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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 5 May 2020

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Stalford] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Members, let me begin this morning by, again, formally recording the Assembly's condolences to those families who have been bereaved by COVID-19 since we last met and recording our admiration and appreciation for all who are working on the front line to try to prevent other families from losing those who are dear to them.

Committee for the Executive Office: Deputy Chairperson

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I wish to advise the House that the Speaker has received notification of the resignation of Mr Mike Nesbitt as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Executive Office with immediate effect. The nominating officer for the Ulster Unionist Party has informed the Speaker that Mr Doug Beattie has been nominated as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Executive Office, also with immediate effect. Mr Beattie has accepted the nomination, and the Speaker is satisfied that the requirements of Standing Orders have been met.

Executive Committee Business

Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I inform the Assembly that the Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill received Royal Assent on Monday 4 May 2020. It will be known as the Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Act (Northern Ireland) 2020, and it will be chapter 2.

Assembly Business

Standing Order 10(2)(a) and Standing Orders 20 and 20A: Suspension

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The first item on the Order Paper is a motion to suspend Standing Orders. This will be treated as a business motion and there will be no debate.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I again object that for the fourth time without debate — that is critical — the House is about to abrogate fundamental scrutiny powers of Ministers by, yet again, removing the right of Members of the House to ask questions for oral answer and topical questions of Ministers. I think that that is a fundamental mistake in itself. I understand that some Ministers are at the forefront of the coronavirus crisis and the handling of it, but some are not. Why can they not come to the House and answer questions? Why should the House decide another month's exclusion of that — another month of trampling of scrutiny in the House — and to do all that without debate? The Business Committee could have brought, along with the motion, a motion to suspend Standing Order 12(7) to allow debate on what we are going to be asked to nod through. It did not even do that. That is wholly disrespectful of the rights of the House and the scrutiny that the House is supposed to afford to Ministers.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I have sympathy with the Member's point. At its meeting last week, the Business Committee reviewed the decision on Assembly questions and agreed to extend that suspension, as the Member noted, for a further four weeks to allow Departments to focus on the delivery of public services to deal with COVID-19. That decision will be reviewed by the Business Committee at the end of this month. The Member has put his comments on record and I hope that they will be considered when the Business Committee looks at the matter again.

Mr K Buchanan: I beg to move

That Standing Order 10(2)(a) and Standing Orders 20 and 20A be suspended until 10 June 2020.

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

Question put.

Some Members: Aye.

Mr Allister: No.

Question put a second time and agreed to.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As there are Ayes on all sides of the House and, at the second time of asking, there were no dissenting voices, I am satisfied that cross-community consent has been demonstrated. The motion is agreed.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Order 10(2)(a) and Standing Orders 20 and 20A be suspended until 10 June 2020.

Ministerial Statements

COVID-19

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister for Infrastructure, Ms Nichola Mallon, that she wishes to make a statement. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members that in the light of social distancing being observed by parties, I have relaxed the Speaker's ruling that Members must be in the Chamber to hear a statement if they want to ask a question. 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 notifying the Business Office or the Speaker's Table directly. I remind Members again to be concise in asking their questions. As this is a plenary session, we do not have the flexibility afforded by the Ad Hoc Committee. If Members monopolise time, those who are further down the speaking list will not be called. I ask Members not to make speeches and to keep their questions short and focused.

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, for

the opportunity to update Members on the ways in which my Department is contributing to the fight against COVID-19. At the outset, I want to recognise that while this is a challenging time for all of us, my thoughts are with those families who have, sadly, lost loved ones and those individuals who are fighting against COVID-19 on the front line.

We are in week 7 of the lockdown. Families, businesses and communities across Northern Ireland have been incredible in playing their part to save lives and protect each and every one of us from the virus. The task has not been easy. Friends and families have been torn apart, unable to share a cup of tea, a hug or even just chat on the same sofa. That is not the life that we all know and it is not easy on any of us. This will be a lonely time for many people — a challenging time — and it is important that, in this place, we say to people at home that it is OK not to be OK. We need to come together to help and support each other as we make our way through.

Lockdown is not easy. It goes against everything that we know and who we are and our need for social interaction, not least with those whom we love. As Members will be aware, the Executive will be reviewing the regulations this week. Guided by the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser, we will look closely at what opportunity there is to safely ease some of the restrictions. A robust testing, tracing and tracking system across the island must be a critical component of that.

We all need to work together in the fightback against COVID-19, and, today, I take the opportunity to provide you with an update on the further action that my Department has taken since my statement to the Ad Hoc Committee on 16 April, as we remain focused on, first and foremost, protecting people and keeping them safe and, in doing so, minimising, as much as possible, disruption to our services.

I am conscious that one of the areas of significant disruption for people is the provision of MOTs by the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA). My Department has worked hard to find a range of solutions for all types of vehicles, and there are now a significant number of exemptions and extensions in place until MOT services can be safely resumed. In addition, the new lifts are being installed on a phased basis and will be fully in place by the start of July, unless the MOT centres are needed for COVID-19 testing, which I have said consistently will be the priority for as long as they are needed.

The provision of temporary exemption certificates (TECs) has been effective in keeping people on the road and ensuring that vehicles can be taxed. However, some of the TECs are starting to come to an end and will need to be reviewed. In considering that issue, I have had to take into account the volume of vehicles currently impacted and the fact that COVID-19 restrictions are likely to result in a suspension of most, if not all, MOT services for some time to come. It is a simple yet challenging fact that, when MOT centres reopen, there will not be the capacity to test all the cars that have missed out along with those that need to be tested normally at that time. I believe that it is really important to minimise the disruption as far as possible. I am, therefore, announcing today that I have decided that DVA will continue to issue TECs to vehicles that have already been issued one, whether they be private cars, goods vehicles, trailers or motorcycles, until their normal annual MOT date. That means that a vehicle will get an exemption for one year, which will bring it back into the system when there is capacity to test it. When vehicle testing services are properly restored, vehicles that are due their annual MOT at that time will be tested as normal and, therefore, will not be disrupted.

The TECs will be extended to the maximum time frames set out in legislation, but, importantly, when each is rolled forward, they will provide full cover for one year from the normal MOT expiry date in 2020 until the date on which the vehicle is due for test in 2021. The PSNI, DVA roadside enforcement and the Association of British Insurers are aware of this position. It is important to remember that these are temporary arrangements, and I remind drivers that they are responsible under the law for the roadworthiness of their vehicle at all times and should maintain it to the appropriate standard.

In addition, I recognise that the current process has been difficult and confusing for customers, with many queries raised about whether a TEC is in place and the time frame for refunds. Therefore, I am also announcing today that an automatic process for the issuing of TECs will apply from 11 May. That will significantly reduce administration for customers and staff. From 11 May, customers will no longer have to book a test that they know that they will never attend and to pay over money only for it to be returned to them in a refund some weeks later. Instead, vehicles that require a new TEC or require one for the first time will automatically be updated on the DVA system and on the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) system in Swansea so that the vehicle can be taxed. The

DVA will not issue a hard copy of the certificate to customers. Instead, the nidirect website will signpost customers to the DVLA website, where they can check whether their vehicle has a current TEC. We will, of course, continue to issue TECs and to provide refunds for bookings that have already been made. Unfortunately, for vehicles registered in Great Britain that have been brought and transported to Northern Ireland, it is not possible to issue an automatic TEC. Those customers will need to contact the DVA for that to be done manually, and, again, details for how to do that will be on nidirect.

10.45 am

Taxis and buses are subject to separate legislation, and a different approach has been adopted. Through a change in legislation for taxis and a determination by the Department for buses, I have ensured that those vehicle licences that expire during the current emergency will be automatically renewed without the need for prior testing. I recognise that clear communication with customers is important and that it needs to improve. I have asked DVA to ensure that comprehensive advice and clear guidance is made available to customers on the nidirect website. I hope that this provides some reassurance to Members and their constituents during this difficult time.

I was pleased to announce last week that the Department is working in partnership with the British Medical Association and our incredible GPs to prioritise the processing of medical forms for those key workers who need them to renew their licences. Medicals are essential to ensure road safety for both the driver and other road users. However, I appreciate that, for some, further specialist assessments may be needed before licences can be renewed. With the strain on the medical profession during this crisis, getting access to this specialist assessment is proving difficult for many drivers, and my Department continues to work hard to find ways of addressing that. I appreciate the patience of Members and the public during this crisis, and we continue to work hard to find a solution, including exploring legal options on the way forward. I hope to be in a position to update Members and affected drivers very soon.

The lack of testing, and indeed the suspension of other DVA services, has meant a considerable loss of income for DVA whilst it continues to incur the costs of staff and other bills. If the COVID-19 suspension lasts three months, DVA will lose income of £8.6 million. Indeed, I have already advised that DVA has identified estimated additional COVID-19-

related pressures of up to £181 million in total. These cost estimates are based on the information available and the current assumptions on the impact and duration of the crisis.

The reality is that, across every Department, the current public health emergency requires a level of response that cannot be contained within conventional budgets or, indeed, conventional processes. All of these pressures arise as a result of lost income from various business areas, including Northern Ireland Water, Translink and DVA, and from sources of income such as planning fees and fares on the Strangford ferry.

At this point, I highlight the particular challenges that Translink faces. The need to stay at home to save lives has clearly had very significant implications for our publicly-owned public transport provider. While my Department remains the only Department, outside of the Executive Office, not to have received an allocation yet from the Department of Finance's COVID-19 budget, I welcome Executive colleagues' commitment to supporting and funding our public transport network.

We are seeing across the world that Governments are recognising the crucial need to invest in infrastructure as we recover from this crisis and build our new society from it. We should be no different if we want to deliver the radical change that our communities and our environment desperately need.

On Friday, I was pleased to announce the provision of a financial support package of £5.7 million, with the costs being shared by the Executive and the British Government, to support our airlines and airports. This assistance will provide financial aid to City of Derry Airport and Belfast City Airport to help with their operating costs as so much of their business has been affected. Finance is also being made available to keep the remaining flights operating out of both airports.

While my powers in respect of airports are limited to regulation, I have been able, working with Executive colleagues and the Department for Transport, I have been able to secure this unique package of support for our airports at this difficult time. It is this type of collaborative working that will get us through this crisis and ensure our recovery from it.

Members will also be aware that, again through collaborative work across these islands, I was able to secure our supply chains with funding of up to £17 million, financed in partnership by the

Executive and the British Government, to support our three ferry operators along our five critical routes — a package that will ensure that food, goods, medicines and personal protective equipment (PPE) will continue to come across to the North. I am, however, acutely aware that the haulage sector is also crucial to the effective functioning of supply chains. Although responsibility for that sits with the Department for the Economy, I will continue to work closely with colleagues to do all that I can to help the industry in its crucial role of securing critical supply chains during this difficult time.

The performance of the planning system will also have a critical role to play in supporting our future economic and societal recovery, so we need to keep plans and projects safely moving through the system. I will bring you up to date with some of the measures that I have brought forward.

Last week, I made regulations to suspend temporarily the requirement to hold a public event as part of the pre-application community consultation process for major applications. I assure Members that that is not, in any way, to remove the need for public consultation, which is a critical part of the planning process; rather, it is about doing it in a different way during the crisis, in line with clear public health advice. I have therefore published practice guidance on appropriate measures to replace face-to-face public events. It covers online engagement and other methods, including the safe distribution of leaflets and newsletters, and, where people do not have access to the Internet, telephone consultations. My chief planner has written again to councils with further advice covering a wide range of issues, including the operation of planning committees and planning decision-making; the role of statutory consultees; the duration of planning permissions; and support for pragmatic measures to keep delivering local planning services.

While we continue to do all that we can to protect our communities from COVID-19, we must also seize the chance for change. In responding to the difficulties, we have learnt lessons. We know that having fewer cars on the roads reduces emissions. More walking and cycling means healthier bodies and healthier minds, time to talk and time to be together. We have to use what we have learnt to imagine and plan for a better, greener, healthier, happier future. To that end, I have met representatives of the business sector and green sector to start an early discussion on how my Department can help shape a recovery and what we can learn from our response to the pandemic. We all share the belief that infrastructure spending will

be crucial to restarting the economy. Investing in our transport system and our water and sewerage network would kick-start the construction sector and its supply chain.

We also need to think about how we enable and support social distancing as we bring people back into the heart of our towns and cities and about how we give them the confidence to make the decision to return for leisure, as well as for work, when the time is right. At the same time, I am very aware that this health emergency has forever changed the ways in which we live and work, and it is difficult to ascertain the impact that it will have on how we use those spaces in future. However, in the darkness of the pandemic, we are being presented with an opportunity to reimagine those places, and it is one that we should seize.

In order to give a real focus to a green recovery, where we will embed more active ways of travelling in the very heart of our overall transport policy, I am delighted to announce today that I am creating a walking and cycling champion in my Department. Our champion will ensure that we deliver on our commitment to increase the percentage of journeys made by walking and cycling, thereby inspiring our communities, restructuring our spaces, changing forever the way in which we live and changing it for the better. I want to increase the space available for people who want to walk and cycle by extending pavements, pedestrianising streets and introducing pop-up cycle lanes. I have already identified some areas in Belfast city centre and in Derry city that can be quickly transformed, and I intend to work with councils right across the North to identify more as a matter of urgency. Doing that will transform communities right across Northern Ireland and inspire a new way of living in our new world of this new normal.

I am clear also on the need for the work to be done collaboratively, so I will also be asking the walking and cycling champion to establish immediately an action-focused group of stakeholders, both in and outside government, to provide quick advice, to challenge my Department and to ensure that we consider opportunities and build on the positive changes that we are seeing when it comes to higher levels of walking and cycling during the current emergency. I also want us to work in collaboration with communities, including, for example, to identify and create quiet streets where pedestrians, cyclists and play have priority, and motor vehicles are guests.

I am determined that we take action, particularly to address traffic issues in inner-city

neighbourhoods. I want to make sure that we do things with, not to, communities. We have a wealth of organisations with skills in working to help residents to develop a new vision for their areas. I want to harness those skills to improve neighbourhoods and improve the quality of life of all of our citizens.

This is not just an environmental imperative. We need to do this because it is a public health imperative. I shall keep a close eye on progress. I want to see ideas not just being talked about but being turned into results that improve everyone's well-being. I am also looking for opportunities to weave blue infrastructure together with new cycle paths and footpaths, recognising that the better management of water in and through urban environments can reduce flood risk while creating more attractive and environmentally friendly spaces.

This may be ambitious, but the one lesson that COVID-19 has taught us is that this is our world, and we must protect it by building a better future that delivers more for our citizens socially and economically, and delivering cleaner, greener and healthier communities.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before we proceed to questions to the Minister, I have a few housekeeping notifications. First, it was spotted last week that there was a bit of backsliding on social distancing, so some microphones have been removed from the Chamber. Members, you must be directly in front of the microphone to be heard.

Secondly, as I said at the start, because this is not an Ad Hoc Committee meeting but a plenary sitting of the Assembly, questions need to be focused and sharp to ensure that everyone gets called to ask their question. Just as questions need to be sharp, answers need to be sharp. I am sure that they will be.

Miss McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure): I thank the Minister for her statement. I welcome the clarity given today on MOTs and the commitment by the Executive in the last number of days to supporting airports as well as city deals and their associated infrastructure projects.

The statement does not mention the outstanding matter of financial support for hauliers and taxi drivers. It is also disappointing that the problem accessing medical assessments has still not been resolved. In addition, DVA has introduced a fully online system for driving licence renewal. This is proving problematic for those who do not have

access to the online system, with hard copy applications being returned. Can the Minister give a clear timeline for when these matters will be fully addressed?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. We have been working very hard across the Executive on the issue of hauliers. I have been working with the Minister for the Economy and the Minister of Agriculture. We engage very regularly with the Department for Transport and the UK Treasury. We are clear that we need to get support to our haulage industry because it has a critical role to play in securing our supply chains, and we will keep up the pressure on that.

On the taxis issue, the Member will be aware that, as Minister for Infrastructure, I have responsibility for regulation. I have put a number of solutions in place. The one that is outstanding is the specialised medical assessment. I am exploring two potential legal options. I hope to be in a position to give confirmation to Members and affected drivers as soon as possible. The challenge is getting a solution that is legally robust while being mindful of the need to ensure road safety for drivers and other road users.

On the issue of financial support for taxis, I am sure that the Member will also be aware that the Department for the Economy is responsible for financial support to those whose livelihoods have been very badly affected by this crisis. I have made representations to the Minister for the Economy, the Minister of Finance and the Minister for Communities on the potential of repurposing of taxi drivers, because I recognise that they are one of the groups that have been really badly hit.

There have been issues with people being able to access and contact the DVA. We launched a single point of contact, the set email address. I am mindful that there are people who are unable to access services online.

I also have a duty to the safety of DVA staff, so we are working hard to see whether we can bring back workers on a safe basis to be able to process those applications and provide services to those who do not have any access to online.

11.00 am

Mr Boylan: I thank the Minister for her statement. I welcome the announcement on walking and cycle lanes, an issue that I have mentioned a number of times. Minister, can you elaborate on how we will realise the expansion

of those cycling and walking lanes and on the issue of resources? Will that include physical structures like bollards? I see that Dublin City Council is engaging more with the public as part of this whole process, and I welcome the announcement that there will be a champion for all of this. Is there any intention to expand that consultation process?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I agree with the Member that this does present an opportunity to encourage and facilitate that modal shift that we have all been so passionate about. One example of a practical project can be found in Belfast. The bolder Belfast vision, which was produced in conjunction with Belfast City Council, the Department for Infrastructure and the Department for Communities, has a number of exciting projects around pedestrianisation and having more people-centred places. I think that my Department, working with the Department for Communities and the council, could look at lifting that.

At this moment, I am very focused on the need to identify and deliver on the ground quick and early wins. As you said, we have seen developments on Nassau Street in Dublin such as pop-up cycle lanes. We have seen in New York the pedestrianisation of streets. In Hackney in London, for example, we have seen the extension of pavements. I am very clear that the approach for the champion is to identify with the stakeholders early, quick wins that we can then build on.

I was very clear in my statement that I am a believer that things should not be done to communities but should be done with them. I have been engaging with Belfast Healthy Cities, for example, and with others. I am very clear that this has to be collaborative. We have to work with councils, and we have to work with communities. One of the ideas that I am particularly attracted to is quieter streets. Again, that would be very much led by residents. I am very committed to this.

On the issue of resource, it is absolutely going to be challenging. As this is a ministerial priority, I have asked my officials to identify what flexibility we have, but I am also very clear that I want to work with other government Departments. This is not just an issue for the Department for Infrastructure but is an issue for all of us. If we work collaboratively, we get the right outcomes and we also get more financial traction for each Department's budget.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for her statement, in which she often referred to the

importance that infrastructure has in enabling the economy to return to normal and to drive forward. Minister, you will be aware of the work, particularly in New Zealand, to get infrastructure projects shovel-ready for when the construction industry returns to normal. Have you given any consideration to the approach taken and whether there is an opportunity to green infrastructure?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. She asks a very important question. We have to invest in our infrastructure — that is key as an economic multiplier for our construction industry, but it also provides a real opportunity. I have been watching very closely what is happening in New Zealand, where there is a commitment to progress shovel-ready projects as part of the recovery from COVID. I am also aware that there is a movement in New Zealand to make sure that those construction projects also have a very clear environmental element to them. I have already asked officials to try to explore that. As an Executive, we recognise the importance of investing in infrastructure, and, as it is being recognised as a key enabler right across the globe, I hope that we recognise that here and, more importantly, that we act on it and invest in our infrastructure to create that economic effect and to get us to a better place in tackling the climate emergency.

Mr Beggs: I too thank the Minister for her statement and the decision to further extend the temporary exemption certificates for MOTs. That has been essential, and that will be automated shortly. Is the Minister reviewing a wide range of regulatory provision and licensing in her Department? Other areas also require to be addressed. I am hearing responses from those who require bus operator licences at some point. That mechanism needs to be followed up. I am also hearing from those who have been driving with a one-year international driving licence in Northern Ireland and who are unable to carry out the practical driving test.

Ms Mallon: I recognise that this crisis has thrown up a number of difficulties and I think that that is inevitable when you are running a service that is interacting with thousands and thousands of people weekly, which DVA does across its range of services.

In terms of licensing issues, if we take the example of taxi drivers, there was an issue around PSV extensions. We have addressed that through a free-of-charge six-month extension. There was an issue for taxi drivers of access to online training. As a result of this crisis, we have increased the number of online

courses. There is an issue around GP medical forms, which are required by some drivers for their licences, and we are working with the BMA to address that. The one particular issue that we have not completely resolved yet is about those drivers who require a further specialised medical assessment. That situation has arisen because all of our medics are focused on COVID-19, but I hope to be in a position very soon to present a solution to Members and those drivers.

The situation has brought home to me that we should have been in a much more advanced stage in DVA in terms of automated services. I hope that the Member recognises that we are trying to address one aspect of that from 11 May, but I am very mindful that we need to extend that across other services where it is not applicable at the moment.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for her statement, particularly in relation to MOTs. That brings a lot of clarity to people. At the outset, I declare that I was previously an employee of Translink.

The decisions that will be made in Northern Ireland in the next weeks are going to affect generations to come, in terms of how we travel. The information that came forward recently that traffic in Northern Ireland has not dropped to the same level as other parts of the UK or Ireland is of real concern. To what extent, and how radical is the Minister prepared to be in her decisions going forward?

For example, you inherited a capital investment plan, with the York Street interchange and widening of the Sydenham bypass. Are you prepared to go ahead with the York Street interchange in its current form or are you prepared to look at that and also the Sydenham bypass?

In relation to active travel, the purchase of bicycles is a challenge for some people. Is the Department prepared to consider a voucher scheme to allow people to buy bicycles on a discounted basis?

Ms Mallon: Members are being very creative at getting multiple questions into one question. I admire them.

In recent days, we have seen an increase in the volume of traffic on our roads. That is a concern to me. The Northern Ireland Civil Service is carrying out a detailed analysis to understand why people are taking those journeys, and I think that it is critical that we understand and are informed by it. I repeat the message: only engage in travel if it is absolutely essential.

The York Street interchange is a commitment in New Decade, New Approach. It is a critical scheme. Given that we are going through this crisis, I think that as a general principle we should not be afraid of looking at things creatively and looking at things again. That applies to any of the schemes. I am willing to look at them creatively, but I recognise that the York Street interchange is a critical strategic project.

The Member asked about bicycles. Other countries have given a voucher towards the repair or purchase of a bicycle. That is something that I could feed through to the champion and the steering group to look at. My challenge is trying to have the ambition and also being able to finance that ambition. Realistically and honestly, we are not going to be able to do everything that we want to do, but we need to do the things that will have the maximum effect.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that if they ask multiple questions the Minister is only obliged to answer one of them.

Mr K Buchanan: I thank the Minister for her statement. My question relates to furloughing in Translink because of the difficulties that they are under. I understand that Transport for London have furloughed 7,000 workers. The furlough scheme opened on 23 March. Has the Minister spoken about or looked at furloughing Translink workers, and what would that save in the budget here if it were possible?

Ms Mallon: The Finance Minister wrote to me and he suggested exploring the furloughing of Translink staff. On the back of that suggestion, the feasibility of that is being explored by Translink. My view is very clear and I have made it known to Executive colleagues. Taking the decision to furlough public-sector staff is a significant issue, it is cross-cutting, and we should approach it as an Executive.

There are a number of practical difficulties with furloughing Translink staff. The furloughing scheme ends at the end of June. We are just a number of weeks out from that. I also have to grapple with the challenge of making sure that we have an essential public transport service for our key workers and that when we provide that we can ensure that social distancing can be maintained, so we require additional fleet to carry a much-limited number of passengers. I also need to make sure that there is a deep clean, so a number of staff are required to ensure that we can keep that transport network going and that we can do so safely. All that has

to be taken in the round with the fact that, when we are encouraging people to come back to work and to do so safely, we should encourage them to have the confidence to be on our public transport network, and that will require that we have our public transport network in a good place and our employees ready to do all that work. I want to consider all these things in the round.

Ms Anderson: I thank the Minister for her statement. Minister, you mentioned the disruption to services, and you have been asked a question already about the haulage sector. I have been contacted by a number of people in the haulage sector who are deeply concerned about the supply chain not just now but in a few months' time. They want some indication from you of what kind of preparation is under way in your Department to ensure that the haulage sector is going to be ready for the full implementation of the Brexit protocol in eight months' time.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. As she will be aware, the lead Department on that issue is the Department for the Economy, but I recognise the critical importance of it, which is why I am trying to do what I can to support her and to support us as an Executive. At the moment, I think that there is a recognition, certainly in the Department for Transport, of the critical role of our hauliers given our unique set of circumstances as an island. The focus at present is on providing the detailed evidence that the Treasury requires in order to provide that financial support. We are working with the sector very closely to try to get that detail across to evidence their case.

I think the Member made a very important point about Brexit. We are all, rightly, focused on COVID-19, but we cannot lose sight of the fact that 31 December is hurtling towards us, and that will present huge challenges. When you put Brexit and COVID-19 side by side, you will find that we are going to face huge and unprecedented challenges as an Assembly, an economy and a society. We should not lose sight of that in the midst of this, and preparations should continue.

Mr T Buchanan: Thank you, Minister, for your statement to the House. I have one focused question for you. Car driving tests have been suspended for a number of weeks, and rightly so, but has any consideration been given to those who want to do their motorcycle test? They are prepared and ready to do it, and the motorcycle is a one-man/one-woman vehicle. The gear that people wear for the motorcycle

indicates that it is safe enough and safe from a virus point of view, and there is social distancing. Has any consideration been given to looking at opening up that aspect of the testing so that somebody who is ready to do their motorcycle test can get it done?

Ms Mallon: Thank you for your question. In relation to the driving test, you are right: there is a distinction with those who are taking a car test, where there is close proximity to the examiner. We are looking to see whether there is anything that we can do with that. At present, we have not been able to find a solution; actually, nowhere across these islands has been able to find a solution to that.

The Member made a very interesting point about motorcycle testing, so I will commit to go back and ask officials to look specifically at that to see whether that is an aspect of the phased return that we could bring forward earlier. If he is agreeable, I can provide that update to him in writing.

Mr T Buchanan: Thank you for that.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for her statement. Whilst I welcome the efforts that have been made in planning, it is very important that I highlight again the issue that is facing many people with planning permission that is due to expire during this pandemic. I have raised this with the Minister on a number of occasions. Does the Minister have any idea how many are due to expire or are at risk of falling?

How quickly could primary legislation be progressed to grant an extension to those with planning permission that is due to expire, because I know that it is a huge concern out there and I have been contacted by quite a number of agents and people with applications?

11.15 am

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. She did ask about the total number of planning applications that are about to expire and I committed that officials would write to her. I do not know whether she has received that piece of correspondence but I can chase it when I go back upstairs.

Yes, planning permission has presented an ongoing difficulty and the Member is right that it requires primary legislation in Northern Ireland. As a Department, we thought that the Northern Ireland Executive might bring forward a COVID-19 Bill, as has happened in other cases, and we

were keen to insert that piece of legislation in that. It does not seem as though that is going to happen, so I have asked officials to explore bringing forward primary legislation. The Member will understand that that takes time and it will not help those who are facing the imminent expiry of their planning permission. I have also said that I recognise that that is not ideal, but for those people the practical option facing them in the immediacy of their situation is either to renew, and that will cost a fee of one-quarter of the original fee, or to commence works. I urge that if people are going to commence works, they remain mindful of the case law so that any works that they can take are considered to be valid.

Mr Catney: Minister, I note your points about taxi drivers, and it is clear that you are doing all that you can to ensure that licensing and regulations are done as quickly as possible by your Department during these challenging times. However, there are still drivers out there who are struggling without any income. While that is not directly your responsibility, will you advise what your Executive colleagues are doing about it?

Ms Mallon: All of us are aware of the hardship that is being felt by the taxi industry and taxi drivers. We know them because of the role that they play in our communities, and I am sure that many Members' family members and friends work in the industry. I have made representations to the Minister for the Economy and I know that she is trying to bring forward a range of financial support schemes for those who have been affected. A number of schemes have been implemented, and I know that she is working on others. I am hopeful that the Executive are in a position to be able to provide financial support to those taxi drivers who have had their livelihoods decimated as a result of this.

I have said all along that I feel that there is a huge opportunity for the repurposing of taxi drivers in delivering medicines from pharmacies and in delivering groceries, because we know the difficulties that people are having in ordering their food online and having it delivered. I have made representations to the Minister for Communities on that and I know that she has been working hard to explore that. As I said, I have made representations to the Minister for the Economy on financial hardship, so I am doing what I can to play my part on the regulatory aspect. I know that Executive colleagues are trying to do the same, given their responsibilities on that matter, too.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: When one of the lines in your question is, "While that is not directly your responsibility", it may be an indication that you are perhaps on the wrong track. If we could keep the questions directly related to the Minister's statement.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for her statement and the update and I think that the provision of test centres for the COVID-19 test has been very positive. We appreciate the efforts that are being made there.

Does the Minister recognise the need for continued investment in our roads? If we look at the main roads into Belfast — if you take the A2 from Bangor — we have a backlog of traffic in the mornings to Holywood. I understand and have seen that if you take the M1, there is a backlog to Lisburn. If you take the M2, there is a backlog to Mallusk and beyond, and I am sure that many Members will concur with what I have said. Does the Minister recognise that, moving forward, it is important that we get the balance right? There is a push here for green and for the use of bicycles, which is fine for a few weeks and months of the year locally, but, for real transport, we need to get our roads moving, get the throughput moving and get vehicles flowing rather than being restricted through to city centres. We need to see an improved flow of our vehicles.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He is right: maintenance of the road network is important. The Member will be aware that there were successive years of underinvestment as a result of cuts that were imposed on the Department. In fact, the recent Barton report said that we need to ensure recurring funding of £143 million per annum in order to prevent further deterioration of our roads. I have not been given an allocation that is anywhere near that amount.

I know that the Member is very passionate on doing — not in a derogatory sense — the basic things right, such as street lighting and roads, and the importance of that for communities. I share that passion. The challenge is that we need to maintain existing services, and, where we can, do things in an improved and better way. I do not want the Member to think that I am completely dismissive of the need to maintain the road network. I recognise its importance. However, I also believe that we should have ambition and try to change the way in which we do things. That is why I am also very passionate about the whole active and sustainable travel agenda.

Ms C Kelly: Can the Minister assure the House that front-line workers, such as those in roads maintenance, public transport and NI Water, for example, are content with conditions in their workplace?

Ms Mallon: I will take Translink first. I have been very clear that, right across the Department, the safety of the public and staff is paramount. Translink has brought forward a number of initiatives. There are cough screens on every single bus. Bus and train drivers have been provided with gloves and hand sanitiser. A no-cash-back policy has been introduced in order to avoid transmission. There is increased cleaning of all vehicles. I want to put on record my appreciation to all Translink staff because they go to work to ensure that the rest of those who are engaged in essential work can get to and from work.

I have stressed the importance of ensuring that Northern Ireland Water workers are safe. I actually have regular conference calls with the chief executive to get assurances on that. In Roads Service, I have been very clear that, where people can work from home, they should, and, where work is essential and they cannot work from home — for example, to keep roads safe or prevent flooding — they can go to work, and we absolutely must ensure that they are kept safe through social distancing and the use of PPE.

As a Department, we engage regularly with trade unions and workers. I request very regular updates on any concerns that trade unions or workers have. I have also told Members that if they are aware of individual cases where someone feels that, as an employee, they are not being kept safe, I absolutely want to know about it.

Mr Lyttle: As chairperson of the Assembly's all-party group (APG) on cycling, I particularly welcome the Minister's commitment to active travel. It is a healthy, socially distanced and fun way for people to move. I welcome the walking and cycling champion and the ministerial advisory group. Hopefully, the Minister's early engagement with the all-party group on cycling was a helpful link to the ideas and people who are needed to realise the potential of active travel. However, she will be aware that it has taken over a year to fix obvious problems with one of the few dedicated cycle lanes in Belfast, at Alfred Street, and that consultation on the Belfast cycle network plan finished in 2017. What specific action will she take to progress those particular matters?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I recognise his passion for the issue. Yes: it was very informative to go to the APG. I look forward to taking up its recent invitation to discuss some of that, and would be keen for the walking and cycling champion to accompany me.

What I have tasked the champion to do is to pull out what exists already. The Member referenced the Belfast cycle network plan and existing cycle routes that need to be improved. To improve an entire network requires investment. That has to be the approach. That will certainly be the focus of the ministerial advisory group and the champion. I am adamant that I will come back very quickly to Members in order to give them practical updates on what we are actually doing to deliver on the project. It is easy to talk about those matters. You judge a person on what they actually do. I am very committed to delivering on that.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. I am slightly surprised, if not disappointed, to learn that, although the furlough scheme was introduced on 20 March, there have not been further and definitive investigations in your Department, particularly for Translink workers.

Minister, what preparations or investigations has your Department undertaken to re-profile its budgets? Clearly, there are pressures on your budgets, and other Executive budgets, but there will be business areas that will have stopped, eased or spent less money than was predicted. Have you started to re-profile your budget?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. The Minister of Finance only raised the issue of furloughing with me towards the end of last week. It is clear that we need to take significant decisions, right across the Executive.

On the issue of re-profiling, this is not a normal budgetary process or a normal budgetary period. Where I can find easements and re-profiling, I absolutely will. The difficulty for my Department is that we have seen a dramatic reduction in revenue through Translink, the DVA and Northern Ireland Water because we have brought in measures to try to support businesses. That dramatic reduction in income sits alongside very high levels of static cost. I assure the Member that, where we can be creative in the budget, we will continue to do so. The challenge is that, in the COVID-19 budget, nothing has come across to the Department for Infrastructure as yet. If I could get some

certainty around that, to ease the financial pressures, it would help me to identify where we have any flexibilities.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister, her Department and the front-line workers for the exceptional work that they have been doing to ensure that the wheels keep on turning to allow our society to keep functioning. I was astonished to learn, Minister, that despite everything that your Department is doing, you received zero funding in the COVID-19 budget allocation. Why did the Finance Minister and, indeed, the entire Executive, award COVID-19 funding to all Departments except yours? Particularly, given your Department's pressures to maintain key services, such as public transport, safe roads and clean drinking water, which are fundamental, not just to the COVID-19 response but to our recovery on this island. What happened to all in this together?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. To date, there has not been an allocation for the Department for Infrastructure. However, £95 million has been kept in the centre for a possible transport package and the support for ferries and airports has come from that. Members will be aware of the issues facing Translink alone, so the remainder of that pot of money is not sufficient to meet those financial pressures so that is a serious concern. I welcome, however, the Executive's commitment to fund Translink. They recognise that we need to have a publicly owned public transport network, not just for the economic and social benefits but for tackling the climate emergency. Yes, it was disappointing, but I continue to engage with the Finance Minister and I hope that, very soon, I will see an allocation to my Department so that I can properly plan and prepare.

Mrs Barton: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. I am glad to see that you are looking at pathways and ways of improving exercise for people. In rural areas, we have many villages that have footpaths along the outskirts and main routes etc. Over the years, these have become totally neglected because of budgetary pressures and they tend to be the last thing that is looked at. Many have grass growing through them and although some of them have what used to be lights along them, they have been switched off and are not used anymore. Can you give an assurance that, with your new thoughts and new look at these pathways for walking and exercise, perhaps, there will be a reassessment, with some of these footpaths made better again for people to walk on?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. The reality is that social distancing will be with us for a long time and we need to create space for people to socially distance and keep safe.

I want, as I said about the work of the champion, to link with a lot of the work that has already taken place, so I am keen to have a discussion with Minister Hargey, for example, on public realm works that her Department is carrying out to see whether we can make the widening of footpaths a key element. That has to be the approach.

11.30 am

The Member is right that we have had to curtail severely a number of services that the Department provides. Grass cutting, for example, has been severely curtailed, as have a number of other services, because of budgetary pressures. We recognise the importance of these issues, and we try to do what we can. However, as always, we have to operate within financial restraints, and that is as frustrating for me as it is, I am sure, for the Member.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for her statement. I am happy to learn of the focus on a green recovery and, in particular, the reallocation of road space, which I and other Greens called on her last time to support. I thank the Minister for her correspondence on that issue.

Given the focus on walking and cycling, will the Minister commit to not progressing any further the experimental traffic control scheme permitting taxis in bus lanes, instead of focusing on other measures to enhance the provision of public transport, cycle infrastructure and pedestrian priority?

Ms Mallon: We need to go up in a helicopter to take a holistic and comprehensive view of our public transport network. We need to look at the hierarchy and put walkers at the top and then have cyclists, riders and drivers. However, we must also recognise that, if we have a really good public transport system, it requires our buses, our trains and our taxi drivers, as I recognise that they too are an important part of it. The challenge, I suppose, is how we use the road space that we have to recognise that it is an integrated transport system, while being mindful of environmental improvements and benefits. It is an issue that I am aware of. I am very much focused on COVID-19 at present, but I know that it is an issue. I had started to

engage on it just before the crisis hit, and it is certainly an issue that I will engage on further.

Mr Allister: Can I take the Minister back to the haulage sector? If the Executive are considering a support package for that sector, will the Minister deal with a rumour that circulated in that sector over the weekend that the Executive are minded to limit such a package to haulage companies with 90 lorries or fewer? That, of course, would be devastating for a major employer such as McBurney Transport in my constituency. Can the Minister assure me that any package will be open to all, will be fair and will be proportionate?

Ms Mallon: That is always the outcome that we seek to achieve. The challenge here is that any forthcoming financial package funded by the British Government to some extent requires sign-off by Treasury. I assure the Member that the Executive have not had discussions about limiting financial support or the granular detail that he has spoken about, so I was surprised to read that online over the weekend.

I am clear that the haulage industry has a critical role to play. The make-up of our haulage industry means that many of those engaged in the service do not have huge reserves to dip in and out of, so they are at breaking point. What we are doing and will continue to do is make representations. As I say, I feel that we have successfully made the case to the Department for Transport. The matter now sits with the UK Treasury, and we will continue to press the case. We will continue to work with the haulage industry to provide the evidence that Treasury seeks. I am hopeful that we can see financial support going to our hauliers.

Mr Carroll: The Minister said that she would like to hear about issues concerning PPE and social distancing, and I welcome her statement and her comments to that effect. Workers in the Roads Service in Belfast have been in contact with my office with serious concerns about non-essential work that Roads Service staff in other regions are not being made to do during the crisis. They have raised concerns that they are unable to distance socially from the public while doing that work, putting themselves and, obviously, the public at risk. Worse, the protection that they are given does not prevent the spread of COVID-19. When they do emergency work, they are not being given proper PPE at all. I have written to the Minister's office about those issues, and the workers themselves have raised them, but, seemingly, nothing has been done. Can the Minister give a guarantee today that those

workers will no longer be asked to carry out non-essential work and will be provided with adequate PPE when they have to do emergency work?

Ms Mallon: I have not seen the Member's correspondence. I do not know whether he has just sent it in, but it has not come up to me, so I am not aware of the detail of the case. It is clear that it needs to be essential work; as Minister, I have been clear on that. I know that there is a challenge. Constituents have told me that they have seen some of our staff out cleaning gullies and cannot understand why that is deemed to be essential works. It is essential works because we run the risk of flooding if we do not clear gullies. It is about the protection of homes.

I will ask officials to provide me with the Member's correspondence, and I will get in touch directly with him on it.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions on the Minister's statement. I thank her for coming to speak to the House.

School Enhancement Programme

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): I wish to update the Assembly on the second call to the school enhancement programme (SEP2).

I launched a second call for applications to the school enhancement programme on 25 January 2017. The applications received by the closing date were assessed under the agreed protocol, and separate prioritised lists were created for primary schools, post-primary schools and special schools. The protocol indicated that those prioritised lists would be held open for two years. As the first tranche of projects was announced on 8 May 2018, the prioritised lists will expire on Friday, 8 May 2020. I am, therefore, announcing a final tranche of 16 projects to advance in design. The lists will then be closed, in accordance with the protocol.

Three tranches of projects have been announced to date, and 58 schools are currently being progressed under SEP2. Design teams have been appointed for 20 of those projects, and work is ongoing to develop detailed designs for those schools. The other projects are at earlier stages of scoping and design. However, the appointment of design teams for those projects is likely to be delayed due to the ongoing COVID-19 restrictions.

The delivery teams in the Department of Education and the Education Authority are

working to capacity to progress the projects. Therefore, it is likely that projects in the schools that I am announcing today will not be initiated before the 2021-22 financial year. Despite that, I consider that there is value in making a further announcement before the lists expire to ensure that a pipeline of SEP projects is maintained for the medium term. That will be welcome news for the 16 schools, the design teams and, ultimately, the construction industry, especially in the current difficult circumstances.

The 16 schools in today's announcement will benefit from a total estimated investment of £40 million to enhance their facilities and improve the teaching and learning environment for each school community. The list comprises 10 primary schools, four post-primary schools and two special schools. The primary schools, in alphabetical order, are as follows: Christian Brothers' Primary School, Armagh; Greenisland Primary School; Hart Memorial Primary School, Portadown; Kilbride Central Primary School, Doagh; Our Lady and St Patrick Primary School, Downpatrick; St Brigid's Primary School, Mayogall, Magherafelt; St Comgall's Primary School, Antrim; St Patrick's Primary School, The Meadow, Newry; St Peter's Primary School, Moortown; and Strandtown Primary School, Belfast. The post-primary schools are: Ashfield Boys' High School, Belfast; Belfast Royal Academy; Carrickfergus Grammar School; and Clounagh Junior High School, Portadown. The two special schools are Hill Croft School in Newtownabbey and Clifton School in Bangor.

SEP2 is a significant programme that will deliver much-needed capital investment in 74 schools across the estate: 43 primary schools, 19 post-primary schools and 12 special schools. Typical projects that are being progressed within the programme include the provision of new teaching blocks to accommodate additional pupils or to reduce the reliance on temporary accommodation or the refurbishment of existing classrooms to address substandard or constrained teaching spaces.

SEP projects have an upper limit of £4 million, so it is important that the investment is focused on addressing the greatest need of each individual school. The delivery teams will consult extensively with each school to identify the deficiencies and agree the priorities for investment within the SEP funding envelope of £4 million.

While 74 schools will receive SEP funding, I am aware that many other schools across the diverse schools estate are in need of capital investment. Officials are continuing to

undertake preparatory work in advance of an announcement of new major works projects to advance in design, and I hope to return to the Assembly to make that announcement in the coming months. The minor works programme will also continue to progress the highest priority schemes.

Improving the schools estate is one of my priorities, and, in the current, unprecedented and difficult times, I hope that this announcement will send a strong signal to the local construction industry that the Department of Education is planning for the future and is committed to supporting the local economy through the delivery of my Department's capital programme. My Department's capital programme aims to ensure that all our children and young people are educated in school facilities that are safe, secure and fit for purpose, enabling them to receive the quality education experience required to help them to fulfil their potential.

This announcement today represents another strand of the overall capital programme and, indeed, marks the last announcement of SEP2 projects. Over my term as Education Minister, I will review progress on the 74 announced projects, and, subject to satisfactory progress and available budget, I will consider whether there should be a third call for applications to SEP — that would be SEP3 — as part of the overall capital investment strategy.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I thank the Minister for his statement. Again, I remind Members that the shorter and sharper we keep it, the more Members will get called.

Mr Lyttle (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I thank the Minister for his statement, which will be a much-needed boost to our education sector. I particularly welcome the investment in my constituency, with Strandtown Primary School and Ashfield Boys' High School, which are good examples of the scale of investment needed to replace mobile facilities and dining facilities in particular. It will be a boost to morale for our education sector, but one of the key concerns for our education sector at this moment is the outstanding matter of payment for substitute teachers. Will the Minister provide the Assembly with an update on that matter?

Mr Weir: I appreciate that a bit of latitude is being given, as this is an announcement on the school enhancement programme.

In respect of substitute teachers, we continue to work with the Department of Finance. As indicated, we want to get the best possible

package, and, if that is to be achieved, it requires something beyond what is available in the Department of Education. There is ongoing work, and I appreciate the frustrations and concerns. We find ourselves in a difficult position. As far as I am aware, in the Republic of Ireland, no particular provision has been given for casual substitute teachers, other than simply to say that, if there is a situation in which a school needs a substitute — it is the same as here — they can use a substitute. In England, the Department for Education is not directly involved in any payment, but, because a lot of the teachers work through agencies, the agency can furlough, and the same is true in Wales. That is not an option that is within the ambit of the Department of Education. In Scotland, there is provision. However, we should note that the levels of pay there for substitute teachers are massively less than what is available in Northern Ireland, to the extent that the overall bill for substitute teachers in Scotland is less than Northern Ireland despite the fact that they teach more than twice the number of children. That also needs to be borne in mind when we look at comparators, but there is ongoing work.

I would like to bring this to a conclusion as quickly as possible. The problem is that, if I were to bring it to a conclusion immediately without any assistance from outside, it would be a smaller package and a smaller level of support than it would be if assistance could be provided from beyond the Department.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: This is a gentle reminder that the Minister's statement is about the school enhancement programme, so questions should relate to the school enhancement programme.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for his statement to the House today and thank him for his ongoing dedication and hard work during the current crisis. I welcome the statement, as it is good news for the education sector. It is also good news, as he said, for the construction industry. I particularly welcome the announcement of the enhancement for Belfast Royal Academy and thank the Minister for taking time to visit the school and meet me and the principal, Hilary Woods, some months ago.

Given the announcement today and the undoubted demand across the education sector in Northern Ireland, will there be a third call for the school enhancement programme?

11.45 am

Mr Weir: I am aware of the Member's particular commitment to Belfast Royal Academy and, indeed, to the other schools in his constituency.

On a third call, there will, as I said, be a review of progress. To some extent we are in quite a fluid situation, and that can have a good side to it and a bad side to it. Education spend on capital is a mixture of minor works, SEP and major works, which means that there can be a level of movement between that side of it. We have, obviously, completed this bit, and there is ongoing work in relation to that. I want to make sure that the flow of projects is kept sufficient. It is unlikely that there will be a third call before 2022, but we will keep the issue under review and, indeed, periodically. For the last number of years, the school enhancement programme has worked reasonably well for schools across the board. Therefore, it is a tool to which I or my successors will want to bear in mind. It can deliver very effectively for schools.

Ms Mullan: Minister, I thank you for your statement. I welcome your update on the school enhancement programme. For the 16 successful schools and their school communities, it will give a welcome boost to their morale at this time.

Minister, before the pandemic hit, I believe, the Department had nearly completed a round of capital applications. In your statement you say that you will return with that announcement in the coming months. Can you give us a clear indication of when that will be?

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for her comments. I do not have an exact time frame. I suspect that I will want to liaise with officials. I suspect that we are probably looking at an announcement in the autumn. Obviously, we have less than two months of the summer term to go, and where we are has got to be factored in. I know that the Executive, as a whole, are looking at how they can help the construction industry and profile capital. That said, major capital spend tends to take quite a long time; for example, if there was a capital announcement for a range of schools, it would be a number of years before they were in a position to progress. I hope to make that announcement as soon as possible, but I will liaise with officials on the timing, the detail and what is available within that.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Minister for his statement, his ongoing engagement with Members throughout the crisis and the way in which he responds to us so openly. I follow on from what other Members have said in

welcoming this enhancement programme, which will come as a huge benefit to the school estate. As we know, the school estate badly needs investment, and it has been long awaited. I welcome the fact that it is a priority for you and your confirmation of it.

Given that the school classroom has been replaced by remote learning from home, Minister, what are your thoughts on the figures for children who are engaging online? They are quite low and concerning. There are reasons for it. However, what is the Minister doing to ensure that no child falls through the gaps in the absence of the classroom in this crisis?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The statement is about the school enhancement programme. The Minister may want to respond to that, but he is under no obligation to.

Mr Weir: I will take it in the generosity of spirit of the question. In enhancing every experience in the school, obviously, we want to ensure that all children are given levels of access. There is ongoing work, and I know there will be some degree of update tomorrow. One of the areas is working with the EA. There has been a level of misconception that, for example, although school IT equipment is compatible with C2k, it is not limited to what can happen in the school, and EA will clarify that with schools. There is an opportunity to use existing kit.

There is a wider context that will need to be looked at for the capital budget. Depending on how this rolls out over time, there may need to be a level of investment and procurement for kit, which, in the grand scheme of things, should not be overly expensive. Therefore, there may be an examination of whether there is any need for a small amount of reprofiling of the capital budget this year to provide that. I know that the Member is aware of that. What we are experiencing is less frequently a situation where, "There is nothing at all in the house"; it is the fact that you get pressure of competing demands for kit. There is an onus on schools to identify technical difficulties, because there are locations — the Member, being from West Tyrone, will be well aware of this — where, with the best will in the world, you can provide all the kit that you want and, because of the issues around the roll-out of broadband, a piece of IT equipment will be of no benefit. Where there is a substitute situation, for instance, providing paper copies of things, that will be factored into remote learning. It is a work in progress, an ongoing issue.

Dr Aiken: I declare an interest as a member of the board of governors of Kilbride Central Primary School and as the parent of my young children at that school.

I thank the Minister for the much-needed investment in all the 16 schools but, in particular, for the three in my constituency, Kilbride, St Comgall's and Hill Croft. Where possible, I would like him to commit to expediting the construction work on the schools, because it is vital for our construction sector and what we are trying to do.

Mr Weir: Obviously, in making the announcement, I had the Member very much in mind [*Laughter.*] In all seriousness, yes, the work will be ongoing. The next stage of the process is discussion between officials and the schools. Obviously, there will be a bit of delay because of the COVID situation. The school makes an assessment of its needs and is scored against that. In most cases, that is what happens, but, in all cases, when that discussion takes place, it is not necessarily what the school puts as its priorities that are considered objectively as such. A little work needs to go on there.

The Executive, as a whole — I am not breaching confidentiality — are looking to see how they can support the construction industry and align its priorities with the capital budget. They recognise, as well, the particular short-term pressures from a capital point of view. With this year's budget, there will be some level of impact because of the level of disruption that has taken place already. There will be ongoing disruption, as construction firms comply with social distancing regulations. We should realise that the announcement today will be something for the future. It should not be particularly impacted, other than the pipeline being slightly slowed in the short-term. As much as possible, we are looking at what can be done directly in Northern Ireland and at international examples to see whether there are any areas that can be expedited; for instance, issues around procurement that could be made easier. Across the Executive, we are all acutely aware, particularly in the education sector, of the extent to which the broad construction industry not only is a major employer in Northern Ireland but acts as an engine for overall growth, stimulating the economy. The Executive as a whole are acutely aware of that, and they want to respond positively.

Mr T Buchanan: Thank you, Minister, for the statement. Perhaps you can clarify how the schools included in your speech were selected. I will push the boat out a little bit: Omagh High

School is awaiting an enhancement programme for a new school on the campus site in Omagh. Maybe you can give us some indication of when that will commence.

Mr Weir: I am not aware of the exact details of the Omagh Academy issue. They say that all politics is local, and, when you get a school enhancement programme announcement, that is particularly the case.

As indicated, a major capital build clearly goes beyond SEPs, and there will be an announcement in the forthcoming months. Those will be assessed against that. The Member asks about the process side of that. The process is fairly lengthy. A call was put out, effectively, to advance with design. It is judged against the protocol and the criteria, which, for example, deal with issues such as area planning, meeting unmet need and where it is essential to address significant and substandard accommodation. There is then what is called the "gateway check" to ensure that the school is sustainable. Those that pass that check — there were 165 applications — will also have had issues around split-site operations and the condition of their existing accommodation considered. Officials will then — this dates back two or three years — do an assessment in each of the three categories — primary, post-primary and special — and rank each of the schools. There is a scoring mechanism. The schools are scored individually and ranked within their category so that, if you like, a primary school is competing against other primary schools. As each tranche has been released, a combination of schools from each of the three categories have fulfilled part of that. Social issues also impact on the process, such as the number of children in a school who are on the SEN register. The number of pupils in a school who take free school meals will also impact on the broad level of assessment.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I have an incomplete list, so, if Members want to ask a question, please indicate that to me either by approaching the Table or rising in your place. I will then add you to the list and make sure that everyone is called.

Ms C Kelly: I thank the Minister for his statement. We are well aware of the additional pressures that the economy will face as a consequence of COVID-19, so announcements like this, as the Minister pointed out, are a positive signal. Given that the Department may need to calibrate its budget as the COVID-19 situation progresses, when will the Minister be

able to give us an update on a timeline for work to begin and be completed on Strule shared education campus?

Mr Weir: It is important that the work on Strule happens as quickly as possible. I have signed off on a range of things in relation to that project and will get back to the Member with the details. There are particular time frames, given that the Strule project is tied in with Fresh Start money and that the longer the delay, the more likely it is that construction inflation will happen, which will impact on spend on the ground. This is the biggest education project undertaken in the history of the state, so there is a level of priority. There will be delays because of the COVID-19 situation, but I am happy to get back to the Member with the detail as soon as possible.

Mr Harvey: I thank the Minister for his statement. Is there money in the budget to ensure that the projects happen?

Mr Weir: Yes. As I indicated on the cost, an SEP project is effectively a mid-range project that runs between a minimum of £0.5 million and a maximum of £4 million. There will then be a scoping exercise, and the Department will ensure that the agreed projects provide value for money. It should be remembered that there is an assumption of, broadly speaking, a capital budget moving forward. The timescales are such that, even at the design stage, it is doubtful whether anything will directly happen as a result of today's announcement in this year's budget. So, there will be a level of disruption from the COVID-19 situation, but there is an ongoing budget and there is an opportunity for variation between SEP projects, minor works and major capital works. Part of that is to ensure, then, that we have flow as we move forward. Anything that has been announced is likely to take time, but it can be guaranteed that it will happen and there will be, therefore, money in the budget for it.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome the announcement, especially for the Christian Brothers' Primary School in Armagh and St Patrick's Primary School in the Meadow. When will there be boots on the ground commencing construction? Will the Minister also commit to ensuring that schools that were not successful in this tranche receive investment in the not-too-distant future?

12.00 noon

Mr Weir: On the first question, the aim is that those projects would be initiated in the 2021-22

financial year, with detailed design work probably taking place the following year. We are talking about, probably, four years before there will be boots on the ground for construction. There are other projects ahead of them in the pipeline. However, they will move as quickly as possible. Again, if additional capital resources are available, things can move quickly. This is, ultimately, about trying to give certainty to those schools. Completion will be a little way off in that particular case, but it will be quicker than a full capital build.

The Member mentioned other schools. The current assessment of bids under SEP effectively ended this week. Initially there were, I think, 59 in total, but that shrank to 58 as one withdrew to be part of a wider capital project, and there are 16 more today. Therefore, 74 schools are benefiting through the SEP. Other schools will be assessed when there is a call for a new SEP. However, some of those may be seeking a full capital build, and they would be part of that overall situation.

I suppose while it is the case that there is no guarantee of any school getting anything from a fresh call, the fact that schools have been getting improvements means the chances for other schools will increase also. There is a knock-on effect. While there is no bar on any school applying for a second SEP project — some may need it and may get it — in many cases that will mean that schools that were ahead of those on the list will, effectively, have moved out of the way, so that will provide greater opportunity.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for his statement; there was welcome news for many schools. As you will know, Minister, it is well documented that to improve pupil and teachers' mental health, the environment needs to be therapeutic. Whilst there is some good news for many schools, do you have any worries about any schools that have missed out in this tranche? Do you have any idea, as another Member mentioned, about the programme moving forward after this tranche?

Mr Weir: Look, along with a level of success for particular schools, there is always a level of disappointment for schools that do not get anything, and I appreciate that. There will be further opportunities through major capital build and future school enhancement programmes. One of the things to note is that anyone who visits schools, particularly those that were built over the past 10 or 15 years, will notice some of the impact on design that has been made, in part to try to create that positive environment. Some of it is about use of space and light, for

instance. I think that incorporating some of that thinking can be quite useful.

Although there will be individual action taken in each school, for quite a number of the schools, there is a common factor, which is that they were built at a stage when classroom size was below that suggested in the current handbook. Part of this is about providing expanded classrooms and expanded space, which, from a design point of view, can create light and good feeling. There is much wider recognition within schools and society, as the Member is obviously acutely aware, of the need to tackle issues of mental health. If, albeit in a small way, school design can help as part of a broader, holistic process, I think that it is something that people will bear in mind when it comes to the detailed design work that goes into schools.

Mr Buckley: I join Members in welcoming the statement. It is indeed a pleasant experience in the House, given what we have been hearing in the past few months regarding COVID-19. I particularly welcome the two additions in my constituency, namely, the Hart Memorial Primary School and Clounagh Junior High School. As has been mentioned, this benefits not only parents, teachers and pupils but the wider school community and the construction industry, so it is indeed welcome news.

Does the Minister have any further detail on the bids from Hart Memorial Primary School and Clounagh Junior High School in my constituency and what they entailed?

Mr Weir: I thank the Member and I know that he has been assiduous in his support for those schools. At present, as I indicated, schools outline what they see as their priorities. Therefore, there is a caveat to be added to anything that I say on the grounds that the next stage will be a meeting between departmental officials and the schools to scope out what needs to be done.

Hart Memorial Primary School lacks the required accommodation for a 14-class-based primary school. A number of its classrooms are undersized, there is no resource area, there is a lack of storage and there are traffic management issues. Those are what the school sees as its priorities. Clounagh Junior High School in Portadown is aiming to look at deficiencies with regard to the DE handbook. A lot of schools are in a similar situation; there are many issues with undersized classrooms. At the moment, Clounagh Junior High School does not have a sports hall or fitness suites. There is a lack of sports pitches and, again, it has traffic management and car parking issues. A lot of

schools will also be looking at pupil and staff safety, so they will have to consider not just what work can be done to the school buildings but what needs to be done externally.

Mr Muir: I declare an interest as a member of the board of governors of Priory Integrated College in Holywood. I thank the Minister for his statement and for his announcement in relation to Clifton Special School in Bangor. Can he give us a bit more detail on what progress has been made on special school area planning?

Mr Weir: I will come to the specific issue of Clifton Special School in a moment. The Member will be aware that the Priory Integrated College project is one of those that is moving ahead under Fresh Start. Things may be moving a little slower because of the COVID-19 situation, but that is guaranteed.

Broadly, there has been a level of investment in special schools. Although Clifton Special School is one of the newer special schools in Northern Ireland, the uptake of places has increased significantly in recent years. Again, Clifton Special School has identified deficiencies according to the building handbook; for instance, it has undersized classrooms and it has issues with its library. There are inadequate toilet facilities and there is a lack of mobility bays and storage for heavy equipment. It also has traffic management issues and a lack of play facilities.

Special schools have particular challenges, which is why there has always been a three-stage division of SEPs between primary, post-primary and special schools. Different levels of assessment are required at each level. As part of the process, while Clifton Special School has identified its key priorities, a sequence of work will go on between officials and representatives of the school to scope out what needs to be done. That will be agreed, and the project will move to the design stage.

Mr McGrath: I welcome the Minister's statement and the inclusion of moneys for Our Lady and St Patrick Primary School in Downpatrick. I hope that it is a good precursor to, maybe, moneys for a full rebuild of that merged school, which will help to address the lack of facilities and deal with the terrible traffic issues in Edward Street outside the school.

Following on from the previous question, will the Minister give some comfort to those special schools that have limited capacity? Many of them have a considerable list of pupils who need to get entry to them, but they do not have

the additional facilities. Will it be possible to have a school enhancement programme for the special schools sector to increase its capacity?

Mr Weir: As I indicated in my previous answer, there is a separate section of the school enhancement programme for special schools in order to address their particular needs. As with all things, if actions can be taken — there is a differentiation here — where a school has an SEP, that means that, effectively, it will not get a full rebuild. To some extent, it is an either/or situation. In the meantime, however, it does not disqualify a school from carrying on with minor works where they are required or where particular individual actions are required to facilitate them.

Ms Bunting: I am grateful to the Minister for the announcement and the strong signal that it is of his commitment to the educational environment of our children. As you would expect, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I am particularly delighted to hear the announcement for Strandtown Primary School and Ashfield Boys' High School, which are richly deserving of the programme and have worked extremely hard to get it. Strandtown school is unique in Northern Ireland, and Ashfield Boys' is always oversubscribed and is an extremely popular school in my constituency. The announcement will make an enormous difference to those schools and their pupils.

I note that the Minister mentioned a forthcoming announcement about major works. Is he in a position, at this stage, to outline how that scheme will differ from this one and potential differences in the criteria?

Mr Weir: The detail on that has still to be brought to a point of fruition. The two principal differences are, first, on the grounds of what constitutes major works. In the system, things are graded into three categories. Anything below £0.5 million will be counted as minor works, and that is particularly driven by health and safety issues. A project in the school enhancement programme is projected to be between a minimum of £0.5 million and £4 million. The other principal difference between the school enhancement programme and major works is that a project in the school enhancement programme is always a change to the school on its existing site. It might be, as mentioned in a number of the cases, the rebuild of some classrooms or the provision of additional classrooms to replace temporary facilities. It may be, as we have seen in the past, that a post-primary school gets a science block, a sports hall or something of that nature.

Essentially, for anything to be major works, it is required to be, at a minimum, above £4 million. Quite often, particularly in post-primary schools, that could stretch to £20/25/30 million; it can be quite large. It will take a lot longer, because it is entirely a new build, and a site search will be part of the process. That will apply, for example, in a number of the Fresh Start cases. Part of that will be an examination of what land is available and a range of options, and then there will be a business case. Even if the option of doing it on the current site exists, there has to be consideration of other locations, and it may well be that the school, in doing major works, will have to move to a different location or premises. That, in and of itself — the scale and the fact that that adds a layer of complexity and time — means that, generally speaking, a major works project is not only much more substantial in terms of money but will, quite often, tend to take considerably longer than an SEP one. There may be a certain level of disruption for SEP projects due to COVID, and we fitted in as many as we could, but, generally speaking, they will be delivered more quickly than would be the case for a major capital build.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Any Member who has not asked a question and wishes to do so should indicate that, please, and I will make sure that they get to ask their question.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for his statement and the announcement of much-needed investment and, in particular, for the commitment for Clifton Special School in Bangor. As the Minister will be aware, there are a number of schools in Northern Ireland, and specifically in north Down, with outstanding needs. Will he confirm that minor works will not be affected by this SEP and outline how he intends to address the issue of minor works to enhance schools?

Mr Weir: There is always a flow between minor works and other works. I indicated that we are looking at a timescale of design teams starting to look at some of the issues within about a year. Certainly, there is no immediate impact. Indeed, consistently, over the last number of years, there has been a flow between the major capital works, the SEP projects and the minor works. Depending on circumstances, there may well be movements between budgets. Some of that will be on the basis of how much can be delivered in some of the major works and the knock-on that quite often happens. It is undoubtedly the case that, because they tend to be more agile in nature, minor works can sometimes fill a void, when some of the major

works are not able to progress as quickly as possible.

Obviously, again, there was a minor works call a considerable time ago. The volume of minor works identified was massively more than could be met.

12.15 pm

The other thing with minor works, as a number of Members will be aware, is that, to some extent, there is an analogy with the Housing Executive list. You can be in a particular place on the list, but if something is then identified as an emergency situation — particularly a health and safety issue — which was not previously part of the call but needs to be dealt with urgently, then that urgency may supersede the list. There is a continual flow of minor works. Allied to that, although it is not a capital issue, is school maintenance. To some extent, if maintenance can take place, it can obviate the need for particular capital actions to be taken. I would not say that there is blurring of the lines, but there is a level of interaction between minor works and maintenance as well.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions on the Minister's statement. If Members will take 60 seconds to allow the Ministers to change over, we will then move on to the next item of business. Just take your ease for a minute or so.

Executive Committee Business

Census Order (Northern Ireland) 2020

Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): I beg to move

That the draft Census Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on this debate.

Mr Lyons: The draft order before the House today forms part of the legislative process that is required to enable the next census. The census is the largest statistical exercise undertaken by government and is the most important source of information on the size and nature of our population. Central and local

government, the health and education sectors, the academic community, businesses, professional organisations and the voluntary sector all need the reliable information on people and households that they get from the census. Billions of pounds of public money is allocated each year using census data. The data is also used to help plan public services in education, health and a host of other areas. The census provides the main source of comparable statistics for small areas and small population groups which are consistent across Northern Ireland, with the rest of the UK and across the island of Ireland.

For the first time, it is planned that the census will be carried out primarily online. That will make it easier for the majority of our population to fill in their returns. Around 80% of households will receive an initial invitation to take part online, with the remainder receiving a paper questionnaire. However, those households can also choose to take part online if they wish. Anyone who does not receive a paper questionnaire will be able to request one via a dedicated call centre. After census day, paper questionnaires will also be sent out to all households that have not yet made their return.

The primary legislation that provides for the taking of a census is the Census (Northern Ireland) Act 1969. This allows the First Minister and deputy First Minister to order that a census of population be taken. The order prescribes the date on which the next census is to be taken, the persons with respect to whom census returns are to be made, the persons required to make those returns, and the questions in each census return.

The order proposes that the next census be held on 21 March 2021, just under a year from now. A variety of factors influenced the choosing of the date, including the tradition of the census being conducted at 10-yearly intervals; the desire to maximise the number of people who will be present at their own home on or around census night; the desire to avoid elections, which could cause confusion for the public; and ensuring the health and safety of census field staff, particularly through there being enough daylight hours for them to undertake the completion of field duties.

Locally, the census is conducted in partnership with the Office for National Statistics (ONS), which runs the census in England and Wales. The date chosen therefore aligns Northern Ireland with the rest of the UK. That joint working gives rise to efficiency savings and allows publicity initiatives to be optimised. Joint

working also reduces risk and the likelihood of public messages being confused.

A census is also planned for the Republic of Ireland in 2021 but on the slightly later date of Sunday 18 April. Officials in the census office in the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) already work closely with colleagues in the Central Statistics Office (CSO) in the Republic of Ireland to ensure that detailed statistics for the island of Ireland can be produced. Going forward, we will keep the timing of the census under review. If, because of coronavirus or, indeed, any other reason, a census cannot be taken, further legislation will be brought before the Assembly to amend the plans laid out here.

Secondly, the order details who is to be included in the census and who is responsible for making the return. The order prescribes that every individual who is usually resident at an address must be included in the census return. A subset of information will also be collected on visitors staying at an address on census night. That helps ensure that nobody is missed and that all are counted at their place of residence. To that end, every household and communal establishment will receive a census questionnaire, and special arrangements will also be in place to ensure that members of the Traveller community and people who are sleeping rough are included.

It will be the responsibility of householders to ensure that their census questionnaire is completed and returned. In communal establishments, the manager or person in charge will be responsible for completing an establishment-level census questionnaire and ensuring that individual questionnaires are completed for all usual residents of the establishment. The public will be able to get assistance with the completion of their questionnaire should that prove necessary. Special arrangements will be put in place to support vulnerable groups to ensure that the census is equally accessible to all.

The third aspect of the order relates to the questions to be included in the census return. The 2021 census consultation process began after the previous census. Two formal public consultations were held, in 2015 and 2018. To create the proposals, discussions were also held with experts from Departments and the main census users in the academic, business, statutory and voluntary sectors. That all led to the detailed proposals paper that was published in April 2019. Subsequently, public engagement events were held to explain and discuss the

proposals. Finally, the Executive endorsed the proposals in March of this year.

The detailed programme of work to develop, test and evaluate the topics has also included a large-scale census rehearsal in autumn 2019. Such activities have helped ensure that the census will deliver consistent, high-quality information to meet user needs on topics that are acceptable. All of that work has drawn on the valuable experience and insight gained through previous censuses. The questions, or particulars, on census returns are outlined in schedule 2 to the draft order. Although most of the particulars have already been included in previous censuses, the consultation suggested the need to collect additional information on the nature of our population.

I draw Members' attention to a number of new topics. There will be an extension to the question on long-term health conditions to include an option on autism and Asperger's syndrome. There will be a new household-level question on whether solar panels, wind turbines or other forms of renewable energy are used in the household. Lastly, following detailed public engagement, there will be an individual question for adults on sexual orientation. To address privacy concerns, and given that the census is statutory, there will be no penalty if members of the public do not answer this question.

A key principle was that the 2021 census should be no longer, in terms of the number of questions, than the 2011 census, and this has been achieved. While some topics are excluded because they could have had a negative impact on the census, alternative data sources such as social surveys and administrative data can be used instead. The topics proposed for inclusion strike the proper balance between meeting the requirements of census users and managing the burden on the public.

I emphasise to Members that the information provided by the public will be treated in the utmost confidence. The census office has a track record, and it will make data security and confidentiality its highest priority. The delivery, return and processing of each questionnaire will be tracked at key stages to ensure that every one is accounted for. All arrangements for handling census information were the subject of an independent security review, which has been published. All temporary field staff who help to undertake the enumeration process are civil servants and will be security vetted by Access NI. All staff working on the census will also be required to sign a confidentiality declaration to confirm their understanding of

and commitment to the legal confidentiality undertakings. Disclosure of personal census information is a criminal offence. Names and addresses are retained purely for census purposes and will be removed from the information that is used to produce the aggregate outputs. Personal census information is kept secure and closed to public inspection. The finalised census data set will be registered under the Data Protection Act 2018.

Further information on the detailed operational aspects of the 2021 census, including the appointment of field staff and the creation of enumeration districts, will be brought forward through the planned census regulations. I commend this draft order to the Assembly.

Mr McGrath (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): I welcome the statement. I speak on behalf of the Committee, which, at its meeting on 25 March, considered a proposal for a statutory rule that directed that a census be held in 2021 and outlined, in broad terms, its content and coverage.

As already outlined, the Department of Finance has central authority for the conduct of the census, but, first, the First Minister and deputy First Minister must direct that the census take place. Given the involvement of the Department of Finance, the Committee for Finance considered the policy implications of the proposal at its meeting on 18 March. It wrote to the Committee for the Executive Office advising that it had no objections to the rule.

The draft statutory rule was laid on 9 April and considered by the Committee for the Executive Office at its meeting on 22 April. At the time of that consideration, the Examiner of Statutory Rules had not reported her findings on the technical elements of the rule. However, the Committee recommended that, subject to the Examiner of Statutory Rules's report, the draft rule be approved by the Assembly. The Examiner of Statutory Rules has now reported on the statutory rule and raised no issues. Therefore, the Committee's recommendation that the draft rule be approved stands.

Speaking as an MLA, I welcome the inclusion of some of the population who were previously excluded, especially those from the LGBT community. I also welcome that the issue of a penalty for those not answering questions on gender identity is addressed. The ability of people to exercise their identity is essential, and this inclusion is very welcome. As someone from the sector said:

"If you don't count, you don't count."

I also welcome the fact that the new process can be completed online.

It is 2020, and, as many people nowadays wholly use technology and online methods to conduct their business, even though this is a voluntary option, it is very welcome that the opportunity is there.

12.30 pm

I also wish to recognise and welcome the fact that extensive stakeholder engagement took place. It is absolutely critical that such engagement continues and that the Executive reach out to as many people who are impacted by the new regulations as possible to hear their voice and have that voice included in the outcomes. We welcome these census regulations.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call the next Member, I remind Members that I have the following names on my list: Mr Aiken, Mr Sheehan, Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair and Mr Allister. If your name is not there and you wish to participate in this discussion, please rise or try to catch my eye and I will add you to the list.

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): The Census Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 is made under powers conferred by the Census Act, which specifies that the First Minister and deputy First Minister must direct the censuses taken. The Chairperson of the Committee for the Executive Office has summarised the anomaly that resulted in the scrutiny of the legislation falling on two Statutory Committees. The Committee for Finance was asked to scrutinise the general policy proposals and then write to the Committee for the Executive Office to advise whether it was content. It then fell to the latter to consider the draft order.

The Committee for Finance received oral evidence from the register general on the statutory rule on 18 March 2020 at the SL1 stage. Members were informed that the legislation would establish the date of census, the area to be covered, the persons who have to complete returns, the persons who should be included in those returns and the questions that should be asked. It also proposed that the census should be, as has already been briefed, held on 21 March. Obviously, that will be subject to any potential COVID restrictions that may then occur.

Members then questioned officials and received assurances on the steps that had been taken to ensure the accuracy of the register on which the census is based. The census will include a number of new topics, including a household question on renewable heat systems, an adult question on apprenticeships completed and an adult question on sexual orientation, which will not be compulsory. Some questions have been omitted from the 2011 census where there are other sources of data available.

Officials outlined the extensive consultation that has taken place since 2014 on the questions to be asked. That included a dry run of the census in west Fermanagh, Belfast and Craigavon, which was to ensure consistency of data and to test systems and services. The dry run also included an online census to ensure adequacy of connectivity in rural and border regions. In response to a question from the Committee, officials revealed that, in the dry run, two thirds of households completed the census online, and that, although the percentage was higher in Belfast, more than 50% of households in west Fermanagh completed the census online. Obviously, that was those who managed to find that their broadband worked.

Having considered the oral evidence from the register general, the Committee for Finance was content with the policy implications of the legislation.

Mr Sheehan: Census is of great importance in gathering the necessary information to understand the needs of the population living in this part of the island. Understanding need is vital to us as political representatives in developing policy and in planning and delivering public services for society. The North of Ireland is becoming more and more diverse, and, as a society, it is important to understand and respond to the changing needs of the whole community. How the census is conducted and the information that it seeks to gather indicates just how diverse our society has become. I welcome the fact that translated booklets on how to complete the census will be provided in many different languages. Of course, the option to complete the census in Irish, as well as Ulster Scots, is an important recognition of the communities who live and work through their own language.

I welcome the inclusion of a number of new questions in the census. The question on long-term health conditions will now include an option on autism and Asperger's syndrome, allowing the needs of those with autism and Asperger's syndrome to be better identified and to provide more planned support and

interventions. The need to establish the uptake of renewable energy sources is also helpful in our contributions to addressing the existential climate crisis facing the planet. I also welcome the question for adults on sexual orientation. That question, unlike others, will not be mandatory, but it will help to improve the visibility, recognition and rights of those in our society who have suffered so much neglect, discrimination and prejudice in the past.

Census 2021 will not just be important for measuring the change that has already occurred, but as a benchmark for the change that we will see in the decade ahead. We are facing significant changes in the immediate and short term, in the context of Brexit, the global pandemic that is COVID-19, and the global climate crisis, all of which pose serious risks and challenges that will change society. Significantly, it is getting increasingly difficult to ignore the reality that those challenges require all-Ireland solutions and approaches. Whether health, economic or environmental, these crises will impact everyone on this island and they are best addressed together. It is important, therefore, that NISRA works closely with colleagues in the South in the Central Statistics Office to ensure that detailed statistics for the island of Ireland can be produced as the outworking of each census, on either side of the border, in 2021.

Ms Armstrong: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I support the independent collection of data through the census. However, and I have to say this to the junior Minister and the Finance Minister, whom I see in the Chamber, I have reasonable concerns about this order.

The proposed census contains a question that is outdated and insulting to many people who do not wish to be identified by their religious background. Mr Sheehan rightly talked about a diverse society, and it looks as if this census is doing that, but, unfortunately, it is a bit backward looking as well. As the Chair of the Committee mentioned, basically, if you are not in the census, you do not count. We are allowing a census to go through in which you have to note down the perceived religion that you were brought up in. So, in this census, the diverse society counts only if you are Catholic or Protestant. The unwillingness to remove that outdated question means that the census in 2021 will deliver information that perpetuates a Catholic or Protestant headcount; data that is not relevant and that is quite disrespectful to the growing number of people who no longer wish to be defined by a specific religion or who do not have a religion.

I want it put on record that if we are considering Northern Ireland only in terms of Catholics or Protestants, or as a special case, how can we move forward in our peace process to what should be a normal future? The outdated language and the use of a question about the religious body that people were brought up in is not helpful in planning for a truly shared and inclusive society and future.

The Northern Ireland census asks, under the demographic particular of question 17, for the:

Religion, religious denomination or body belonged to, or if none (selecting all that apply).

It then goes on to ask:

For those indicating none to the above;

Religion, religious denomination or body brought up in, or if none (selecting all that apply).

Why ask that question? The 2021 census and the Executive Office are asking people who are not involved in a religion to be defined by that religion, and to state the religion that they may have been perceived to have been brought up in or that their grandparents were brought up in. That is quite insulting and it does not recognise religious diversity. It is all religions, and none, that we are supposed to be respecting. It is like the old thing that I grew up with, "Aye, but are you a Catholic Jew or a Protestant Muslim?". It is ridiculous. Is this the way that the Executive Office still considers Northern Ireland? Instead of using the factual data that is already provided through the question, "What religion do you belong to?", the question undermines a respondent who chooses to answer no by requiring them to confirm the religion that they were brought up in. What use is that data?

Instead of looking forward, this census will again collate data that is irrelevant. Surely the priority in our diverse society is to ensure that we capture data to measure equality for all, not just those who have defined themselves as Catholic or Protestant. Persisting in asking a population to define itself in this way means that society here will always be held back by people who are determined only to recognise division and not the inclusive nature of our much more diverse society.

I am extremely concerned by the second religion question. When I met NISRA as part of the ongoing consultation, it confirmed that the question would be optional. Really? It is not in the order as being optional. Under 3.9 of the

explanatory notes, it confirms that the question on sexual orientation:

"will have no penalty for non-response."

I was told that there was no penalty for not answering the second religion question, so I am going to ask the junior Minister whether he can confirm when summarising that the public will not be fined if they choose not to answer that irrelevant question. If you do not have a legal obligation to answer the second religion question, why is it asked and deemed necessary?

Just when I mention not having to answer that question, when I met NISRA and it mentioned to me how the question was not going to be compulsory, I asked it to ensure that a pop-up would appear when people get to that question — question 17 — to explain to them that they do not have to answer it, and NISRA absolutely refused to consider that. If the census is going online, why not make it easier for people to use and enable pop-ups that can give instructions? I was told, "No. People have to have a printed copy sitting beside them to refer to for every question that they answer". Why? Why not use technology to let the public know that they can ignore that question and will not face a fine? The census places unreasonable respondent burden on the person. Respondents would have to print and keep referring to the completion guidance just to know that they do not have to answer that question. That is not fair.

I could understand the refusal if there were a financial reason for not using the technology to its full extent. Adding a pop-up, I accept, could cost money. However, NISRA already confirmed for me that there is no cost to removing the second religion question from the system. That means that there is no financial concern with making a proactive and positive change.

The second religion question is not asked in England and Wales. Scotland decided that 2011 would be the last time that it would ever be asked because when they examined it, they saw that there was the same limited interest in looking backwards to what someone once was or could be perceived to have been. The public acceptability of the question has gone. The census should be there to provide evidence about who our population is, not what it was 30, 40 or 50 years ago. In the South, the Irish census tested different versions of their religion question. In the 2016 census, they found that the people who selected no religion represented the second-biggest group. They

changed how they asked the question and have come up with, "Do you have a religion?" rather than, "Do you belong to a religion?" People then respond yes or no. If you say no, you move onto the next question. You are not then asked, "What religion were you brought up in?" If you mark yes, you say what religion you are. They decided to remove the second religion question as it was less about religion and more about finding out the cultural background of the person. It was decided that it was not correct to use the data in that way, and they, rightly, removed it.

When statisticians here use the information gleaned from the religion question, they mash together the factual answer to the question, "What religion do you belong to?" with the answer to the second religion question, which is a presumption that is based on background. When a person answers a census question, they are asked to do so honestly, so why, then, ignore the answer that they have given honestly to the question of the religion that they belong to by forcing those who say none to say what community background they were brought up in? Unfortunately, it is the same with the Equality Commission, which is still using data that is provided by employers, who are told by law to guess someone's religious background rather than use the facts that the employee has provided.

As background, public bodies and businesses are required to monitor equality of employment under the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998. Those duties are part of the Good Friday Agreement. As part of the monitoring process, employees and job applicants are asked to answer a question on a monitoring form stating whether they are part of the Catholic or Protestant community or neither. Sadly, the Equality Commission, the equality regulator, supports the production of religion and religious upbringing census outputs to help inform whether an affirmative action programme is needed, even though it has already written to signify that race should be considered in that employment piece. There is no such affirmative action being considered for people who, like me, have disabilities, and gender, age and race are not considered. All we are doing is using this information on religion. The system is enabling an unfair society because the census is asking backward-facing questions.

In consultations for the 2021 census, there appears to have been support for maintaining the census as was, but, given that so few actually responded, I find it difficult to understand why the then Ministers accepted the

results: 1,400 consultations were sent out and 50 were received back.

12.45 pm

I think that keeping the second religious question in the 2021 census is a very flawed measurement; it is one that is outdated and backward. What the census is doing is saying that we must consider you as you have always been with regard to what you once were and where you once lived — no such thing as a shared society.

The Education Authority uses the census to track demographic shifts and patterns, but the school census should be able to provide that information. The root-and-branch reform of our education system is defined in 'New Decade, New Approach' as child in education centred and not along the lines of segregation. Therefore, why when planning for a shared future, would any Minister allow outdated and backward-looking information to guide them? We should be looking to build local inclusive schools that work for the whole community. We should stop enabling division by using presumptions that no other country in the British Isles recognises as being fit for purpose.

I have not tabled an amendment to the order because I was told that it was a waste of my breath to even try, "The deal is done; they are the questions that are being asked. Go away, Kellie". I am saying to the Executive Office that it has the last chance to bring this census up to date by removing an unnecessary question that harks back to a segregated past that we are all working so hard to move on from. Junior Ministers, I ask you to consider what I have said. Do you think that it is right to not accept what people have said about their faith, or no faith? Should we not actually be accepting their honesty? Thank you.

Mr Blair: My colleague has most ably just reflected on the difficulties for many of us on the religious question in the census 2021 questionnaire. I fully concur with her comments regarding that matter and I want to take the opportunity to make clear my feelings.

In many ways, you could say that this is a personal comment and I think that is understandable in the circumstances because, just like everyone else in the House, and the many millions outside of it, I am an individual. Therefore, I am entitled to decide whether I have a religion or not and I should also be able to decide whether or not I leave it up to others to decide that for me. I should never be put in a

position where I am expected to declare the expected perception of others on an identity that I do not believe that I have. However, I know that as soon as I say that that I am going beyond the personal, because I know, and it has been widely analysed and reported, that a substantial and growing number of people in Northern Ireland take that position and make that choice. The reality is that some of us consciously decide not to be defined in that way. You might expect that we would have the right to do so. The core issue here is the right to be who we are irrespective of perceptions. I hope that the Ministers present will take that on board when they are making their reflections at a later stage.

To go further on the issue of identity, and in staying on the theme of being who we are and allowing others to do likewise, I will address the inclusion in this census of a question relating to sexual orientation. I am perfectly happy that the question is there, although I am less happy that it will be posed as an optional question, rather than a compulsory one with a very clear option of, "prefer not to say".

In the interests of gathering full, or as full as possible, data, we should proactively seek information that is truly reflective of our entire community. That is vital in the need to shape policy that is representative and meets the needs of all in society, especially in trying to address bias, discrimination and hate crime. It is also important that any question on sexual orientation allows the respondent to identify who they are beyond the rigid categories of gay, bi or straight. I hope that too will be addressed in the reflections made by Ministers.

Even at this stage, I am hopeful that the Ministers can reflect on those points and take action in the interests of true fairness and representativeness.

Mr Allister: I cannot and will not take part in a debate on the census without reflecting on the fact that, in a past census, one of the most brutal and callous acts of the Provisional IRA was the cold-blooded murder of a census collector, Mrs Joanne Mathers, as she did her public duty in the city of Londonderry. In the annals of all murders, that murder stands out for its particular cruelty and utter lack of anything that could ever be dressed up as justification. Of course, it came at a time when the republican movement sought to thwart the taking of a census. It went to the lengths of that brutal murder, and then, of course, tried to cover it up and deny that it was a murder by the Provisional IRA. Of course, at that time, the commander of the IRA in that city was, we are

told, one Martin McGuinness, who, sadly, took to his grave such knowledge as he had of that fiendish murder. I do not think that any of us, when we hear the word "census", should do other than reflect upon the awfulness, cruelty and vileness of that hideous murder.

The junior Minister who will respond to the debate has always been very upfront as a propagandist for the republican movement, both in his speeches and in his writings. I trust that he will take the opportunity, without weasel words, to apologise unambiguously, on behalf of the republican movement, for that hideous murder. There must be no more equivocation but a facing up to the fact that it was wrong in all its dimensions and robbed a family of a young mother who was going about a public duty. I will listen, more in hope, maybe, than in expectation, for the junior Minister to step up to the plate on behalf of his republican movement and face the facts of that awful, cruel murder.

I will turn to the content of the census order. When he introduced the order, the other junior Minister underscored the significance and importance of the census in obtaining reliable information, which is then utilised to shape Government policy and funding. It is fundamental to the whole process of governing. Given its fundamental nature, therefore, it is critical that it is made foolproof in order to be reliable. We need to know that the information that is given by the population is accurate, yet I heard nothing from the junior Minister about how the information will be checked for its accuracy or how that will be made foolproof. I do not think that any of us in the Chamber should be so naïve as to think that there are not people out there with various agendas who are willing to give their pet cause a leg-up in a census, particularly in circumstances where they can now do it online and no one will come to collect the information.

I will take the issue of language fluency. We all know that, in this Province, there is a politically-driven campaign to big-up the needs of the Irish language sector. We are going to have a census that asks a question about capacity in Irish, for example, fluency, ability to understand, ability to write and ability to speak. What is in the process to stop anyone who is so minded — whose knowledge of Irish might be no greater than Gregory Campbell's — to write on the census form that they are fluent in Irish and that they can speak it, understand it and write it, for the purpose of demonstrating a phantom rise in the number of Irish speakers in Northern Ireland. There is nothing in this census which protects against that. I, for one, am not foolish enough to think that that would not happen,

given the political nature of the campaign that drives much of that contention.

I challenge the Ministers on what protections are in place, or will be put in place, to proof the answers that are given. I see nothing in the legislation that adequately provides for that. Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, that is a particular flaw in this matter.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Can I ask the Member to resume his seat, briefly?

Mr Allister: Yes.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: It is now 12.57 pm and the Business Committee has agreed to meet at 1.00 pm. Therefore, I propose by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be Mr Allister resuming his contribution.

Mr Allister: I can conclude very quickly. I have two issues. One is that pertaining to the unrequited apology, unfulfilled apology, of Sinn Féin for the murder of a census worker. The other is how we are going to check against abuse of this census process. I would like to hear the junior Minister step up to the plate on both issues.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I apologise to the Member for interrupting. I did not realise that he was coming to his conclusion.

The Business Committee are meeting at 1.00 pm. The next item of business, when we return, will be junior Minister Kearney making his winding-up speech on the motion.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.58 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Beggs] in the Chair) —

2.01 pm

Assembly Business

Mr John Dallat MLA

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Members, before we resume our business this afternoon, some of you will be aware of the sad news that our colleague John Dallat sadly passed away this morning. I served alongside John as a

Member of the Assembly from 1998 and while he was a Deputy Speaker. I know that I speak for all Members when I say that he will be sorely missed. The Speaker will put arrangements in place for formal tributes to be paid to John at the start of our sitting next week. However, for today, let me express our condolences to John's wife Anne, his children Helena, Ronan and Diarmuid, and his eight grandchildren. They are in our thoughts and prayers today.

Executive Committee Business

Census Order (Northern Ireland) 2020

Debate resumed on motion:

That the draft Census Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Mr Kearney (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): Gabhaim buíochas leis na Comhaltaí sin a chuidigh le díospóireacht an lae inniu ar an dréacht-Ordú Daonáirimh, agus cuirim fáilte roimh a gcuid tuairimí agus barúlacha. I thank the Members who contributed to today's debate on the draft Census Order and welcome their comments.

The census is subject to many competing demands. The consultations identified more demands per census question than it would be possible to accommodate in a questionnaire that households could reasonably be expected to complete. In coming to a final selection of questions, some difficult decisions had to be made. Those decisions balanced the requirements for information with the burden placed on the public. The topics outlined in schedule 2 to the order are judged to have the greatest demonstrated need, not to be available from other sources, not to place an excessive burden on the public and to be obtained through easy-to-answer questions.

Ba mhaith liom léirmheas a dhéanamh ar an díospóireacht anois. I will now deal with a number of the observations and contributions that Members made during today's debate and do my best to respond to them as fully as possible.

Colin McGrath, Chairperson of the Committee for the Executive Office, noted that the Committee approved the regulations. He welcomed the fact that the census reflects the

diversity of our society and made the telling point that, sadly, if you do not count, you do not count. He commended the level of stakeholder engagement as a positive development.

Steve Aiken, Chair of the Finance Committee, noted the anomaly that the order was processed between his Committee and that of the Executive Office, and he outlined the scrutiny process that was undertaken by his Committee. He reflected on the dry-run process undertaken by the census office and on the fact that that extended to urban and rural areas. He noted that 50% of recipients in Fermanagh responded online to the dry run, and he advised that he and his Committee were content for the regulations to proceed.

Pat Sheehan underscored the importance of the census. He said that it took account of diversity in society. He welcomed the facility to respond in Gaeilge and Ulster Scots and endorsed the additional question to include those in society with autism and Asperger's syndrome — an issue very close to my heart. I, too, am delighted to see that those members of our community will be properly recognised and identified as we move forward in our census data. Pat Sheehan also welcomed the addition of the question on sexual orientation. He encouraged closer collaboration between NISRA and the Central Statistics Office in the South as another practical way to develop closer all-island working.

Kellie Armstrong made a forceful argument that the inclusion of questions on religious and community background is backward-looking, outmoded and counter to a shared society. The Member expressed serious concern at the second question that is posed. She feels that public acceptability for the inclusion of such questions in our census has disappeared. Kellie Armstrong asked whether citizens would be fined for not answering those questions and whether it was obligatory to answer them. I assure Kellie Armstrong and the House that failure to answer those questions carries no penalties. The two religion questions were first included in the 2001 census following the creation of new legal obligations under the Fair Employment and Treatment Order 1998, which the Member mentioned. That legislation requires employers to establish the community background of their employees and, in turn, for that to be compared with the eligible population. The religion and community background questions, therefore, produce a composite census output based on the answers to the two religion questions that is essential for those purposes. The public consultation also identified continued support for the questions to

be included from Departments and the Equality Commission. However, I assert and assure the Member that citizens are not required to answer the questions. The online system will allow you to bypass the question, and citizens will be given advance notice by the Registrar General to that effect in the lead-up to the census.

John Blair agreed with Kellie Armstrong that it is unfair to have to define oneself according to a religious or community background. He asked why identifying sexual orientation was optional and not compulsory. He reflected a concern that there is a lack of consideration of the social reality of our very diverse LGBTQ community and said that that must be recognised in wider society. I agree with the Member that the identity rights of our LGBTQ brothers and sisters should be affirmed and can confirm that it is acceptable and is an available option for those to write their sexual orientation over and above a sexual identity of gay, lesbian, bisexual and so on.

Jim Allister began by speaking of the tragic killing of the census enumerator Ms Joanne Mathers in 1981. That was indeed a terrible act that caused deep hurt and suffering to her family and scarred our society. Her death is another heart-wrenching reason that it is so important to ensure that our peace process guarantees a better future for us all and for all of our children. As a Minister and a public representative, I assure the House that I am absolutely committed to securing a better, shared future for everyone in our society.

The Member also questioned the accuracy of the census.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Kearney: No, Mr Allister, I will not give way.

Ag tiontú ar an cheist i dtaobh na Gaeilge de, proficiency in Irish has been a census question since 1981. A question is also included in the 2021 census that determines the frequency of the use of the Irish language. This question has, in fact, been fully tested in voluntary household surveys run by NISRA, and the figures are accurate. NISRA will, in turn, run a follow-up survey to assess and test the accuracy of the census. I mo mheas féin, a LeasCheann Comhairle, léiríonn an daonáireamh, leis na blianta anuas, go bhfuil líofacht na Gaeilge ag gabháil ó neart go neart sa tsochaí seo. I am delighted that our society is becoming increasingly culturally diverse and that we hear many other languages spoken in this society here in this region above and beyond the use of Gaeilge and Ulster Scots.

In conclusion, I thank Members for their interest in the draft census order and for contributing to the debate. Tá mé fíor-shásta go soláthróidh tosú an ordaithe seo bunchloch reachtach don daonáireamh a bhéas ann sa bhliain 2021. I am satisfied that the commencement of the order will provide the legislative foundation for a successful census in 2021.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Census Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): Before I move the order, I join others in expressing my sadness to learn of the death of John Dallat. I worked with him for many years in the House and express my condolences to his family, friends and party colleagues at this very sad time.

I beg to move

That the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 be affirmed.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate.

Mr Murphy: This order is brought forward annually, and it stems from the Executive's Budget for the 2020-21 year, which was originally brought to the Assembly on 31 March 2020. The order has been overshadowed by the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to the crisis, I introduced a three-month holiday for all businesses. In England, only certain businesses were given rate relief. Had I followed that scheme, which some Members have called for, rates would now be paid on 60% of business properties. My Department will shortly bring to the Executive an extension to the rate relief scheme targeted at the hardest-hit businesses. That, however, is separate from the order in front of us today. This order is about laying the ground for economic recovery in the longer term. It responds to a key concern of businesses for many years: the relatively high level of business rates. In fact, the order delivers an 18% reduction in the non-domestic regional rate.

I turn to the detail of the order and its purpose. The regional rate supplements the Executive's block grant. It helps fund expenditure on health, roads, schools, infrastructure and other essential public services. To underline the significance of the rating system, last year, over £1.3 billion was collected in rates — regional and district, domestic and non-domestic. Taken together, the domestic and non-domestic regional rates set by the order equate to a headline revenue figure in the region of £684 million at the time of the Budget.

The legislation before you today for approval is the outworking of that important Budget decision. The breakdown is that the regional rate represents just over half of a typical rate bill, with the other half made up of the district rate that is set independently by local councils. District rates set for 2020-21 are high in some councils as a result of their financial difficulties.

2.15 pm

Today's order fixes two separate regional rate in the pound figures for 2020-21: one for households and one for businesses. The new rate in the pound figure freezes the domestic regional rate for the 2020-21 rating year for households. In other words, there is no increase on last year's domestic regional rate poundage. Our household rates charges are relatively low here, but this freeze is important given the financial pressure on households at this time. On the non-domestic side, the over 6p cut to last year's poundage represents a very significant 18% reduction. These, together, will help household and commercial budgets as we emerge from the initial wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

I will close these opening remarks by addressing technical matters concerning the order. Its main purpose is to give effect to the poundage decisions already made during the Budget process by specifying the regional rate poundage for 2020-21. Article 1 sets out the title of the order and gives the operational date as the day after it is affirmed by the Assembly. Article 2 provides that the order will apply for the 2020-21 rating year through to 31 March 2021. Article 3 specifies 27.9p in the pound as the commercial regional poundage, and 0.4574p in the pound as the domestic regional rate poundage.

I look forward to hearing Members' comments, and I commend the order to the Assembly.

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): May I, as leader of the Ulster

Unionist Party, on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, pass on our condolences to John's family and to all his friends. He will be a very much-missed Member of the Assembly. We wish his family all the best in these trying and difficult circumstances.

As has been outlined by the Minister, the purpose of the proposed statutory rule is to set the amount of the domestic and non-domestic regional rates for the year ending 31 March 2021. The order stipulates the regional rate for domestic and non-domestic property expressed in pence per pound that will apply for the 2020-21 rating year. The poundage laid out in the proposed rule will reflect the Executive's Budget for domestic and non-domestic purposes.

The policy proposals contained in the statutory rule were considered by the Committee at its meeting on 5 February 2020. The Committee had no issues to raise in respect of those policy proposals at that time. The Committee formally considered the statutory rule at its meeting on 22 April 2020, along with the accompanying report from the Examiner of Statutory Rules, who had no points to raise in the technical scrutiny of this rule.

Much has changed since the Committee's initial consideration of the outlying policy proposals, but it is necessary — and I re-emphasise that it is necessary — to enable the Department to issue rate bills to ratepayers. Naturally, any measures taken by the Executive to provide financial support to ratepayers during the current crisis will draw on the resources received as part of the COVID-19 response.

Whilst I am mindful that the next item of business is on the Budget, it is important to recognise that the collection of rates provides vital funding for the delivery of our public services. However, that being said, I suspect that every Member here has heard the concerns, particularly from the business sector, about the burden that non-domestic rates have on day-to-day cash flow.

The Minister previously outlined his intention to review the wider rating system. The Committee will be keen to consider any policy proposals and will work constructively with the Department early in that process. The Committee agreed to recommend that statutory rule No. 59, The Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020, be affirmed by the Assembly. Therefore, Mr Deputy Speaker, we support the motion. Thank you.

Mr Lynch: I welcome the Minister's statement. As the Chair said, we will have further

discussion on matters relating to the issue afterwards in the Budget. However, I welcome the order as an important element in the much wider programme that the Executive will need to put in place as we move through the immediate health and economic traumas of COVID-19. Whilst responding to events as they unfold, the Assembly must begin to plan for the long-term economic recovery. The order addresses the issue of high business rates, which, as the previous Member to speak said, have been raised with most of us, particularly by business people, and it delivers an 18% reduction in the non-domestic rate. The order also freezes the domestic regional rate for the next year for struggling households during this difficult period. There will be no increase on last year's domestic regional rate. Therefore, I welcome the order.

Mr O'Toole: First, on behalf of the SDLP, I want to thank other Members for their remarks and condolences on the passing of John Dallat MLA. In some ways, it is ironic that I am the first person from our party to talk about John's legacy and our sadness at his passing, given that my time serving in the Chamber has been fairly brief, but, in that brief time, like everyone in the Chamber, I experienced his extraordinary integrity, courage, passion for the people of East Derry and commitment to inclusive politics in this place. He was one of the few people who served in the original Northern Ireland Assembly, having been elected in 1998, along with you, Mr Deputy Speaker. People who served with him through that time know the size of his character and his heart. It is an immensely sad time for his family and all those who knew and worked with him. I hope that we will have some more time to reflect on his legacy in the Chamber.

I am a member of the Finance Committee, and as the Chair and Sean Lynch, a fellow member, have said, we discussed the rates order in the Committee and approved its passing. I want to make the point — I will make it again in my remarks on the Budget — that, in a sense, the changed times that we are all living in since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis mean that we have to look, almost from first principles, at how we do fiscal policy in this place. As the Minister and the Chair of the Finance Committee said, regional rates, non-domestic and domestic, are one of the only revenue tools that the devolved institutions here have. However, taking a step back, we can see that the people on whom that burden falls greatest are small businesses in Northern Ireland, particularly small retail and hospitality businesses. Which are the sectors of the economy that have been hardest hit by the necessary steps that we have had to take

because of COVID-19? It is hospitality and small retail. That cannot be right. We need to be able to have stable and reliable revenue sources in addition to the block grant, but we also need to be able to recover our economy. The order was processed or, as it were, born, before the COVID-19 crisis and everything that came with it. That has changed things entirely; it has changed the entire assumptions on which the tax is based. We do not know what the commercial property sector will look like in the medium- to long-term. While I support the principle of the order — there was no alternative to supporting the principle of the order to allow the Department and Land and Property Services (LPS) to continue their business this year — I would say —

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Toole: I will give way briefly.

Mr Wells: I had not indicated that I wished to speak in the debate, but I was one of the Members who entered the Assembly in 1998 with John Dallat. It is appropriate that the Member is speaking now, because I want to pay tribute to John.

John and I sat together on many Committees in the Assembly, including his favourite, the Public Accounts Committee. He was the scourge of government overspending. He made an enormous contribution to the House over 22 years and will be missed greatly as one of the very few Members, including me, who arrived in 1998. Many of us would like to be in Kilrea to pay our respects. We will not have that opportunity, which is very sad. I certainly would have been there had I been allowed to do so.

My intervention is entirely not in order, but I am glad that it has given me the opportunity to pay tribute to someone whom I regarded as a great friend.

Mr O'Toole: I am glad that the Member intervened and that I gave way. I will conclude my remarks at that and defer to what the Member has said. It is an extremely sad time for everyone here who values inclusive politics and making this place work.

Mr Muir: I join with others and express my condolences on behalf of the Alliance Party to the family and friends of John Dallat. I have only been here a short time, but we managed to have a conversation outside a number of months ago. It was around his dogged determination to ensure justice for Inga Maria Hauser, who was murdered in 1988. He fought that case very hard. All of us would agree that

the best legacy to John would be ensuring that the perpetrators of that murder are brought to justice. Our thoughts are, obviously, with John's family at this time.

In relation to the order, as a new boy, I looked at the last time the Assembly debated a rates order and what the protocol was for contributions. The debate was on 22 February 2016. It lasted less than 15 minutes, but it was at 11.00 pm. The situation that we are facing today, in 2020, is very different and, perhaps, it merits a bit more debate due to the circumstances that we find ourselves in, with the affirmation of the order occurring in May, as opposed to February, and the future so uncertain.

At the outset, I declare that I was previously a member of Ards and North Down Borough Council. I welcome the decision to cut the regional non-domestic rate by 4p, delivering an overall reduction of 18% and alleviating somewhat the impact of Reval2020, which hit some sectors very hard, especially hospitality and hotels.

Historically, in Northern Ireland, business rates, as the Minister outlined, have been much higher than in Great Britain. Papers that led to the 'New Decade, New Approach' document detailed that as a significant issue of concern for businesses. Options for action were set out but, at that time, were not felt to be feasible. I am, therefore, pleased to see action on the issue in the making of the order, and I hope that it can be sustained in the future to ensure that the rates burden is fairly shared.

As Members are aware, rates in Northern Ireland are made up of the regional and the district rate, which provide the main source of income for our 11 local councils. In the current economic circumstances, a serious and almost certain risk exists that the revenue forecast for district councils, when striking the rates in February, will be much lower than anticipated, whether derived by the district rate or by provision of services, such as leisure, planning, tourism and more.

We are, therefore, making the order in the knowledge that the levels set do not secure the financial future of our councils. The arrears that are likely to arise for domestic and non-domestic rates, or the downturn in the estimated penny product for the non-domestic property base, are storing up a crisis for local government and making double-digit rises across Northern Ireland in the next financial year almost certain, if assistance is not provided centrally. The delay in the dispatch of bills will help somewhat to reduce the level of

arrears, but bills will still end up being higher than before.

It is, therefore, of paramount importance that the Department of Finance, working in conjunction with the Department for Communities, provides the financial assistance necessary to ensure that our councils can continue, do not become insolvent and are not forced to implement swingeing cuts and massive rate hikes next year to recoup the unanticipated costs arising from COVID-19. To witness the collapse of one form of local government in Northern Ireland that has continued through thick and thin would be a tragic mistake, overlooking the valuable role played in delivering key services, such as waste collection, burial, planning, leisure and economic development, alongside local civic representation.

History will judge whether the decision to offer full rate relief for all businesses for the first three months of this financial year was the right one in the use of public funds. However, the Executive found themselves in unique circumstances and needed to take an urgent decision to provide immediate support, so it was the right decision at the time. The decision on whether to extend the rate relief beyond the end of June now needs to be taken. In the context of the ability to review the effectiveness of the blanket relief, and the understanding of sectors most in need of further assistance, I urge the Minister to consider targeted relief extension, taking into account those businesses that will remain under lockdown restrictions and struggle to come back as soon as others, such as, for example, the retail, aviation, hospitality, leisure and tourism industries.

LPS conducted a non-domestic rating review in 2019, and the consultation closed on 11 November. In the challenging circumstances in which we now find ourselves, it is even more important that the recommendations arising from that review are brought forward, evaluated by an independent panel and published for consideration. The new economic circumstances require, more than ever, a fit-for-purpose business rating system, which is not focused purely on bricks and mortar, but ensures that businesses not only survive but thrive.

Alliance will vote for this order but requests that clarity is given by the Minister on the issues raised, whether they are in relation to securing a sustainable financial future for local government, the extension of the non-domestic rates relief or the status of the non-domestic rating review.

2.30 pm

Mr Catney: I thank the Minister for coming here today, and I thank everyone for their kind words about John Dallat. I saw John just last week; I went out to see him and was talking with him. I had to go out to see him simply because I was put on a Committee that he was on. When I went out to visit John he was not well, but he still had that fire in him. He and I were trying to plan a trip to Munich; I have a daughter who lives in Dachau and we were going to try to go over to follow-up on the terrible tragedy, which Mr Muir mentioned, of young Inga Hauser's murder. John was still up for the trip. The day that I was there was the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Dachau, which was the first concentration camp. It was in Germany, but it was the very first one and was the model for the rest of them. I was able to talk to John and, as I say, he lit up.

I will miss John. I know there will be a time for the House to pay tribute to him, but I genuinely miss him. He was a good man. I knew him long before I ever went into politics; I knew him from the bar but that is neither here nor there now. *[Laughter.]* As so many Members have said, I have no option but to support the order. I see the small reductions that are being made, but there are a lot of small businesses like my sister's, who rang me last night. She and her family have a very busy house and one pub in the centre of Belfast. They have no money and have used up whatever savings they had on the rates. The three-month rates holiday was welcome for them, but they are trying to come out of the current situation and they can find no way of sustaining their business if the lockdown continues much longer. There is no way that they will find the resources that they need if they have to try to operate a business through distancing in a public house, because that will not be possible.

The review has been carried out, and it will be much fairer to get away from bricks and mortar and look at turnover. That is for the days ahead, and we will be able to debate such issues in the Budget debate. I have reservations and will reluctantly support the order.

Mr Murphy: I thank all the Members who contributed to the debate. As I have stated, today's 2020 regional rates order gives effect to decisions that were made as part of the Executive's 2020-21 Budget. The Executive's aim is to strike a balance between meeting the needs of ratepayers during what will be a challenging long-term economic environment and ensuring that public finances are sufficient

to cover the priorities that we have set ourselves.

Turning to some of the points that were raised, I appreciate the support expressed for the order. Matthew O'Toole mentioned revenue raising, which is an issue that we have discussed on many of the occasions that I have spoken in the Chamber. He will be aware that I am committed to looking at the fiscal levers that are available to us. That work is even more important in the time ahead, given the circumstances that we face.

In relation to council finances, which Andrew Muir mentioned, of course we will continue to engage with councils and try to ensure that they have the necessary resources. There is no question of local government going under or going out of business. Councils, like all other public departments, will find that a certain amount of the money that they had budgeted spending in this quarter will not now be spent. From my experience of talking to some councils, they are already looking to see where they can find savings as well as recognising that they have a reduced income from the normal services that they provide. However, there will be savings from contributions that would have made to various events, particularly over the summer months, that will probably not go ahead. We will continue to look at that and look at the finances that are available to councils through the rates discussions with them.

I of course get the points that Mr Catney raised in relation to the ongoing struggle of small businesses, although that is not part of this. This does contribute to businesses through the reduction of the non-domestic rate over the year and further into the future, but obviously the Executive want to look at other interventions that we can make. There has been, I think, over £0.5 billion-worth of interventions to try to support businesses to date. We understand that the economy will struggle in the time ahead and we will continue to do what we can.

I trust that Members will show the necessary support for the order. I believe that a strategic approach to the domestic regional rate and, in particular, the non-domestic regional rate will be welcomed by households and businesses alike. In closing, I thank the Committee Chair, members and staff, for their work in reviewing the concept of the order at its meeting on 5 February and the substance of it on 22 April. The timing of the Executive's return, the late Westminster Budget and the issues facing us all as a result of COVID-19 have been real challenges, and I welcome, therefore, the

Committee's work to assist the Department in its scrutiny, and I look forward to working with it, hopefully in a more typical environment in the months ahead as normality begins to return. I commend the order to the Assembly and ask Members to affirm it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Before I put the Question, I remind Members that this motion requires cross-community support.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 be affirmed.

Budget 2020-21

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call the Minister of Finance to move the motion.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the programme of expenditure proposals for 2020-21 as set out in the Budget laid before the Assembly on 31 March 2020 and the further detailed information laid on 30 April 2020.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to four hours and 30 minutes for this debate. The Minister will have up to 60 minutes to allocate, at his discretion, between proposing and winding up the debate. The Chair of the Finance Committee will have 10 minutes to speak, and all other Members who wish to speak will have seven minutes. I call the Minister to open the debate.

Mr Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. This Budget was constructed in unprecedented circumstances. The restoration of the Executive in January and the Chancellor's Budget on 11 March meant that there was a limited period in which to develop this Budget. In addition, the Budget has been overshadowed by the outbreak of COVID-19.

In his Budget on 11 March, the Chancellor announced initial measures in response to the economic disruption caused by COVID-19. The allocations arising from those measures were included in the statement that I provided to the Assembly on 16 March 2020. Since then, the British Government have made further

announcements on funding for the response to COVID-19, and while some of the measures apply here, the Executive receive Barnett consequential on any funding provided for England only. Legislation prevented me from including further COVID-19 funding in the Budget subsequently laid on 31 March. However, the Executive have taken forward the COVID-19 response separately.

While the Budget outcome does not reflect the full COVID-19 funding, the Budget document does contain details of how Departments are responding to the challenges presented by the pandemic. It also outlines the measures that have received additional funding so far. The Executive have allocated funding to support businesses; to maintain public services, including our health service; and to protect the vulnerable.

Although our block grant has still not been restored to its pre-austerity levels in real terms, the Executive have been able to support businesses and households. Domestic regional rates, which are already relatively low, have been frozen, and the non-domestic regional rate has been reduced by 4p in the pound, and that, combined with the revaluation, will see average bills fall by 18%. A three-month rates holiday has been provided to all businesses to help them cope with the lockdown. All Departments have received real terms increases.

The Executive have prioritised our key services, with the non-ring-fenced resource budget for Health breaking £6 billion for the first time and Education being given an 11% increase from its baseline. The Budget will also allocate £1.6 billion to capital investment. Ministers have been given flexibility to reallocate resources so that they can respond to the new challenges that have been created by COVID-19.

The Budget is being presented in very difficult circumstances but it offers a platform to support businesses, maintain public services and protect vulnerable people during the crisis. I commend the Budget to the Assembly.

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): As the Minister has outlined, the motion seeks the Assembly's approval for the expenditure proposals that are contained in the Budget, which was laid on 31 March 2020, and the supporting information that was laid last week. As we are acutely aware, the resumption of routine Assembly business has taken a significant detour while we understand and react to the impacts on our society that have been caused by the devastating pandemic and

the significant challenges that we all face to mitigate them.

The events leading up to the collapse of the Executive in 2016 are well rehearsed and I do not intend to revisit them today. However, they have provided the necessary catalyst to change how we as elected representatives meet our responsibilities to scrutinise the Executive. Due to circumstances that relate to the timing of the Executive's return and the impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak, the Budget process has been far from ideal. However, it was necessary in order to try to get us back into a normal budgetary cycle.

For this Budget cycle, the Committee for Finance has revised the usual methodology to help facilitate a more consistent, coordinated and productive approach to gathering budgetary information from Departments. A key aspect of that work was the introduction of a standardised template, which was developed in conjunction with the Assembly's research and information service (RaISe) to provide a reliable baseline of evidence to assist all Assembly Committees and the Committee for Finance to deliver a more consistent approach on how information is sought from Departments and presented to Committees. I want to convey my special thanks to the RaISe researchers for their invaluable contribution to developing that approach and for the analysis of the departmental responses under what were considerable and significant time constraints. I also want to thank all Committees for adhering to the time frame that was set by the Committee for Finance to coordinate and contribute to today's business.

At its meeting on 22 April, the Committee considered evidence on the Department of Finance's requirements. Although the Department has smaller resource requirements compared with others, its functions fulfil a critical role in coordinating expenditure across government Departments. It has been difficult for all Committees to fully scrutinise their Department's budget because of the condensed process for Budget scrutiny resulting from the Assembly returning to normal business shortly before the deadline for the Budget Bill, restrictions that were imposed on Committees and Departments as a result of COVID-19 and the consistently changing financial position resulting from funding measures that were put in place to respond to the pandemic.

Despite those difficulties, the approach that was adopted by the Committee for Finance has allowed the Committee to circumvent many of

the barriers and find a way to undertake its scrutiny function at departmental levels. The Committee raised a number of issues with the Department in relation to the departmental budget, including departmental pressures on rates and pay, how IT costs are classified as either resource DEL or capital DEL, provisions that were made for potential slippage in the delivery of projects, departmental borrowing and funding related to Brexit. The Department made a timely response to the issues that were raised, which was considered and approved by the Committee at last week's meeting. The Committee is, therefore, satisfied that it has had the appropriate opportunity to adequately scrutinise the Department of Finance's budget.

I will now move on to the Executive's budget. In the Minister's statement on 31 March, there was a funding provision of £120 million specifically in response to COVID-19. Further measures have, subsequently, been announced by our Chancellor of the Exchequer as the situation has developed and the impact of the pandemic on health and the economy has become, regrettably, clearer. The Department of Finance has also laid a Budget document that includes details of further COVID-19 funding bringing the total provision to £1.19 billion, which has been provided, quite remarkably, in less than four weeks from our national Exchequer.

The Committee's focus to date in relation to the allocation of that funding has been on scrutinising the procurement of personal protective equipment (PPE) for our front-line workers and volunteers and on how resources are being used to support the economy and employment, mainly through non-domestic rates measures.

2.45 pm

Appropriate resource allocations to Health and Economy, in the response to COVID-19, are critical if we are to fight the virus, reduce its spread and mitigate the long-term impacts on our economy. Sufficient and timely preparation to respond and revitalise our economy, once we start to emerge from the lockdown and to rebuild our economy and society, is also essential.

The Committee considered the Minister's announcement that he intends to bring forward a further Vote on Account aimed at preventing COVID-19 departmental spending from exceeding limits contained in the Budget Act that was recently passed. Having received notification from the Department on Friday 24 April that, in the absence of a further Vote on Account and Budget Bill, there is a risk that

Departments will exceed their authorised spending limits, the Committee broadened the scope of its oral evidence session last week to receive evidence and question officials on the matter.

Officials confirmed that the Departments most at risk of exceeding those limits are, not surprisingly, Economy, Health, and Communities, but also Education, and Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. Officials also explained that it is likely that some Departments will need to access in excess of their indicated budget allocation because payments are being front-loaded in order to support the requirements of our recovering economy. It is important to note that the Committee received assurances that, in such instances, those totals would not exceed the combined totals contained in the Budget and coronavirus-related allocations.

The Budget cycle is an ongoing process, which is currently being implemented in an ever-changing environment. Given the current circumstances, the Committee is content with the progress that is being made to date. The Committee will continue to scrutinise the Budget position as it develops and will expect the Department of Finance to be proactive in including the Committee in regular ongoing consultation.

The Committee will, of course, consider the additional Budget Bill in detail when it is presented to the Committee. The Committee will expect to be appropriately consulted on the Bill prior to considering whether it is content to grant accelerated passage in line with provisions under Standing Order 42(2).

The current circumstances underline the need for timely and relevant information and engagement with Committees at all stages and, particularly, during the in-year monitoring process. June monitoring will be the first opportunity that Committees have to formally scrutinise how Departments and the Executive's spending plans are being implemented. I encourage all Committees to make the most of that opportunity.

As we look to the future, we will need to consider how we plan for and shape our recovery from the devastating economic effects of the pandemic. It is crucial that we put the appropriate support in place to breathe new life into our economy. At last week's meeting, the Committee questioned officials on how plans for recovery are being taken forward. It was encouraging to hear that the public spending directorate is part of the group that has been

established in the Department for the Economy to look at just that issue. Although it is at an early stage, the Committee will view progress in that group with interest, and, in that regard, I have written to the Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy to consider how our two Committees can work together on that important, cross-cutting matter.

On behalf of the Committee for Finance, I support the motion.

I will now make some remarks — very short remarks, you will be glad to hear — as the finance spokesperson for the Ulster Unionist Party. I think that only the most narrow-minded politicians would query the efforts of the Government in London to provide necessary resource during the crisis. However, where legitimate questions do arise is in the speed and overall response of some Executive Departments to pass on resource and support to our business community, our disadvantaged, our employed, our transport infrastructure and our third sector. Many in the House will have dealt with complaints and quite justifiable concerns that our citizens are not being as equitably treated as those in the rest of the United Kingdom. In a budgetary context, much of the resource required to sustain our people is there; what is lacking is any strategy or evidence of a longer-term plan. Plans have already been outlined in Scotland and Wales, by our Prime Minister in his five points, and even by our close neighbours in Dublin.

The UUP has called time and again for a recovery plan to be created; a plan that involves all the key stakeholders. We have even asked that the New Decade, New Approach Programme for Government be refocused to COVID recovery. Now is the time for all parties to join us and show leadership in delivering for all of the people of Northern Ireland.

On behalf of the UUP, I say that the party supports the motion.

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): Mr Deputy Speaker, I also pass on my condolences to John Dallat's family at this very sad time.

The Committee for Communities was briefed by officials on the Department's budget position on 22 April. The Committee acknowledges the extremely difficult circumstances in which the Department has compiled the budget, given the funding requirements for COVID-19 actions to date and the uncertainty that the crisis has presented. The headline resource DEL budget for 2020-21 is £824 million. The Committee

noted that, while specific budget allocations have been made, they are subject to change depending on the Minister's priorities and the evolving impact of the COVID-19 position.

What was most striking about the briefing was the uncertainty regarding any funding specifics beyond quarter one and the generally heavily caveated nature of the estimates provided to the Committee. The COVID-19 budget requirements for quarter one alone total almost £61 million, with a projected requirement of just over £49 million per quarter for the remaining three quarters. Of course, the Committee recognises that recent priorities have all been COVID-19-related, and the Committee has supported the Minister in her initiatives to support those people impacted as a result of the crisis. We also note that each of these initiatives has generally come with a significant price tag.

I am sure that many here have heard from their party's local councillors about the pressure that councils are under. The reduction in the revenue of local councils is not sustainable for much longer. We heard just last week of at least one council planning redundancies, and there have been conflicting analyses of whether councils can place staff on the Government's furlough scheme. I note that last night the Minister for Communities confirmed that council workers can apply for the furlough scheme. That will come as a welcome relief to many councils, but it does not solve the significant financial pressures that councils are under as a result of COVID-19.

The Department has sought £16.5 million for councils in quarter one, and in subsequent quarters, but over the medium term this is unlikely to be enough to enable councils to continue to deliver the services that ratepayers expect. The Committee is scheduled to hear from the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) next week, and hopefully the financial position of councils will be made clear. Perhaps the Minister can say a few words about the likelihood of additional funding in the coming months for councils.

The Committee was told, and is concerned, that, if more funding for COVID-19 is not forthcoming, the Department will be under pressure to find the requirements from its existing budget. What is also concerning is that the Department envisages additional funding demands as a result of the New Decade, New Approach agreement and the potential impact of EU exit. Officials noted that, on those two issues, there was significant uncertainty around requirements and funding available. With

uncertainty being the prevailing theme of our briefing, it is likely that the figures we discussed a couple of weeks ago with officials will be unrecognisable in the coming weeks.

Some funding issues have been agreed. The extension of some of the welfare mitigation measures agreed as part of the NDNA agreement have a cost of £41.7 million for 2020-21, and the Department was allocated £40.3 million to meet those mitigation requirements, over half of which will go towards the social sector size criteria. At any other time, we would be discussing in detail how we continue to fund the mitigation measures beyond 2021 — a difficult enough decision to reach in normal times, given the range of other competing priorities and financial limitations. Now, as a result of COVID-19, we will have many more people claiming universal credit who will not have had the same protections as those who were already on benefits when the mitigation measures were introduced. That presents us with the increasing moral dilemma of a possible two-tier benefits system. Clearly, we need agreement on what a sustainable and stable benefits system should look like.

The current circumstances have clearly made what we might consider "normal" prioritising and budgeting something of a moveable feast. The Committee was advised that officials would be working to finalise figures over the coming weeks, meaning that the June monitoring round was likely to be the more informative point in the budgetary cycle, rather than anything we might hear this week. The flexibility afforded to Ministers to reallocate internal funding as part of the June monitoring round is important. It is perhaps more important than ever this year, given that there is likely to be very little money to be surrendered to the centre for redistribution. I note that flexibility is to be kept under review by the Executive and may be extended if necessary. The Committee would certainly support flexibility in internal reallocation. The Committee urges the Minister for Communities to decide on her priorities sooner rather than later and to make the appropriate allocations based on a strategic way forward.

One of the Committee's main concerns was the impact of COVID-19 on capital funding. The Committee would be supportive of taking as flexible as possible an approach to capital funding to ensure that key projects are not put at risk. The Committee welcomes the increased bid of £232.25 million for new-build social homes. That is an increase of £145.86 million from last year and meets the NDNA

commitment to increase the number of social homes to 3,000 a year.

The Committee supports the £55 million bid for financial transactions capital (FTC) and notes the additional bid for £55 million capital DEL in case the legislation to reclassify registered housing associations as private entities is not progressed in time. The Committee will hopefully be briefed by the Minister next week on that legislation. If its progress is agreed with the Committee, we hope that the £55 million FTC bid will ultimately be successful.

The COVID-19 crisis will clearly continue to delay projects. When, for example, housing associations are having to plan for new builds, including buying land and getting planning permission, the possibility that they will be able to spend the allocated budget before the end of year is remote. Therefore, looking ahead, the Committee would like flexibility to be extended to capital projects.

To say that the budgetary position of the Department for Communities is evolving is to state the obvious. It is clear that we will know more when the Minister's priorities are decided.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask the Chairperson to bring her remarks to a close.

Ms P Bradley: We look forward to liaising with the Minister on those matters over the coming months and to lending her our support.

Mr Lynch: As a member of the Finance Committee, I commend the Minister for setting the Budget and for the numerous initiatives that he has designed to protect our people and mitigate the damage to the economy during these very challenging times.

When we first sat as a Committee some three months ago, little did anyone know that the Budget of 2020-21 would be overshadowed by an unprecedented public health crisis: a crisis that would impact on all our lives, both socially and economically. In his statement to the Chamber in March, the Minister said:

"Protecting lives and livelihoods from the pandemic is now our number one priority."
— [Official Report (Hansard), 31 March 2020, p9, col 2].

In that regard, many Members will want to know whether help will be available in our response to the COVID-19 crisis. Since the beginning of March, that priority has dominated everything that we do as elected representatives. The

Minister has confirmed in the Budget the level of funding allocated to the various Departments for the period 2020-21 and the level of funding available to offset the huge impact of COVID-19. Separate from the departmental allocation set out in the first section, the COVID-19 response has included funding of £1 billion allocated to maintain public services, support businesses and protect the most vulnerable. I commend all Ministers for getting the money from that funding out the door as quickly as possible. I know from speaking to many businesses and communities that the assistance has been welcomed.

The grants and schemes did not cover everyone, however. That was understandable, because of the speed with which Ministers and the Executive had to react to the developing health crisis and the virtual close down of society. I know that the Minister has recognised that and given an undertaking to look at schemes to try to cover those who have fallen through the net.

I commend the Minister for Communities for the assistance that she has given to the most vulnerable. It is encouraging to witness parcels being delivered to our local communities. I commend her for the work that she has done to include charities, communities and the voluntary sector. She has demonstrated flexibility with grant funding. That has meant a reduction in bureaucracy on important measures in order to help communities and the voluntary sector and to make things easier for them. Measures include no need for fees and more simple applications for grants.

The COVID-19 community support fund that she announced is also to be welcomed. The fund released £1.5 million, initially through local government's existing support programme and the Community Foundation's small grants programme, to tackle the crisis at a local level.

From talking to communities and sports organisations, I know that the way in which these programmes reach the most vulnerable is hugely appreciated. Credit should also go to the staff who are making all this happen in difficult circumstances.

3.00 pm

As I said in the earlier debate on the rates order, and as most Members will have encountered, rates are a huge issue, particularly since the COVID-19 outbreak. In these challenging times, the 18% reduction in the non-domestic rate and freezing of the

domestic regional rate for the next year will be welcomed by struggling households and businesses.

I turn to the Budget itself. Even before the arrival of COVID-19, the Budget had been initiated in a very different financial context. In real terms, the block grant was some £360 million below pre-austerity levels. Over that period, the pressure on public services has increased. Indeed, that has been highlighted to an extent in the process to tackle COVID-19. However, despite the pressures, the Minister has been able to deliver a Budget that, compared with last year, provides a real-terms increase to all Departments. I am encouraged that he has prioritised the Department of Education and the Department of Health, which, for the first time, have been allocated over £6 billion in resource funding. There is £1.6 billion of capital allocated to investment in infrastructure, an increase in much-needed funding for broadband and support for the construction industry. These allocations will support the economy and, hopefully, assist in the recovery from the current crisis.

I also welcome the flexibility that the Minister has given each Department to re-profile its budget in response to the health emergency, with particular focus on protecting key services and businesses and looking after the most vulnerable. That flexibility is important in allowing Departments to be agile in their planning for the challenges that arise during this unprecedented period.

Finally, on the in-year Budget, I am aware that the Executive and the Minister support bringing forward multi-year Budgets that will give greater certainty to public services. The Committee for Finance looks forward to working with the Minister on the process to ensure that that will happen in future.

Mr McGrath (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): Mr Deputy Speaker, I hope that you will give me, as chairman of the SDLP, a little latitude for a moment to offer my condolences to the family of our colleague John Dallat at this sad time. John was a representative of East Derry for a generation, and a teacher before that. Always in a community role and working hard, he had a fire in his belly that most of us would be jealous of. I appreciate the remarks made by colleagues in the House today, and I know that his family — his wife, Anne, his children, Helena, Ronan and Diarmuid and his eight grandchildren will take great comfort from them. I appreciate, too, that, next week, we will have an opportunity for a full and proper reflection on

John's immense contribution to life in civic Ireland.

I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate and thank the Minister of Finance for bringing it to the House. There is no doubt that there have been unusual challenges around this year's Budget. Not only are we dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic that has turned our world upside down and changed beyond recognition the way we work and conduct our lives but we are still feeling the effect of the three-year absence of a fully functioning Government, which has resulted in a compressed timetable for Budget planning. Despite these circumstances, it is important that Committees conduct their scrutiny in as thorough a manner as possible, and we have all endeavoured to do that in these very challenging and unsettling times. As is the case with other Statutory Committees, the Committee for the Executive Office adopted a standardised Committee scrutiny approach to the Budget. As part of that approach, it issued a budget template to the Executive Office to capture relevant information on the 2019-2020 financial year, the resource and capital requirements for the 2020-21 year and the revenue expected.

At this point, I put on record the Committee's thanks to the Assembly's research team for developing the template. It has proved really useful in helping the Committee to look back and forward to get the full financial picture.

Departmental officials attended the Committee meeting on 22 April to answer members' questions on the pressures that it had identified and the Budget allocation made by the Executive. A formal response to the Budget was then agreed at the Committee meeting on 29 April, and I will now rehearse some of the main points contained in it. The Executive Office received an uplift in budget of over 72%, primarily due to the inclusion of £37.5 million for the historical institutional abuse payments, and a total of £98 million has been allocated to the Department. Similar to previous times, significant pressures were identified. There were inescapable pressures totalling £151 million, pre-committed pressures totalling £33 million and one high-priority pressure of £0.5 million, covering departmental running costs. In relation to capital, the Department identified inescapable pressures of £10 million and pre-committed pressures of nearly £9 million. The Department has also identified £5.2 million of anticipated income, although the Committee noted that the majority of that income represents recoupment of existing departmental

costs and is therefore required to meet the Department's resource pressures.

Given the time limits of the debate, I do not want to go into every pressure that was identified, but I do want to draw attention to some, including a number that have not received an allocation. A pressure of nearly £1 million was identified for NDNA programme delivery, covering management and preparatory work on language, identity and cultural expression, including progressing legislation and the creation of the relevant bodies. The Executive's Budget did not include an allocation for this area, however the Department will take forward this work using existing baseline resources and will progress legislation and the creation of the relevant bodies as the operation of the Assembly and available resource permit during the current crisis.

During the evidence sessions with officials, clarifications were sought on whether the £5.83 million pressure that had been identified earlier in the year for the same area was no longer relevant. The Committee was advised that the earlier-identified amount was a marker bid as costs for the scheme had not been determined at that stage. The Committee noted that, and, given the current COVID-19 pandemic, timing around the introduction of the legislation is unclear, and, therefore, significant expenditure into 2020-21 is very unlikely.

As I mentioned earlier, the uplift in the Executive Office budget was primarily due to the allocation of funding for the historical institutional abuse redress scheme, and it is very much welcomed. All members share the view that the costs should be met centrally from the block grant for the lifetime of the scheme. However, there is also a very strongly held view that robust efforts should be made to secure funds from those institutions that were involved in the abuse. It is important that they take responsibility and share the costs with the public sector. The Committee understands that there has been some initial contact between the Executive Office and the institutions, and this is an area that the Committee will follow up on. The redress scheme has now commenced, and, while the Committee is very much in favour of increasing the cap on the maximum amounts payable to victims and survivors, it appreciates that the introduction of legislation necessary to do that could cause unwarranted delays in the payments being made to those who have already waited far too long for the redress scheme. I would like to point out very clearly that the Committee believes that the maximum amounts payable should be more. The victims and survivors deserve more.

Turning now to capital, included was a £2.3 million pressure for ongoing development of the Ebrington site and £5.2 million pressures for capital programmes within the Urban Villages programme. When asked for certainty around funding for this work, officials assured the Committee that there was no threat to the availability of capital funding, and this was very much welcomed.

There were other pressures identified that did not receive an allocation in the Executive's Budget. COVID-19 is one such pressure, and the Committee appreciates that the bulk of funding allocated through the Barnett formula to deal with the COVID pandemic is being used to support the health response to the pandemic. With time pressing on, I would like to mention the issue of legacy. I mention as an individual MLA that there is a bit of concern on this. Payments to victims of the Troubles here have taken too long. As it stands, we have no scheme and we do not know who will pay for it. These individuals are some of the most deserving in our community, people who were going about their daily life only to be caught up in an incident —

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

Mr McGrath: — and, as a result, have lifelong injuries. Those injuries have changed their lives, and we hope that some scheme can be developed so that they can get the pensions that they so richly deserve.

Mr Lyttle (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I will begin by responding to the Budget debate as Chairperson of the Education Committee in relation to the budget for the Department of Education, which, as we know, is in financial crisis.

The Department of Education previously advised the Education Committee of financial pressures of £427 million for 2020-21. Although that included £148 million for teacher and non-teachers' pay, £80 million for the Education Authority and £60 million-plus for school budgets, the Department for Education has been allocated £227 million — some £200 million less than the amount requested. Due to COVID-19, some of the expenditure planned by the Department of Education has been paused, but the Department's non-COVID-19 resource pressures still exceed the Budget 2020-21 allocation by £165 million.

Education Committee members are particularly alarmed to learn of the increasing annual pay

pressure in education, which may conceivably exceed £200 million by 2022-23. That significant financial challenge, as I have stated clearly on many occasions, demands radical reform and reorganisation of education in Northern Ireland. The consequences of that funding gap for education are severe, but Education Committee members are clear that no cuts as a result of that financial gap should fall on special educational needs provision, mental health and emotional well-being, tackling underachievement linked to deprivation and delivering equal educational opportunity for all.

The Education Committee also reiterates its support for the restoration of modest funding for the BookTrust Bookstart programme, which is a low-cost, high-impact early years literacy programme. The programme is even more important during social isolation, as, whilst reading has thankfully increased for many families, a significant number of children are at risk of inadequate access to resources and learning. Indeed, BookTrust research published on 1 May found that 22% of parents are unable to complete any home education with their children, and 14% are unable to read to, or with, their children. That, surely, is an issue to which we, the Budget and the Education and Finance Ministers must respond.

I encourage any parents or guardians who have internet access and are struggling with reading at home to visit the www.booktrust.org.uk/hometime-ni website to access local authors and artists who are demonstrating reading and drawing activities for families, and for links to other valuable programmes, such as the Libraries NI and Fighting Words websites. Not everyone has access to the internet, which is why BookTrust's Bookstart programme is such a worthwhile investment for the Executive and why I am eager to hear what, if any, plans the Executive have to provide internet and computer resources to those children and young people who are in need of them.

The Education Committee welcomes funding for a number of essential COVID-19 measures, such as the free school meals payment and the childcare support scheme, which is being delivered by the Education and Health Departments in partnership. There are, however, families in Northern Ireland who do not have a bank account and who are not therefore in receipt of the free school meals payments that they need. The Education Committee has raised the matter with the Education Minister.

The £12 million childcare support scheme is, of course, welcome, but its implementation by the Health and Education Ministers is taking too long and asking too much of our highly valued and dedicated childcare providers. The joint Department of Education and Department of Health childcare support allocation of £12 million was announced on 9 April, yet not a penny has reached childcare providers and a childcare sector that is fighting for survival; a sector that is vital to the development of our children and which will be essential to the recovery of our economy.

It is particularly concerning therefore to learn that PlayBoard NI surveys suggest that up to 20% of childcare providers are unsure if they will be able to reopen further to the COVID-19 shutdown. The Education Committee has met childcare representative bodies, such as the Northern Ireland Childminding Association, Early Years, PlayBoard, Employers for Childcare, Northern Ireland Day Care Owners and the Employers Forum for Early Years Playwork and Childminders. We will do all that we can to support the prompt and sensible delivery of the COVID-19 childcare support scheme to that key sector.

3.15 pm

The Education Committee has also consistently raised the need for the urgent delivery of adequate pay for substitute teachers during the period of COVID-19 social isolation, and it is increasingly concerned by accounts of significant hardship being experienced by dedicated substitute teachers in our community and expect that to be urgently addressed by the Education Minister.

The Education Committee also asks the Executive to support all funding for educational settings to safeguard the well-being and educational development of our children and young people on their return from COVID-19 lockdown.

There are some aspects of the Department of Education COVID-19 budget requests for which the Education Committee seeks further rationale, such as approximately £4 million for preparatory schools and boarding schools.

Turning now to capital expenditure, the Department of Education had a budget of around £157 million for 2019-2020 and £138 million for 2020-21. The Committee accepts that that is, to an extent, due to the COVID-19 shutdown, but the disrepair of much of our school estate must be addressed.

I realise that I am running out of time, so perhaps the Finance Minister could speak with some clarity on the availability of Fresh Start capital funds, in particular whether there is further clarity on the money for 2020-21.

Miss McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure): I express my condolences to John Dallat's family at this very difficult time.

I welcome this opportunity to outline the Committee for Infrastructure's consideration and views for today's debate. I will first reiterate the size of the deficit facing the Department of Infrastructure prior to the current health crisis, before speaking about the impact of COVID-19 on the Department and the budget allocation being discussed by Members today.

During the Committee's scrutiny of departmental finances, the stark situation faced by the Department was made clear. The Department informed the Committee in January that its budget has a recurring structural deficit of £61 million going into 2020-21, which is to rise to £80 million in 2021-22 and to £90 million in 2022-23. While the Department's budget for 2020-21 has increased by 8.6% to £558 million capital and almost £418 million resource, that amounts to an additional £33 million on last year. The Department has warned that:

"The proposed Resource funding increase of £33m for DfI will have severe implications on critical infrastructure services, not least, water and waste water, road maintenance, street lighting repairs, winter gritting and public transport."

The Minister advised that she has yet to decide on the final distribution of allocations for resource and capital and so provided the Committee with only indicative resource budget allocations. Given that the Committee is unable to fully scrutinise the 2020-21 allocations at this stage, I will outline the pressures facing the Department.

With respect to water and sewerage, it has not been possible to fund Northern Ireland Water to the levels recommended by the Utility Regulator. That has meant that Northern Ireland Water has been unable to connect new housing developments and businesses to the sewerage network and has warned that developments at over 100 locations across Northern Ireland have the potential to stagnate. Officials told the Committee that, prior to the 2014-15 departmental budget reductions, the Department would have regularly allocated some £35 million to cover routine maintenance

and meet winter requirements. In recent years, that budget has been cut to less than half.

The capital budget for 2019-2020 was £471 million, and the requirement for 2020-21 is £795 million, increasing to £1.4 billion by 2022-23. Officials outlined that the Department prioritises funding for flagship projects, such as the major road upgrades, and says that those are inescapable. The Utility Regulator's determination on Northern Ireland Water funding is inescapable. There is a contract in place to buy new carriages for the rail network and procurement for new buses. Funding for Waterways Ireland, the design phase of York Street and the deficit to Translink also has to be found. The Living with Water Programme requires £1.45 billion capital budget over the next decade. The recent Barton and NIAO reports on structural maintenance of the roads network recommended that the Department of Finance and the Department for Infrastructure work towards ensuring funding of some £143 million per annum on a recurring basis to prevent further deterioration.

I have left the most notable shortfall to last, namely the matter of Translink and the very real possibility that it could become insolvent. As has been well rehearsed, Translink has had a reduced budget of around £13 million per year and has run its service at a deficit and used its reserves to supplement that. The £19 million requested for Translink in the monitoring round was unsuccessful. Next year, Translink's reserves will be well below the level of working capital that it needs and it may cease to be deemed as a growing concern. In many respects, that is academic now given that, as a result of this crisis, Translink's revenue streams have dried up due to social distancing and the lockdown.

The Committee is aware that there is a COVID-19 fund to mitigate those challenges, yet the Committee has had to write to the Minister of Finance for clarity on why the Department for Infrastructure is the only Department not to have received money from that fund. The Infrastructure Minister acknowledged that when she came before the Committee last week. At that briefing the Minister noted that her Department's estimate of COVID-19-related pressures was up to £181 million — £90 million to £114 million are estimated to come from the loss of revenue to Translink. The Committee has been assured that a cast-iron guarantee has been given to cover that loss and to protect public transport. It would be welcome to hear that directly from the Finance Minister, along with his view on the discussions with DFI on furloughing Translink staff.

Turning to Northern Ireland Water, it relies on the income that it receives from businesses to provide its essential service. Due to the closure of many businesses, the estimate of pressure on Northern Ireland Water's finances is between £17.5 million and £32 million. The Committee was advised that if that revenue stream is not covered, it will render Northern Ireland Water unable to sustain essential public services and put at risk its ability to provide clean and safe drinking water, which is critical for public health, and to effectively treat waste water to protect the environment.

The Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) is primarily funded through fees. The cessation of most of the services provided by DVA has resulted in little to no fee income being collected. However, significant costs continue to be incurred. The Department has estimated that the lost revenue for three months is £8.6 million, increasing to £19.4 million for six months and £30.7 million for nine months. The Department has also warned that if funding for that loss of revenue is not secured, there will be an inability to continue paying fixed costs, such as staff costs, and the trading fund status of DVA may not be sustainable.

That is a grim picture and does not even include the funding that will be required to meet the Department's obligations under New Decade, New Approach. While we welcome the Executive's announcement yesterday of additional money towards city deals and associated infrastructure projects, it is imperative that additional money is found to kick-start the economy with investment prioritised for key capital infrastructure programmes. The Committee for Infrastructure will continue its scrutiny of the Department for Infrastructure's budget as we move through this process.

Dr Archibald (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): I too extend my deepest condolences to the family, friends and colleagues of my constituency colleague John Dallat.

It really does not seem that long since I rose to speak in the Chamber during the Second Stage of the Budget Bill in February, yet so much has changed since then. None of us could have imagined the situation that we now find ourselves in. The COVID-19 pandemic and crisis has changed all of our lives in so many ways. The pandemic is the extraordinary backdrop against which we discuss the 2020-21 Budget.

I am sure that the Minister of Finance, other Members present and the Committee Chairs contributing to the debate will acknowledge that this crisis has had a large impact on the Budget process. The Committee for the Economy and, I expect, most other Statutory Committees, will not feel that they have been able to apply the level of scrutiny to the Budget that they normally would at this stage. I know that some members of my Committee have expressed frustration that the Department's budget has been a moving target.

The allocations made in the latest Budget document are likely to be subject to an unknown level of change and that hinders scrutiny. We do not know how long this situation will last and, as a consequence, it is difficult to assess how many of the Department for the Economy's budget allocations can and will be utilised for their original purpose. It will be some months before there is a truly clear picture of the impact that the COVID-19 crisis and the subsequent Executive response is having on the 2020-21 Budget.

In their briefing to the Committee for the Economy, officials indicated that there may be elements of the departmental budget, and those of its arm's-length bodies, that can be repurposed for the COVID-19 response. Again, that makes scrutiny at this point difficult.

The Committee is very supportive of the Department's COVID-19 response to date and is advising the Department on gaps in schemes and other issues through extensive consultation with its stakeholder network.

The Committee cannot make a definitive judgement on the Department for the Economy's 2020-21 budget plans at this stage because of the issues that I have outlined. However, members stand ready to scrutinise the Department's budget as and when there is greater detail and certainty. The Committee has already raised the issue of the need for sign-off on the graduate medical school at Magee project before the end of May, as per the General Medical Council's requirement for opening in the academic year 2020-21. Members support the required funding being made available by the Executive once the project receives timely sign-off.

As a key driver of the COVID-19 response, the Department for the Economy must have its budgetary needs prioritised. The Committee looks forward to the outcome of the June monitoring round to better assess where the Department's budget position sits. The Committee has concerns about the other work

that is a vital part of the Department's remit: the response to Brexit and the impact of the protocol; dealing with the RHI inquiry response; and strategies across a range of policy areas that include energy, tourism, further and higher education and skills. Additionally, the Department has a number of actions that come from 'New Decade, New Approach'.

While it is not possible at this point to make definitive statements or scrutiny points on the Department's budget, the Committee remains ready to offer advice and guidance to the Minister in the challenging days ahead. Members are cognisant of the fact that considerable resources will be needed to get the economy back on its feet and to begin to build the recovery. The Committee is united in its view that, at present, this is, first and foremost, a health crisis and the Budget must be deployed appropriately in response. For now, the Committee for the Economy is forced to reserve its position, as this is not a normal Budget process.

I will, now, make some remarks in support of the motion in my capacity as Sinn Féin's economy spokesperson. The current priority for us all is to deal with COVID-19 and its impact. The restrictions that have been put in place have severe economic consequences, but they have been necessary to save as many lives as possible. As we plan for the recovery, that remains our aim: to save lives. We need a phased return to business that keeps the spread of the virus under control, because lifting the restrictions too quickly and allowing the virus to spread could lead to further lockdowns that would cause even greater economic damage.

The £510 million that the Finance Minister has directed towards supporting businesses to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 so far has been most welcome. It has comprised £370 million for grant schemes, £100 million to date for the rates holiday and a further £40 million towards a hardship scheme to support those who have missed out on other support that, we hope, will be announced soon, along with support for others who have not yet received any funding.

The growth deals and city deals funding that was announced yesterday for regions across the North are also very welcome. I thank the Minister for his work on those. They will be very important in the years ahead. However, I think that we all recognise that there will be a need for further targeted support and that the British Government will have to invest further to support the economic recovery. As we look

forward to planning for the recovery, there needs to be debate and discussion about the type of economy and society that we want, as we come out of the pandemic: an economy that recognises the vital role of the healthcare and other key workers who have stepped up to the plate to ensure that essential services continue to be delivered, many in roles that the British Home Secretary deemed to be "unskilled" not so long ago; an economy that upholds workers' rights, where zero-hour contracts and bogus self-employment are things of the past and agency workers enjoy the same rights as other employees; an economy that encourages entrepreneurship, where businesses can thrive; and an economy with decarbonisation as a core tenet that harnesses the potential of natural resources through a green new deal.

Prior to the pandemic, hospitality, tourism, manufacturing and many other sectors were thriving. Social enterprises and cooperatives were doing brilliant work in communities. They will need support and guidance to return to doing what they do best. While some sectors have ground to a halt, others, such as the digital economy, cybersecurity and delivery services, have had to expand rapidly to support new working arrangements. In planning for the recovery, we should seek to develop the sectors that have high-value growth potential. That will require investment in digital infrastructure, skills development and innovation through research funding but will have great benefits.

For the second time in little over a decade, an economic crisis is likely to result in high youth unemployment. We need to be prepared to respond to that and ensure that young people have alternative pathways to develop their skills or learn on the job in new industries.

An all-island approach to the recovery is the only sensible option. Coordinating a response, benefiting from our interconnected supply chains and building on our strengths just makes sense.

3.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw her remarks to a close?

Dr Archibald: The challenge facing us is great, but our response must be one that tackles inequality and builds resilience to future pandemics like this one.

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): I welcome the

opportunity to speak as Chairman of the Committee for Justice in the debate.

The Budget announced by the Minister of Finance on 31 March 2020 included allocations of £1,111.2 million resource DEL and £88.1 million capital for the Department of Justice. The Budget document noted that that was an increase of 6.3% on the 2019-2020 resource DEL allocation. However, the Department has advised that it includes funding for a number of matters, such as £5 million of ring-fenced funding for legacy pressures and PSNI security funding. When you remove such costs and compare like with like, it equates to an increase of just 2.5% on the 2019-2020 resource DEL. The Department has advised that the allocation is not adequate to maintain current services, and the Minister of Justice has raised her concerns with the Minister of Finance. Overall, staff costs account for over two thirds of the Department's resource expenditure, and the major portion of resource funding — 72% — is allocated to its non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs). That includes the Police Service, which alone will receive over £785 million, including security funding. The Department's agencies account for 23% of expenditure, whilst 5% will be allocated to the core department. The Police Service will also receive the highest capital allocation — nearly £60 million — while the Prison Service has been allocated just under £17 million and the Court Service will receive nearly £7 million.

With regard to COVID-19, the Committee was mindful that the Department's planning took place before the COVID-19 crisis materialised. Members recognise that the pandemic is likely to have a significant impact on the delivery of services across the justice sector that may not be fully realised for some time. The Committee also understands that there is regular engagement with the Department of Finance on COVID-19-related costs. The Department of Justice had earlier indicated costs in the region of £38.8 million and received allocations of £4 million for the Police Service and £1.9 million for the Prison Service.

It is the Committee's view that there will be programmes and projects that had been planned before the crisis began to unfold that will now not continue or be initiated as anticipated. That could free up resources for reallocation to meet urgent COVID-19 resource requirements. The bid submitted to the Department of Finance appears to have been made without evaluating or taking account of the likely reduction in business activity to identify what predicted expenditure could be reprofiled or surrendered. The Department has

advised that it intends to undertake work in the coming weeks to assess the impact of COVID-19. The Committee believes that that is critical to providing an accurate picture of the resources available in the Department to manage the crisis and determine whether additional funding is required from the centre.

I will leave aside the COVID-19 pandemic for now. The Department has advised of inescapable pressures of £67.3 million just to stand still. Of that, £31.8 million relates to police operational pressures, £17 million for inflationary pay and price increases, £1.5 million for transformational initiatives and £14.5 million for operational pressures, including costs arising from court cases and routine legal aid payments. The Committee has asked the Department to provide further information on services or activities that could be reduced or ceased and the impact that that might have, particularly given the assertion that the resource DEL budget falls short of what is required to maintain current services.

The Department also set out a range of matters that it identifies as other significant pressures. They include EU exit costs, legacy and the impact of the BEAR Scotland case with regard to the calculation of overtime pay, which is particularly relevant to the Police Service. Regrettably, the Department has not provided indicative costs, citing uncertainty around timing and scale. However, the Committee believes that some of the information must be known. For example, the police provided an estimate of inescapable legacy-related pressures to the Department, but they were not included in the £31.8 million inescapable pressure attributed to the police that I mentioned earlier. The Department has also advised that costs for these matters are expected to be so significant that they could not be managed within budget and additional funding would be sought from the centre. That suggests that there must be some indication of what the costs might be.

Funding of £10.7 million was allocated towards the costs of exiting the EU. The Department has advised that that is only a small proportion of the total estimated pressure but, again, has failed to provide an indication of what that pressure might be. The reason the Committee has been given for the absence of the detail is that planning for 2019-2020 was mostly done on the basis of no deal, which is no longer relevant, and that requirements will be informed as the implications of the exit protocol become clearer over the coming months. The Committee expects to be kept up to date.

Similarly, on New Decade, New Approach, no costs were provided. Unfortunately, the Committee is again unhappy with the Department of Justice at its failure to provide that information to the Committee.

Mindful of the time, I have highlighted a range of areas where the Committee did not get the figures from the Department. The Department subsequently went to the Department of Finance and to the Minister to seek additional funding, without having done its internal housekeeping work. I do not believe and the Committee does not believe that it is acceptable for the Minister of Justice to fail in that way in her Department. It is unfair on the Minister of Finance to be faced with requests from the Minister of Justice when that Department has not carried out the work in its Department. It is incumbent on the Minister of Justice to do her job and to carry out the necessary work before going back to the Department of Finance to seek additional funding. I say that outside of being Chairman of the Committee as well. It is totally unreasonable for the Minister of Finance to receive such requests when Ministers need to evaluate their own priorities on the basis of the situation that they face.

I will make some brief comments as an individual MLA in the last 20 seconds that are available. We are in the calm before the storm. We face significant business problems, including closures and high unemployment levels, and we will face an economic crisis —

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

Mr Givan: — that requires this Budget and future Budgets to prioritise support for our economy.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): Ba mhaith liom sonraí a thabhairt don Tionól faoin dianscrúdú a rinne an Coiste Sláinte ar Bhuiséad 2020-21. I rise to provide the House with details of the Health Committee's scrutiny of the 2020-21 Budget. Ba mhaith liom, ar dtús, aitheantas a thabhairt don chóras cúraim sláinte atá faoi bhrú millteanach faoi láthair, ó na cúramóirí go dtí an fhoireann leighis ar an líne thosaigh, agus na hoifigh atá ag obair faoi stiúir an Aire. First, I acknowledge the enormous pressure under which the health and social care system is working, from care workers and medical staff at the front line through to officials, led by the Minister. I understand that the fast-moving situation makes it impossible to provide certainty on spending and service provision in the months

ahead. The pre-existing financial, waiting list and transformation challenges are impeded and yet made more urgent by the threat to life from COVID-19, which, the Committee recognises, as you have stated, Minister, is an unprecedented crisis.

In summary, the Health Committee has been advised that, as things stand, the Department of Health has been provided with an uplift of £399 million compared with its opening baseline last year. However, given in-year allocations, that, while welcome, amounts to a 4.7% increase on its forecast spending. That allocation falls short of the Department's estimated requirements. There is no money to meet New Decade, New Approach commitments. The transformation budget will be so small that some existing projects will have to be cancelled or paused, and there remains a further funding gap, which means that choices may have to be made between some bare-minimum inescapable pressures. Indeed, it could be worse: the calculated funding gap is based on assumptions that the trusts can carry on meeting standards while achieving further savings. Members will, no doubt, share my concerns at that picture.

Owing to the compressed timescale and the late arrival of papers, the Committee did not come to a formal position on the Budget but raised the following matters. The Department estimates that it requires £169 million to meet the health and care commitments set out in 'New Decade, New Approach', including progress on transformation, further provision of IVF treatment, dealing with excessive waiting times for elective care, the reform of adult social care, upgrading palliative care services and developing a new mental health strategy. For many, the disappointment that there is no funding as yet is all the worse for having had their hopes raised. I know that you, Minister, continue to press the British Government to honour their commitments as set out in 'New Decade, New Approach'.

We are all agreed that transformation is essential to deal with rising costs. It is a priority agreed across the Executive and, indeed, reiterated in 'NDNA'. While initially allocating £81 million to fund a standstill approach to transformation, the Department has agreed to divert some of that resource to deal with the underfunding of other inescapable pressures, leaving only £44 million this year available to maintain some but not all projects. Nevertheless, it represents not much more than a third of last year's spending and is well short of this year's budget, which is a real concern.

In terms of the funding gap and scaling back transformation, there remains a funding gap of about £34 million to meet inescapable pressures. However, that £34 million gap assumes the achievement of £72 million of savings and that last year's target of £77 million will prove deliverable on a recurrent basis. However, as officials admit in their briefing to us, that is a risky assumption. Officials advise that the Department expects trusts to make the 1% savings in a low-impact manner through efficiencies. We have further work to do to get to the heart of that. We will apply oversight and accountability to explore whether savings are genuinely achieved through more efficient ways of working or, for example, by failing to replace a retiring member of staff.

In relation to COVID-19, the Department updated the Committee on its assessment of costs, which could run to upwards of £500 million. That is significantly more than has been received to date; however, they have advised us of a degree of confidence that pandemic costs would be met.

In terms of in-year issues, while allocations are, no doubt, hugely welcome, particularly at this time, Members will appreciate that that is not conducive to long-term planning, which is crucial to transformation and to our charity and community sectors.

There is concerning evidence of growing financial strain in the health and social care system and little opportunity to make the progress needed to address those strains, due to COVID-19 as well as ongoing financial pressures. The Committee will continue to monitor the situation and engage constructively as matters progress.

I would now like to add some remarks as Sinn Féin health spokesperson. I welcome the speedy resolution of the pay issue at the start of your tenure, Minister, in relation to our Health and Social Care staff. It reminds us how vital it was in demonstrating how we value our Health and Social Care staff. I am struck by how quickly that became obvious when the COVID-19 pandemic struck. The pressures brought on by 10 years of austerity have come into sharp focus since the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, with shortages of personnel and equipment impacting on our ability to meet the challenge head-on. Ahead of us, we face the uncertainty of a Brexit that we did not vote for and its impact on our already shattered health and public services. The COVID-19 crisis has challenged our health and social care system in unprecedented ways. It highlighted the ravages of 10 years of Tory austerity, when we sought

to locate suitable PPE, ventilators and the staff we needed to face the challenge head-on to save the lives of our people. It has also demonstrated the need for deeper and wider cooperation in the provision of health services across this island to protect all our people. The Minister of Finance has tried to alleviate the worst effects of COVID-19. We also need to resource the charity and community sectors and to work with them to ensure that we address social care and protection for the most vulnerable in our society.

Faoi dheireadh, a LeasCheann Comhairle, ní mór dúinn cosaint a thabhairt dár gcóras sláinte agus cúraim shóisialta. Caithfidimid iad a fhorbairt chomh maith. It is essential that we protect and promote the need to transform our health and social care systems. It will require proper planning, implementation and resourcing in the time ahead. We must grasp that nettle collectively to make the changes that we need for our community.

Mr McCrossan (The Chairperson of the Audit Committee): Can I follow on from my colleagues and other Members in paying tribute to our dear friend and colleague, John Dallat? His death came as a tremendous shock to us all today. Even though he had been unwell, it still came as a shock that he has gone so quickly.

John was elected to the House for 22 years. He spent 45 years of his life as a public servant. He showed an unbelievable dedication and commitment to the public, and he was a fierce champion of public funds. He was a man who chased every pound and accounted for every penny when it came to his accountable role on the Public Accounts Committee.

3.45 pm

John loved his family, the SDLP and the people of East Derry. To finish, with your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker, John had a tough and ballsy exterior, but underneath he was a soft, gentle, kind man and someone who had a great sense of humour. Before I stood to speak, I was thinking about the last time that John stood with me in the Chamber. It was when he stood just behind me and paid a heartfelt tribute to Séamus Mallon on his death. This place will certainly be a lot sadder for the loss of a great man — a man who gave his life to so many.

I will speak now as the Chair of the Audit Committee to reflect the scrutiny of the Budget 2020-21 for the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office

and the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman. The Committee's agreed report on its deliberations was published on 5 March, and a debate on the Assembly Commission's budget, specifically, took place in the Chamber on 16 March. The Committee's evidence-gathering took place over two meetings on 13 February and 4 March 2020. All evidence gathered has been published as part of the Committee's report. With the limited time available to me today, I cannot dwell on the detail of the evidence gathered by the Committee, but I will reflect on particular areas, the first of which relates to the Assembly Commission.

It is clear that a large part of the Assembly's Budget is driven by costs set out in the Assembly Members (Salaries and Expenses) Determination 2016. The Commission is legally obliged to meet those costs, but members questioned officials on the controllable proportion of the Commission's budget. Elements include income-generation options, staffing implications of a fully functioning Assembly, the Commission's capital budget and staff resources. Members also noted the anticipated financial implications of the New Decade, New Approach agreement, some of which are still uncertain. That will, no doubt, be a focus for the Assembly Commission and an area of future scrutiny for the Committee.

Members were satisfied with the detail presented during its evidence session, but there is a clear need to have more than one opportunity to examine the Commission's budget. It was also noted that the scrutiny role of the Audit Committee in that regard needs to be codified.

I move now to the Audit Office. Members questioned officials on the new business model and the transformation work undertaken in recent times. Members were pleased to see the amount of budget reductions that the office has been able to make in that regard and received a number of assurances from officials that they had not had a detrimental impact on the work outputs of the office.

Despite having a relatively small budget, members of the Committee were struck by the wide remit of NIPSO, as well as the growing numbers of complaints considered by the office since its inception in 2016. Members were particularly interested to hear about the future role of the office in relation to the complaints standards authority. That, combined with investment in other preventative measures outlined, could lead to huge savings further down the line due to a reduction in the number

of complaints finding their way to NIPSO in the first place. The Committee also looks forward to a timely appointment of a permanent ombudsman, given that the powers of the acting Ombudsman will expire in July of this year.

The Committee would be supportive of a multi-year budgetary framework in the future as it would enable a more strategic budgetary focus. The Committee would also encourage maximum focus on income-generation opportunities. As such, the Department of Finance's Budget document has made provision for the figures agreed by the Committee in its report published on 5 March 2020.

I will now make comments as the SDLP's education spokesperson, and as an MLA for West Tyrone. I thank the Executive and Members present for showing a collective front in tackling what has been one of the most serious global public health issues in our lifetime. I pay tribute to our front-line staff, health workers and front-line workers in the community. I also mention Pat McManus, who sadly lost his life. He was a Strabane man who moved to England, some years ago, and was a front-line health worker. He was the first person from Northern Ireland to sadly lose their life.

Turning to the education budget, it remains concerning that all additional pressures in the education budget will not be met in this Budget or a future Budget. Taking existing allocations in addition to COVID-19 support, the Department's budget is still £165 million short, and there are no indications as to where the shortfall will impact. The SDLP has major areas of concern about education, including fair pay for teachers, special educational needs, school budget pressures. The list goes on. Those are all pressures that have to be met if we are to ensure that our education system is properly delivering for all our children and that no child falls between the gaps. Pre-COVID-19, our schools system was crippling at its very knees, and, unless proper action is taken, that will continue to be the case when this pandemic is over and our schools reopen.

I am very tight for time, but I would like to touch on the issue of supply teachers. We have ended the long-running discrimination around teachers' pay, but, as one ends, another begins because supply teachers have been left out in the cold in relation to COVID-19. There is no sign of any funding, although we have heard commitments from the Department of Education that it has made a bid for the £12 million required. Those teachers have livelihoods,

houses to pay for and bills to pay. They are very concerned and there needs to be provision for them.

I will throw the A5 in as a one-liner because everyone knows that I have to mention it.

To conclude my remarks today, we are in uncharted waters. This is a testing time for the Government and the Executive. It is vital that the parties around the table, particularly the larger two, pull together in one direction. Stop stamping on each other's toes and do whatever possible to protect our people, to save lives and to help society recover from COVID-19.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member's time is up.

Mr McCrossan: The Assembly and its survival is more crucial than ever before, and we must work together to ensure that we get through this together.

Mr Chambers: I rise today as the health spokesperson for the Ulster Unionist Party. This would have been a difficult Budget to align under any normal circumstances, so with the ongoing challenge of COVID, the actual end-of-year Budget report will, in all likelihood, look very different from what is being discussed today.

Given the immediate demands and pressures at hand, it was perhaps understandable that the Budget did not include the costs associated with the current response to COVID-19. However, the urgency of the situation must not mean that public money is spent in an ineffective manner. In the weeks and months after the current crisis, there will be time to review how the Executive spent their COVID allocations, but, for the time being, their focus must absolutely remain on saving lives.

Whilst recognising that we are in the midst of the biggest public health emergency in the history of Northern Ireland, we must also remember that much of the day-to-day work of the health service has to continue. People are still having strokes and cardiac arrests, women are still giving birth and all our health workers, more than ever before, need and deserve their pay. They earn every penny.

With an ageing population, with increasing complexities, co-morbidities and medications, it is little wonder that this year's forecast expenditure needed to increase by 6% just to maintain existing services. It is welcome that the health service was to receive an additional £399.6 million. However, that included £170

million for the Agenda for Change pay deal that had already been committed to by the Executive. The Department stated clearly that it needed £492 million as an absolute minimum just to meet inescapable costs. With that allocation, it means that the health service was facing an immediate funding shortfall of £92 million. As a result of the shortfall in funding, unfortunately, the Department may find itself in a position of having no choice but to use money that had been earmarked for transformation instead. Transformation is key, yet this Budget sadly did not acknowledge that.

When all this is over and done, our waiting times, which were already by far the worst in the UK, will be even more frightening. The Executive have broadly done the right thing in recent weeks by giving the Department of Health the money it needed to support care homes to pay for the thousands of staff coming on to the payroll and to protect essential services such as community pharmacies. However, all parties must recognise that the cost of repairing the psychological and physical damage of this virus will demand serious attention and serious resource for years to come. People who needed an operation on their hip before COVID-19 will still require it after COVID-19.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Can I ask Members to be careful with their microphones. They are picking up some interference. The microphones are picking up interference. If you can just be careful.

Mr Chambers: Sorry.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): OK. Continue.

Mr Chambers: The end of this pandemic will end one major challenge for our Health Ministry, but will reopen another major challenge to address waiting lists that will, as I have said, undoubtedly be higher than when Minister Swann came into office in January. I will quote the Health Minister, Robin Swann. When he spoke in this Chamber last week, he said:

"Let us resolve to do better for the health service, which has stood so firmly by us. Let us fund it properly in the long term and transform it for the better. Let that be one of the lasting legacies of the period that we are living through. Let that be the true and lasting tribute to those whom we applaud every Thursday night."

In conclusion, Mr Deputy Speaker, I place on record the appreciation that we owe the Treasury in London for the major additional funds that it has made available to the Executive to tackle the current health crisis and to help mitigate its economic impact on our citizens and businesses. If we ever needed reminding of the practical benefits of being part of the United Kingdom, this crisis has provided it.

Mr Frew: I support the Budget, knowing that what we are actually debating here — the facts and figures and the numbers in front of us — is not really a true reflection of what the Budget will be. In that sense, whilst it is useful to put our concerns, queries, wishes and wants on the record in Hansard, we do so with the caveat that, given the crisis that we are in, the Budget will probably be completely different by the end of the financial year. I also realise that the slow cogs of government turn at a different pace than the emergency dictates, and that is why most of the Barnett consequentials have been left out and are on a different page, if you like.

Therefore, I come with the knowledge that we are in unprecedented times and that things are very fast moving. It has been difficult for a lot of the Departments, not least the Finance Department, to manage, cope with and get to grips with the crisis. However, some Departments have handled it better than others. Some have had more of a burden than others, and some have had to learn more quickly than others. Some, if you like, have not really been affected, and some have been at the heart of the battle. Therefore, that should be reflected in any Budget settlement that we can produce, and that is where I worry.

I worry that we have the capacity and the ability to actually think strategically. Thank goodness, as many Members have said here, for the Barnett consequentials and the benefits of being in a strong union, with the financial power and weight that it brings. Of course, money was floating down, nearly on a daily basis, to help us and the Executive to formulate plans, some of which we mirrored from GB and some, then, we have taken upon ourselves because things are different, and that is fine as long as we have a strategic vision and plan.

I am worried. Whilst the original Barnett consequential float-down of £120 million went directly to provide a three-month rates holiday, I do worry that we have not yet been able to expand on that. The rates that we bring in make up a very small percentage of our income, but for some businesses, especially in this day and age, the rates holiday will mean everything.

Remember, businesses were affected by the revaluation in the first place, and there was a massive change in some quarters. They were struggling and wondering how they were going to see it through. Now, they have been hit with COVID-19. Some of those businesses are in a very difficult place.

4.00 pm

I appeal to the Minister, the Department and, by extension, the Executive to think strategically about how we can provide the best support to our businesses. In some cases, it will be throwing money at them, but, in many others, it will be about ensuring that the financial burden that is placed on them going forward is not too great. When you look at the small percentage of our rates payout, what we receive compared to our overall income, it does not compare to what businesses have to deal with in their budgetary positions. Rates could be the final straw and, if it is not rates, it could be something else. Let us try to support those businesses as best we can by not placing a burden on them.

With the Minister's statements so far this financial year, it is clear that he has added flexibility to the system. That is good. It is well and good for Departments to be able to move money about and move money into the centre and one thing and another. It is essential that that takes place. However, have I yet seen a strategic vision or a plan? No, I do not think that I have. Of course, when we were speaking in the Budget debates, which were before the COVID-19 emergency, many of us asked, "Where is the vision? Where will we do things differently? What about investment in infrastructure? What about bringing in an age of decisionism? What about aligning the Budget with an outcomes-based Programme for Government?". Now, we ask what about major recovery plans for businesses that have been affected by COVID-19? What about mitigation measures for our community? What about — it has also been raised today — our ageing housing stock? Those were issues and emergencies before the current emergency took hold, but have we dealt with them? No, we have not — not according to this Budget.

I worry about the future. Do we have the capacity to get us out the other side of the emergency and win the war, and then win the peace given the outlying issues that have always been there and that we have not been able to grapple with and fix up to this point? The water infrastructure and the energy issue. They are all sitting there buzzing away waiting to be fixed, and they are not being fixed. That will hurt people in recovering and getting through this —

even if we get through the health emergency and make some kind of economic recovery, those burdens will still lie with us, and we will still not have resolved them. I worry about that.

I have some queries about the actual detail of the Budget. I can understand the uplift, the percentage change, in most of the Departments. It does not seem to be that strategic and just seems to be a layering up of the big beast Departments, while giving a lesser amount to the smaller Departments.

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

Mr Frew: One thing that strikes me is the 72.4 % jump for the Executive Office. I take it that that is the £37.5 million for the implementation of the historical institutional abuse scheme, but the Minister could clarify that for me.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member's time is up.

Mr Frew: Thank you very much.

Mr McAleer (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I would like to begin by also expressing my condolences to the family of John Dallat on his sad passing. I knew John from back in the days of the Committee for Regional Development. Recently, he was a member of the AERA Committee and was replaced by Pat Catney. He was a dedicated public representative and very effective in his roles as a legislator and a scrutiniser of public policy. In recent times, I noted that, even when he was visibly ill and weakening, he was still as sharp as a razor in, perhaps, spotting salient points or small pieces of detail in a raft of documents. He will be badly missed here, by his party and, most of all, by his loving family.

I will now speak in my capacity as the Chairperson of the AERA Committee. In February, the Committee began its engagement with the Department on its budget requirements for the year 2020-21. As we know, in light of the COVID crisis, the situation in mid-February was very different from the one that we have now.

The first matter that I want to draw attention to is the funding of direct payments to farmers. Previously, that had been done via CAP pillar 1, which involved funding coming from the EU to Westminster and then on to the four regions. The method of distribution between the four regions, including that it should be ring-fenced, is well established and it has been in place for

some time. The Committee welcomes the fact that £293 million has been secured for 2020-21, but it has concerns about what will replace the funding of the basic payment, and what form it will take in future years.

The Bew Review made recommendations regarding the farm support budget, 2020-22. That may see us with reduced amounts of funding for farm support, and that is a major area of concern for the farming and wider rural community, particularly in the current situation, with many of our food producers facing a financial crisis as a result of COVID-19.

The Committee explored the possibility of farm support schemes and an area of natural constraint (ANC) scheme. A motion was passed in this Chamber regarding that. We noted that, in the 2019-20 financial year, DAERA had reduced resource requirements of £12 million. We asked questions regarding the possibility of using that underspend for a future ANC scheme. DAERA responded that the reduced requirements do not become firmed up until the last monitoring round of the financial year, and that all reduced requirements over £1 million must be automatically surrendered at the earliest opportunity. Thus the time frame for identification and surrender meant that it was not possible to deliver a farm support ANC scheme.

Related to replacement funding for CAP pillar 1, are the Committee's concerns on replacement funding for the rural development programme (RDP), that currently derives largely from CAP pillar 2. Some £10.8 million of non-ring-fenced funding is set aside for the RDP, specifically for LEADER and forestry. This is to continue, with schemes such as the rural business investment scheme, rural basic services and village renewal, and that is welcomed by the Committee.

A further £6.3 million has been set aside under capital for the Environmental Farming Scheme (EFS) and rural tourism, and £9.7 million for the farm business improvement schemes. The EFS funding would allow for the roll-out of the next tranche of that programme, which brings environmental benefits to farms. Members have considered the EFS previously and noted that the rates of subsidies should be reviewed in order to maximise environmental sustainability, and that they are economically sustainable for, and attractive to, farmers.

We were also pleased to see that the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI) programme will receive £2.5 million of resource funding, again non-ring-fenced. It will support

rural community development and cohesion, particularly welcome at this difficult time.

In the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, we welcome the £3 million of capital for TRPSI. That is to be used for community facilities, fuel poverty and rural transport. The £7 million, secured under the Rural Business Community Fund to replace the current EU priority 6 element, is also welcome.

We are aware that COVID-19 is having a deep impact on rural areas, many of which are isolated from essential services, such as food shops and medical centres. It has underlined the need for reliable and fast broadband provision. Patchy broadband provision in some areas is therefore worrying. To that end, the Committee noted and welcomed that £7.5 million of capital funding is set aside for Project Stratum. The Committee also welcomes the support that the DAERA rural affairs division provides to a range of statutory, community and voluntary groups to provide support in rural areas during this COVID-19 crisis.

Rural development is largely funded from CAP pillar 2 and other EU sources, and it is intended that its replacement will come from the Shared Prosperity Fund. However, we are very concerned that we have no clarity as regards the details of the Shared Prosperity Fund policy. We are not aware of a guarantee that such replacement funding will be ring-fenced. This is creating a degree of concern and uncertainty about the future for rural communities funding. The Committee has serious concerns about the lack of clarity and information on the future Shared Prosperity Fund.

The Committee is also pleased to see that £2.2 million has been allocated for staff to deliver the new climate change legislation, as well as a scoping study for the independent environmental protection agency and the light detection and ranging (LiDAR) study. In connection with the independent environmental protection agency, the Committee draws attention to the Environment Bill that is currently making its way through Westminster. Large parts of the Bill apply to here, in particular the Office of Environmental Protection (OEP). We are still concerned about the lack of clarity on the role of the OEP, and how it will interact with the NIEA here.

The Committee also noted that the COVID-19 crisis means that it is likely that there will be delays to the roll-out of many projects. That means that consideration is being given to the

reallocation of resources to meet the current emergency as part of June monitoring.

The Committee also has many concerns on the EU exit. The Brexit budget allocated to the Department for 2019-2020 was not included in its baseline; it is additional money that the Department must bid for year-on-year. The Committee noted that £23.6 million of non ring-fenced resource has been allocated for EU exit costs.

I want to jump on very quickly. One of the biggest concerns that we have is the agri-food sector, which has taken the biggest hit during the COVID-19 crisis. Farmers are our primary food producers, and they are facing an unprecedented crisis. A bid has been made to Westminster and the EU for a £105 million package. That is really important at this time because the measures for the self-employed do not apply to the agri-food industry.

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

Mr McAleer: I conclude by calling for support for the agri-food industry and our farming and rural communities at this very difficult time.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for his statement and rise to speak on a Budget that has been set in what are unprecedented and uncertain times in the history of this place. Nobody in this Chamber can say with any confidence what the future may hold, with Departments already burning through cash so quickly that another Vote on Account will soon be required to release more money to spend, just over a mere month since the start of the financial year.

We are, therefore, being asked to vote upon what could best be described as a "blindfold Budget" without any clear view of what the year ahead may bring. Many issues contribute to the uncertainty, whether they are a result of COVID-19 and the lack of hard evidence on how successful loosening the lockdown will be in keeping R under one, or the risk of a no deal Brexit as a result of the failure to positively conclude trade negotiations and a refusal to request an extension. The ability of our health service to deal with a potentially colossal surge in non COVID-19 waiting lists is also a real concern; something my colleague Paula Bradshaw will speak about later.

Coming back after a three-year political hiatus, the Assembly was already facing significant financial challenges due to key decisions having been deferred for years, year-on-year

funding cuts due to the politics of austerity and the failure of the UK Government to honour the financial commitments set out in 'New Decade, New Approach'. Setting a Budget was already going to be tough before COVID-19 arrived. A quick review of the bids for additional funding from Departments due to COVID-19 versus the moneys available from additional Barnett consequentials and the allocations made to date make sobering reading and point to a financial crisis of unparalleled measure if further and extremely substantial Barnett consequentials are not forthcoming.

The welcome decision to provide increased flexibility to ensure that essential front-line public services can continue will help. However, without additional funding, a way needs to be found to ensure that Executive Departments can continue to operate on a sound financial basis, not just now but throughout and until the end of the year to ensure that front-line public services continue to be delivered by workers who must be properly and fairly paid.

Access to the UK reserves by the devolved Administrations for COVID-19 related reasons, which was announced by the Chancellor on 11 March, is welcome, but we have not yet received any indication from the Executive or the Department of Finance on whether they intend to use that power and what options could be utilised to repay the moneys obtained as a result. I would therefore be most grateful if the Minister could detail more in relation to whether that is being considered and whether the Executive are prepared to consider utilising their limited borrowing powers to safeguard businesses and stimulate economic recovery, recognising how vital it is that the Northern Ireland Executive do all that they can to protect jobs and livelihoods. A well-thought-out stimulus plan and targeted investment could be the difference between a short recession and a long depression, and the livelihoods of thousands of citizens depend upon that.

All Departments need to be part of that, with capital and resource spending critical, including the maximum possible utilisation of financial transactions capital to aid our construction sector.

4.15 pm

Regardless of whether the Chancellor realises the need to fund the recovery on the same basis as the interventions made to date, the need for us to face up to and make difficult decisions and reform the way in which our public services are delivered will not go away.

In fact, in the light of the major financial challenges being endured and the colossal changes inevitable as a result of the pandemic, we simply cannot afford not to take the tough decisions, many of which have been around for decades. There is simply no more road to kick the can down. Whether it is tackling the cost of division, implementing Bengoa, implementing the recommendations arising from the independent review of education, the mutualisation of Northern Ireland Water or delivering modern working practices fit for 2020, the failure to face up to hard and potentially unpopular decisions just is not an option any more. COVID-19 provides more, not less, reason to urgently reform our public services.

At this point, before I touch on my other brief as my party's infrastructure spokesperson, I declare that I was previously an employee of Translink.

While COVID-19 will eventually pass, the need to tackle climate change and avert catastrophe will not. Our way out of lockdown and the pandemic must be via a well-funded, green recovery, not towards even more cars choking up our streets and polluting our atmosphere. The Department for Infrastructure will play a vital role in ensuring that, but, to date, it has failed to be allocated sufficient funds from COVID-19 moneys, apart from £90 million set aside for ferries, airports and logistics. I recognise and welcome the previous commitments given by the Finance Minister to provide necessary funding, but, for the Department to plan ahead, those promises soon need to materialise. It is not sufficient for the Department of Finance merely to state that DFI should reprioritise existing budgets to address pressures emerging due to COVID-19. The financial implications of the way we will have to travel, the downturn, non-domestic water charges, reduced planning fees and charges levied by DVA cannot be funded within existing budgets.

I hope that the Finance Minister will elaborate on what he will be able to do to aid the provision of quality infrastructure and on the other points that I have raised. I thank the officials for all the work they have done over the past number of weeks in extremely challenging circumstances.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): We are due to change the personnel at the Table, and it has been a long debate already. I propose that we take a short comfort break for everyone's benefit. By leave of the Assembly, I will suspend the sitting until 4:35 pm. The first

person to speak when we return will be Pam Cameron. The sitting is, by leave, suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 4.18 pm and resumed at 4.35 pm.

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

Mrs Cameron: I put on record my condolences to the family, friends and, indeed, colleagues of John Dallat at this very sad time. It is a difficult time for anyone to grieve. In these circumstances, I know that we are all thinking of his family and his colleagues.

As DUP spokesperson and as a member of the Health Committee, I will make some brief remarks about the allocations to the Department of Health. If ever there was a time when the need to fund our health service was evident, it is surely now. We must resource our NHS to make it fit to tackle any crisis that comes our way, such as COVID-19, but we must also ensure that the daily needs of those ill and suffering across Northern Ireland are met. We must also focus on adequately resourcing the most valuable asset in our health service: our staff. Let the House never again see nurses on strike to bring about a fair pay settlement. Resourcing comes in two areas: staff resourcing and equipping the estate. The Budget does that. While we would all want more, we work within finite resources, where prioritisation is fundamental to the best outcomes possible from the funding envelope available.

For the resource budget, we are talking astronomical sums of money. An extra £400 million is needed next year, and we have inescapable pressures arising from 'New Decade, New Approach' around nursing and midwifery training, safe staffing and transformation. Transformation is vital to the continued effectiveness of our local NHS. For it to be planned effectively, we need to move towards a multi-year Budget, providing clarity over time to plan change in a more strategic way. We also need to have clarity around the £72 million savings target. Is that realistic, given the pressures from COVID-19? If it is not, where is the revised target? For capital spend, we really need the longer-term strategic approach that comes with multi-year Budgets. We also need clarity on the status of the capital projects pre-committed to, not least the mother-and-baby unit. We think of Bengoa and the reform of our health service, including its estate, and we need progress on that to be made sooner rather than later if budgeting is truly to

make the best use of the money that is available.

There can be no underestimating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our health service and its budgets. Next year's Budget will be dominated by COVID-19 and the response to it, and that is right. Of course, the money, sadly, is very much needed. We will have to see how the additional costs are met. We will also have to assess how the suspension of other services has produced savings elsewhere in our healthcare system. Those are issues for investigation on another day, perhaps, but they are challenges coming down the track towards us and challenges that we cannot dodge or delay indefinitely. The bottom line is that, moving forward, we need more money. In that regard, we must get clarity from our Government and the Government of the Irish Republic on the commitments made in 'New Decade, New Approach'. We must also push ahead with transformation at pace. Most importantly, to succeed, we need to be able to plan on a multi-year basis.

Ms Mullan: I also send my condolences to John Dallat's family and his SDLP colleagues. Our thoughts are with you all.

I thank the Minister for his statement. Today, as the Sinn Féin education spokesperson, I welcome the news that the Department of Education has received an 11% increase on last year in its resource budget. That is the first significant increase in its budget for 10 years. It is a step towards addressing the huge shortfall in the system that came about as a consequence of a decade of Tory policy. The increase in funding for the Department has also made it possible to make a long-awaited pay award to our teachers, and I commend all involved in making that happen.

The onset of COVID-19 has brought with it much tragedy and uncertainty. At this stage, however, I pay tribute to our teaching and non-teaching staff, our youth and childcare services and the wider education sector for how they have adapted in order to continue to deliver educational, youth and childcare services. Like every other Department, the Department of Education has had to make changes to its initial budget plans and bid for extra resources to deal with the emergency that we find ourselves in.

Last week, the Education Committee had a budget briefing from departmental officials and was informed of some of the changes and the ongoing bids. I welcome that proactive approach and ask the Education Minister to do all that he can to make the necessary funding

available to support our day-to-day substitute teachers, who have been without an income since the crisis began.

The Finance Minister's announcement of at least £227 million of additional funding for the Department of Education is hugely welcome and should be commended. That funding boost is, hopefully, the beginning of the turning of the tide in the crisis of school budgets. Our school leaders need to be able to prepare and plan in the confidence that they have the resources that they require to deliver for their pupils.

It is also welcome news that over £40 million has been made available for special education needs provision. In recent years, special education has been starved of resources and investment. The Education Authority has consistently exceeded its SEN budget, which highlights the shortfall in the funding that was going to SEN provision. I am hopeful that the additional funding announced by Minister Murphy will help to address some of those difficulties and alleviate some of the other pressures facing children with special education needs and their families.

In a short time and in difficult circumstances, the Finance Minister has not only delivered a much-needed increase in the Department of Education's budget but made real-terms increases to all Executive budgets. As the Finance Minister stated, the block grant to the North is still lower than it was prior to austerity, which means that pressures will continue. With those pressures in mind, it is important that we get our priorities straight. We must deliver on the basis of objective need. An area of work that I am keen to see progressed is closing the attainment gap between our most disadvantaged pupils and their better-off peers. In that context, we must seek to ensure a culture of collaboration, joined-up thinking and working across the Executive. Departments should be able to and should be encouraged to share costs in order to achieve common outcomes.

Yesterday, in Derry and Strabane, we received confirmation of the long-awaited city deal match funding. That funding can be a catalyst for regeneration after decades of neglect and underinvestment. While it is welcome, further work needs to be done. Derry has an unfortunate history of being ignored and discriminated against when it comes to the development of our universities. Now, we have an opportunity to put that approach behind us. I call on the Health Minister and the Minister for the Economy to sign off on the graduate entry

medical school for Ulster University at Magee without further delay.

4.45 pm

Mr O'Toole: Before I start my remarks in earnest, having reflected on the passing of our colleague John Dallat earlier, I would like to thank various Members who have shared their condolences through the course of this debate.

Every time that we have debated Budgets in this place since January, we have had to acknowledge extraordinary circumstances. Earlier this year, we were debating spending allocations that had already been committed. Then we passed the Vote on Account for spending that had already happened. Now we are debating a Budget that has already been rendered partly obsolete by COVID-19 and the subsequent response. Budgets are always works in progress. They are always statements designed to be revised and reworked as new information becomes available, but that does not mean that they should not be scrutinised in their own terms.

The Budget has things that are welcome, things that are worrying and many things that are left out. We know that the COVID-19 crisis will create not just new challenges in our public services and our economy but that it will ruthlessly expose all the existing weaknesses that we have procrastinated over since the end of the conflict here. We do not know precisely when we will be out of the crisis, but, when we are, we know, as various Members have reflected, that we will need to take a fresh look at how we organise our public services and our economy. That will require a fresh and detailed look at our fiscal position. Clear, long-term budgeting will need to be at the core of that, but, with respect, this Budget, for obvious reasons, is neither long term nor clear.

There is some avoidable confusion in the document. For example, several Departments state that they are working to deliver outcomes based on the draft Programme for Government. Presuming that this refers to the 2016 draft Programme for Government, it would be useful to know what the current status of that document is. It would appear from some departmental chapters that some Departments, including the Department for the Economy and DAERA, are working to those outcomes but that others are not.

That confusion is in part a product of the mash of packages from which funding has been derived over the past number of years, which is in part a product of the stop-start nature of

devolution here. Fresh Start, confidence and supply and New Decade, New Approach could be the names of new records from a band that had great promise 20 years ago but whose fans have long since grown tired of hyped promises that never quite deliver and public rows between members. Many of the packages were of themselves welcome and necessary, but the way in which they have been delivered add confusion to Executive budgeting, with pots of hypothecated money left here and there and others left half-filled or cynically double-counted by the Treasury, as with some of the New Decade, New Approach money that we have talked about already.

That, along with the enormous financial scandal of RHI, has frayed public confidence, but it has also led to a significant level of confusion about our budgeting processes among the public. Indeed, I estimate that there is a very high level of confusion about our budgeting processes in the Northern Ireland Assembly. That is one of the many reasons why we need to introduce much greater clarity on Budget processes than exist at present, and that includes how we are spending COVID-19 money. We have large amounts of money centrally held for fairly vaguely described items such as business support and support for vulnerable members of society, and, while I acknowledge that these are extremely important things and completely vital, we need to know where exactly that money is being spent. On the other hand, the additional COVID-19 allocations do not so far contain any funding at all for the Infrastructure Department. As others have said, it would be helpful to understand why.

An important question is: why is £2.3 million being held centrally to pay the UK Exchequer for the cost of lower long-haul air passenger duty? That was devolved to us a number of years ago, but there are currently no long-haul flights from Northern Ireland, and, for that matter, global aviation of all kinds, short and long haul, has collapsed. Why is that £2.3 million being held? There may be a good reason that I do not understand, but it would be helpful to know why. One use of that £2.3 million — it would take significantly less than that — would be my plan, which I have published and recommended to the Executive, to save and protect local media. I hope that the Minister and others can get on board with that. Indeed, the 'Newry Reporter', his local paper, is one of those that has had to furlough its operations. I hope that the Executive can get behind that, and that is one small way that we could use that money.

As I said, the crisis will reveal even more sharply the challenges that we already face but have failed to deal with. This is something that we all bear responsibility for. Our economy is among the least productive in these islands, and, when you leave aside our hallowed grammar schools, we have poor educational outcomes. Our public spending has failed to deliver on infrastructure investment, and that has made our productivity problem even worse. Where we do have skilled young people, we have a shocking inability to keep them here or to bring them back once they leave, added to which we have the looming threat of an exit from the Brexit transition period without a new trade deal and with the UK Government apparently backsliding on their commitment to implement the Ireland protocol. This Budget barely mentions Brexit, although there are some specific allocations. I hope that the Minister — I am sure that he will — agrees with my call that the Executive as a whole should ask for an extension on behalf of Northern Ireland.

For all those reasons, we urgently need to match our Budget plans to a long-term strategy for the future of our public services and our economy. I urge the Finance Minister — I think that we may be in some agreement on this — to bring forward plans for both the fiscal council pledged in New Decade, New Approach and the fiscal commission that he has suggested. That needs to be joined up to an operation of long-term economic forecasting. We need to have a long, hard look at how we get out of the funk of simply going in supplication to an often cynical or just distracted UK Treasury. I say respectfully to some of my colleagues on the Finance Committee, including the Chair, who is no longer with us, that while the UK Exchequer might seem generous at certain moments, supplication is not a long-term acceptable fiscal strategy for Northern Ireland.

What are the other ways that we can find to invest in our public services and to make our economy here more productive? Why, for example, are we not making more use of our limited borrowing powers? The cost of borrowing is very low at the minute. This year, why are we not using the reinvestment and reform initiative to invest in the productivity and infrastructure that we so sorely lack and that we will need to recover properly from the COVID-19 crisis? What are our plans to make better use of financial transactions capital?

We are currently placed in the invidious position of having one meaningful and politically acceptable form of revenue-raising, that of rates, and specifically non-domestic rates, but

we know that those rates fall hardest on the sectors of the economy that will be hit worst by COVID-19, that is to say, hospitality and retail. That cannot be right. The world around us has changed. We cannot avoid changing any longer. Let this be the last Budget based on short-term fixes and moving around pots of money. Let us all do better next time.

Mr Middleton: I join with colleagues in passing on my sympathies and condolences to the family and loved ones of Mr John Dallat MLA, and indeed to our SDLP colleagues as well. I know that this is a difficult time for everyone, but particularly for those who are bereaved, and my sympathies are with them.

We all recognise that this Budget process is like no other, given that we find ourselves in a situation with COVID-19. The challenging financial pressures that many in our communities and our businesses are facing are evident to us all. It has long been the case that the Department of Health has been the priority, and, of course, that should remain the case, but, at the same time, we know that there needs to be a greater emphasis on some of the other Departments as well.

The Budget allocations have been overshadowed by the public health crisis that we find ourselves in. The Budget document refers to the fact that the response to COVID-19 has been developed mainly outside the Budget 2020-21 process. I acknowledge that that needed to be the case, to allow for money to be issued quickly and also to allow for flexibility.

The context in which the Budget process is taking place is indeed extremely fluid, making it very difficult for Committees to scrutinise the Budget. It is next to near impossible to do that, but, at the same time, we recognise the unique position that we are all in. There is no doubt that, whilst there are issues in the Budget, we do have to be mindful that whatever we do, the priority should be protecting lives and livelihoods during this pandemic. I welcome the additional funding allocated in response to the COVID-19 crisis to maintain our public services, support our businesses and to protect the vulnerable.

My comments today are very much focused on the elements relevant to the Department for the Economy. At the recent meeting of the Economy Committee, we heard from the Economy Minister about the actions being taken in her Department to support business. It is very much welcome that the Department for the Economy has received £370 million, so far, for its COVID-19 response, with a total

requirement of £418 million. In particular, the £270 million that was allocated to the small business grants scheme has, in my opinion, been very effective and has saved a number of businesses, but we appreciate that that is short-term and that we need more support going forward to try and kick-start our economy. The £100 million allocated to the £25k grants scheme is again a good news story. There are, no doubt, people who are falling between the gaps, but I urge the Finance Minister to work with the Economy Minister to ensure that, if there are gaps and businesses are falling between the stools, we can get the support to them sooner rather than later.

At the Economy Committee, the Minister mentioned the need to look at the recovery phase. Without starting too soon, and being mindful of the ongoing concerns, we need to start looking at how we plan to get our businesses back on their feet and through this crisis, and start to rebuild our economy again. At last week's Committee briefing, officials indicated that there may well be elements of the departmental budget and that of its arms-length bodies that could be repurposed for the COVID-19 response. Again, it is making scrutiny of this very difficult. In their contribution, the officials flagged up that there are resource-related, high-priority pressures of between £180 million and £200 million. Again, most of that is related to the COVID-19 response.

With regard to capital inescapable pressures, the Department indicated a total of £70 million, which includes two significant sums for construction work and associated costs for further education and Invest NI EU funding.

As a key driver of the COVID-19 response, the Department for the Economy must have its budgetary needs prioritised. The Committee looks forward to the outcome of the June monitoring round to better assess where the Department's budget position sits. The Budget document also highlights the Department's key policy initiatives for 2020-21. Key current policy focuses include the skills strategy to support our skills system and the changing needs of individuals and the economy; the tourism strategy; the energy strategy; city deals, covering tourism, innovation, digital and skills projects; and, of course, preparing for and managing the EU exit consequences. There are a number of areas that, as a Committee, we need to focus on, but the budget needs to be there to ensure that we can deal with a lot of these issues going forward.

I want to now turn to a few of the recent announcements that have been made,

particularly on the city deal. That is very welcome news. We know that, last year, the UK Government announced a funding package for the city deal and the inclusive future fund. That is welcome news, and I very much welcome the Executive's decision to match fund that. That is progress, and it has been welcomed by all the stakeholders. I take this opportunity to thank those key stakeholders for lobbying us, as political representatives, and our Ministers for getting that over the line. That is good news, and it is a welcome way to get our economy moving again as we come out of this crisis.

The other issue that I want to turn to is the medical school. We know that that is very much part of the 'New Decade, New Approach' document, and we need to see the new medical school get over the line. I am working with my colleague in the Department for the Economy, and we know that other Ministers are very much pushing to get it over the line. It needs to happen sooner rather than later. If anything, the current crisis highlights that there is a real need for the medical school so that we can train our doctors and ensure that they are working and residing in the north-west. That is something that we cannot allow to fall off the radar, and we need to ensure that that gets over the line before the end of May.

Finally, I want to put on record my appreciation for the package for the airports. We know that the airport in Londonderry is vital for our local tourism industry and our businesses. Those are all things that we need to support and to continue to support as we make our way through the current crisis. I urge the Finance Minister to prioritise, along with Health, the Department for the Economy because it is going to be one of the key Departments in ensuring that we can get through the current crisis.

Mr Boylan: I echo some of the comments about John Dallat and extend my sympathies and condolences to his family and to his colleagues here. I had the privilege of working with John on a number of Committees over the last 13 years.

I will speak as the infrastructure spokesperson for the party. The Department for Infrastructure has many responsibilities, including the maintenance of our roads, public transport, water and sewerage services, and planning. Those are important services that people use on a daily basis, and I believe that that is recognised by the Finance Minister, who held this portfolio in a previous mandate. He is well versed in the responsibilities that lie in DFI. His recognition is demonstrated by the 8.6% rise in

the resource budget and an increase of £89 million in the capital allocation from the previous year's opening budget. In fact, this is by far the highest resource budget increase that the Department has received in a single year since its inception as DFI. Compared with the 2016 Budget, last year's resource allocation rose by only around 3%. In the light of that, the Finance Minister's allocation can be viewed as a welcome change from past Budgets and demonstrates that he is fully aware of pressures felt by the Department.

I also commend the Finance Minister on his recognition of the importance of transport and connectivity during the coronavirus pandemic, as he, along with Executive colleagues, has secured support for airports. Additionally, £95 million has been centrally held for transport issues.

5.00 pm

Looking ahead, the recent announcement of £700 million of funding will also help to develop key infrastructure developments throughout the North, and that is to be welcomed. The circumstances for the Budget are not normal and the reality is that the response to the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be held in the confines of the conventional departmental budgets. We need to look at our response to the pandemic in a holistic fashion. That is why, instead of allocating funding on a departmental basis, the Executive have agreed the funding to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic on a needs basis.

We also need to look at the Budget in context in order to completely understand our situation. To do that, we have to recognise the crippling effects that 10 years of Tory austerity has had on our public services. COVID-19 has reminded people of the importance of core public services and the people who deliver them. However, the same public services have been stripped of funding for years and years under austerity. That is evident in the fact that, even with an 8.6% rise in the resource budget, it still leaves significant departmental budgetary pressures.

The reality is that the Department for Infrastructure has been dealing with constraints for years as a result of the Tories' reckless financial policies. Under normal circumstances, austerity was highly damaging to our public services. Now, however, it is that same soaking away of public expenditure that is harming the Department's ability to respond to COVID-19.

Translink, for example, is experiencing a reduction of 90% to 95% of passengers. If, as a

result of austerity, it had not had to eat into its reserves over the past few years, it would likely be in a stronger position to deal with the crisis. Instead, Translink was already calling for much needed additional funding way before the virus arrived in this island. Now its situation has escalated as the entire Department is facing significant pressures as a result of the crisis and that is mostly in public transport, NI Water and DVA. The consequences of austerity's disregard for public services is demonstrated in full during the time of public emergency, and is a testament to its failure as a policy.

That is also compounded by the fact that the British Government have reneged on their commitments in New Decade, New Approach, one of which was turbocharging infrastructure. Then you also have to consider the costs of Brexit upon the North. Although it is difficult to assess the total costs, it is safe to say that the loss of access to co-financing provided through competitive programmes such as the Connecting Europe Facility will have a detrimental impact on our infrastructure.

To conclude, I commend the work of the Minister of Finance who, within the context of this heavily constrained environment, addressed those challenges. That is demonstrated in the biggest increase to the DFI's resource budget since the Department was created, with a significant jump in capital allocation and £95 million being held centrally for transport issues during COVID-19.

Sadly, there are fears among most that a new round of austerity may hit us after the crisis. However, if there are any lessons to be learnt with regard to COVID-19 and 10 years of austerity, it is that real investment in our public services is what is needed so that we can all move forward. Sin a bhfuil le rá agam.

Mr Storey: I join the Members of the House who have expressed their condolences to the Dallat family on the sad passing of a Member of the House, Mr John Dallat. I offer my personal condolences to the family and also to his party at the loss. It is but a reminder to us all that there is but a step between us and death. We would all do well to remember the words of the saviour when he said:

"Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

There is a rest and a peace to be found in him, even in the midst of crisis and turmoil.

I declare an interest as a member of the Northern Ireland Policing Board because my

comments will be focused on the settlement for the Department of Justice and the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

It is disappointing that we have come to the House four years since the last Budget was presented to us — I presented that Budget in 2016-17. The reason for that is that the party opposite, which now holds the ministry of Finance, decided for political reasons, and nothing else, to walk away. Without worrying about the medical school, the poor, the unemployed, children or education, but for purely political reasons, it ran away. Members, do not be under any illusion: if that party thought that it was politically expedient, it would do it again, because what drives that party is not care for the poor and the oppressed but its political ideology. Shame on the party opposite that it took four years for it then to come back to the House after it got more concessions from the Treasury.

I have listened to those Members talk about Tory austerity and the big, bad Tories, but look at page 6 of the Budget document. Perhaps, figures do not mean much to the Members opposite. It states that 85% of the Budget comes from the block grant. Where does that come from? Does it come from the Irish Republic? Does it come from Europe? Does it come from fiscal policies that we have here? No: it comes from the very place that the Members opposite criticise. They never miss an opportunity. They have no thankfulness or gratitude. They just say, "Give us more".

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Storey: Yes, I will give way.

Mr O'Toole: The Member seems to have an interesting conception of Northern Ireland's fiscal position. Does he recognise that people here pay taxes for public services that, by law and without any choice, have to go to the Exchequer in London, and the constitution means that the money comes back here? That is not a choice that anyone here has.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for that. I was going to commend him for the way in which he presented his comments earlier and set a balanced approach — perhaps more balanced than mine — to the Budget. He makes a valid point: yes, we do pay our taxes. Remember, however, that if we depended only on paying our taxes, there would be an almost £10 billion deficit. That deficit is made up by the Exchequer. Let us not cut off the hand that feeds us. Let us have a little bit of gratitude. I

am sure that that will be lost on the Members opposite, who will find some other political imagination to have a go at the British Government.

While, on the face of it, the settlement for the Department of Justice has a 6.3 increase, which would equate to around 3%, for the Police Service of Northern Ireland, in real terms, it is a standstill budget. It is a flat budget with regard to what is provided for the Police Service. Let us remember that the Police Service is the most scrutinised, looked at, observed and changed, and there are all the other things that it has to do as well as provide for us all a peaceful and safe community.

The pressures that the Police Service is under include such issues as legacy litigation, compensation, holiday pay, injury awards, estates, body armour, human resources, and technology. The list goes on and on. There was a funding gap of £58 million. I cannot criticise the party opposite for being ungrateful and, then, not be grateful myself: the Department of Justice provided in-house an additional £23 million for the Police Service of Northern Ireland. That is welcome. However, the reality is that a challenge remains.

During the COVID-19 crisis, we have seen a particular demand, sadly, that relates to the rise in domestic abuse. Shame on those who would engage in such a vile thing in society. Last week, the House debated the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill. Where will the additional resources be found to ensure that the police are adequately resourced to be able to deliver on that? Let us remember that, last week, an Audit Office report stated that, over 10 years, £200 million has been taken from the police budget. If they had delivered a reduction in headcount, that would equate to 4,000 officers.

I want to conclude with a comment on what is in this Budget. My colleague has already spoken on the need for £15 million for health provision in the maiden city of Londonderry and the medical school. In the New Decade, New Approach deal there was a commitment to increase the number of police officers to 7,500. Minister, will you tell me, and the House, where that money is and what has happened to the Barnett consequential with regard to the additional 20,000 officers that was announced by the Prime Minister? Where are we on giving the PSNI those additional officers? It cannot be that one side gets what was agreed and the other side — and the other part of the agreement — is left for six months or six years.

We will not wait. If it is a deal, then we do them both together or we do not do them at all.

I will wait for an answer from the Finance Minister this afternoon.

Mr Catney: I thank the Minister and his Department for all the hard work that they have done at this time. I recognise the difficulties of working from home, the pressures and the anxiety over this pandemic. Like my colleague from north Antrim, we have all seen that rise in domestic violence and the cries for help coming through our offices. We, in Lisburn, know the great work that the PSNI are doing and I want to put that on record to try to see where we, possibly, can come out of this at the other end.

I want to thank the Minister for what he has already announced with regard to COVID-19. I can see the fisheries support, the discretionary payments, the community support scheme, direct payments to families, school meals, the small business grants, business rates holidays, COVID-19 pressures and the help that is coming from that — I think that this Budget represents about 10% of that but I am not sure — and the Prison Service and the storage.

It is understandable that the measures have to be very blunt to get to as many people as possible, and it is impossible to cover everyone right away. However, now that we are a few weeks down the line, the people who have been left behind by these measures must be considered, Minister. For example, industrial derailing, manufacturing and SMEs. I thank the Minister for making the £10,000 grants available to those with industrial premises below a net asset value (NAV) of £15,000, but we must look at those who have larger premises. There is nothing for them. I know the fear that those businesspeople have because they ring me — they ring us all — and they want to be there. The one thing that they need is certainty, but that certainty is not given to them and they are facing the cliff edge. If these businesses go down, they are not coming back, folks.

As I said earlier, my sister rang me last night. She and her husband have a pub in Belfast; it is a good bar, a good centrally located bar and they are finding it tough. They are finding it very difficult and they do not know what the future holds. These are not big, huge businesses but small family-owned SMEs that are the backbone of the Northern Ireland economy. Another example is a small business, in Lisburn, which rang me, and has outgoings of £8,500 per month with no income.

Businesses with multiple locations in England can get a grant for each of their premises. Why is there not something similar here, in Northern Ireland? This is not a criticism. I am trying my best to see the pressures that the Minister and his Department are under but it is a cry for help because I am getting that cry and feeling it, as are the rest of us. These are people who are not afraid of hard work, folks. We all know that. They go into the uncertainty and take the risks. They are the risk-takers in our community and they are the ones who are going to drive this economy, when we get out of this.

5.15 pm

Small freight companies — again, they are not owned by big companies — make their money from the goods that they bring back and forth from trips to England and continental Europe. What help is there for them?

There is no mention of help for students. I welcome the increase in the student hardship fund, but it is not enough. Students who are already in debt due to large tuition fees are struggling at the moment with no way to earn extra money because everything is closed. Some are still tied into rental agreements for properties that they are not using. How can we support them?

Hospitality is an area that I know personally. I spoke a bit about it earlier. These are small businesses that people have grown. They have put their lives into their businesses and are proud of them. At the end of the Troubles, there was a package, and prosperity came from the tourism that started to flood into Belfast and all parts of Northern Ireland. That growth was slow, but it came. When those people came, the businesses on the front line were the small hotels, the bars, the restaurants and the coffee shops. It was there that they got the best asset that we have in Northern Ireland: our people. We have an asset here that is second to none, but they need the tools. They cannot be expected to fight this battle without a little help. What we have at the moment is good — I recognise that and thank the Minister and his Department — but more is needed. The current rent, rates and licensing system makes it impossible for a business to sustain itself at these low levels. Hospitality is an area that Northern Ireland has been able to grow in recent years. The Minister needs to consider the measures urgently, or the businesses that you see today will no longer be here and will not come back.

In my last few seconds, I want to say that my sister was born above a pub and she has

reared her family there. I use that as one example. This has gone. They do not want it to go; they want to work. The main thing is that they did not ask to close; they were asked to. They had a viable business that they had worked hard for. We need to be sure that we can help them sustain this business and grow Northern Ireland. I am proud of Northern Ireland. I am proud of the people in Northern Ireland. I am proud of the support that I got through difficult times working behind a ring of steel in Belfast. We need to step up to the plate again, folks, because it is now worse than that.

Ms Bradshaw: I extend my sympathies to the Dallat family. I met him a few times, and I always found him incredibly charming and very polite and courteous.

I rise on behalf of the Alliance Party and will focus my comments on health spending. Only a few short months ago, with the re-establishment of the Executive, we were all full of hope that the Statutory Committees would refill the three-year void in accountability and transparency around all aspects of our devolved Administration, not least with regard to finance. It was deeply frustrating for me, as the Alliance Party health spokesperson, that the much-hailed health transformation agenda that was launched in October 2016 had been taken forward during that hiatus exclusively by civil servants in a manner that they neither sought nor desired and that associated decisions on priority and the allocation of previous years of confidence-and-supply funding were being taken without scrutiny by the representatives of those elected to the Assembly from across our community. I am pleased, therefore, that the Finance Department has received an assurance from the Treasury that the £10 million for mental health will be available this year. I am sure that we all feel that is important as we move through and beyond the pandemic.

This January, not only was the Health Committee to be re-established but we had the New Decade, New Approach deal to focus our energies on delivering for Northern Ireland. That deal contained many commitments and many proposals for much-needed change. Among those commitments were high priorities around dealing with waiting lists, reform of adult social care, the mental health strategy, palliative end-of-life care, three funded cycles of IVF and a new strategic direction for drugs and alcohol. Quickly, however, it became apparent that the financial requirements for their implementation would not be met to the level required, and so departmental officials have been faced with identifying and allocating funding to meet those commitments, while

dealing with other inescapable pressures across our health workforce, work streams and workplaces. Then, just as ministerial and Executive direction was beginning to give clear guidance on political priorities, the threat and then the reality of COVID-19 refocused minds and activity. I credit the Health Minister for his recent announcements outside the pandemic with reference to the first 300 undergraduate nursing and midwifery places, as well as his announcement about a mental health champion. However, the wider health transformation agenda has, again, unfortunately, been seriously disrupted and delayed, just as the need for transformation has been demonstrated so clearly.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown why systems are so important. It has, no doubt, thrown all financial planning for this year into disarray. It is worrying, therefore, that the allocation to date to the Department of Health to meet the challenges of coronavirus has been £205 million, despite its template response identifying that it would need between £508 million and £588 million of additional costs. I appreciate that that figure does not include the centrally held fund of £150 million for PPE. However, there remains a significant chasm between estimates of cost and allocation.

At this point, I want to raise the plight of charities and community and voluntary organisations, which have continued to provide health and well-being support across a range of conditions during the health crisis. Pages 67 and 68 of the Budget statement highlight that the Health Department is responding. It states that there is business

"Support for Voluntary and Community Sector and Independent Sector (including Hospices)."

During a call yesterday in which some Members were involved with Chief Officers Third Sector (CO3), it appeared that details of that support are not yet forthcoming, which leaves them in precarious financial positions, as well as undermining their future sustainability. All the planning for the delivery of front-line services of individual transformation programmes and initiatives will now need to be significantly revised during this year. However, that does not mean that they are any less urgent.

The impact of the reconfiguration of health and social care services on non-COVID-19 care and treatment is significant, as highlighted by the British Medical Association (BMA) just this week. It is clear that the response of the Department in dealing with COVID-19 was

necessary to protect the public and those working in the health service. However, on the far side of the crisis, we need to give greater priority to catching up on things such as tackling our waiting lists. In the medium and short term, I am sure that Members share my concern for the many thousands of people who have had their appointments cancelled, their treatment delayed and their ability to stay on their care pathway seriously disrupted. We will never be able to calculate the true cost of the pandemic not just on those who have so tragically lost their life to the virus but on those whose operations and treatment have been indefinitely postponed and whose conditions have, undoubtedly, worsened. On the far side of the virus, the health service must be in a position not just to restore services but to make up for lost ground and address further pressures. That means not merely proceeding with the transformation process but hastening it. We have seen that changes in mode and place of working can take place quickly where there is strong focus and political backing. We must maintain that. To do that, we must embrace the need to include our front-line workers, allied health professionals, our charities and voluntary organisations and the many representative bodies in frank and realistic conversations about how best to meet the needs of our people urgently.

I am running out of time, so I will move to the end. The Health Committee will have to play a pivotal role in monitoring in-year financial accounts to ensure that the reconfiguration process proposals are robust and transparent and that any associated costs represent value for money and will produce the desired improved health outcomes.

In closing, I place on record my appreciation for the work of those in the finance section of the Department of Health. 2019 was not an easy year, and it does not look as if this financial year will be any easier.

Mr Irwin: I begin by passing on my condolences to the Dallat family on John's passing.

These are unprecedented times for the House and, indeed, everyone in Northern Ireland. Today, we speak about finances and the 2020-21 Budget, but we must not forget the heavy impact that the coronavirus has had throughout the Province, the rest of the UK, the Republic of Ireland and, indeed, across the world. The health of our population is our major concern, and that is very much reflected in the Budget report. I put on record my gratitude to the nursing and care staff who live in the Newry

and Armagh constituency for their brave and important work in our hospitals, nursing homes and care homes and to the paramedics, GP centres and all other providers of healthcare. Words do not do justice to how important their work has been throughout the crisis. I also offer my deepest sympathy, thoughts and prayers to the families who have suffered bereavement due to the coronavirus. This has been an awful time for many families who have suffered loss.

I will now focus on the issue before us. The budgetary positions are somewhat altered due to the virus pandemic and the measures that have been put in place to help mitigate the worst effects. We are all aware of that reality. As the focus of the Assembly continues to be on the response to the virus across our hospitals and testing sites and as the First Minister and deputy First Minister continue to chart a course through the pandemic, it is important that we also focus on the wheels of government and the fact that Departments must continue to operate to support not only the health and well-being of Northern Ireland but the social and economic well-being of Northern Ireland.

I welcome the significant support mechanisms that have been put in place by the Westminster Government to assist the public. I also welcome the role of the Departments of the Executive. Their support for people in Northern Ireland is vital. I am sure that most Members have been contacted by people who, for various reasons, are missing out on vital assistance. Work to make assistance available to as great a number as possible is ongoing by the Executive. That work has not been easy. I commend the Executive and the Department staff for their work under huge time pressures and under the pressure of a real and concerning virus risk to get schemes up and running and for making thousands of payments to businesses across Northern Ireland.

I move now to the allocation to DAERA. I welcome the progress in the Budget from an agri-food and environmental perspective. On the environment, we cannot fail to be struck by the reports circulating on the improvements in air quality and pollution during the lockdown. I have been amazed at the pictures of large cities without the usual haze of smog. That is a real and stark reminder of the impact of industry and modern-day living on our environment.

The Budget report mentions DAERA's role in the promotion and sustainability of our agri-food sectors and the protection and enhancement of the environment. It must be said again — I have said it before in the House — that, in their daily

work, farmers make a massive contribution to sustaining our food supply network, which has been commendable during this period of great crisis and uncertainty, and to caring for the environment and maintaining thousands of acres of land across the Province. Food supply has been to the forefront in recent times, and panic buying brought pressure on our producers, processors and retailers. It has been evident that our network works well under immense pressure. Thankfully, those pressures have subsided somewhat. With our agri-food sector amounting to £5 billion in turnover, supporting over 100,000 jobs, it is an important sector to the future post Brexit and, indeed, post coronavirus.

Whilst we are looking closely at measures and methods of supporting that industry post Brexit, we have to look at ways to ensure that our farmers receive support to weather the virus storm. That has added an extra layer of complexity. I know that the Minister, my colleague Edwin Poots, is acutely aware of that and is actively and progressively doing what he can to mitigate those challenges along with his Executive colleagues.

As I have said before, farm support and direct payments totalling £278 million are very welcome and provide an important level of support and assurance that agri-food will continue to be supported as the final details of who to support are tied down. I suspect that these discussions could be delayed somewhat, given the necessity to focus on the coronavirus. However, I remain eager and ready to represent the voice of the farmer in the discussions that will come down the line on this issue.

These are unprecedented times. I support the paper before the House today and look forward to brighter days ahead when the House can return to full capacity.

Ms McLaughlin: First, I pay my respects to my colleague and very dear friend John Dallat and offer my heartfelt condolences to his wife, Anne, and his much-loved family whom he constantly talked about and also to my colleagues because it is a great loss for us in the SDLP family.

I will speak as the economy spokesperson for the SDLP. It is almost surreal to be discussing a Budget under the shadow of COVID-19. As other Members have said, it has been absolutely impossible to adequately scrutinise this Budget as we are trying to do so in an evolving health and economic crisis. At this point, I commend my colleagues here in relation

to their comments about looking at our fiscal powers and looking at our borrowing, and the passionate plea by the Member for Lagan Valley for more COVID-19 support, particularly for the hospitality and tourism industry. It is really important. There is a lot of distress out there.

These are extraordinary times that require extraordinary responses, yet the challenges and priorities that we face today — health, skills, infrastructure and climate change — are essentially the same as those that we faced before this pandemic, albeit there is greater urgency. Northern Ireland's National Health Service has shown amazing capacity for resilience and its ability to reform its structure and to do it quickly during this emergency. That approach needs to be built upon, and it needs to be built in its DNA, with urgent implementation of the reforms outlined in the Bengoa review.

Those investments have to be backed by greater investment in training a new generation of professionals. I, too, welcome the recent announcement of the expansion of the training provision of nurses, but we must make very urgent progress in approving the graduate-entry medical school in Magee. This is an absolute demand and priority for the SDLP, which is why we successfully insisted that it be included in the New Decade, New Approach agreement.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Ms McLaughlin: No, sorry.

Our commitment to skills goes beyond that. As we emerge from the worst of the COVID-19 crisis, we will need to consistently and constantly evaluate our approach to skills. Let us be clear: we need to step up on our output of graduates with the relevant skills and of our vocational training programmes for our workforce and our future workforce across the entire age range of our existing workers and our potential workers. That means that we have to get the 14-to-19-year-old skills strategy absolutely right. I am really concerned about the situation facing our young adults and teenagers. What future are they facing? My generation has failed them with the environment and climate crisis that we are giving them as a legacy. Will we now also leave them an economy that fails them?

For all the talk of COVID-19 and of us all being in this together, it is simply not true. The risk is that it increases division: the division between those who can work at home, who have a well-paid income, and those who cannot. I am

thinking of the vulnerable, insecure workers: the cleaners, delivery riders and taxi drivers. Those are the people who we have a special duty of care towards. It is those pupils who leave school without the best grades or qualifications who risk a future in the gig economy in which they will struggle to survive and to earn. Let us make sure that we do not fail them.

So far, as our party's economy spokesperson, I have spoken about health and education. Yet, I am still talking about the economy, and that is because these issues span the Departments and responsibilities of individual Ministers, and that is why I urge the Executive Ministers to work together. I know that I speak for my Minister, Nichola Mallon, when I say that our party is absolutely committed to joint working to make this a better place. I urge all Ministers to do the same.

That brings me to another urgent priority, and that is infrastructure. Probably the number-one priority for our society is to withstand the current and, perhaps future, isolation lockdown, and ensure that we have the right telecommunications, broadband and electricity infrastructure to enable us to reduce carbon emissions. The lead Department for this is Economy, and broadband is absolutely essential for getting our economy right. We need to work closely with the private sector to ensure that we get the fastest possible deployment of the fastest possible broadband. If we fail to do this, and we are already miles behind other countries, we are placing our economy at the back of the pack.

We need to respond to these extraordinary times with the flexibility to adjust our spending programmes to focus on the emerging priorities of ramping up performance in health provision, increasing our skills output and investing in the necessary infrastructure. To do this will require the Ministers of Northern Ireland to work like never before, and they must work together. I urge them to do so.

Mr Allister: These are challenging and difficult times and so they will continue, I fear, because on the other side of COVID-19, the fiscal commitments that have been made will have to be paid for, and the economy — whatever shape it emerges in — will be indisputably weaker than when it entered the crisis. Therefore, facing into that, it is a comfort to any thinking person to know that, at our back, we have a major country, the United Kingdom, with a leading role in the world's economy and with opportunities and reserves far greater than many lesser countries. Therefore, as her Majesty's Minister of Finance here continues to

spend the money sent from the Treasury, and as we look forward to playing our part, as part of that nation, in picking up this economy hereafter, we do have the comfort of knowing that far from chasing the rainbows of some fantasies — constitutional or otherwise — we are part of a solid reliable economy, and that is a good place to be during difficulties such as we are facing.

In the last Budget debate, we had a discussion about the fiscal deficit. The Minister tried to diminish the fiscal deficit, tried to talk down the amount of money that we get in the block grant, and took refuge in all sorts of inexplicable obfuscations to minimise it. I am, therefore, glad that today, in his Budget document at paragraph 2.3, there is this emphatic and unmistakable statement. This is a document in which the Minister writes the foreword, of course. It is his Budget document. It states:

"The taxes generated within Northern Ireland are considerably less than the level of funding received from HM Treasury, this shortfall is known as the fiscal deficit."

They are "considerably less". That is the reality that I and other Members were talking about in the last Budget debate and the reality that the Minister was seeking to deny. I am glad, therefore, that it is down in black and white in his document today.

Speaking of paragraph 2 of the document, I draw the House's attention to the very next subparagraph. It states:

"The most important point to note is that all DEL allocations, frequently referred to as the NI Block Grant, are made on the basis of a clear separation between Resource ... and Capital."

That is plain wrong. It is wholly misleading and factually inaccurate to say that DEL allocations are:

"frequently referred to as the ... Block Grant".

The block grant, as surely we should know, is DEL plus AME. The block grant is cash. The block grant in tables 1 and 2 etc in the annexe is the DEL and the AME. It is not a mere £12 billion or £14 billion as the DEL tables show. Indeed, go to the current Treasury publication of the United Kingdom Estimates and look at page 424 and you will see that the estimated block grant, the payment into the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund for this year, is

£22.6 billion. That is what the block grant is. It is not just DEL. I must say that I am astounded that a Department would produce a document that contains such a misleading assertion: that the DEL allocations are:

"frequently referred to as the ... Block Grant".

I say it again: that is just wrong. Why is it here? The block grant is DEL plus AME. I would like the Minister to explain why the matter is so misdescribed in paragraph 2.4. It is not just some flippant document that is dashed off for someone's entertainment. It is the Budget document. It is supposed to be accurate and complete, so why is it misleading in paragraph 2.4.

I want to ask a few other questions that come out of the document. Paragraphs 2.36 to 2.38 refer to the confidence and supply monies, and I confess that I have almost lost track of all of it. I simply ask the Minister this: has all the confidence and supply money that was previously promised been paid or promised to be paid, or is there still a shortfall in that regard?

Paragraph 2.34 deals with New Decade, New Approach and the Budget document sets out various amounts of money. They total £523 million that seems to be coming. If I recall correctly, the Minister previously said that the figure that should have been coming from New Decade, New Approach was £740 million. Which is the up-to-date figure?

Finally, I once asked the Minister a question for written answer — AWQ 238/1722 — about what efficiencies would be required from Departments. He answered that question by saying that, when we came —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Allister

Mr Allister: — to the allocations to various Departments —.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am sorry, Mr Allister. I did show a bit of leeway, but we are now seven and a half minutes into your contribution.

Mr Allister: I very much apologise. I simply ask that the Minister would, at some point, give an updated answer to that question for written answer.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That was a very sincere apology [*Laughter.*]

5.45 pm

Miss Woods: I also express my condolences to the family, friends and colleagues of Mr John Dallat.

As I stated last time I commented on the Budget in this Chamber, we need a comprehensive, adequate process, with real time for scrutiny. Notwithstanding the difficult circumstances that we find ourselves in, we are still in the same position that we were in February. We do not have any of the detail. The Executive talk of a new decade, and a new approach, but this is more of the same old.

As the Chair of the Justice Committee has already outlined, the Committee had a short period of time to examine the Department's budget. I found it difficult to scrutinise the proposals, due to the absence of estimated costs, and lack of detailed information on funding for various parts of the Department and other bodies. The scale of the costs for COVID-19 had not been supplied. The funding gap for the PSNI has not been met, and there were no indicative costs for the New Decade, New Approach commitments. We do not know the extent to which slippage will shape the departmental budget, what the impact will be or what the re-prioritisation by the Minister will look like. In the case of Brexit, a forgotten issue at this time, we are told that a separate exercise is to be carried out by the Department of Finance to address funding gaps, but that just shows an overarching wait-and-see approach.

This is not how Budgets should be planned, how public money should be spent and it is not a good example of governance. Greater transparency is needed in order for us to see what avenues Departments are going down, to ensure that this is effective, and also for us to scrutinise what is going on. I look forward to additional time in Committee to scrutinise this process.

I will not repeat all the issues that I raised before in this Chamber, many of which should be addressed by this Budget but are not addressed sufficiently, including local council funding, the hospitality industry, housing, adequate resources to tackle climate breakdown and our ecological crisis and the need for the independent environmental protection agency that this House committed to. I agree with the comments of Mr Frew made earlier. This Budget will be subject to change, but I argue that it must change.

I ask a very simple question: are we prepared for what is coming? Is this Budget sufficient?

Will this shape the aftermath of COVID? We know about the businesses and people who are falling through the cracks, and that we are staring into the face of another economic recession. It is estimated that the Northern Ireland economy alone will contract between 6-7% and 10%, so how are we going to tackle that? It is certainly not through the matching City Deal money, which is not new and is already committed to by Westminster, with a focus solely on gross value added (GVA). GVA means nothing when there is no food on the table, or when living in fuel poverty in a freezing house.

The pandemic and lockdown have laid bare the precariousness of many people's livelihoods, the plight of the self-employed, those on inadequate contracts, the pay and conditions of our essential workers, who are, basically, those who we need the most. Inequalities are more apparent than ever. Landlords are given mortgage holidays, while those who rent struggle to pay their bills. Those from lower income backgrounds are disproportionately suffering because of health inequalities. Children, who, because their families cannot afford the additional equipment, are disproportionately affected by the closure of schools which can have lasting effects on their learning and future prospects. Today, it was announced that over 2 million children are experiencing food poverty in the UK since lockdown began. COVID is certainly not the great leveller, as it has been described.

The last opportunity when there was growing momentum for change was after the financial crash of 2008 but, instead of tackling inequality and bailing out our people, those in power decided to bail out the banks, and deepen disadvantage through crippling cuts to public services in the age of austerity.

We cannot return to the old way of doing things. In the context of a global health emergency, some Governments around the world have bailed out workers. Some are introducing a minimum vital income. The pandemic, its effects and the response are consistently referred to in warlike terms. We know that the need to reduce poverty and boost the economy after World War II led to the foundation of the modern welfare state.

So far, we missed a glaring opportunity to introduce a universal basic income (UBI) that would go some way to redress the many inequalities and pave the way for a just recovery from the global health emergency. Whilst I welcome the political parties joining our call for a UBI, there has been no action.

There should be no return to business as usual. The new normal must incorporate some of the things that we all witness around us now, things that, just a few months ago, seemed almost impossible to achieve. The state must be able to meet those challenges.

Why has it taken a pandemic to result in positive environmental indicators? That we now have better air quality should not be seen as some silver lining to the crisis; it should be something that we, as citizens, demand moving forward into recovery and beyond. Instead of returning to the roads and resuming the daily commute, sitting in private cars on our own and complaining about the lack of parking spaces, we should be thinking about more flexible working patterns and conditions, and serious investment in the provision of public transport and active travel.

How do we measure success? Is it through economic growth, or should we have other priorities in health outcomes, education, justice and the environment? Why is there always money for war but never enough for health and education? We need to look at other criteria for measuring the success of our communities and societies so that they are met with nurturing and resourcing in the interests of the public good. Not narrow macro-economic objectives but community and social objectives. GDP obsession and perpetual capitalist growth to some unknown destination is no longer the dish of the day, and at the heart of this is the need for a true, green and just recovery as the basis for our future development model.

Now is the time to develop a new sustainable economy as part of a fair and just recovery so that new jobs are created in an ethical and environmentally friendly way. That can be achieved through a just transition and a green new deal, which all of the Executive parties supported in previous mandates and manifestos but, unsurprisingly, is not here today.

A green recovery presents us with a short- and long-term vision of sustainable jobs for life, with simultaneous improvement socially, environmentally and economically. It is not about getting back to business as usual to a world where many struggle to get by. A green recovery will address the fundamental problems that this pandemic has brought to the surface for us, including the valuation of the workforce and what is valued as being "key" or, in crude Brexit terms, "skilled".

As a colleague of mine has been arguing, it is not the currency speculators who are important

for the functioning of our society when it is stripped back to the essentials: it is the nurses, the carers, the posties, the bus drivers, the refuse collectors, the prison officers, the police, the funeral directors, the shelf-stackers, those who keep the lights on and the water running, the teachers, those who work in our refuges and our homeless shelters and those who work in community and voluntary agencies. The list goes on.

Missing from this Budget are the very options that we need to have in order to answer the fundamental question that I raised about what kind of world we want to get back to. What this Budget does, yet again, is put the sign up on our door saying, "Normal business as usual". That cannot and will not be the case. We need to build back better and reimagine a society that works for everyone.

Mr Carroll: I put on record my condolences and sympathies to Mr Dallat's family and party colleagues.

There is no escaping that we are in the throes of a global health pandemic and are veering into a deep recession as we consider the Budget. The period ahead may be filled with massive uncertainty, but one truth rings clear as a bell: we cannot return to the normality that gave rise to this crisis. No return to normal.

That sentiment has been felt and expressed around the globe and, unsurprisingly, has been felt most strongly by those at the bottom of society who feel the outworkings of this pandemic most sharply. No return to our nurses standing in the freezing cold for months for the pay that they deserve and no more systematic under-funding of our health service until it is perpetually at the brink and under-prepared for whatever crisis is around the corner. No more food production based on bottom prices and agri-food competition, which pumps our food full of antibiotics and gives rise to new and resistant viruses and destroys the environment to the tune of millions of tonnes of carbon. Summed up, it is a fundamental break with an economic system that gives primacy above all else to the market and breeds through competition. The very duo that sees nations around the world struggle for basic orders of PPE, including the Finance Minister apparently.

This emergency shows that we need emergency action that goes beyond treating the current pandemic. This Budget, I am afraid, does nothing of the sort, nor does it try to. There is no ambition for a different kind of economic agenda and, in my role as one of the very few opposition MLAs, I will do my best to

scrutinise it today, although I share others' sentiments that it has been hard to scrutinise over the past few days. It is bizarre in the extreme to hear Committee Chair after Committee Chair raising concerns, many of which I concur with, when many of them will vote for this Budget Bill regardless.

Look at health. The big parties in the Executive have spent years implementing Tory cuts to our NHS. That had a very real impact during the crisis, with too few ventilators and ICU beds, too little PPE and a lack of capacity to properly test. We have been forced to play catch-up while the virus has spread. One might hope that there was a lesson here, but looking through the fine detail of the Budget projections it is clear that nothing has been learned.

Much is made of a 6% bump for the health budget, which certainly would be promising if it were not for inflation and the fact that we are all living longer and adding to the cost of running the health service. That means that it is not really a 6% increase at all. It is not a significant increase in real terms. If anything, it is a repeat of similar baseline austerity Budgets with "savings" at their heart. Indeed, as I pointed out in the Health Committee, these projections are predicated on at least a £50 million cut to health trusts across the region — £50 million stripped away from our health service during a global pandemic — but that figure was not the headline, unlike the supposed 6% bump. While communities are out clapping for the NHS every Thursday, some elected reps are suggesting £50 million cuts to the health service. It would be unbelievable if it were not so true to form.

Sticking with Health, this Budget guarantees a continuation of the logic of the Bengoa report, which is predicated on efficiencies and savings, rather than the massive investment needed in our health service. Clearly, the strong warnings from unions and health workers about such an agenda have fallen on deaf ears. I do not look forward to future sittings of this Assembly when we look back at the ruinous impact of such a strategy, but I fear that that will indeed come to pass.

Where is the commitment to double the funding to mental health — a basic demand that mental health workers say will make a massive difference. The increase in depression and anxiety that isolation has brought should have given us the impetus to act on this issue. Once again, mental health has been relegated.

I now move on to the other crisis that faces us, climate change. It is often said by environmental activists that this Assembly is

addicted to roads. Look at the Department for Infrastructure figures; this Budget will not prove them wrong. There is £75 million for the new A5, but where is the budget for rectifying the additional air pollution that that will cause — air pollution that kills one in 24 people in Belfast alone. Nor is there reference to rectifying the air pollution likely to come from the York Street interchange. Nor, and this is stark, is there a massive increase in investment in Translink, which, just months ago, warned that our public transport system will collapse without additional funding. Where is that funding? A break with individual cars will not come without a proper alternative, but this Budget does not provide one.

Instead of sustainable funding for Translink, we have seen suggestions from the Finance Minister for further austerity in the request that Translink staff should be furloughed to deal with this crisis. This suggestion of further austerity will only make the situation worse. The Committee Chair raised concerns about Translink's future.

I move on to the Department for Agriculture. There is no attempt to intervene to create a food production sector that shirks competition in favour of health and sustainability for those of us who eat the food and those who produce it. This will be vital in the challenges around the global climate crisis.

We see a reflection of previous austerity Budgets in the section on the Department of Finance, where it talks about:

"Improving effectiveness across the public sector by transforming the way the [Civil Service] works".

We all know what that is code for. It is the same tale that was spun to us when the voluntary exit scheme saw 20,000 secure, unionised jobs offered up on the chopping block. The result today is that most of those workers have been replaced by agency staff on precarious contracts, unable to join a union; encroaching privatisation; and a massive bill from recruitment agencies.

What was done to the Civil Service in the name of effectiveness under the previous Executive was a neo-liberal's dream and a worker's nightmare. Again, either lessons have not been learned or the new Executive are as neo-liberal as the previous one.

Two measures relating to COVID-19 are mentioned in the Budget. For me, the standout figure was £99 million for businesses.

Undoubtedly small businesses need support during this crisis, but just as necessary is a large injection of financial aid for individuals thrust into poverty and unemployment. The economist Michael Roberts has noted this trend right across Europe: state aid for businesses at around four times that for ordinary people. Though it is notable that, compared with other Governments, we have given out much less.

On the question of rates, for example, I do not oppose freezing the domestic rate and reducing the regional rate to help struggling small businesses, but in my view, the Executive must go much further, and workers and families should also see their rate payments cut.

There is a question around the priorities —.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Carroll, we are beyond seven minutes. Thank you.

Mr Carroll: I will continue to scrutinise this Budget. Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Dead on. We will read it on the website.

Mr McNulty: I begin by sharing with other Members of the Assembly in passing on my sincere condolences to the family of my esteemed colleague John Dallat.

To me, John epitomised the size of the fight in the man as opposed to the size of the man in the fight. He was a warrior for peace, justice and social democracy, and he will be greatly missed.

6.00 pm

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate. We are in uncertain times, and, as many fellow Members have said, this is no ordinary Budget. The Minister has also indicated that it will need to be reviewed in a few weeks' time, which makes today's debate important and yet, at the same time, almost futile. Our public finances have never faced so much pressure and demands, and, given that reality, there is also much uncertainty and a lack of the normal scrutiny process. I want to make my contribution as a member of the Education Committee and then as a constituency MLA.

We heard today from the Finance Minister about the real-term increase in the Budget; however, our Committee has heard from the Minister of Education and his permanent

secretary about the real pressures faced by the Department for Education, including £165 million in revenue spend and an additional pressure of £200 million going forward. The Budget still does not address areas such as the unacceptable backlog in the school maintenance programme, which is estimated to be in the region of £400 million. Our children are often taught in substandard accommodation, and school leaders are crying out for capital investment and maintenance. Any initiatives cannot and should not be derailed and nor should the ongoing work to reform and reboot special education needs provision and mental health support in schools.

The Budget does not take into account the new normality that our schools will face when children return to their classrooms. It does not meet the need for support to adapt classrooms physically or for the resources that are needed for what may come down the line. The Committee Chair referred to the commitments made in the New Decade, New Approach agreement: again, the Budget makes no provision for them. It is important that we are honest with the public in the time ahead about the commitments that have been made and about what will be honoured.

I will now speak as a constituency MLA. There is lots of talk about doing things differently post pandemic, but that needs to be demonstrated in the Budget and at any review stage. I fear that we will soon transition from doing things differently back to plugging the funding gap. I fear that we will just be doing less rather than more, but we need to be ambitious for our economy and our society. An opportunity has presented itself to reboot our economy in a different way. The key to our economic recovery will be sustained capital investment and an infrastructure programme across all Departments. That will be key to getting our construction industry back to work, and it will have far-reaching impacts on all associated services and sectors from the suppliers to the corner shop.

As part of that infrastructure programme, we need to see commitments to projects such as the hourly Belfast to Dublin Enterprise high-speed rail link being delivered. We need to see investment in greenways and public transport and the delivery of broadband into every community if we are to really adapt to new ways of living and working. We need to invest in and deliver more social housing and open spaces and public parks. It is time to see the delivery of the Albert Basin park in Newry. We need the Executive to step in and step up to support councils and public bodies that have seen their

income decimated in the same way as we have seen Governments step up to support some other businesses.

There is much more to do to support those who have fallen through the cracks from substitute teachers, cross-border workers and student renters to self-employed people who need financial support and not just tea and sympathy. That support needs to be timely. Too many of the pledges that we hear take far too long to implement. It is also important that we protect people from the harshest elements of welfare reform, challenges that were being faced long before COVID-19, such as the bedroom tax, although we still contend that the best way to have done that would have been to vote against it in the first place. I welcome the extension of the mitigations, but there are no mitigations to protect families from the ultra-draconian two-child rule, as it was only dreamed up by the Tories after the last Executive handed power back to Westminster. Can the Minister say whether money will be there to support the families affected?

Minister, I could go on and on, but I will not. I urge you to think of those who have contacted every one of our constituency offices in the last few weeks, whilst we have been working in different working arrangements. Our workload, as, I am sure, you will all agree, has increased threefold. People are seeking help. They are fearful about what lies ahead for them. They want the Executive and Assembly to listen and to act.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Members will remember that the Minister was allocated an hour. He used two minutes in opening the debate. I once read that Gladstone delivered a Budget that took seven and a half hours. The Minister has certainly smashed that record. He has 58 minutes of his hour left.

Mr Murphy: You will be pleased to know that I do not intend to take my 58 minutes, although I would kind of get a sense of revenge for sitting through four hours of the rest of you *[Laughter.]* I thank Members and the Committee Chairs for their participation in the debate. I thank Members who were supportive of the Budget proposals for their input, and I listened with interest to Members who spoke against the Budget, although, as is always the case, I heard demands for a litany of more expenditure and no propositions for where, in a finite Budget, we would cut, if we want to spend more in other areas. It is often the case that we get a list of things that we should spend money on but no suggestions of where we should take that money from. Nonetheless, Members are free to

make their points and to write their statements accordingly.

I intend to use the remaining time to respond to a lot of the issues raised. I will try to be as constructive as possible. I thank the Chair of the Committee for Finance for its work on the Budget. He raised an issue about the further Vote on Account that we will need in the coming weeks. Obviously, there was recognition from, I think, nearly all the Members who spoke that we are in unique circumstances. We were in unique circumstances when we came back in January, and that has greatly multiplied over the last number of weeks. Of course, that has put a stress on some Departments that have had to spend much more than they anticipated, while other Departments spend much less, and that will make for a challenging June monitoring round. I assure you that the second Vote on Account is not based on this 2020-21 Budget; it will be based on a high percentage of the 2019-2020 expenditure. It is a technical approach to make sure that Departments have the authority to spend in order to continue to operate through the period when this Bill may not have completed its legislative passage. It is necessary because the time simply does not permit the production of a detailed Main Estimates document, and, given the fast-evolving COVID-19 situation and the spend associated with it, the Budget may be out of date by the time the Bill is passed. Of course, we will engage with the Committee on that, and I will bring the Main Estimates along with a further Budget Bill to the Assembly in the autumn, by which time, we hope, the financial position will have stabilised somewhat. Certainly, we need to ensure that the Departments can continue to spend money.

The Chair of the Communities Committee raised the issue of additional funding for councils. I am aware that the Communities Minister is working with the councils to finalise pressures, and I expect to see a paper on that. You need to bear in mind that the £50 million Barnett consequential that came from England applies to a different set of functions related to councils from those here. Councils in England have functions in relation to social services and education, all of which we have had to spend money on here from our own budgets. Of course, there will be a loss of revenue to the councils, and we recognise that and want to ensure that we support them however we can. There will also be an opportunity for councils to save, as I said in the rates debate. Again, as with us, there are quite a lot of issues that the councils had budgeted for in anticipation of a certain outcome this year that they will now not be able to spend money on, and we look to the

councils to look to themselves, in the first instance, to see what savings can be found from that.

The Chair also raised the issue of capital funding for the Department for Communities and the flexibility and certainty around all of that. Of course, I have asked Departments to look most acutely at capital spend projections, because we have already lost, effectively, the first quarter of this year. We may lose a significant proportion of the second quarter of this year, and we may not get the flexibility that people might anticipate at the end of the financial year from Treasury. We hope that we will, but there are no guarantees in relation to that. So, particularly in relation to capital budgets, we have asked Departments to look early at what, they think, they can spend and what they may not be able to spend and to work with us on that. I have to say that it is a mixed bag in terms of Departments' response to that. I noted the impassioned opinion of the Chair of the Justice Committee, who made the point well from the Committee's perspective that they will look to Departments to play their part in ensuring that we do not end up, in the early part of next year — the end of our financial year — surrendering significant portions of money back to Treasury that people had held on to in anticipation of spend that we were not able to spend.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for giving way. Obviously, he has had some conversation with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, but can he confirm to the House that, while many Members come to the House and talk aspirationally about what we should do and so on, he has the power to write to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and to set out in detail that issue around flexibility? If ever there was an opportunity for us to make the argument in these circumstances and justify the flexibility, now is it. Will he commit to ensuring that that is done, if he has not already done so?

Mr Murphy: I assure the Member that I have a weekly conversation with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, and, of course, we write to him as well. I have recently written to him on another issue that I will raise shortly in relation to supply teachers. Yes, we have raised that, and, yes, we got assurances. The Member will know that, at the very tail end of the last financial year, the Treasury made an adjustment that forced us into a readjustment of our capital budget, which, thankfully, we were able to carry over to this year. We have argued that, rather than give us Barnett consequentials that are, perhaps, above what they may be able to deliver, we get the baseline of that so that we do not end up

having to readjust later in the year. We have also argued for flexibility, but this is a very uncertain picture. While I welcome the interventions that there have been from Treasury in relation to employee retention and support for the self-employed, nonetheless there is no doubt that Treasury will look to recoup as much money as it can as the year goes on. We are asking and pressing the case, and the meetings that I do with him are often joined by the Scottish and Welsh Finance Ministers, who have similar issues to raise with him. It is not just a demand from here but from other devolved areas. We will continue to press that case, because it will be key in the time ahead. However, Departments need to help us out in the here and now by making sure that we do not end up in a situation at the end of the year where we have a significant portion of money that we are trying to reallocate.

In relation to the sub teachers, that is another issue. People will understand this — certainly the Member who last spoke, as well as other Members who have been here a longer time. When a range of bids come in from Departments and the Executive have a limited amount of funding, we agree how that funding will be allocated, but we also agree the funding that is not allocated. The bid in relation to supply teachers was not supported, because we had a limited amount and priorities went to other areas. That means that the Executive also agreed not to put money into that at this time. Since then, I have had several discussions with the Education Minister, because I do recognise the issue of supply teachers. A number of Members have raised the issue of supply teachers and sub teachers, and we put the case very firmly to Treasury that, while, in England, Scotland and Wales, supply teachers normally come from an agency and that agency could have them furloughed, here they come in a random fashion off a list. They are essentially very much self-employed and do not have that overarching organisation that can bid for furlough on their behalf. We have pressed that case and continue to press that case. Both the Education Minister and I have written to the Treasury, and I raised it over the course of two meetings, including last Thursday, with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. We are waiting for a response to that. We have not forgotten the issue; we will continue to press for that and try to get some support.

The Chair of the Education Committee, Chris Lytle, raised the issue of capital funding for shared and integrated education from the Fresh Start funding, and £68 million has been provided for shared and integrated education in 2020-21. We are in discussion again with the

Treasury in relation to the profile of money for future years.

6.15 pm

The Chair of the Infrastructure Committee raised several issues, particularly about Translink. Other Members also mentioned Translink. Matthew O'Toole asked where the COVID-19 funding is that the Department of Infrastructure said that it has not received. Andrew Muir raised that issue as well. Some £1.2 billion of COVID-19-related funding has come across from Treasury. We have already allocated or identified for allocation over £900 million of that. The lion's share — in and around half a billion pounds — went on business support measures and has already been spent. A significant proportion went to the Department of Health; to the Department for Communities to protect vulnerable people; and to the Department of Education to finance some of the interventions that we have made there.

We have set aside £95 million for transportation issues. To say that the Department for Infrastructure has not got any of that is not strictly accurate, because it has already allocated money to support the airports and ferries to ensure that they continue to operate. We are awaiting a proposition on freight, on which the Department is working with the Department for Transport. We have also indicated that there will be funds for Translink within the £95 million. Therefore, although it may be strictly accurate to say that, as things stand, the Department for Infrastructure has not got the funding for Translink, we have set aside money for it, and that is clearly understood by the Department.

Furloughing Translink workers is a matter for the Infrastructure Minister. We did what we were asked to do, which was to ask Treasury what the situation is with furloughing public-sector workers. We were given the criteria by which some public-sector workers, including some council staff, might be furloughed. The decision on whether then to apply for the furlough payment for workers is a matter for the Minister or council involved. We were asked to provide the information, and that we did. The decision is then left up to the individual Minister.

Mr Catney: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Murphy: Sure.

Mr Catney: You said it is for an individual Minister to decide whether to furlough workers.

Would it not be for the Executive as a whole to decide?

Mr Murphy: No, I do not necessarily think that it would, no more than if an individual council had to check with other councils if it were wanting to furlough, say, workers on its leisure side who cannot be redeployed elsewhere. That is one area in which councils have certainly lost income as a consequence of COVID-19. One of the key factors is that you have to have lost income. That means that the furlough scheme would apply to Translink where it would not necessarily apply to public-sector workers across the board. If any Department has lost income, it is a matter for it to consider whether it wishes to make a case to Treasury to furlough the workers concerned. If it decides not to, it needs to manage its budgets accordingly.

Paul Givan spoke about what is required of Departments. He was referring specifically to the Department of Justice, but the points that he made can apply equally to all Departments. I say to all Committee Chairs and Committee members here that it is incumbent on each of them to scrutinise. Each Minister comes to the Assembly to be scrutinised, and rightly so, and each of the Committees has a very important role to play in that scrutiny, which I absolutely welcome. However, none of us has faced such a situation before, in which certain Departments have had to spend a significant amount of money but in which planned spend in other areas will not happen. We therefore need to make sure that we have the ability to respond. In emerging from this crisis, we need to try to assist supporting the economy, the vulnerable in society, the health service and all the other areas that Members have raised. We have to ensure that money is properly allocated throughout the rest of the year so that we do not end up in a situation in which we have Departments sitting on money and there is some sort of scramble beyond January to try to spend it. The Committees as well as the Departments have work to do in that regard.

The Chair of the Health Committee, Colm Gildernew, raised issues about the New Decade, New Approach priorities. He is correct: the British Government have not provided sufficient funding to meet what was committed to in New Decade, New Approach. The Executive have allocated £81 million to the Department of Health for transformation and £5 million for safe staffing. Those commitments were included in New Decade, New Approach, but, in the light of the impact of COVID-19, Departments had to reallocate some of their transformation allocation to meet other

priorities. The Executive will need to look though that and agree to it.

A number of Members, including Daniel McCrossan and Karen Mullan, mentioned special educational needs. In this Budget, I am very pleased that we have been able to provide an additional £42 million, which is ring-fenced, for that important issue. We do not claim that it addresses all the pressures, but it will certainly go some way to addressing existing pressures to meet the needs of children and young people with special educational needs. It is a very important step towards addressing those known pressures.

Paul Frew raised issues in relation to ongoing rate relief. He remarked that rates are a fairly small part of our resource. However, £1.3 billion in the last financial year is, by anybody's reckoning, a fairly substantial amount. He also argued for a more strategic approach to this Budget. Of course, that is what we want to do. We recognised when setting out this Budget, before we knew the depth of the situation that we would be in, that this was an unusual and time-limited approach. The clear objective is to get to a multi-annual Budget approach. I hope for, and I will certainly prepare and plan for, a much more strategic approach over a number of years. That will allow us to get much more certainty going forward. I think that everyone recognises that we are in far from ideal times for Budget preparation. I can confirm that the significant increase in the Executive Office budget that he asked about relates to the historical institutional abuse redress allocation.

A number of Members asked about how we pay our way out of this and about trying to secure as much resource as we possibly can. They raised the issue of borrowing. The Executive can access up to £200 million of borrowing, which can be used only under the reinvestment and reform initiative for capital expenditure. Without Treasury agreement, it cannot be used for resource costs such as grants to business or to help with running costs. In addition, it should be remembered that borrowing comes at a cost. In 2020-21, our significant existing borrowing of £2.5 billion will cost £169 million in repayments. Borrowing is always seen as a quick fix to meet the cost of what we might want to spend to secure our emergence from the situation that we are in, but people have to remember that we already have significant borrowing. There are restrictions on how that money can be used, and the cost of repaying it is significant. Bear in mind that some people argue that capital spend is a way to kick-start economic recovery. Significant capital spend that should have been happening in the first quarter of this year will not happen. Departments have to look at the

money that they have themselves to try to assist with the priorities of the Executive.

Matthew O'Toole asked about air passenger duty. Previously, the Executive made a commitment to eliminate it. A £2.3 million Budget allocation reflected the block grant reduction agreed to devolve the power to set the level of APD from 2012. The cost relates to the duty payable on devolving the power to set the rate, not the duty that would be payable on current flights.

The former Finance Minister, who produced the last Budget here, gave us a very stern lecture on the missing years. May I remind him that we would have had a Budget in 2018-19 and 2019-2020 had his party not walked away from a deal that we had reached with it? His party's leadership was quite prepared to accept that deal, but party members scuppered it.

Mr Storey: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Murphy: Let me just finish the point. The Member might allocate four years of missing Budgets to us. I assure him that at least two or three of those years were the responsibility of his party.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for giving way. We might as well get a bit of a discussion going because we will not be going too far this evening. Although, right enough, I have a board of governors' meeting at 7.00 pm.

It does not serve the Minister well to try to shift the blame. The reality for him and his party is that they decided to pull the institutions down. The late Martin McGuinness decided, collectively — maybe not, but, whoever it was, it was decided to pull the institutions down. Will the Minister at least accept that, in doing so, Martin McGuinness created further problems for children with special educational needs, further crises in the health service and further challenges for the unemployed? As a result, the Minister cannot try to do a Pontius Pilate in the House tonight. He cannot wash his hands and say that it was somebody else. I have the letter with me. It was the late Martin McGuinness and his party that decided to do the job, so do not try to blame the DUP.

Mr Murphy: In his remarks, the Member heaped shame across the Chamber on the party opposite and did exactly what he is now accusing me of doing. He ignored the build-up to the inevitable collapse in the Executive and the role of his own party. Senior party members on his own side have acknowledged that there

are lessons to be learnt, and I think that we all will learn lessons in relation to all of that. Let us not try to rewrite history in relation to what caused the issues and how long ago they could have been fixed. As I said, we could have had an Executive and a Budget for 2018-19 and 2019-2020 delivered in this House had things turned out differently.

Mr Storey made several points about financial support for the PSNI. Indeed, Mr O'Toole corrected him, pointing out that we actually pay taxes across to the Treasury. That makes up a substantial proportion of the block grant that returns. Very recently, in the past number of weeks, I allocated £4 million for additional support for the PSNI, and I am sure that he would acknowledge that. Of course, yes, there was a proposition to increase the number of PSNI officers as part of the agreement to reform the Executive, and I have had some discussions with the Justice Minister. The Member will know from his presence on the Policing Board that you cannot simply go out tomorrow and recruit 700 police officers. That commitment still stands, and I am sure that he will equally reaffirm his commitment to things like the Irish language Act to make sure that the agreement that we reached is honoured in all its forms.

Mr Storey: Here again we are seeing played out in this House a classic example of, "If we do not get what we are looking for, you will not get". However, the problem is that it is not in the Budget. That is the problem. It is on a piece of paper that says, "We will increase the numbers of police to 7,500". There is no financial commitment, yet we have a financial commitment in this document of £15 million to a medical centre in Londonderry that the business case today does not stack up for. We are then told by Members from the SDLP and Sinn Féin that we have to make sure that everything has to be done properly and that we have to have scrutiny. We are told that we cannot have anything done that is improper. If you do not have a business case that stacks up, why have you allocated £15 million to something that is not financially viable?

Mr Murphy: If he had listened to me, he would know that I said that I had a discussion with the Justice Minister as part of the Budget allocation. The Member will know that no bid came forward from Justice for that additional recruitment; the Department needs time to work that up and work out how that recruitment will be shaped up and how it would begin. As I said, you cannot simply recruit 700 police officers overnight. I have said that there clearly is a commitment to meeting that recruitment target, but he will know

that that will require Justice to come forward with propositions and a supporting bid.

The Executive announced an additional £55 million yesterday or the day before — yes, it was yesterday; we are all losing track of days — for the inclusive future fund. That was fully supported by the Executive, and, of course, only a proportion of that is for the graduate-entry medical school. There are other much-needed projects for Derry and for the north-west generally, and that is a commitment in principle to spend that. Those projects will have to be assessed, they will have to stack up and they will have to pass the necessary scrutiny and tests that any public expenditure would meet. That is clearly going to be the approach there. Nonetheless, I think that it was a very important signal to the north-west to ensure that the Executive were making that commitment. Again, we had agreed to that in the 'NDNA' document.

Pat Catney raised issues, and I get those exactly. I understand his passion for supporting small businesses. The responsibility for the £25,000 grant lies with the Department for the Economy, and an additional £40 million has been set aside to address what it calls a business hardship fund, which is intended to target those who have fallen through the gaps of existing small business grant schemes. A paper was brought forward recently on that, and that is going through the processes of Executive approval. Of course, as I said in the rates debate, we have a clear understanding of the challenges facing the hospitality, tourism and leisure industries.

In relation to the rates relief package, we offered that to all businesses, including small industrial businesses which got access to the £10K grants scheme; that was not in the initial package. We included all businesses here in that rates relief scheme, which was not the case in the English scheme. We have a specific focus on those that we know will continue to struggle, even if restrictions are lifted and businesses can start again. Clearly, some businesses will not be able to start in the way that they had operated just a short number of weeks ago, so we will look to provide all the support that we possibly can.

Some other questions were raised. It is interesting that Mr Allister waxed lyrical. Interestingly, my party leader was criticised for making a constitutional point in relation to COVID and we have a whole range of constitutional points raised from across the Floor in relation to the British Government and the funding that we have received and which I

have said that I very much welcomed. He asked about the confidence and supply funding. I have secured that for 2020-21, and I expect the remainder to be provided in future years. He will know, because I told the House before, that the previous Secretary of State informed us that the confidence and supply money was gone — it was over and there was nothing more to be had so I was pleased that we did manage to secure this year's, and I intend to continue the battle to secure money in future years. Not that it was something negotiated by my party or the Executive, but it was a commitment from the Conservative party to here for a number of years and we want to see that commitment honoured.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Murphy: Yes.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Minister for giving way. When Mr Allister talked about the block grant, he insisted that annually managed expenditure (AME) was in the block grant funding. I just want to draw to the Minister's attention a Treasury document — or a Her Majesty's Treasury document, as I am sure Mr Allister would prefer. It is from my former employer and it is very clear. The document is called 'Block Grant Transparency'. It was published in December 2018 and it makes clear that departmental expenditure limits is the block grant, and that AME is outside the block grant. I just wanted to draw that to the attention of the House and also to Mr Allister.

Mr Murphy: I thank the Member for anticipating my next point. *[Laughter.]* I was going to quote from a similar Treasury document, and that is the 'Statement of Funding Policy':

"Funding from the UK government to the devolved administrations falls into two broad categories: block grant (or DEL) funding and funding in relation to Annually Managed Expenditure (AME).

This chapter covers the element of block grant funding that relates to UK Government departmental spending within Departmental Expenditure Limits (DEL)."

I hope that that clears the matter up for him. That is a statement of funding policy that has come from the British Government. Of course, he takes me to task over the description of the fiscal deficit. A £3 billion fiscal deficit is not an insignificant figure. If someone is sitting on universal credit it is a very significant figure and I have always acknowledged that, but what I

have said is that the figures that have been bandied about, of a £10, £11 or £12 billion deficit being met by the British Government have been inaccurate. The figures that I provided during the last debate were figures that were worked out by the Department of Finance and not by me on my own, you will be pleased to know.

A number of people made points in relation to multi-annual Budgets and their ability to give us more certainty, which I have addressed. Others recognised that we are in far from satisfactory circumstances at the moment. Nonetheless, I have to say that, even though it is not satisfactory, I believe that Executive Ministers, supported by the Assembly, have risen to the challenge, have responded as best as they possibly can. They have managed to get a very significant amount of money out on the ground to support not only our Health Service in fighting this pandemic, but also to support our economy and other vulnerable people in society, through very quick interventions that, in normal circumstances, would probably take six months of planning, road testing and consultation. Schemes have been turned round in a number of days or maybe weeks and have gone out. I recognise that we are in far from ideal times in terms of scrutiny, but we also have a duty to respond as quickly as we can to the public health challenge, one of the most serious issues that I think any of us have ever faced in our lifetime.

Several Members mentioned the New Decade, New Approach deal. Despite those who have wallowed in the comfort of the support that the British Government has given us — and I welcome that support — they have certainly not got given us the commitments that they made under New Decade, New Approach. I intend to continue to pursue that with Treasury at every opportunity, because that was a commitment that they made to all parties. Just as our political commitments to various sections of that agreement and deal are, quite rightly, held to, so too must the Government's.

It is the responsibility of the Finance Minister to bring Budget proposals before the House, and it is a responsibility that I take seriously, particularly now, when our citizens are facing such uncertainty about the future. The Executive's main focus at this time has to be on getting funding to where it needs to be to address the COVID-19 issues. In a world where a future economic, social and health landscape is uncertain, it is imperative that we provide a platform that is needed for public services to respond to changing demands. The Budget seeks to support key services now and is a

platform for future responsive planning. On that note, I commend the Budget to the Assembly for its approval.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that, because this is a Budget motion, it requires cross-community support. I again remind Members present that, if possible, it would be preferable to avoid a Division of the House.

Question put.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Do Members wish to divide the House?

Question put a second time.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The House will divide.

Before the Assembly divides, I remind Members that, as per Standing Order 112, the Assembly has proxy voting arrangements in place. Members who have authorised another Member to vote on their behalf are not entitled to vote in person and should not enter the Lobbies.

It is important that, during any Division, social distancing in the Chamber continues to be observed. In order to facilitate that, I ask Members to do the following: any Members in the Chamber who are not due to vote in person should consider leaving the Chamber until the Division has concluded. Those Members who wish to vote in the Lobbies on the opposite side of the Chamber to which they are sitting should leave the Chamber via the nearest door and enter the relevant Lobby via the Rotunda. Those remaining Members who are sitting closest to the Lobby doors should enter the Lobbies first, and any Member who has voted may then wish to leave the Chamber until the Division has concluded.

I remind Members of the need to be patient at all times, to follow the instructions of the Lobby Clerks and to respect the need for social distancing.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 76; Noes 4.

AYES

NATIONALIST:

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin.

UNIONIST:

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mrs Barton, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stewart, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.

OTHER:

Ms Armstrong, Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Mr Lyttle, Mr Muir.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Lynch and Mr McAleer.

NOES

UNIONIST:

Mr Allister.

OTHER:

Ms Bailey, Mr Carroll, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Carroll and Miss Woods.

<i>Total Votes</i>	<i>80</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>76</i>	<i>[95.0%]</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>37</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>37</i>	<i>[100.0%]</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>34</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>33</i>	<i>[97.1%]</i>
<i>Other Votes</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>Other Ayes</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>[66.7%]</i>

The following Members' votes were cast by their notified proxy in this Division:

Ms Armstrong voted for Mr Blair, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Dickson, Mr Lyttle and Mr Muir.

Ms Bailey voted for Miss Woods [Teller, Noes]

Mr K Buchanan voted for Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms

Bunting, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Storey and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Allen, Mr Stewart and Mr Swann.

Mr McGrath voted for Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Mrs D Kelly, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon and Mr O'Toole.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch [Teller, Ayes], Mr McAleer [Teller, Ayes], Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan and Ms Sheerin.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves the programme of expenditure proposals for 2020-21 as set out in the Budget laid before the Assembly on 31 March 2020 and the further detailed information laid on 30 April 2020.

7.00 pm

Committee Business

Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The next item of business is a motion from the Committee for Finance to extend the Committee Stage of the Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill.

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 2 December 2020, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill (NIA Bill 01/17-22).

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no limit on the debate. I call the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance to open the debate on the motion.

Dr Aiken: The Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill passed its Second Stage on Monday 16 March and should complete its Committee Stage on Wednesday 18 May. The Bill's main intention is to introduce a range of statutory measures relating to the conduct of special advisers and the functioning of government. The Bill is of concern to a number of Committees. It was not, therefore, clear at the outset to which Committee the Bill would be referred following Second Stage. The Bill is primarily of concern to the Committee for Finance and the Committee for the Executive Office. However, the Committee for Justice, the Committee on Standards and Privileges and the Assembly and Executive Review Committee all have an interest in the provisions set out in the Bill. The Chairpersons of the relevant Committees met on Wednesday 26 February to agree a position. The Committee received an overview of the Bill from the Bill's sponsor, Mr Allister, at its meeting the same day, and the Bill was subsequently referred to the Committee for Finance on Wednesday 18 March 2020.

In normal circumstances, the Committee would have sought an extension to the Committee Stage until late October in order to have sufficient time to take evidence from relevant stakeholders, receive the considered views of all other relevant Committees and provide the Bill's sponsor with the opportunity to formally respond to the evidence presented to the Committee before reporting to the Assembly. Members are, of course, aware that these are far-from-normal circumstances, and the current pandemic has created a lot of uncertainty in all aspects of our lives. For example, the second Vote on Account will come to the Committee in the near future in advance of the Budget (No. 2) Bill. The Committee will also have to schedule time to consider the Main Estimates, probably in early autumn, in advance of an unprecedented Budget (No. 3) Bill. Urgent essential Committee business, such as Budget legislation, may result in some of the Committee scrutiny of the Functioning of Government Bill having to be extended beyond what would normally be required. There is potential for essential business to take up considerable time in other applicable Committees, which may result in those Committees being unable to report to the Committee for Finance in time to meet an October deadline. The Committee considers it essential that it is afforded sufficient time to

exercise its scrutiny role to the full. Therefore, on behalf of the Committee for Finance, I ask that the House supports the motion to extend the Committee Stage to 2 December 2020.

Mr Lynch: I want to make a number of points. As the Chair has said, Committee members have already agreed to the extension. Therefore, we will agree to it in the Chamber. Finally, I want to lay out our position. The Bill seeks to bring into legislation matters that are being addressed through codes of conduct and guidelines.

Mr O'Toole: As Seán Lynch and the Chair of the Committee have outlined, we have already agreed in Committee to the extension, so I support the motion. Just briefly, it is worth saying that Mr Allister's Bill is important in that its subject is important. It is important that we scrutinise it and discuss it. The intention of his Bill is clearly to deal with issues that arise from the renewable heat incentive (RHI) scandal. That is why it is worth us giving proper consideration to the Bill in slower time, once we are, hopefully, through the worst of the COVID-19 crisis.

There are bits of the Bill that I and my party are interested in and agree with the intention. There are other concerns about specific issues and provisions in the Bill, so it needs to be examined in detail. That is why it is important that we have time to take evidence from stakeholders in slower time and to scrutinise it in the context of the RHI inquiry findings. I support the motion to extend, and I hope that we are able to give the Bill the time it needs for proper scrutiny.

Mr Allister: I have no objection to scrutiny. It is important. I express the hope though that, though we are fixing a date in December, there is nothing to ail the Committee completing its work before that. It is my hope that that will be possible. We take our first evidence tomorrow, and I hope that we can finish well in advance of December.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I invite the Chair of the Committee to respond before I put the Question to the Assembly.

Dr Aiken: From what we have heard from Members of the Assembly, we are content, if the Assembly so wishes, to go to 2 December.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 2 December 2020, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill (NIA Bill 01/17-22).

Adjourned at 7.10 pm.

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