been attacked.

I am glad to see that the report also deals with transgender issues. It is incredibly important that those issues are dealt with at the same time as all the others, because that is an area where the number of people who experience hate crimes and, indeed, discrimination is increasing. We have to prepare for that and deal with it adequately.

Prisons: Planned Investment

4. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Justice what investment is planned for prisons over the next three years. (AQO 1247/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Northern Ireland Prison Service has a central role to play in seeking to make our community safe as we contribute to reducing reoffending and improving the effectiveness of the justice system. It is essential that we hold those who are in our care safely and securely, and it is equally important that we make the community safer by supporting and challenging people to change as we focus on rehabilitation, resettlement and reintegration into society. In order to do that, it is important to have the right infrastructure.

There has already been considerable investment in the Northern Ireland Prison Service under the Prisons 2020 programme. That included the construction and opening of Davis House at Maghaberry prison, modernising the fleet that is used by the prisoner escorting and court custody service (PECCS) and significantly improving how modern technology is used to support people in our care. Subject to funding being made available, that investment will continue, and the Northern Ireland Prison Service has identified four priority areas for consideration in the next three years.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for her answer. No prison service could achieve the high standards that we all want without the dedication of the staff who are employed in it at all levels. All those staff are agents of change and, indeed, reform, whether that be in the prisons or the young offenders' centre. What specific investment will take place in order to upgrade the skills, qualifications and knowledge of prison staff at all levels?

Mrs Long: There is a continual improvement programme for prison staff training and to support them in other learning that they may wish to take as part of their continued professional development. That is very important.

We also invest, and will continue to invest, in the well-being of our prison officers because it is an incredibly complex and stressful job that they undertake. I am awaiting the outcome of the review that I commissioned into dealing with mental health, but also other issues that might arise as a result of people working in the Prison Service, to look at the support that we can give

people while in service and also after they leave.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call our newest Member Nicola Brogan.

Ms Brogan: Concerns have been raised that Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre has been used as a place of safety for young people when beds have not been found for them in suitable places by social services. Does the Minister agree with me that the juvenile justice centre, as a prison, is not an appropriate place of safety and should not be used as a children's home?

Mrs Long: I am not aware of that allegation. However, to be clear: people who are committed to our care come into our custody having first passed through the courts, so someone has made a judgement as to whether they should be committed to our system.

As the Member will know, we are taking forward work on the reform of Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre to produce a care and justice campus. Many of the young people arriving at the care centre at Loughview and in Woodlands will be the same young people at different stages in their development. So, we are working very closely with the Health Minister to develop a proper campus that will allow for their individual needs and a needs-based approach to be taken to remove some of the stigma that the Member is concerned about around people being committed to custody rather than care.

Miss Woods: Does the Minister support the installation of technology, such as body scanners, in the Northern Ireland Prison Service so that people who are, or, importantly, are not, carrying illegal drugs and substances on their person can be identified quickly?

Mrs Long: Technology has a role to play, although it may not be as cut and dried as the Member suggests in terms of its ability to determine whether people are carrying contraband into prison. However, we are, of course, always interested in using technology where we can, subject to the budgets available to the Prison Service. We want to maximise the use of technology to enable us to minimise the time that people have to spend in searches, for example. However, it is not a straightforward issue. It will require significant investment in the prisons estate, and that will depend on the outcome of the budget.

Sentencing Review

5. **Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Justice what impact her Department's sentencing review will have on people convicted of causing death by dangerous driving or driving while intoxicated. (AQO 1248/17-22)

Mrs Long: A maximum sentence of 14 years' imprisonment currently applies for the offences of causing death by dangerous driving, causing death by careless driving whilst under the influence of drink or drugs, and causing death by careless driving and failing to give a specimen.

The report on responses to my Department's review of sentencing confirmed support for an increase in the maximum sentence for those offences, increasing minimum periods of disqualification for the offences; and applying the disqualification period after the custodial part of any sentence has been served.

I am not yet in a position to advise on the impact of the sentencing review on those convicted of causing death by dangerous driving or driving while under the influence of drink or drugs. However, I find the arguments in favour of longer maximum sentences and changes to disqualification periods persuasive, and I expect them to be reflected in any decisions that I might take.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Minister for that answer and welcome the increase in sentencing and in the disqualification period. I also thank the Minister for meeting Peter Dolan, the father of Enda Dolan, who continues to campaign hard for all those families who have lost a loved one to a dangerous driver or a driver who has been behind the wheel whilst intoxicated.

Given the sentencing to date and how painful it has been for those families, does the Minister agree that the sentences handed down in previous cases have failed many families who believe that sentences were too lenient?

Mrs Long: The Member will appreciate that I cannot comment on whether sentences are too lenient or otherwise, much as I may have personal opinions. As Justice Minister, it would be inappropriate for me because it is a matter for the judiciary to decide on the leniency or otherwise of sentences and, indeed, for the Director of Public Prosecutions to appeal where he feels that that is necessary.

However, I will say that I share the Member's admiration for Peter Dolan and the work that he and his wife have done in respect of campaigns. It will not change their situation. It will not change their tragic loss of Enda, who had a horrific death due to dangerous driving. However, it will, undoubtedly, bring some comfort to others. The problem with sentencing is not necessarily always whether the sentences are appropriate; the complexity of our sentencing structures often make them impenetrable and leave families unable to understand why sentences have been given and what they mean. That is something that we are taking seriously as we look at the sentencing review, because, for sentencing to be effective, it also needs to be easily understood.

Ms Flynn: Will the Minister give an updated timeline for the next steps of the sentencing review, including how long she believes it will take to complete the programme of work?

Mrs Long: I extend my condolences to the Member; in remarks made during the Minister for Infrastructure's Question Time, I heard about her loss of family members as a result of driving incidents, so I extend my condolences to her and to other families who have suffered likewise.

It is my intention to take decisions, particularly around sentencing, hopefully this side of Christmas. It will then be a matter for us to consult on my preliminary decisions with other Justice partners, and, as a result of that, develop instructions for legislative counsel to take forward to start to draft appropriate legislation. That will be done in two stages.

There are a number of elements to the sentencing review itself, but I intend to accelerate the area around dangerous driving and drink-driving as my priority area, because that was the one area that came through as being a strong priority in the consultation, and then to take through the remainder of the recommendations at a slightly slower pace. I hope that we will be able to at least get to that stage.

Members will be aware that our legislative programme — it sounds strange saying this in 2020 — in the Department of Justice is pretty much full until the end of the mandate. However, that does not preclude us from starting to draft legislation that will then be ready to take forward urgently in the next mandate.

PSNI: COVID-19 Absences

6. **Mr M Bradley** asked the Minister of Justice how many PSNI personnel are off work due to the COVID-19 pandemic. (AQO 1249/17-22)

Mrs Long: As of 1 December, 51 PSNI personnel were absent having been confirmed as positive for COVID-19. There were also 308 police officers and staff in the PSNI self-isolating and one person absent on compassionate leave due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mr M Bradley: Does the Minister agree that it is vital that the PSNI does not draw personnel away from investigations into drugs and criminality to police COVID breaches? Are there sufficient numbers available to provide community protection, particularly patrols in the community and in my local area, which is rural?

Mrs Long: The management of resources within the PSNI is a matter for the Chief Constable, not the Justice Minister, and he will determine how those resources are deployed. There has been a challenge, obviously, for the police in policing the response to COVID-19 and reflecting the demands of this Chamber that they be part of that response where people are breaking the rules. That takes up time from a limited resource, but it is, of course, always important that they continue to deliver against their vision of being a police force that is responsible, visible, accessible and victim-focused.

We have to accept that the police have been pulled in a number of directions, as we all have, during the COVID-19 pandemic, but I have no doubt that they remain committed to serving all communities, rural and urban, on all issues, including regular crime. Even during the pandemic, we have seen some particularly impressive work by the PSNI, whether as part of Operation Arbacia or in detecting other crime in local communities.

Mr Sheehan: Will the Minister give an assessment of how her Department has been affected this year by virtue of the fact that many staff have been absent as a result of COVID-19?

Mrs Long: With respect to the Department, it is always difficult when staff are absent. Our Department is a small one, but it is very much outward-facing, so most of the people in the Department work in contact-facing roles with the public.

Their engagement has also been curtailed as a result of COVID-19 because, where they would normally be out on site, working with people and engaging with communities, that work has been much more challenging.

3.15 pm

We have also had to manage things that we would not normally have to manage, whether that is keeping our prisons, as far as possible, free from COVID, ensuring that we have safe spaces in the courts so that we are able to continue to deliver justice in a timely way, or our wider work in local communities, dealing with some of the outworkings, for example, of lack of access to youth services and some of the diversionary work in which members of my staff are involved, particularly around interfaces and other places.

It has been a challenging year, but I want to give credit to the Department's staff for the amount of work that they have been able to put in. The fact that we have seen so little slippage, for example on substantive work such as our legislative programme and many of the other topics that we are dealing with, is a credit to them and the amount of work that they have put in.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That concludes the period for listed questions. We will now move to 15 minutes of topical questions. I advise Members that topical questions 1 and 5 have been withdrawn.

Innocent Victims of Terrorism

T2. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister of Justice whether she recognises the terrible injustice, pain and agony experienced by many of the innocent victims of terrorism, including the victims of atrocities such as La Mon House, Enniskillen, Omagh, Teebane, the Shankill bombing and the Darkley shootings, when law-abiding, decent people were caught up in terrible events, and to state why there has been no justice in the courts and no public inquiries for those victims and their families. (AQT 772/17-22)

Mrs Long: It is very difficult for me to answer a question that engages the investigation by the RUC, and subsequently the PSNI, of those atrocities; the decisions of the Director of Public Prosecutions in respect of whether cases that are brought to him met the evidential test for prosecution; and the responsibility of judges, who, again, are independent but make decisions as to whether people are prosecuted.

I remind the Member that there are many families — he is quite right — who have not received, and will not receive, justice and truth as a result of the atrocities that were committed during the Troubles, and that is hugely regrettable. It is a source of pain for those families, and I believe that that needs to be remedied and that the remedy needs to be a comprehensive one. The remedy for that was, as best we could get, in the Stormont House Agreement. That has now been resiled from by the UK Government, and we are now in a hiatus and unaware of what the alternative proposition may look like.

Every day that passes without justice being delivered is another day of anguish and pain for those victims. I will repeat what I said to the Secretary of State last night in a call with him. I believe that there is a degree of urgency to this, which is not reflected in how it has been handled since March. I believe that he needs to bring forward his intended alternative mechanisms now.

To be clear, the current justice system, the Department as it is now and our budgets are neither designed for nor big enough to deal with all of the legacy issues that are now arriving on our desks. There is increasing legacy litigation, and there are increasing pressures on staff time and on the number of inquiries that are likely to come forward. It will simply not be possible for us to police both the past and the future.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for her detailed answer. There is a need for justice for all innocent victims of violence. Does she concur with Stephen Farry, her party's MP for North Down, who supported the Finucane inquiry and said that a public inquiry was warranted in that case?

Mrs Long: Mr Deputy Speaker, this is not "Ask Alliance"; this is Justice questions. This is a question about my position as Justice Minister, not about my position as leader of the Alliance Party. In answering, however, I first want to acknowledge the hurt and disappointment of the Finucane family. They will, no doubt, be experiencing that just as — as the Member has said — other families will, as a result of the Secretary of State's decision.

I recognise that the issues are complex and difficult and that they have profound impacts on the families concerned. I spoke with the Secretary of State last night, as I said, and I outlined my concerns to him.

Since March, I have raised with him, on a number of occasions, my concerns about the absence of any coherent and credible plan for dealing with the legacy of the past, despite commitments in New Decade, New Approach. It was a decision for the Secretary of State, ultimately, but it is the justice system here in Northern Ireland that is left to deal with the outcome.

On the substantive point of whether I believe that a public inquiry is necessary: yes, I do. When a Government stands in Parliament and admits and apologises for collusion, a family has a right to know what involvement that Government and their predecessors had in that collusion.

ROXANNE: PSNI Involvement

T3. **Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Justice, assuming that she is aware of the issue, for her view of the fact that the PSNI is involved in an EU-funded research project, ROXANNE, and is, therefore, working in tandem with the Israel Ministry of Public Security, including the Israel National Police, the border police and the Israel prison service, which oversees the committing of serious human rights abuses. (AQT 773/17-22)

Mrs Long: Yes, I am aware of ROXANNE, but it is an operational matter for the Chief Constable as to what programmes officers are involved in. It is a European programme that involves a number of EU nation states. The direct cooperation between the PSNI and other EU states is something to be encouraged and welcomed. I am also aware that the involvement of Israel is a separate issue to the main involvement in ROXANNE. However, the Member would be best asking that question of the Chief Constable.

Mr Carroll: It is important for the Minister to comment on the matter since she has declared that PSNI actions were proportionate in cases such as the Black Lives Matter protest. Amnesty International has cited the Israel National Police:

"for carrying out extrajudicial executions and other unlawful killings, using ill treatment and torture (even against children)".

Sunday was International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People — a day on which millions of people across the world engaged in activities to condemn the Israel state and its occupation, aggression and racist laws. Given that other state police forces —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member come to his question, please?

Mr Carroll: — have pulled out of the programme and that the Minister has a duty to uphold justice, will she commit to pressing the PSNI to withdraw from the programme for reasons based on the daily denial of justice for Palestinian people?

Mrs Long: I refer the Member to what I have just said. It is a matter for the Chief Constable and the Policing Board to take that forward. To be clear on the Israeli-Palestine question, I voted for recognition for Palestine when I was a Member of Parliament. I have made very clear my views on some of the actions that the Israeli Government have taken. I detach that from the people, because their Government are often not a good representation of individuals in the country.

I want to be clear about this. It is not my role to direct the PSNI in any of its jobs. I also want to correct the Member, because he has, for whatever reason, latched on to the idea that I said that the policing of Black Lives Matter protests were proportionate. They were not, and I did not say that. I did not say that. I have a list of quotes that I have made on the issue because I knew that the Member would raise it. I said that the policing of COVID generally was proportionate and appropriate. There is a distinct difference. I also stressed on every occasion that I could not comment on individual circumstances.

Court Cases: Backlog

T4. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Justice to quantify the number of cases that, due to the pandemic, could not be taken before the courts and to give a timescale for addressing the backlog. (AQT 774/17-22)

Mrs Long: Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there were approximately 8,000 criminal cases in the court system. However, with the closure of some courts during lockdown, that rose to approximately 12,800 cases by early September, which is a rise of about 59%. With the reopening of almost all courts from August onwards, the cases disposed of by the courts have exceeded those received. Consequently, the outstanding caseload has reduced. The most recent real-time management information indicates that the figure stands at around 11,255 cases. The figures also show that recovery is taking place across all areas, and the number of cases in the system is reducing by around 175 cases a week. The figures in

relation to outstanding caseloads for civil and family business cannot be generated retrospectively, and, because they include cases that may have been settled privately between parties, they cannot be interpreted in the same way as criminal cases.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for her detailed answer. Has any assessment been carried out of the mental health problems of or support offered to the victims of crime who have been waiting such a long time to have their cases dealt with?

Mrs Long: No systemic research has been done on the impact, but action has been taken. For example, Victim Support has been engaged in keeping people updated and offering them adequate support during the time that they are waiting. The Public Prosecution Service has also engaged additional resource to communicate with people who are waiting for cases to come to trial. Every justice organisation has a recovery plan in place to take account of some of the challenges that we will face.

We also meet regularly as the Criminal Justice Board to ensure that our response to the impact of COVID on the courts is balanced across all the different issues. It would have been easy, on the face of it, to reduce the number of cases much more quickly by having quick disposals of simpler cases, but I was committed to the fact that we needed to be able to return to a situation where, as well as dealing with simpler disposals, we could also hear complex cases with jury trials. It is important to recognise that those are some of the most sensitive and difficult cases. Keeping those people waiting a disproportionate length of time, simply to get better statistics, would be unjust in the extreme. Therefore, we have ensured that we are able to continue with jury trials, and we hope to open additional courts in Laganside over the next number of months.

PSNI Injury on Duty Claims

T6. **Mr Chambers** asked the Minister of Justice, given the understandable delays caused by the pandemic in relation to dealing with PSNI injury on duty claims, to confirm that the appeals are being considered once again and are progressing in a timely manner. (AQT 776/17-22)

Mrs Long: COVID was one of a number of issues in policing injury on duty claims. Progress is being made. I am happy to write to the Member, because I do not have all the

detail in front of me, giving him further detail on exactly where we are with that programme.

Mr Chambers: I appreciate that, Minister, and look forward to receiving it. Perhaps you can also address my supplementary question in the letter: are you satisfied that sufficient administrative resources are in place to expeditiously discharge the backlog in cases awaiting consideration?

Mrs Long: Dealing with resources will always be challenging for a small Department with limited resources. We do exactly what we can. We are dealing with several priorities at this time, a number of which have a deadline attached. We are conscious that matters that may have been delayed due to COVID are among those priorities, and we try to progress things as quickly as we can and in as timely a manner as possible.

PSNI Pay Award

T7. **Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the implementation of the PSNI pay award that was announced in February 2020 and was backdated to 1 September 2019. (AQT 777/17-22)

Mrs Long: The pay award for last year has been progressed. I certainly signed off on one of the pay awards earlier this year. The current pay award is still under consideration, but good progress is being made, and it is now between my Department and the Department of Finance. I am happy to write to the Member to confirm the detail of the most recent award.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for that answer. I would appreciate that clarity because I have had several officers contacting me and looking for that pay award to be made available to them.

Does the Minister agree that issues such as delays in pay awards and the potential impact of the spending review announcements made by the Chancellor will have a negative impact on the numbers in our front-line workforce?

Mrs Long: There are two issues. The first is delay. We have sought to eliminate as much delay as we can. As you will appreciate, a process has to be gone through: the pay remit must go through the Police Remuneration Review Body, then come to the Department, and we must make our case to the Department of Finance.

The wider issue is that stringent measures may be imposed on us from elsewhere. That is a whole other matter altogether. It will be a matter for all Departments, not just mine, and for all who receive funding through central government, to reflect on the fact that we may find ourselves in what is, in budgetary terms, a standstill situation next year, with a not particularly bright economic horizon ahead.

That is the simple reality, and it will require us all to manage our expectations in line with our budgets.

3.30 pm

Organised Crime: Legislation

T8. **Mr Harvey** asked the Minister of Justice, further to the findings in the recently published annual report of the Organised Crime Task Force, to outline whether she intends to introduce new legislation to tackle organised crime. (AQT 778/17-22)

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for his question. A review of organised crime is ongoing in the Department, and we intend to look at introducing new offences at some point after the review is complete. We are, however, doing other things in the interim to tackle organised crime. For example, I have liaised with the Home Office to ensure that the Criminal Finances Act 2017 is commenced in Northern Ireland. That will lead to the implementation of unexplained wealth orders, account freezing and forfeiture, and a number of other financial measures that I hope will act as a disincentive to those who are involved in organised crime because they believe it to be profitable. When it is no longer profitable, I think that we will find a decline in that type of crime.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That is the end of our period of questions to the Minister of Justice. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments before the question for urgent oral answer to the Minister for the Economy.

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

Economy

Collapse of the Retailers Debenhams and Arcadia

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Gary Middleton has given notice of a question for urgent oral answer to the Minister for the Economy.

I remind Members that, if they wish to ask a supplementary question, they should rise continually in their place. The Member who tabled the question will be called automatically to ask a supplementary question.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister for the Economy what support she and the Executive will provide to local employees affected by the collapse of the retailers Debenhams and Arcadia.

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): Debenhams is a name familiar across many towns and to many shoppers in Northern Ireland. The news today about it and Arcadia will have come as a shock to their employees and to the shopping centres — CastleCourt, Rushmere, Fairhill, Foyleside and the Quays — where Debenhams is an anchor tenant. It is important to note that no redundancies have been announced at this point. I intend, however, to write to the administrators to impress on them the need to seek alternative buyers to take on the stores as going concerns in order to retain the jobs and livelihoods of local staff.

We are heading into a very difficult period for the economy in Northern Ireland, the United Kingdom and, indeed, the British Isles. I previously warned in the Chamber that the cycle of restrictions would impact particularly on the young and on female, part-time and lower-paid workers. Unfortunately, today's news shines a light on that.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Minister for coming to the Chamber and answering the question for urgent oral answer. The announcements by Debenhams and Arcadia have come as a huge blow and shock to our high streets, with thousands of jobs now at risk. Many employees are deeply worried and concerned, and our thoughts are with them at this time.

Will the Minister commit her Department to working with the wider Executive, particularly the Minister for Communities and the Minister of Finance, and with local councils to deliver stimulus packages to our high streets to provide them with as much support as we can in the coming months?

Mrs Dodds: The Member is quite right: this is a UK-wide issue. It has been estimated that there are around 12,000 jobs at risk in Debenhams and around 13,000 jobs at risk in the Arcadia Group. That is an enormous blow to the United Kingdom's retail economy. I have a meeting tomorrow with the Business Minister, and I intend to take this up at a national level because this is something that our national Government also need to work on. However, the answer is an absolute yes. I will work with colleagues across the House to ensure that we deliver what we can to support employees and, indeed, those shopping centres where Debenhams is a significant and important anchor tenant that attracts shoppers into the other stores.

My Department already has the Assured Skills academies and the Bridge to Employment programmes. We are engaging with companies and recruiting for the Assured Skills programme. Since the start of the financial year, 192 young people out of 203 on Assured Skills programmes have gained employment. The programmes are short, sharp, targeted interventions in the labour market that are designed to return high levels of employment. Of course, we continue to operate the Bridge to Employment programmes. The Careers Service will also be on hand to try to help employees match their skills and experience to vacancies, give advice and guidance on reskilling and give information on growth and emerging sectors.

It is clear that a joined-up approach across government is absolutely necessary, and the involvement of the Minister for Communities and the Minister of Finance will be essential. However, the House should be in no doubt that the best way to support jobs in Northern Ireland is to have an open economy.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I remind the Minister that she has two minutes.

Mrs Dodds: Thank you.

Mr Carroll: I offer my sincere sympathies to the staff of Debenhams and the Arcadia Group who have lost jobs and to the others who may do so in the near future. Our workers have been treated like dirt. It really says everything about

the obscene system that we live under that a man who owns a yacht worth £100 million can play God with the lives of thousands of workers.

Does the Minister agree that those workers' pensions should not be touched or impacted in any way by these announcements? What measures will her Department take to ensure that those workers are financially protected or given the opportunity to get support to access employment, where appropriate, in the future?

Mrs Dodds: The Member makes a very important point about the pensions, particularly those in the Arcadia Group. I intend to take that up with the Business Minister tomorrow in order to ensure that those pensions are protected and that appropriate funding is put into the pension pot so that there are proper resources for people as they retire.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. As well as this being devastating news for the Debenhams workers and their families, hearing of the number of other retailers that are also in difficulties is another major blow. The news is hugely devastating for Newry, which is in my constituency, where a significant number of those retailers employ hundreds, if not thousands, of people.

The Minister alluded to some of this in her previous answers, but, for clarification, what is the Department doing proactively to engage with workers and to help them reskill and retrain to try to bridge the gap if those redundancies come?

Mrs Dodds: As I said in a previous answer, it is really important that there is a cross-departmental response. The Department for Communities, with all the employment programmes that it progresses, will be very important in addressing those issues.

As I said, my Department has been promoting the Assured Skills academies, and they are really important in the targeted approach of trying to provide employment for people, as is the Bridge to Employment scheme. It is important that we reach out and help people to retrain as quickly as possible. Because of COVID-19, my Department has, since March, offered more than 5,000 online training places to allow people to upskill and to improve their prospects in the labour market. That is a very significant intervention that we intend to continue, as it has had notable success.

Ms McLaughlin: Thank you, Minister, for coming to the House today to address this serious issue. Like others, I pass on my sympathy to any workers who have got this devastating news. Given what retail workers have gone through in recent months and given that Christmas is ahead of us, it is devastating. I will pick up where my colleague to the left of me left off in relation to Philip and Tina Green.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Can you come to your question?

Ms McLaughlin: Minister, this company has a track record of stripping assets from businesses that go into administration, leaving people without pensions and proper redundancy packages. You need to move quickly with the Business Minister to protect the assets of the Arcadia Group so that employees are not left holding pension pots that are worth nothing.

Mrs Dodds: The Member makes an important point about protecting workers' pensions, and I will raise that issue at my quad meeting with the Business Minister tomorrow.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Minister for her remarks so far and for coming to the Assembly. On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I put on record our commiserations and our support for help for the workers in Debenhams and Arcadia who are approaching a particularly poor Christmas and beyond.

Minister, in August, you set up a high street task force, which should now work closely with Land and Property Services (LPS), chambers of commerce, the Federation of Small Businesses, Retail Northern Ireland and councils to come rapidly to a set of outcomes and proposals that should be brought before us here. Will the Minister commit to have that task force, which is now in place, come up with answers and to come back to the Assembly within two weeks to explain how she will support the high street, particularly in the difficult times ahead?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question but point out to him that responsibility for the high street task force lies with the Executive Office and with the Communities Department, which are charged with bringing it together. I am sure that they will be happy to answer the Member's question in detail.

In relation to the high street — I have mentioned this on many occasions — over the past number of months, my Department has given out almost £340 million in support to businesses through the £10k grant, the £25k

grant, which was specifically targeted at retail and the high street, and the microbusiness fund. Today, I am sending for urgent procedure a scheme in relation to the self-employed, and we are looking at developing other schemes alongside the schemes operating in relation to the local restrictions. It is important to support businesses and the high street in particular. However, the most important thing that we can do is ensure that our high street is open for business and can trade safely.

I must say, Mr Deputy Speaker — I beg your indulgence on this — that I listened with great hope to the plans for the roll-out of the vaccine. I hope that we can do that as safely and as quickly as possible so that life can return to something more normal.

3.45 pm

Mr Dickson: Minister, key and crucial to any redundancy situation are negotiations with trade unions. I was shocked to hear Paddy Lillis, the general secretary of the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW), say today that neither Debenhams nor the administrators had engaged in any discussions with that union about potential redundancies in this company. Will you take that up with the Business Secretary tomorrow and encourage him to ensure that Debenhams and/or the administrators stand up to their legal obligations to consult the trade unions? While the focus is on Debenhams today, let us not forget those who have been excluded in other areas with regard to employment matters.

Mrs Dodds: Yes, I will. It is extremely important that we are able to speak to the trade unions and that we treat them as partners in an extremely difficult, sensitive situation for many of their members.

Mr Dunne: I think that we all share the pain and the loss of Debenhams and Arcadia and the potential loss to our high streets. Does the Minister recognise the real threat from the internet? I think that we are all guilty of it and we all must admit that we use the internet too much for purchasing, and that is a real risk. What can be done to address that issue, and what further support can be given to the high street? I understand that you are bringing forward a voucher scheme.

Mrs Dodds: Many businesses have indicated to me that they now operate a dual system for their business where they have an online presence and a high-street presence. It is important that we retain the high-street

presence, but sometimes the online presence also helps to sustain that business. I talked to businesses in mid-Ulster recently who gave us real examples of that.

Yes, we will bring forward a £95 million stimulus scheme for the high street in the new year. It is aimed at supporting bricks-and-mortar businesses on the high street. You will not be able to use the prepaid card or the funding online. It is aimed at supporting local businesses in local towns and local jobs.

Ms Mullan: I thank my fellow Member for Foyle for tabling the question. I also extend my thoughts to the employees facing redundancy.

Minister, in the summer, Debenhams paid off a number of staff, including staff in Derry — many of them long-term staff — who could have been furloughed at that stage. They treated them terribly. As outlined by Mr Dickson, they would not engage with the unions or with me. Will you engage with Debenhams and the administrators to ensure that workers receive their redundancy entitlements?

Mrs Dodds: I have already indicated to the House that I will write to the administrators who have now taken over responsibility for this to ensure, first, that we try to salvage as much of the business as possible and, secondly, that workers have their rights. Of course, should any of those workers feel that they have not received their rights, they should revert to the Labour Relations Agency, which has a dedicated line to help those people with their employment rights. I urge them to do so.

Mr O'Toole: It is worth clarifying that, while, correctly, the thoughts of us all are with the workers at Debenhams and Arcadia, who have been put in the most appalling situation in the run-up to Christmas, it is worth differentiating between the two businesses. One — Arcadia — is in administration, and the other — Debenhams — is in liquidation. Those are two different things. When the Minister speaks to the UK Business Secretary, can she clarify exactly where they are in respect of the pensions deficit? There is a pensions deficit specifically with Arcadia, which is in administration, that is, in significant part, due to the grotesque greed of Philip Green and his family, who have taken billions of pounds out of that business.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member come to his question?

Mr O'Toole: Can she clarify that she will have conversations about the two specific situations as they relate to the employees in Northern Ireland? We know that, in the Republic, Debenhams employees were let down badly.

Mrs Dodds: I will be happy to do so.

Mr Nesbitt: The Minister on more than one occasion has referenced the fact that Debenhams has been an anchor tenant for a number of shopping centres in Northern Ireland. Can I ask the Minister for her assessment of the viability of those centres without an anchor tenant? What steps might she take to ensure that this news does not provoke further closures and job losses in smaller outlets?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question because he describes a real danger. Many of those large stores brought people into shopping centres and then they visited the smaller shops in the shopping centres. That is why I have persisted in saying two things in the Chamber over the last number of months: we should have an economy that is open and shops that can trade, and we should try to do so safely.

The other element, in recognition of the real difficulties on the high street — we use that term generically to include all shops in Northern Ireland — is that there are real difficulties in the sector. One is from persistent rounds of closures, particularly now, in the run up to Christmas, but there is also competition from online sales. That is why we are introducing our high street stimulus scheme and why we want to support Northern Ireland businesses, shops and jobs through that stimulus scheme. I look forward to it rolling out in January and February so that we can signal a recovery as well as the hope of the roll-out of the vaccine. I hope that that will lead us to more hopeful times.

Mr Muir: As others have touched on, many workers in Northern Ireland have already suffered the scars of a Philip Green business going bust. The actions of Philip Green, as Matthew O'Toole outlined, have been grotesque. He paid his Monaco-based wife billions in dividends, while former BHS workers were left with massive holes in their pensions. Does the Minister agree that it is incumbent on Mr Green to make good his obligations to his employees?

Mrs Dodds: I have said many times that my sympathies, on this occasion, are entirely with those who are impacted and will, potentially, lose their jobs. Many of those jobs are part-

time, they are for female workers and they are lower-paid jobs. My sympathy is with them and not, of course, with Philip Green. I have committed to the House that, in my call with the Business Minister tomorrow, I will ask that they ensure that pensions are protected, particularly in Arcadia, and that pension pots are appropriately managed.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for coming to the Chamber today to discuss this devastating blow to many workers. I declare an interest, as I have a daughter who is employed by Arcadia and is incredibly worried about her future. Does the Minister agree that the best thing that we can do as an Assembly is to support retail to open as safely and as quickly as possible and for as much time as possible through the remainder of the pandemic?

Mrs Dodds: Yes. I absolutely agree. I am on record many times in the House as saying that the best way to support our economy is to have an open economy, to allow our retail and high street to trade and to do so safely for customers and employees. I would like to see retail outlets able to open again in the run-up to Christmas. It is a really important time for retail in Northern Ireland, but, of course, I urge everyone to follow the health advice to keep your distance, wash your hands, wear the face mask and behave appropriately when in retail outlets for the safety of employees and business owners. We need to ensure that our high street can function again as quickly as possible.

Ms Dolan: I pass on my sympathies to the workers and their families at this difficult time. There is no good time for job losses or job insecurity, least of all at the start of December.

Minister, you will be aware that many young people work in Debenhams and in the retail sector generally. Unlike many of their colleagues, workers under the age of 22 will receive less redundancy pay, despite having the same period of service and the same role. In light of that announcement, will you amend the relevant legislation and remove the age discrimination that exists in redundancy pay?

Mrs Dodds: Redundancy pay is a reflection of time served, the position held and wages gained. We are committed to a wide-ranging review of employment legislation, and I am sure that that can be one of the elements. However, we are where we are. It will not impact on the young people who will sadly lose their jobs through the liquidation of Debenhams and the potential administration losses at Arcadia. I hope that we can salvage something for those

businesses, for young people, for part-time workers and for the many female members of the workforce there. It is really important that we try to support them.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Minister for her statement. Minister, this is a devastating blow for our economy, for our constituencies and for the employees and businesses that are affected in the rippling consequences of the closures. The challenges facing business today are unprecedented with Brexit, COVID-19 and the rise in online sales. How can the high street survive unless we in the House change how traditional town centres and high streets operate?

Mrs Dodds: It would be interesting to have a conversation with the Member about his vision for how we change that and for how high streets operate. I am sure that the high street task force will afford him the opportunity to input to that.

For the here and now, we are very concerned. I have said repeatedly and say it again today that this is a difficult period for the economy. It has been an extraordinary and unprecedented period for the economy, and the best way to help the economy and businesses to survive and to support jobs is not only to open up the economy but to support Northern Ireland jobs, businesses and high streets. I look forward to rolling out the £95 million stimulus scheme, which, I believe, will do that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments until the next item of business.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr McGlone] in the Chair)

4.00 pm

Private Members' Business

COVID-19 Vaccine: Preparations

Mrs Cameron: I beg to move

That this Assembly welcomes the recent breakthrough in efforts to establish a safe and effective COVID-19 vaccine; highlights the importance of Northern Ireland retaining full access to the UK Government's supply network, including national distribution plans; stresses that this approach provides the best means of protecting the wider public as soon as possible; believes a professional expert should be appointed to lead on the vaccination programme in order to ensure it is available to front-line staff and those most vulnerable in Northern Ireland at the same time as the rest of the UK; and calls on the Minister of Health to outline a clear action plan for the roll-out, starting before the end of December 2020, of a COVID-19 vaccine in Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes. Please open the debate on the motion.

Mrs Cameron: I very much welcome the opportunity to propose the motion on behalf of the Democratic Unionist Party, because, today, we have light at the end of the tunnel. I am sure that all our hearts have been lifted in recent weeks with the announcements heralding the groundbreaking development of vaccines to combat the horrendous virus that has lived amongst us for the last 10 months. It is a remarkable feat of science and an answer to the prayers of millions across the world that we now stand but weeks away from administering a vaccine to those on the front line and the most vulnerable.

Sadly, for many families, the vaccine has come too late. We now know that, according to the NI dashboard, over 1,000 lives have been lost to COVID-19. Many homes across Northern Ireland struggle to bear the pain of loss to that awful disease. We know of others for whom the mental anguish of lockdown, the fear of catching coronavirus or the belief that they have

contracted COVID-19 and may pass it on to a more vulnerable loved one has been just too much to bear. The number of such lives lost will likely not be captured under the banner of COVID. As we move ahead with plans for a vaccination programme, we do so with the memory of those whom we have lost at the front and centre of our hearts and minds.

Of course, we are very much taking for granted that the regulator will approve the vaccines in the coming days and weeks. However, that process must be thorough and independent. The vaccines must be safe, and they must — absolutely must — have the confidence of the public. If and when that approval arrives, we must be ready to hit the ground running in Northern Ireland in order to protect our people. That is the purpose of the motion: to focus minds and to collectively identify issues and offer solutions.

It is a matter of concern and regret that we are, to some degree, playing catch-up in planning for the roll-out of a vaccine. When you look at Wales, for example, you see that its Health Department and Chief Medical Officer were, months ago, doing some of the work that we are doing now. We need to act with haste because, ultimately, the speed at which we can deliver a vaccine will be a matter of life or death for some.

I will focus my comments on three key areas: getting a plan; the logistics of delivering the plan; and equality of access in the plan. We come at the issue of planning with the comfort of knowing that the UK has one of the world's largest vaccine order books per head of population. The Government have secured early access to over 355 million vaccine doses through agreements with separate vaccine developers at various stages of trials. The NI share of the BioNtech/Pfizer vaccine will be around 1.14 million doses between December 2020 and September 2021. The NI share of the AstraZeneca vaccine will be around 2.85 million doses. For that, we say thank you to our Government at Westminster.

Given the confidence about what is coming, we could have planned to a greater degree, but we have not done so. Our constituents remain largely in the dark about how the vaccine will be delivered. Whilst I understand the need for the public's help in continuing to adhere to the regulations and guidelines until it is safe to do otherwise, it is also vital that we have hope for the very near future. What would be better this Christmas, during a pandemic, than saying that next Christmas could be truly normal?

What shape must the plan take? First, it is vital that front-line health workers and the most vulnerable across our Province — those living in care settings, those reliant on domiciliary care, those with underlying medical conditions and those most at risk — are able to avail themselves of the vaccine at the same stage as those in the rest of the UK, and that means accelerating this work.

Furthermore, it requires a strong, ambitious action plan for getting ready.

That plan should include detail on appointing external professional logistical expertise and support where needed; meeting workforce requirements by ensuring that staffing levels can be scaled up or down and are mobile where necessary; maximising available premises where the vaccine can be administered; procuring appropriate levels of cold storage and transport; having a strong communications strategy that addresses misinformation about the vaccine; addressing barriers to access or proximity for marginalised groups; and preparing digital systems to capture data on who has received the vaccine and how it has affected different groups. I urge the Minister to address those issues in his response to the debate.

The second area that I will highlight is the logistics of the plan. Put simply, do we have the people to deliver the vaccination programme? We are told that our GPs, many of whom have not conducted face-to-face appointments for many months now, have never been busier. We understand that a knock-on impact on workload has emanated from the worst waiting times that NI has ever seen for elective surgery and from the impact of long COVID.

With GPs under pressure, how can they do more? If they are to, can the Minister tell us how much GPs will be remunerated for administering each vaccination? With GPs under so much pressure, surely we cannot reduce public access to their day-to-day appointments in order to enable them to deliver the COVID vaccine as well. Will others be skilled up to fight the war against coronavirus? If so, will they need to have a background in healthcare?

Let us not forget that many of our front-line healthcare staff, especially our nurses, are simply exhausted, having been at the coalface of the battle for months. At a time when we should be ramping up all aspects of our healthcare system, we cannot draw more people away from that task. The Minister has often said that the health service is short-

staffed. The vaccination programme will only exacerbate that.

In that context, I urge the Minister to utilise our nation's military resource to deliver the vaccination programme alongside our medical professionals. With the understanding that the vaccine will require two doses, 28 days apart, it is vital that there are enough hands on deck to deliver and administer it. That is critical to the success of any programme. The deployment of MoD personnel to explore the logistics of rolling out a vaccine in Northern Ireland is therefore a welcome and constructive move.

The third element is equality of access to the vaccine. We have a diverse population: young and old; urban and rural; those who have underlying health conditions and those who do not; and those who work on the front line and those who do not. To meet that reality, the vaccination programme must be dynamic and flexible, owing to the fact that it will be administered in a range of settings to patients whose circumstances will differ. Serious consideration must be given to mitigating any risk, such as that to the 80-year-old with underlying health conditions who is living at home. What about cancer patients? What about the 100,000 people who were named as being clinically vulnerable because of diabetes at the start of the pandemic? Where will they be on that priority list? What about those from an ethnic minority background, who may well be more susceptible to the virus? There are many people who have many questions about how the vaccine will be administered to them, and many will question the safety of it.

We understand that it may not be possible to use certain vaccines in care homes owing to logistical issues. Why is that? Will that lead to a delay in residents being able to avail themselves of the necessary protection that they require? We have also learnt much about the impact of the varying types of underlying health conditions. That begs the question of whether priority for vaccination will be given to those on the at-risk list: those who were previously shielding. I ask the Minister to outline what we have learnt over the past period and whether that learning has impacted on the potential roll-out of the vaccine. Is there a new, nuanced list of at-risk individuals? If so, how will those individuals be made aware? I implore the Minister to communicate and to be as transparent as possible about the roll-out of this life-saving vaccine. We know that some will not take the vaccine. That is their choice, and it should always be their choice. If we want maximum buy-in to the programme, however, communication and openness will be vital.

This is the first day of the last month of 2020. I do not think that any of us has ever looked forward to a new year as much as we are this year. I look forward to Members' contributions and to the Minister's response in due course.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): I, too, acknowledge the individual and family tragedy of every one of the 1,011 deaths that we have sadly recorded to date.

After so many difficult months, I very much welcome the opportunity to consider some much yearned-for positive news, albeit that it will undoubtedly bring additional challenges of its own.

The Health Committee has briefly considered legislation and funding associated with the vaccine and will be briefed in further detail at its meeting on Thursday on plans for the roll-out of the programme. In August, the Committee received correspondence advising us of a consultation on proposed amendments to the Human Medicines Regulations 2012 to support the rapid and effective roll-out of a COVID-19 vaccine and an influenza vaccine. We were advised that that was to ensure that an unlicensed vaccine, once it is deemed safe and effective, could be given temporary authorisation pending the licensing process and subject to strengthened controls. It was also designed to allow a wider range of trained personnel to administer the vaccine, allow for promotion of the vaccine and facilitate its transportation.

The Committee sought information on consultation responses and enquired about liability in the case of any adverse impact of a vaccine. In October, while the Committee was assured that all safety checks were proceeding as normal, we were advised that an individual would be able to claim against the vaccine damage payment scheme, should they meet the eligibility criteria. The Committee was updated on the consultation responses and was advised of changes made in response, including commitments to review the relevant regulation within a year; to specify that a person of appropriate expertise will consider any question of loss of immunity for liability where conditions are breached in respect of vaccine authorisation; and to enhance supervision arrangements for the expanded workforce administering the vaccine.

During discussions on the budget last week, the Committee enquired about costings associated with COVID-19 and the vaccine in particular. We were advised that an initial £140 million had

been allocated towards the vaccine but that the British Government had since indicated that it would be purchased by them and that the charge would not be passed on to the Executive. While a lesser amount will now be required to fund the administration of the vaccine, officials stressed that a high degree of ongoing uncertainty about COVID-related costs remains more generally. The Committee welcomed those positive developments and will continue to monitor the next steps.

I would now like to make a few comments in my role as Sinn Féin health spokesperson. We all understand the grave nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and the devastating effects that the virus has had on the health and well-being of our citizens and economy. We understand that an effective vaccine is the best way to combat the virus at this time and to allow our citizens and our communities to return to more normal activities. Around the world, incalculable numbers of lives have been saved by widespread vaccination. Vaccines have all but wiped out smallpox, rubella, typhoid, measles and polio, which we witnessed in Belfast a number of years ago. Those are illnesses that can cause immense death and suffering.

The science behind any COVID-19 vaccine must be transparent, and there must be no doubt about the safety of the medicine. While the successful development of a vaccine is very welcome, we must ensure that it does not lead to complacency. It cannot be a reason to lose focus on the crucial find, test, trace, isolate, support and communicate strategy that is so badly needed to stop the transmission of COVID-19.

Ms Flynn: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gildernew: Yes.

Ms Flynn: Does the Member agree that countries that have put in place a more robust find, test and trace programme have been successful in protecting not only their people but their economy?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Gildernew: Yes, there is significant emerging evidence that that is the case, and we should look at that. We look forward to welcoming a panel to the Committee on Thursday who might give us more information.

We must also guard against community complacency at this time about the need for

basic precautions to be maintained, including washing hands, maintaining social-distancing requirements and reducing our social contacts where we can. That is particularly challenging as we enter the Christmas period, but it remains as vital now as it has since the outset of the emergency. I appeal again for everyone to do all that they can in that regard.

4.15 pm

The vaccine must be delivered through the public health system with community support. It must be made available to all equally, regardless of age, location or financial means, free of charge, with priority given to the most vulnerable: the elderly, those with underlying conditions, those in areas of high deprivation and front-line workers. It is important that that work be clinically led to ensure that the vaccine is rolled out in a way that maximises its protection.

This horrendous pandemic has shown that we need to transform our health and care system and that austerity has no role to play. A key part of rebuilding must include preparations for any public health emergency that may occur in the future. We must have the staff, equipment, systems, training and preparedness built into the health and social care system —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Gildernew: — and the ability to find, test, trace, isolate and support must be central to that plan.

Mr McGrath: I welcome the opportunity to take part in this important debate. Recent announcements of successes in the development of vaccines to treat COVID-19 have brought the greatest injection of hope that the world has witnessed this year.

I concur with the remarks made earlier about the vaccine probably being too late for many people and families. That will be difficult for them to process, so our thoughts are with those families at this time.

A major impact of COVID-19 has been loneliness — loneliness for those who have been isolating, loneliness for those who live alone and have lost their community support networks and loneliness in the face of winter darkness. The vaccine brings hope that, with the short relaxation of the regulations this Christmastime, it will help us to combat loneliness at a critical time. As we prepare for

the celebration of Christmas, knowing that the new year will bring with it hope for the roll-out of a vaccine will bring comfort to many.

Our primary concern, when the vaccine arrives, should be whether we have adequate supplies for those who need it most: our hospital and care home residents and staff; our healthcare staff; and our essential workers. They are the people who need to be protected now, and that is something that we could achieve quite quickly.

We have to remember that a vaccine is not a silver bullet to address all our worries about COVID-19. It will not depoliticise the virus or fix our economy. In the absence of a vaccine, we can follow those crucial steps of hand hygiene, face covering and social distancing to ensure the safety and well-being of the most vulnerable and our key workers. We can keep flattening the curve through our supply of common sense and personal responsibility.

The vaccine will act as another step on the road out of COVID-19. With the delivery of a vaccine will, I hope, come the loosening of the restrictions placed on the public. Important discussions will have to be had for those who want to avail themselves of the vaccine and, just as importantly, for those who do not want to take the vaccine. While it is essential that the North receive the roll-out of the vaccine at the same time as our counterparts in GB, it is also essential that any action plan for the roll-out includes discussion on a cross-border plan. The vaccine does not recognise borders, and it does not generate in predominantly nationalist or unionist areas.

I welcome the fact that discussions with GB are already under way. I also welcome the fact that the Health Minister has conveyed to the UK Government the need for lateral flow device testing kits for the North. Although, regrettably, I have little faith in the Tory Government's willingness to deliver in the interests of the people here, I have faith in our Health Minister. I want to assure him of our support as he continues his work in leading our response to COVID-19, particularly where other Ministers have shirked their responsibility.

The motion suggests that we need an accountable person to lead the roll-out. I appreciate that the newly appointed head of the Civil Service will have a part to play, but I hope that there might be some sort of task force in the Department and a senior named official there to lead the roll-out so that we can interact with that person should we have difficulties in our constituencies.

The best tool that we have to beat COVID-19 is our willingness and ability to come together to form a cohesive approach that all of us can buy into.

We have shown what we are capable of achieving here when we work together with a common purpose against a common foe. Every choice that we make from here on will determine our future, and therefore hope remains. Our hope for a better tomorrow is our single greatest weapon against this foe. It is that hope that will allow us to endure these difficult days, safe in the knowledge that our best days are ahead. We will reach those days, but only when we stick together. I support the motion.

Mr Chambers: I place on record my admiration and appreciation for the urgent response of scientists in producing a vaccine that will protect our population from COVID-19. This has been a fantastic United Kingdom achievement. It is reassuring that checks and balances have been, and are being, carried out to ensure that it is a vaccine that is safe to use.

What is our expectation of this vaccine? Is it a magic wand? In the medium to long term, it will give community and individual protection. The more people who decide to be vaccinated — I hope that it will get close to 100% — the quicker the spread of this deadly virus will be slowed down and eventually halted. In the short term, we must not allow its arrival to create any sense of complacency in the community. The virus will not go away just because a vaccination programme has begun. The messaging around washing hands, wearing face coverings, social distancing and following the guidance in regulations will still be a vital weapon in suppressing the virus while we seek to vaccinate everyone, starting with our valued NHS and care staff and then our most vulnerable citizens. That is another reason why it is not a good idea to campaign, contrary to medical and scientific advice, for the opening of certain sectors currently closed by legislation.

The motion calls for the urgent appointment of a professional expert to lead the vaccination programme. That is a sensible suggestion that I think has already been addressed by the Minister of Health. I have to say that I was a little bit disappointed by earlier remarks that implied a degree of criticism of the plan to roll out the vaccine in Northern Ireland before it has even begun. It is reassuring that a panel of vaccinators are being recruited from various parts of our health service and that they are receiving the necessary training for the task.

This programme is an enormous challenge, and certainly unprecedented in living memory. It is an exercise that will require the support of the entire Executive and everyone in the House. Any actions or words that compromise this operation, or, indeed, lead to a loss of public confidence, would be unhelpful in the extreme. We have to recognise that there will be local hiccups and not try to use them for political point-scoring. It is correct that those who will be administering the vaccine initially will be the first to receive the dose. There will be some logistical issues around how some of the vaccines produced have to be stored or transported. This will add to the challenge of the task. There will also be challenges in how the vaccine will be brought to nursing and care homes and taken out to those who are receiving care in their homes. These are all issues that the professional experts who are leading the programme will undoubtedly address.

Over recent months, there have been calls for military intervention. The Minister is on record that he would not hesitate to call in such help if it was required. To date, it has not been necessary. However, that may change in this phase of the fight against the virus. The logistics of this operation will be such that I have no doubt that the army will be able to offer support. I am sure that the Minister will be happy to deploy that help and support if it is needed. As if the roll-out of this vaccine was not a big enough challenge for the NHS, there will also be the development of a mass testing procedure. This testing will slow up transmission of the virus while we strive to protect the community through the vaccine. The pilot scheme in Queen's University, which used lateral flow devices to test students, has been a useful and helpful exercise in informing how this type of speedy testing can be rolled out for general public use.

We have come a long way in the fight against this virus. We have learned a lot about it. We have also come a long way in protecting our citizens. Hopefully, we are about to commence the last lap of what has been a difficult pandemic that has caused much pain, suffering and death within our community. If we stick together in the coming weeks and months, we will get our lives back and be able to do the things that we may have taken for granted before this virus reached our shores. It is certainly not a time to let our guard down or to start to relax. Complacency is the friend of the virus; there is a responsibility on all of us not to do anything to encourage that friendship.

Ms Bradshaw: I rise to support the motion in the hope and expectation that the Assembly will stand united behind vaccination. There are some specific issues around this motion that I want to prioritise, and there are some matters in it that remain legitimately uncertain.

First, the efforts to establish a vaccine have been a remarkable triumph of science. This motion carries, inherent within it, a clear trust of science when it comes to the development of safe and effective vaccines. Those endorsing it must also reflect that we need to trust science when it comes to managing restrictions around social distancing in order to protect public health and the health service during the period between now and increased population immunity, as is to be delivered by those vaccines.

If we are to trust the scientific experts on pharmaceutical interventions, then we must also trust them on non-pharmaceutical interventions. That does not mean that we do not challenge or debate, but it does mean that we should not be ignorant of their advice and the reasoning behind it. Indeed, the motion specifically refers to a professional expert to lead the programme, yet we have seen politicians increasingly try to overrule professional experts in recent weeks on issues as wide-ranging as the closure of gyms and the wearing of face coverings. If we are going to endorse the use of professional experts, then we have to start respecting their professional expertise. We simply cannot have parties overruling the scientific evidence in their partisan political interests on one occasion before demanding that we all trust the science and experts on another.

Secondly, which brings us to the core point that is missed in the motion, I share in the call for all of the parties in the Chamber to get behind a public awareness campaign that is focused on the need for this vaccine to protect the health of the population as a whole, and, particularly, to remove pressure from the health service. Every party leader needs to clearly commit to endorsing the use of vaccines that the regulators have deemed safe and effective and that they will fully and proactively encourage access to, and the use of, those vaccines through the agreed vaccination programme without reservation. I trust that we will soon hear a unanimous statement from the Executive to that effect.

However, I am unsure why a date — the end of December 2020 — appears in the motion. I am uncomfortable with the treatment of this issue by the UK Government as some kind of

competition to get there first. We must emphasise that, while time is clearly important, this cannot be rushed and that the vaccines used must be established by the professional experts to be absolutely effective and safe. We must allow for that in this process. Any vaccine that is used in Northern Ireland or anywhere else will have to have been through that process, and we want that regulation to be clearly detailed and definitive. In practice, that may mean that a roll-out is delayed if further assurances are sought. In our case, that would be by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency. Alternatively, of course, if authorisation proceeds quickly, it may mean that a roll-out can begin imminently, perhaps well before the end of December. However, let us not solely be driven by time; we also need to be cautious about creating false hope that the roll-out will be completely swift. Regardless of where in the world the first jab takes place, it will be well into next year — even in the best case scenario — before we will be able to return to relatively normal lives, which will be thanks to the population immunity that will be delivered by the vaccines.

We should not underestimate the global logistical challenge. Protection only comes from population immunity, which, realistically, will need to apply across as much of the globe as possible, as quickly as possible, to enable the safe resumption of international travel and trade. It is welcome news that at least one of the vaccines can be stored for some days in smaller sites, but the issues around haulage and storage are not to be underestimated, especially as two doses are likely to be required.

The strongest aspect of the motion is the call for a clear action plan to be published for the roll-out of the vaccine. We have surge plans and suchlike, so we need an action plan here that makes it clear who makes up the priority population groups. I welcome that the Health Minister has released the draft potential plan for the roll-out to the Health Committee, and I have had a quick look at that.

With regard to the Minister's recent decision to continue to pause shielding and the placing of that group on the list for prioritisation, I encourage him —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to draw her remarks to a close.

Ms Bradshaw: — to ensure that the clinically extremely vulnerable group is well up the list of people who are called forward.

4.30 pm

Mr Easton: We can all agree that the recent news about a number of vaccines being developed is extremely positive. It gives us all hope of a return to normality. I must say that I am quite optimistic and excited about it.

The roll-out of vaccines will be on a scale that we have never seen previously. Given the recent issues with the distribution of the annual flu vaccine, thorough preparation must start now. A clear action plan must be developed in order to achieve a successful roll-out. The motion calls for the appointment of a medical professional to lead on the programme. I agree with that wholeheartedly. I note that, over the weekend, the UK Government appointed a junior Minister to have oversight of the vaccination in England for that specific reason.

On the delivery of the vaccine, it is obvious that current staffing levels will not be enough to cater for the demand. What discussions has the Minister had on the potential for former NHS doctors and nurses to come back into service to assist in that roll-out? Likewise, has he discussed the potential for current student doctors and nurses to administer vaccines? What about the use of the army? Obviously, training will be required for administering the COVID vaccine. Can the Minister update the Chamber on that? Given that a large number of staff will presumably be involved in administering the COVID vaccination, can he assure the House that GP practices will be able to continue to operate for those who need telephone or in-person appointments?

Another important aspect is prioritisation for the vaccine. I understand that the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) has released a draft priority list for those who will receive the vaccine, with care home residents and staff, rightly, at the top, followed by Health and Social Care workers and people who are over 80 years of age. However, the list goes on to make a distinction between those who are under the age of 65 and at high risk from the virus and those who are under the age of 65 and at moderate risk from the virus. We have all heard about the conditions that put one at increased risk of hospitalisation: cancer, diabetes and obesity. Can the Minister advise the House which conditions may be prioritised over certain other conditions and whether the body of evidence on which such decisions are made will be published?

I highlight the point following the roll-out of the annual flu vaccine and the shortage of supply. The chairperson of the BMA's Northern Ireland

general practitioners committee said that, if the issue in the flu vaccine supply chain had been known about earlier, the over-65s who were most at risk could have been prioritised. Given the potential issues in obtaining a supply of COVID-19 vaccines when one is approved, it is imperative that the priority list is clear and well publicised.

With regard to those who were instructed to shield earlier in the year, some of the practices that delivered the flu vaccine in my constituency allowed those individuals to have their vaccine administered during an appointment. While I appreciate that practices have taken thorough measures to become COVID-secure, that allowed those people who were most clinically vulnerable to avoid the majority of those who were receiving the flu vaccine and to have private appointments. Some of those people may not have left their homes a great deal since the beginning of the pandemic. Some may be very elderly or fearful and daunted by the thought of being asked to attend a site where mass vaccination is taking place. Can the Minister advise the House whether private appointments for vaccinations could be an option for those who were shielding?

That brings me to the issue of location. I am aware that, in England, sites are being readied in preparation for the roll-out of the vaccination. Have universities or other suitable venues, such as leisure centres or church halls, been identified as potential sites for mass vaccination — particularly in north Down, by the way? On the vaccines themselves, what would happen if more than one vaccine were approved for use at around the same time? We do not yet know the conclusions on the effectiveness of each vaccine. From what I have read, it appears that some vaccines are more effective at reducing an individual's risk of serious illness from COVID-19.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. On that point, does he agree that it is vital that as much information as possible on the individual vaccines available is in the public domain?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Easton: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Yes, that is crucial. While the Oxford vaccine has shown signs of reducing the transmission of the virus, are we to prioritise certain vaccinations over others once they are

approved? Some vaccines require one dose; others require two. Will there be some logic in deciding which individual receives which vaccine? I would like confirmation from the Minister that the vaccine will be voluntary, which is also very important.

I want to make it clear that I want the funding in place now to roll this out. I want hundreds of trained people ready to roll this out. I do not want any excuses or delays. I want to get back to a normal life, as does everybody else.

Ms Flynn: I apologise that some of my points will be repetitive as other Members have touched on them, but it is important that I cover them. I support the motion and join other Members in welcoming the positive developments to secure a safe and effective COVID-19 vaccine.

Last week, I held engagements in my local area of west Belfast with a number of groups, including a pensioners' group and a youth group with children ranging from the ages of 10 to 18. What I found most interesting was that, regardless of age, the same question was to the fore of people's minds, and it was, "When can I access a vaccine, and when will we begin to see an end to coronavirus?"

Concerns have been brought to my attention, and some Members have touched on this, by people who had to clinically shield during the first wave of the pandemic. Understandably, they have been worried and anxious throughout this whole period, and it is fair to say that many have been living with the constant fear of contracting the virus and with the thought of how serious that might prove for them.

With that in mind, I have submitted a question to the Minister of Health asking which clinically vulnerable groups, apart from those over the age of 65, will be considered as priority groups for receiving the COVID-19 vaccination. I look forward to the Minister's briefing to the Health Committee on Thursday, when, I am sure, we will be provided with such further detail. However, today, I stress to the Department and to the Minister that central to any successful roll-out of this vaccination must be a clear communication strategy with the public on what to expect and when to expect it.

All the groups that I have spoken of — pensioners, young people, those who were shielding — as well as the wider public need firm assurances that, when the vaccine is ready, it will be safe and free, and it will be made accessible as swiftly as possible to all,

regardless of age, gender, financial position or location.

The Minister and the Executive must initiate a compelling, powerful information campaign to generate maximum awareness of the importance and safety of the COVID-19 vaccine. A high uptake of any future vaccination programme will be crucial, as we all know, in defeating this virus.

People need to know and understand that countless lives are saved daily across the globe as a result of vaccines. As referenced earlier by the Committee Chair, vaccines have all but wiped out serious diseases such as smallpox, polio, measles, mumps, rubella and many more. We have a responsibility to make people appreciate and take pride in the fact that this is the chance for our generation to eliminate coronavirus.

I am conscious that today's debate will, as the Deputy Chair of the Committee and others mentioned, be of little comfort to families mourning the death of a loved one who tragically lost their battle with COVID-19. Earlier, Ms Cameron referred to the fact that, sadly, we passed the sad milestone of 1,000 deaths today. However, I hope that, in some small way, the progression of a wide-scale vaccination programme will instil some happiness, contentment or hope in the wider public and that we can all begin to plan and to aspire to live our lives just as we used to before.

Mr Sheehan: This virus has turned all of our lives upside down, and not just here. On the face of the planet, there is barely a country that has not been badly affected by the advent of this new virus. Here, it has shone a light on the inadequacies of our health service as a result of years of underfunding. As we come out of this, and hopefully as the vaccine brings an end to the crisis that we are in, I hope that there will be a complete review of the funding of our health service so that, in the event of any future pandemic of this nature, it will be ready to deal with it. The virus has also shone a light on the health inequalities in our society. As usual, those on the margins are the ones who have been the most adversely affected by the pandemic.

Those are issues for the future. The immediate future, hopefully, is bright. We have a vaccine coming to deal with the virus. We know, and this has been mentioned by a number of Members, how much vaccines have advanced the cause of medicine in the past 100 years. According to the World Health Organization, 28

diseases can be treated, and in some cases almost eradicated, by the use of vaccines, including diphtheria, hepatitis A, B and E, measles, meningitis, polio, rubella, TB, yellow fever and whooping cough. The list goes on. When the virus becomes available, I will certainly be taking it and my children will be taking it.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Will the Member give way?

Mr Sheehan: Certainly.

Mr Swann: We will give you the vaccine rather than the virus. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Sheehan: I beg your pardon. I was getting carried away there. As I said, I will be taking the vaccine and my children will be taking the vaccine. I will be encouraging everyone to take the vaccine, because that is what we need.

One of the questions that we must ask about an action plan, which, I hope, we are going to see more detail on over the coming weeks, is this: who is going to get the vaccine? We understand that the most vulnerable should get the vaccine first, but then where will the vaccine be delivered? Whom will it go to? Will it be care homes, of course, then the over-70s, then the over-60s and so on?

Ms Ennis: I thank my colleague for giving way. He will be well aware of the nightmare situation that those who reside in assisted living settings have had to endure throughout the pandemic. They have effectively been unable to leave the places where they reside owing to the PHA classing them as domiciliary settings or care home settings. I am sure that my colleague will join me in calling on the Minister of Health to ensure that those who live in assisted living settings are among some of the first to receive the vaccine when it is rolled out.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Sheehan: I could not agree more. That is the type of question that the Minister is going to have to answer at some stage. There is the broader question of who is going to get the vaccine, and then there is the question of at what stage it will be delivered to them.

There is another question: who is going to deliver the vaccine? I do not want to make a political point here, but some of the Members who are advocating the use of the British military to roll out the vaccine are trying to make

some sort of political point. I do not envisage the British military being on the Falls Road giving out a vaccine for the virus. That is not realistic. We have enough people, and that part of the action plan that the Minister is going to roll out will need to say who will be administering the vaccine. Will it be GPs? Will it be community pharmacists, who were saying recently that they are at the ready to deliver it if they are needed? Will it be paramedics, district nurses and nurses in hospitals delivering it to staff, patients and so on? All of that detail needs to be clarified.

4.45 pm

Clarity is also needed on where the vaccine is going to be delivered. We already heard talk about leisure centres being used for mass testing. Perhaps GAA clubs or other sports premises, where a lot of people would be confident about going for their jab, could be used as needs be. All those things are important.

Hopefully, the vaccine will be here soon. I do not have a lot of confidence in this British Government if they are behind providing and delivering the vaccine here. They have made an absolute hames of everything that they have done concerning the pandemic so far. I hope that they get it right on this occasion, that we get the vaccine soon and that we get our whole population vaccinated. In the meantime, we need to be sure that we have a proper contact-tracing system. I welcome the Minister's acknowledgement yesterday that I have some expertise in that field.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close, please?

Mr Sheehan: Certainly, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It is important that we have that fallback situation in case there are any delays with a vaccine.

Mr McCrossan: I also support the motion. It has been a very painful and difficult year for our society, the world, families, business and those who have lost loved ones. We have heard that in excess of 1,000 people have now lost their life to the virus here in Northern Ireland. The virus has shattered dreams, ripped the hearts from families, devastated our economy, taken people's livelihood and turned our entire world upside down, but, at the heart of the virus, there has always been our heroes in our health service. Those people have stood on the front line and have not only provided the necessary care for people who were in desperate need but

have had to communicate with families who were in great pain and drive themselves beyond their own limits — emotionally, mentally and physically. It is important to acknowledge that they have led the fight against the virus and provided support to every person in our society. It has touched our heart in some way for the past nine or 10 months. There is light at the end of the tunnel, and I am very relieved to see it. The vaccine is welcome. The memory of the damage that the virus has caused will live with each of us for the rest of our life, particularly those on the front line who have held the hands of the dying, and those who have lost loved ones.

The vaccine is welcome news. Society can breathe a sigh of relief at last, but not just yet. We still have the Christmas period to get through. The slightest bit of complacency could put a life at risk. The House needs to be clear that the most dangerous period that we have faced in the last year is upon us. The Christmas period, when, naturally, we come together with family and friends, is the most dangerous and critical time. If we are taking this seriously, we need to take every necessary step to ensure that we stick to the advice.

Over the past week, I have raised the importance of getting the vaccine out to the most vulnerable. I echo the words of colleagues across the House in ensuring that that happens. I also welcome that there are five stages to the roll-out, with the first focusing on our dedicated healthcare staff, care home residents and those over the age of 80. It is my understanding that the plan will advance to those over 65, then to those under 65, then to those over 50, and then widened out to the general population. There is a job of work, because, as always, social media has the naysayers who are asking how a vaccine has been developed so quickly. It has been a global effort to save human life, and we need to be very clear that that has been the case. For the next number of weeks, we need to urge people to take the vaccine and to encourage their families, friends and community to do so. The leadership of that message needs to come consistently, clearly and strongly from the House.

As to logistics, I represent rural West Tyrone, and my constituents will be asking themselves how far they will have to travel to access the vaccine. We should also remember that many in my constituency and in other rural parts have no access to vehicles. Therefore, where the vaccine is to be provided will be critical to them in alleviating any anxiety that they may have. That is why ensuring that it goes to the hearts and hubs of communities is important.

Mr Gildernew: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCrossan: I will indeed.

Mr Gildernew: Does the Member agree that, in order to provide accessibility and to build community support, it would be of value to talk to community groups such as the GAA or rugby clubs that provided good support at the start of the pandemic?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Member for his intervention. It is clear that we are all in this together. A single life lost is one too many. We all face a huge challenge as we work together to get the vaccine rolled out and to support those with responsibility for overseeing it. That is why, across these island and this island, we need to work with our counterparts to ensure that we have a united approach to battling the virus.

After that, we face big challenges. The battle does not end when the vaccine is rolled out. Work will then start to repair the damage that the virus has left in its path in mental health services, investment in rural services and the health service, as Mr Sheehan rightly pointed out. I do not envy the Minister, but I put it on record that he has my support and that of my party in overseeing a difficult and challenging task ahead. I also put firmly on the record a thank you to our healthcare staff, who have led the battle against the virus.

Ms Armstrong: I welcome the motion, as it provides an opportunity for the Health Minister to confirm his roll-out of the vaccination programme across Northern Ireland.

I will take all of us on a step back. On behalf of the Alliance Party, let me say that we are extremely grateful to the scientists, biochemists, doctors, researchers, nurses, lab technicians and all who have helped to get us to the vaccine.

We all have concerns about circuit breakers and about not being able to see vulnerable family members. Some businesses are at breaking point, and, sadly, some have already closed. In the House, we are acutely aware of the pressure that the Department of Health and all working in it are under. This is the first chink of light, the first real hope of a solution that will bring the misery of COVID-19 under control and, hopefully, lead to the eradication of the virus.

The planned, large-scale vaccination programme is, I am sure, being developed with the engagement of multi-professional health experts across the system, including primary care, general practice, pharmacy, community services, care homes and school health. It is potentially linked to acute services, for example A&E and outpatients. While all that goes on, we need to consider the public. Our population needs infrastructure availability and service capacity, and all those demands need careful consideration. If we are to take forward a vaccination programme, the House wants to learn more about it. As others have said, there needs to be clear guidance for the public. We need to manage their expectations and give them confidence that the vaccine will work.

In considering how the vaccine will be rolled out, I expect that a well-organised system will break down the population into priority groups. It is, of course, vital that healthcare staff be among the first to receive the vaccine, but I urge the Minister to ensure that all key workers and front-line staff, as mentioned by the Chair of the Health Committee, are taken into consideration in the first wave. That should include the police, public transport staff, people who work in residential and domiciliary care, Prison Service staff, teachers and classroom support and foster and kinship carers. It should come as no surprise to the Minister when I say that the absolutely exhausted, unpaid carers should be in that first wave.

Mr McCrossan mentioned access to the vaccine. I worked in community transport for years before I became an MLA, providing access to services for older people and those with disabilities across Northern Ireland. It will be a key issue to ensure that people who are defined as vulnerable can get to where the vaccine will be administered. It does not matter who says what and whether it is a church or a GAA hall, a school or anywhere else: if you cannot get to it, there is no point in it being there. I ask the Minister of Health to work with the Minister for Infrastructure to ensure that older people, people with disabilities, people with limited mobility and rural dwellers all have access to a public transport solution if needed.

I ask everyone to consider 2013. In 2013, we had one of the heaviest snowfalls in Northern Ireland for years. If that happens in 2021, what will we do? We need to think about the worst-case scenarios and give people an honest-to-goodness solution. I ask the Minister for a clear public messaging campaign that needs to start as soon as he has a clear idea of what the programme will look like. We do not need any

more podiums of doom, Minister; we need to look at people and ask them to work with us.

As Mr McCrossan said, there will be naysayers out there and the people who will never take a vaccine. It would not matter what the vaccine was for; they would never take it. They will say that it is all rubbish and that the Government have made it all up. However, this will save lives. Those scientists — our heroes — have come up with something that will save the lives of people across Northern Ireland. We need to ensure that the public come with us, that their expectations are managed and that they have confidence. The best place that they can get that confidence is here in the House. Leadership is unity, and unity is what is needed in the time ahead. We have lost over 1,000 people: we do not need to lose any more.

Mr Carroll: We certainly welcome the news that a COVID-19 vaccine may now become available. We have shared in the suffering and tragedy of the pandemic with people around the world over many months — almost a year. It has been a stark reminder of our common humanity, because, as people have said, the pandemic pays no heed to borders or nationality. It has impacted on all of society, but, as others pointed out, not and never equally. Healthcare workers risked their lives on front lines to save people's lives and sometimes paid tragically with their lives, whilst billionaires, some of whom are stuck on private islands, saw their wealth increase exorbitantly during the pandemic.

The health and safety of the low-paid essential workers who kept society moving during the pandemic were treated as an afterthought by those who were most concerned with how the likes of Randox and other big corporations could profit during the pandemic. The vulnerable and the low-paid have suffered most through botched government health and financial relief policies, while the politically connected rule with one law for them and another for the rest of us. Workers and small businesses have fallen through the cracks time and again, while government contracts worth billions have been dished out to a corrupt, politically connected golden circle. Shameless profiteering has been ramped up by unscrupulous people in power during the pandemic.

The pandemic has revealed the impact of decades of neglect and attacks by government on our health service, but it has also made clear why our health service and all other public services are vital and so essential. The private sector cannot deal with a crisis on this scale,

because it is geared towards profits primarily and not the health and well-being of society. The private care homes debacle has demonstrated why privatisation has failed residents, workers and families. The era of Stormont looking after the likes of Moy Park bosses while crushing the health service into the ground must end. When the pandemic finally ends, a new era of equality must begin in which our health service and all our public services are fully protected and funded; care home residents, their families and workers are kept safe and paid properly; poverty pay and zero-hours contract are ended; students are not treated as disposable; people of colour and migrant communities are treated with the respect that they deserve; and bosses and politicians are no longer allowed to shamelessly profit and make rules and laws, often to suit themselves.

We still face the immediate danger of a life-taking virus, which has been compounded many times over by the catastrophic response of the Governments on these islands, including the Executive. While we certainly welcome the potentially extremely positive news, my party thinks that several points need to be raised. We are unlikely to be able to vaccinate our way out of the pandemic, at least not this year. Therefore, there will be a continuing need to pursue a strategy to protect people. We have joined others in calling for an all-Ireland zero COVID strategy against the policies coming from Westminster, the Dáil and, indeed, Stormont.

The need for an all-Ireland integrated health strategy has been made all the more evident this week as the guidelines in the North and South go in different directions, and that is a continued recipe for disaster.

5.00 pm

Secondly, the distribution programme for a vaccine should not be done in a way that creates disparities. It should be done on an all-Ireland basis, with healthcare workers, the vulnerable and the elderly being first in the line. We cannot have a situation where people are being vaccinated in Derry but not Donegal or vice versa. We need to make sure that the vaccine is safe, and therefore, the patent should be made available for scientific scrutiny. The vaccination science should be transparent, and that is crucial to build public confidence in any vaccine programme and to keep people safe. It is worth mentioning that Jonas Salk who created the polio vaccine said:

"There is no patent. Could you patent the sun?"

It is disgraceful that the profits of major corporations could soar as a result of COVID vaccinations.

Connected to that, we need to invest in education on the scientific and health merits of utilising a vaccine, as others have said. A lot of confusion about the science is swirling around and being promoted by former US President Donald Trump — assuming that he is going to walk out of office — neo-Nazis and the far right, and other deplorable conspiracy theorists.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Carroll: Sure. We should invest in education rather than rely on punitive measures to encourage participation in a vaccine programme. Finally, as I said, my party does not think that corporations should be able to profiteer from the misery that people have been afflicted with this year.

Mr Swann: As Members have said, today we reached another sad milestone in this pandemic, where the number of COVID-related deaths recorded on my Department's COVID dashboard has passed 1,000. We must always remember that we are not talking about statistics but much-loved people who will be desperately missed. My profound sympathies go to every bereaved family. This is a harsh reminder of the threat posed by COVID-19, and no one should underestimate the virus or delude themselves that it can never affect them.

I am very aware that there is a small and vociferous minority who seek to play down the coronavirus risks. To anyone trying to play it down and minimise the impact, I say, please, think again. This vaccine has come too late for those people. So let us not lose or abuse the time between now and when we are able to deliver the vaccine.

I thank Members for bringing this motion, as it provides a timely opportunity to provide the House with the update that was given to the Executive last Thursday. The update will answer many of the initial questions that Mrs Cameron posed when she moved the motion.

When the Executive returned on 11 January this year, no one in the Chamber could have imagined what lay ahead or that we would soon be entering a once-in-a-generation global health crisis that would push all of us — not

least our front-line health and care staff — to the extremes. However, while the pandemic has been a health crisis, the impact has been much wider, as has been mentioned. Daily life has changed beyond anything we could have imagined at the start of this year.

We are now in the midst of a further period of extended restrictions. I fully appreciate the huge impact that these restrictions are having across so many sectors in Northern Ireland and the many sacrifices that people are making. However, thanks to those restrictions, the number of infections is starting to come down, although the system is still under significant pressures. As I speak, there are still COVID-positive inpatients in our hospitals and a high, but stable, number in critical care. These are not decisions that anyone wants to take, but they are necessary. They will prevent our health service from being overwhelmed. They will save lives, and not just the lives of patients with COVID but of any patient who urgently needs treatment.

I have listened with interest to Members' contributions, and I should state that I wholeheartedly support the motion. This is an important subject and a valuable discussion, but I am sure that all Members will agree that it is imperative that we get this right.

At this point, I will take a few moments to describe the planning and preparations for the vaccination programme. As has been said across the House, we need experts to lead the House, and, as has been said by most parties, we need experienced health service professionals who know what they are doing and can act quickly and decisively.

The motion calls for the appointment of a professional expert to lead our vaccination programme. I can confirm that that has already happened. I have appointed Patricia Donnelly, who is a former director of acute services in the Belfast Trust and a highly experienced health professional, to drive and oversee the planning and delivery of our vaccination programme. She has been working extensively with officials and clinicians in the Department, the Public Health Agency and the health and social care trusts for some time, and she gave a presentation to the Executive last Thursday on the advanced stages of planning.

Vaccination plans are at an advanced stage and will be delivered over a number of phases, which will see different groups or age cohorts being invited in to receive the vaccine over the following months. The vaccination programme will build on the Northern Ireland health service

expertise in delivering immunisation programmes, as was mentioned by the Chair of the Committee and a number of Members.

As Members may be aware, the UK Government have secured access to seven vaccine candidates across four vaccine types, which could result in 357 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines being made available in the United Kingdom. While I am always open to all-island solutions, the UK did not sign up to an EU procurement process as the Commission confirmed that it was not possible for the UK to pursue parallel negotiations with potential vaccine suppliers. That meant that the UK would be required to stop its negotiations with manufacturers with which the EU had launched negotiations, and I suspect that Members will agree that that would have been a mistake and a challenge.

The UK is well positioned nationally. The Government have secured early access to doses through agreements with several separate vaccine developers at various stages of trials. I can confirm that Northern Ireland will receive its Barnett share — 2.85% — of the total UK stock of COVID-19 vaccines that are eventually approved for use. It is important to say that the vaccines will be deployed only for use when they have passed the required safety and efficacy tests and received authorisation from the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA). I assure everyone that, while the process is being progressed as rapidly as possible, the experts in the MHRA will provide that approval only when they are assured that the vaccine is safe and effective.

Nevertheless, we expect to have authorised vaccines available for use shortly, and we are ready to begin a programme once sufficient quantities are in place. Realistically, it may be early in the new year before the full vaccination programme is in operation, but we are hopeful that the programme will be launched in only a couple of weeks in each of the four UK countries. As I mentioned earlier, the planned vaccination programme will be a major logistical exercise that will last many months and will take us well into the middle of next year at least.

Members will be aware from media reports of some of the requirements for the different vaccines in terms of storage, transport and other logistical issues. At present, the two vaccines that are expected to be used first require two doses to be given 28 days apart, which answers some of Mr Easton's questions. We are therefore planning on the basis of a number of scenarios based on different vaccines becoming available at different times.

This is a developing situation, and our plans are flexible enough to respond to any emerging developments.

The vaccines will be rolled out to eligible groups as quickly as possible, bearing in mind the limitations of where the Pfizer vaccine can be safely deployed. This will initially involve health and social care workers and care home staff. It will extend to the over-80s and care home residents early in the new year as additional vaccines become available,

In addition, we are rapidly exploring the most effective way to safely deliver vaccines to other priority groups as quickly as possible. The Pfizer vaccine, which is expected to come online first, presents a number of logistical challenges. With colleagues in England, Scotland and Wales, we are continuing to work through those challenges. The handling of subsequent vaccines is expected to be more in line with that of routine vaccines. It will therefore be easier to deploy those outside of the mass vaccination sites, and it should allow them to be delivered by GPs and others, as some mentioned in the House, in the same way as the current flu vaccination programme.

I mentioned earlier the importance of getting this right. The most important aspect of this is to have a systemic, reliable and sustained vaccination programme. While we want this to start as quickly as possible, we also need to minimise waste and, above all, ensure that vaccines are delivered in the correct environment for them to be effective. The vaccination workforce will initially be based mainly on occupational health staff, trust peer vaccinators and GP staff, who have a proven track record of delivering the annual flu programme to thousands of patients over a 12-week period. The exact composition and location of vaccination teams will vary according to the requirements of the different vaccines and the population receiving the vaccine as well as the timescales of the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency approval.

On 16 November, an expression of interest was issued to all registered healthcare professionals, including pharmacists, nurses, dentists and allied health professionals, in relation to becoming sessional vaccinators. These individuals will be trained up and brought into the programme as and when they are required. In addition, we are seeking healthcare assistants and admin staff to support the programme and free up the time of the vaccinators. As always during this pandemic, I have been overwhelmed by the commitment

and enthusiasm of staff from across the health and social care system. Already, almost 1,000 individuals have registered their interest in helping to deliver this programme, and over 400 applications have now been submitted.

In recent weeks, I have received a number of queries related to how different groups will be prioritised in receiving the vaccine, an issue that has also been raised here today. Vaccination policy in Northern Ireland is based on the recommendations provided by the JCVI, which advises the four UK Health Ministers. Made up of independent experts, it advises the Government on which vaccines the UK should use and provides advice on who should be offered the vaccination first. The JCVI has access to all relevant information on the COVID vaccines and to the clinical data on the groups who suffer the worst outcomes if they catch COVID-19.

Although we are not strictly obliged to follow JCVI recommendations, up to this point, Northern Ireland has always implemented its recommendations. It is appropriate that we follow its expert advice on who should be offered the vaccine first. On Friday 25 September, the updated JCVI interim position on prioritisation was published. It was produced on the basis of a combination of clinical risk stratification and an age-based approach. It has advised that the vaccine first be given to care home residents and staff, followed by people over 80 and health and social care workers, and then to the rest of the population in order of age and risk. It is expected that this will help to optimise the targeting and the deliverability of the vaccines. The JCVI position is available on its website and will be updated as more information becomes available.

An effective vaccine will be the best way to protect the most vulnerable from coronavirus. It is the biggest breakthrough since the pandemic began.

It is a huge step forward in our fight against coronavirus and will potentially save tens of thousands of lives. Once vaccinations begin, we will closely monitor the impact on individuals, on health service pressures and on the spread of the virus. As large numbers of people from the at-risk groups are given a vaccine, we will be able to examine the impact on infection rates, on hospitalisations and of reduced deaths. If successful, that should, in time, lead to a substantial reassessment of current restrictions.

5.15 pm

In closing, I want to leave the House with three main messages. First, work to deliver the vaccines is well advanced. Our health service is primed and ready to deliver a vaccination programme, safely and systematically, and I look forward to updating the Health Committee in more detail on Thursday.

Secondly, mass vaccination is an enormous logistical challenge, and it will take time. There is no way around that and no quick fix. We expect that it will take many months before the vaccination programme is complete, and we need to recognise that we are not through this yet.

Thirdly and finally, although there is some way to go, the appearance of these vaccines is real grounds for hope. An effective vaccine will be the best way in which to protect the most vulnerable from coronavirus, and it is the biggest breakthrough since the pandemic began. Although the pandemic is not over yet, and there are still difficult decisions ahead, this may, at last, signal the turning of the tide.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call Jonathan Buckley to conclude and make a winding-up speech on the debate and the motion.

Mr Buckley: I begin by thanking Members for their positive contributions to the debate and their support. There have been many dark days in the House throughout 2020, but, even as we debate the motion today, there are glimmers of light. For the first time, and on record, health officials have confirmed that if the Pfizer vaccine is given the go-ahead in Northern Ireland, it will be good to go, with roll-out on 14 December. That is something from which Members can take great heart and solace.

If I had to sum up Members contributions, I would begin with one word and one word only: hope. The proposer of the motion, Mrs Pam Cameron, whom I thank for being a co-signatory to the motion, talked about the light at the end of the tunnel. Those points were echoed right across the Chamber. Colin McGrath talked about an injection of hope. Órlaithí Flynn talked about the hopes of many from different groups in her constituency. That is something that is shared, regardless of constituency or country, right around the world.

Pat Sheehan talked about the bright future ahead. Daniel McCrossan talked of a painful and difficult year of shattered dreams but acknowledged, in a strong contribution, the support and help of the NHS staff who have been on the front line of this battle. Alan

Chambers, Paula Bradshaw and Kellie Armstrong talked of their appreciation of the scientific efforts behind vaccine development. It goes on record, from all Members, that we owe a great deal to those scientists who have worked diligently to try to produce a vaccine, safely and efficiently, to deal with this pandemic.

Paula Bradshaw referenced the appointment of professional expertise in the motion and questioned some Members' sincerity on that point. Although there will always be widespread differences on the effects of lockdown from a range of experts in their field, it is right that politicians challenge those viewpoints as well. By "expert", this motion made specific reference to the logistical administration to ensure speed and accuracy of a vaccine programme.

Colm Gildernew, the Chair of the Health Committee, talked about the vital Committee scrutiny that is ongoing and hopefully will continue on Thursday. It is a vital aspect of the engagement required. He also mentioned, along with Órlaithí Flynn and Pat Sheehan, the worldwide vaccines and how they have transformed our world. He referenced 28 worldwide diseases that have been eradicated through vaccines. That is a very important point, and one that we should all bear in mind.

We are all too aware of the challenges at hand. We live in unprecedented times and face a monumental task on many different fronts on the road to a coronavirus recovery.

The effects of COVID-19 and, indeed, the consequential lockdown have presented challenges that will take a considerable time to overcome and may present some that perhaps we have not even encountered yet, sadly.

Almost all families have been affected either directly or indirectly by the virus. Indeed, the development of a vaccine is quite simply a matter of life and death for some, including those who are vulnerable and high-risk and those who are desperately waiting on a return to normality.

Amidst the challenges that we have faced, I welcome the recent breakthrough in establishing a safe and effective vaccine. We all must hope that this is the turning point, as the Minister said, on the road to recovery. That was echoed right across Members' contributions today.

Central to the fight against COVID-19 is our capacity to research, trial and develop a vaccine. From day one, as mentioned, the

United Kingdom has been a leading influence in the global effort to develop a vaccine, and, to that end, we can be proud and thankful for local companies such as Almac, which is in my constituency, for their key role in the clinical trials that led to the first effective vaccines. That is an incredible contribution from the scientific field here in Northern Ireland.

The United Kingdom boasts one of the world's largest vaccine order books per head of population, securing early access to over 355 million vaccine doses through agreements with seven different developers at various stages of trials. Northern Ireland alone is projected to account for a share of nearly four million vaccines from phase 3 of trials from BioNTech, Pfizer and AstraZeneca.

With that supply network in place, it is now essential that Northern Ireland develops a decisive action plan, as outlined by the Minister, on a roll-out of a vaccine so that the wider public and those who are most vulnerable can get the protection that they urgently need. Some Members made reference to that in their contribution. I echo the points about a clear communications plan — I think that that was mentioned by Órlaithí Flynn and others — in order to ensure the safe roll-out of a vaccine and to address some of the concerns that people will, rightly, have about the speed of its development.

The action plan must be —.

Mr McGrath: I thank the Member for giving way. Do you agree that, alongside the plan that there is going to be, there needs to be one for easing the regulations, although obviously not immediately for all the regulations? People need to have hope that, as we start the vaccine process, we will also start to have the road back to normality. People may have a concern that we are going to be looking at a vaccine that may take until the summer to deliver, and they are keen to get back to some sense of normality soon.

Mr Buckley: Absolutely, and I thank the Member for his intervention. It is vital that the news of and potential roll-out of a vaccine brings hope about some form of normality in the short term for those many businesses and people right across your constituency and mine who have faced the realities of lockdown and its effects on their business and livelihood.

The action plan must be strong and ambitious, detailing how workforce requirements can be met and how to maximise the number of premises where vaccinations can be

administered. Members right across the House made reference to the different types of community settings that have already played a vital role, but, in anticipation of a vaccine, we must be strong and ambitious in how we can mass vaccinate our population in order to ensure that we put an end to this disastrous saga of lockdown and COVID-19.

It is essential that external professional logistical expertise is appointed to lead on a vaccination programme. We simply cannot get this wrong. I welcome the appointment of Patricia Donnelly and the detail of the decisive plan that the Minister outlined. At the Committee on Thursday, I would like to hear how the logistical expertise of the personnel that are involved can be part of that solution with the task force.

With that in mind, we must emphasise that any vaccination programme that is put in place be dynamic and flexible owing to the fact that it will be administered in a range of different settings to patients whose circumstances will, inevitably, differ. That point was highlighted quite well by Sinéad Ennis about those in a home setting who have not been able to access community facilities because of PHA advice.

I welcome that the initial recommendation set out by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation prioritises healthcare and care staff to be among the first to receive access to vaccines.

It is crucial that that be upheld, given the vulnerability of those whom they care for and the grave consequences of the infection being in such settings.

We must take into account the needs of conscientious objectors to vaccines and respect their right to choose. That is vital. While we sell the message of hope, we all must bear it in mind that there are conscientious objectors.

Ensuring that there are enough hands on deck to deliver and administer a vaccine — indeed, some may require two doses weeks apart, as outlined by Alex Easton — is critical to the success of the programme. At a time when the health service's capacity is under pressure, the deployment of personnel, be they from the Ministry of Defence or elsewhere, to explore the logistics of rolling out a vaccine in NI is a welcome and constructive development.

There is absolutely no doubt that the distribution of a COVID-19 vaccine is a large logistical, operational challenge, but it is one that we must act on now and be adequately

prepared for. Northern Ireland cannot lag behind any other region or country in its preparations. The first seemingly insurmountable challenge has been overcome. The sun is finally setting on what has been a horrendous 2020. The glimmers of a new dawn await our nation, and I hope that the Executive and, indeed, the world grasp the opportunity with both hands.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly welcomes the recent breakthrough in efforts to establish a safe and effective COVID-19 vaccine; highlights the importance of Northern Ireland retaining full access to the UK Government's supply network, including national distribution plans; stresses that this approach provides the best means of protecting the wider public as soon as possible; believes a professional expert should be appointed to lead on the vaccination programme in order to ensure it is available to front-line staff and those most vulnerable in Northern Ireland at the same time as the rest of the UK; and calls on the Minister of Health to outline a clear action plan for the roll-out, starting before the end of December 2020, of a COVID-19 vaccine in Northern Ireland.

Adjourned at 5.27 pm.

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