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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 7 December 2020

The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Stalford: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. There are conventions and practices, sir, on the answering of questions tabled by Members. On 2 November, I tabled a question to the Minister of Health, asking him which procedures, other than cancer and heart operations, have been postponed for patients as a consequence of the pandemic. It is now 7 December. Can you guide me as to how I can get a timely answer from a Minister to a very important question?

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Mr Stalford. You are aware that I have limited authority to address those matters. Standing Orders state that Ministers should respond to queries and letters from all Members and that all Ministers are accountable to Members. You have made your point on the record. There are other opportunities for you to follow that up through other forms of questions and so on. The Member has made his point. I always encourage Ministers to respond in a timely manner to all Members' questions at all times.

Mr Givan: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am looking for your advice to Members as to how we can seek responses and what the protocol is in light of the Justice Minister's decision not only to register an interest on a policy issue but to recuse herself from that policy responsibility, which has been delegated to the permanent secretary to take key policy decisions. That is unprecedented in Northern Ireland's devolved history; it has never happened before. What are the protocols for Members when seeking responses on that issue, particularly in light of the fact that the permanent secretary does not have speaking rights in the Assembly to deal with a very serious issue?

Mr Speaker: The Member is aware that I have not had an opportunity to look at that. I do not know much about the background, but I know that all Ministers are responsible and accountable to the House for matters that are within the remit of their Department. Whether or

not they have delegated authority to a particular civil servant or official to take certain matters forward, the Minister is still accountable to the House and will always remain so. I hope that that satisfies the Member.

Ministerial Statements

Intergovernmental Agreement on Criminal Justice Cooperation

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Justice that she wishes to make a statement. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members that, in light of the social distancing being observed by the parties, the Speaker's ruling that Members must be in the Chamber to hear a statement if they wish to ask a question has been relaxed. Members still have to make sure that their name is on the speaking list if they wish to be called. They can do that by rising in their place as well as by notifying the Business Office or the Speaker's Table directly. I remind Members to be concise, please, in asking their questions. I also remind Members that, in accordance with long-established procedure, points of order will not normally be taken during a statement or in the period for questions thereafter.

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement regarding a bilateral meeting under the auspices of the intergovernmental agreement (IGA) on cooperation on criminal justice matters, which was held virtually on Friday 27 November 2020. This was my first such meeting with Helen McEntee TD, the Minister for Justice, at which I represented the Executive. I intend to continue the practice, which was introduced by former Justice Minister David Ford, of making periodic statements to keep the Assembly informed of meetings held under the auspices of the agreement.

The intergovernmental agreement on cooperation on criminal justice matters provides the framework for North/South cooperation in this area. It provides for meetings between the Justice Ministers, North and South. Such engagement is very important. To a large extent, we share the same justice problems, issues and concerns. This was the first IGA ministerial meeting to take place since November 2016. That long gap came about as a consequence of the period of the Assembly's inactivity and the recent Irish general elections.

The re-establishment of the ministerial meetings is particularly timely given the known impacts that the coronavirus pandemic has had on the justice systems and the as yet unknown consequences that will flow from Brexit. It is an extremely useful forum to maintain relationships with our counterparts in Ireland across a wide range of justice issues. The IGA joint work

provides a focus on justice issues related to management of offenders, support for victims, knowledge exchange between our forensic services, engagement on youth justice developments and policing of diverse communities. Five joint project advisory groups provide the mechanism by which the work in each of those areas is taken forward.

In spite of the hiatus in the publication of a work programme, Minister McEntee and I were impressed by the progress made in those areas since the last IGA meeting. A work programme is normally prepared and published annually under the auspices of the IGA. That requires ministerial sign-off, and I am pleased to announce today that a new work programme has been prepared under the terms of the IGA for 2020-21. The programme was signed off jointly by Minister McEntee and me at the IGA ministerial meeting.

I have spoken often about the importance of working together across the justice system, the Executive and the voluntary and community sector to implement the recommendations of the Gillen report in a way that delivers the reform envisaged. I therefore particularly welcomed the opportunity at the IGA meeting to share the progress that we are making on the implementation of the Gillen review, highlighting some of the current key initiatives that will help to transform and improve the experience of victims and witnesses.

Those initiatives include the introduction of the Committal Reform Bill to the Assembly on 3 November, which will help to reduce delay and the time taken to deal with serious sexual offences cases by removing the use of oral evidence as part of the committal process. It will also avoid vulnerable victims having to give oral evidence and be cross-examined more than once in the process. In addition, the Bill will introduce new arrangements whereby relevant cases can bypass the committal process entirely, thus ensuring that those cases are transferred to the Crown Court at an earlier stage.

I also updated Minister McEntee on the establishment of a new pilot scheme that will provide publicly funded, independent legal advice to adult complainants in serious sexual offence cases. The service will be available from the point that a crime is reported until the commencement of the trial. I recognise that the criminal justice processes themselves can be traumatic for complainants in those cases. I am confident that the new initiative, which should be operational by 1 April next year, will help to support complainants as their cases progress

and increase their confidence in the criminal justice system.

We also discussed the work that my Department is taking forward on providing remote evidence facilities in Belfast and Craigavon. I expect those facilities to be operational within weeks, enabling vulnerable adult and child victims and witnesses to provide their evidence to the court remotely. That important step forward will also improve the experience of complainants and vulnerable witnesses.

It will minimise the likelihood of their being re-traumatised by having to meet the accused or give evidence in a daunting courtroom environment at what is undoubtedly a traumatic and distressing time in their life.

Minister McEntee and I agreed on continuing collaboration and on a work programme at official level that is aimed at promoting shared learning on support for victims. So many of the issues and challenges relating to victims and witnesses are mirrored across our two jurisdictions. In each jurisdiction, we face challenges around supporting victims and witnesses in the criminal justice system; providing timely and accurate information to victims that is relevant to their case; and ensuring that victims and witnesses are consistently able to access their entitlements under their respective charters. There is much merit in continued cross-border cooperation on those issues, and I welcome the ongoing commitment to close cooperation through the support for victims programme advisory group.

We also discussed the impact of domestic violence and the exacerbation of incidents of domestic violence that have arisen during the COVID-19 pandemic. That is something that both Ministers and the two police services see as a priority area of work. We expect some further areas of shared work to develop in that area following the introduction of the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Act in Northern Ireland.

I have attached a copy of the 2020-21 work programme, which was agreed at our meeting on 27 November, to the printed version of the statement. It will also be published on the relevant departmental websites following the statement.

We had an important discussion on the challenges being faced by justice organisations in both jurisdictions as a result of Brexit. As Ministers, we are committed to ensuring that we maintain and build on the good cross-border

cooperation that exists, as well as to sharing standards, practices and procedures in areas such as operational engagement, forensics and data exchange. It is critical that those important areas of joint work can continue as we approach the end of the transition period following exit from the European Union.

I will also provide Members with an update on the Joint Agency Task Force (JAFT), which was instituted under the Fresh Start Agreement and is led by senior officers from the Police Service of Northern Ireland, an Garda Síochána, the Revenue Commissioners and HM Revenue and Customs. A number of other organisations, including the National Crime Agency (NCA) and the Irish Criminal Assets Bureau (CAB), are also involved in operational activity. That is overseen by a strategic oversight group and an operations coordination group. Six initial priority areas of action were agreed: rural crime; child sexual exploitation; financial crime; illicit drugs; excise fraud; and human trafficking. The task force has advanced our cross-border operational response. At the meeting, we received a copy of the latest six-monthly JATF report, which covers until September 2020. In spite of the coronavirus pandemic, cross-border investigations have continued across a number of crime types, including burglary, armed robbery, hijacking, ATM thefts, livestock thefts and cruelty to animals.

Human trafficking remains a concern in both jurisdictions. A number of cross-border investigations remain active, with potential victims having been identified. The PSNI modern slavery and human trafficking unit (MSHTU) and an Garda Síochána human trafficking investigation and coordination unit (HTICU) recorded 76 persons who presented during the period as potential victims of human trafficking in Ireland and Northern Ireland. During the reporting period, the coronavirus pandemic, because of the international restrictions on the movement of people, has negatively affected the illicit production facilities of organised crime groups (OCGs). That is assessed as a temporary effect, however, and illicit production remains a significant threat. A number of cross-border excise fraud investigations are currently being pursued by the authorities on both sides of the border.

A total of 15 financial crime investigations are ongoing under the auspices of the cross-border JATF. The investigations are being conducted by the PSNI, an Garda Síochána, the CAB and the NCA, supported by HMRC and the Revenue Commissioners, and they incorporate a range of criminal offending, including drug trafficking, cigarette smuggling, modern slavery

and human trafficking, theft and fraud. In addition to criminal investigation powers, non-conviction-based asset recovery powers are being utilised in both jurisdictions to disrupt OCGs and recover the proceeds of crime.

The reporting period witnessed three large law enforcement agency interventions on both sides of the Irish Sea. Those resulted in the seizure of approximately €9.7 million of drugs. Minister McEntee and I will take receipt of the formal six-month update from the Joint Agency Task Force at our next meeting, and I look forward to being able to report on the further success of the task force to the Assembly in May.

12.15 pm

In conclusion, I am committed to maintaining our excellent criminal justice cooperation with Ireland between our respective law enforcement agencies. The strong levels of engagement between our respective criminal justice agencies is all the more important as Brexit negotiations reach a conclusion and we begin our exit from European Union structures.

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): I thank the Minister for the statement and for coming to the House to provide it.

Since long before Brexit, there has been a crime bonanza on the border that has been exploited by criminal and paramilitary organisations. A lot of the issues that the Minister referred to have been taking place for many years. Did the Minister discuss with her counterpart in the Republic of Ireland the measures that will be taken post-Brexit that will demonstrate a serious level of engagement to tackle the criminality that has existed for many years at the border?

Mrs Long: The Chair of the Committee is correct to say that there has been a history of criminality on both sides of the border. That is true of almost all border communities right across the globe, because people will work to exploit differences at the interface in order to continue with criminal activities.

It will be a matter for the future security partnership, if such a partnership can be agreed, to ensure that we maintain the kind of streamlined, effective and efficient cross-border working that we currently have. However, I am reassured that the work that has been done by my Department and the Department of Justice in the Republic of Ireland builds on the good cooperation and collaboration that we have.

Through the joint agency task force, there is a real opportunity to bring together revenue and customs interventions as well as criminal justice interventions in order to ensure that we are able to actively and cooperatively deal with cross-border crime.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Minister for her statement. I appreciate some of the issues that were outlined.

For the future, it might be beneficial for us to get a wee bit more information about what is coming from the other side, meaning what is being said by the Justice Minister in the Twenty-six Counties about the updates that Department is giving us.

Will the Minister give some more detail about the new pilot scheme and the legal advice for adult complainants in cases of serious sexual offence, including the number of complainants that might have access to it, where it will be based and how long it will run for?

Mrs Long: I am happy to write to the Member with further details of that. My statement is obviously about my engagement with Minister McEntee. She will make a comparable statement to the Dáil in due course.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the Minister's positive engagement with her counterpart in the South, in particular on sexual and domestic violence. However, it is very important, given the week and the day that are in it, that we examine a wee bit more closely the operational engagement of forensic and data exchange in the absence of the agreements that will be lost to us when Britain leaves the EU. I know that there is unprecedented cooperation in the exchange of data on forensics, fingerprints, DNA and the European arrest warrant between the PSNI and an Garda Síochána and the two Ministers. What are the gaps and how will they be filled in the immediate aftermath of the UK exit?

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for her question. As she is aware, there are two main priorities for the Department of Justice. The first is to have an effective and efficient replacement for the European arrest warrant should we not have access to it beyond our exit from the EU. The second priority is for data adequacy agreements to be sought. Data adequacy agreements have been sought by other countries, particularly in relation to General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), so there is an effective way forward on that. However, we will be the first to seek a data adequacy

agreement when it comes to justice measures, so it is, as yet, untested territory. However, both Departments have worked closely together in order to ensure that we have effective mechanisms to continue with our cooperation on a legal basis in the interim while those things are done.

However, it is our view that, should there not be a future security partnership agreed as a result of Brexit, it is important that the Home Office takes forward as a matter of urgency bilateral negotiations under the protocol with the Irish Government in order to ensure that all the various justice measures that may be compromised by Brexit can be streamlined and improved through a bilateral agreement.

Mr Beattie: I thank the Minister for a really useful statement. I apologise if I am straying into the operational side, but I would like to hear her view on this, although I appreciate that she may not be able to go into detail. As you know, a lot of cross-border crime is organised by paramilitaries: financial crime, illicit drugs, excise fraud and human trafficking. How will the JATF coordinate with our own paramilitary task force and feed in to the action plan on paramilitarism, criminality and organised crime?

Mrs Long: The Member makes a very good point. As he knows, the PSNI is the main coordinating body for the paramilitary and organised crime task force. So the work done through the JATF will also be reflected in work on paramilitarism more generally. The Chief Constable is best placed to discuss operational matters for the coordination. However, as the Member will be aware, the Department is also doing work to enhance our capability in areas such as civil recovery under unexplained wealth orders, the freezing of criminal assets in banks, and forfeiture orders, and that will help in the fight against organised crime. As he rightly says, the division between organised crime and paramilitarism is often paper-thin, where it exists at all.

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister for her statement. Cross-border cooperation and policing is a crucial matter at all times, but it is particularly so in the context of Brexit uncertainties. The statement and the planned work programme provided today refer to cooperation on operational engagement, forensics and data exchange. Is similar cooperation taking place at a local level with, for example, neighbourhood teams and district policing teams?

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for his question. It is a consideration that the Department

discussed with both the Chief Commissioner for An Garda Síochána and the Chief Constable of the PSNI. There is very good local cooperation between community policing teams on their concerns such as community crime, tensions, fear of crime, and tackling local neighbourhood issues in communities.

As we all recognise, people in border communities live cross-border lives, and what impacts on people on one side of the border will impact on communities on the other side. There is good ongoing working, and the Department believes that that will continue post exit from the European Union and the transition period largely through cooperation at local level between the various policing teams. We have seen that, perhaps to a greater degree than usual, because of policing on COVID-19 issues and trying to cooperate on the use of resources. It is very important that we continue with that on-the-ground cooperation as well as the high-level cooperation that is taken forward with Ministers for operational planning.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for her statement. We welcome the commitment in the joint agency task force that tackling human trafficking is one of the six priority areas. However, there is real concern about the very low number of convictions secured for human trafficking offences, with only nine individuals prosecuted for trafficking and four convictions secured. What more can be done to tackle human trafficking on a cross-border basis?

Mrs Long: First, it is worth acknowledging that the JATF can do a number of things. For example, previous reports have indicated areas where collaborative working has added value. Not only does it increase the ability of law enforcement to target, intercept and seize tangible criminal assets, but to interrupt and disrupt criminal activities, particularly those that will lead to crime groups having financial incentives for their work. Human trafficking falls within that category because, unfortunately, those involved in human trafficking do not treat people with human dignity but as commodities to be traded, and it is hugely important. There has also been enhanced identification of organised crime groups that work across the border, better communication and stronger relationships between law enforcement North and South, and that is also important.

Whilst there have previously been strong cross-border links, the ability to run coordinated operations has a particular value, particularly with issues like organised crime and human trafficking. There are also opportunities for enhanced and streamlined information- and

intelligence-sharing and opportunities for joint training, all of which will impact on human trafficking.

It has to be said that organisations that, as part of their organised crime networks, are engaged in trafficking anything at all will use those routes to traffic drugs, contraband, cigarettes and whatever it might be, and they will use them just as readily to traffic individuals. We need to be very conscious of that. Even the work at a local level in creating more vigilance and more awareness in local communities has been hugely important in exposing suspicious activity, which can then be reported on either side of the border and escalated so that it can be looked into.

Ms Rogan: The Minister has noted that both Ministers and the two police services see domestic abuse as a priority area of shared work, and that is welcome. A particular focus should be on those living, working and residing in the wider border regions. Can the Minister outline some details of her discussions with Minister McEntee about any joint work that was done to tackle domestic abuse during the recent pandemic?

Mrs Long: First of all, quite a lot of work was done on both sides of the border in terms of communication, and that was a key aspect of this, because people will listen to the media, will access Twitter and will access social media and the mainstream media in much the same way regardless of which side of the border that they live on. Coordination of our being able, for example, to bring forward more advertising to raise awareness has also been important.

As the Member may be aware, the Republic of Ireland has also had the O'Malley review of domestic abuse and vulnerable witnesses, particularly in the prosecution of sexual offences. That work very much mirrors the work that was done by Gillen, particularly around sexual offences, and it has been good for us, for example, to be able to look at areas where we have been piloting certain approaches to dealing with vulnerable witnesses and then feeding that through to our counterparts in the South. There are other areas where they are piloting the issues and we are able to learn from their experience. That kind of cooperation and collaboration, whether it is in relation to domestic abuse or sexual offences, is something that we need to build on in the coming weeks and months.

Across this island, there are clearly people who are living in fear in their own homes and are subject to domestic abuse and violence. We

want that to stop, and it is very clear that there is a coordinated effort on both sides of the border to ensure that, first of all, we have the right legislative vehicles to ensure that abuse is captured and also that we have the right coordination when it comes to, for example, training of officers who will be dealing with this on the front line. That is another area where cross-border cooperation can be very helpful.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for her statement. It was extremely useful. I note, Minister, that cruelty to animals was discussed with your counterpart. Specifically, was the cruel practice of puppy farming discussed? I note that the mid-Ulster PSNI is running a campaign in this area that it has titled Paws for Thought, and it is indicating in that campaign that it believes organised crime groups are involved in puppy farming. Indeed, the PSNI indicated to me that it is concerned about puppy smuggling across the border. If puppy farming was discussed, perhaps the Minister will let us know, or, if it was not discussed, will she add it to the next agenda?

Mrs Long: It was not particularly focused on at the meeting, though we did talk more widely about animal cruelty and animal welfare, particularly issues around, for example, organised crime group involvement in the theft of animals, the smuggling of animals or the abuse of animals through things like dogfighting. However, I am more than happy to add puppy farms and, indeed, puppy smuggling to the list of issues that we talk about, because it is clear that organised crime groups will diversify into whatever sector they can, and if they have no consideration when it comes to human trafficking, they certainly have no conscience when it comes to how they treat animals.

Ms Dolan: I thank the Minister for her statement. I note and welcome the Department's work on providing remote evidence facilities for vulnerable adults and child victims and witnesses.

Will the Minister agree that the Barnahus model is the gold standard for supporting child victims and witnesses, and can she confirm if there is any work ongoing to introduce such a model here?

12.30 pm

Mrs Long: Yes, I am happy to confirm that we are looking at the Barnahus model, and we would like to see it introduced, in line with the recommendations of the Gillen report. We are

building, first, the remote evidence centres, because that is the first bit that we are going to trial and pilot here. That will be done in Craigavon and in Belfast initially, and we will then be able to test the effectiveness of those operations and learn from that pilot. It would then be our intention to look at the wider issues around the Barnahus model to see whether there are more things from it that we can bring forward in due course. However, I would like to believe that, at some point, we will be in a situation where we will not have vulnerable victims and witnesses having to give evidence in court at any of our courthouses in such sensitive and difficult trials.

Mr O'Toole: Minister, thank you for this update. It is, however, mildly perplexing that, with just a couple of weeks until the end of the transition period, Brexit has just three short paragraphs in this statement. To that end, and given the importance of the issues that have been outlined in relation to the end of the transition period, first, can the Minister update us on her reasonable worst-case scenario, which may have been presented to her by officials, for what happens with cross-border law enforcement if there is not a deal by the end of this year?

Secondly, can I invite her to set out her position today to people who are still considering that no deal is a good outcome for any part of the United Kingdom? Can I offer her the opportunity now to make her position and that of the Northern Ireland Executive clear to people who are still toying with that idea?

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for the opportunity to do so. I would not wish people to think that, because it is three short paragraphs in my statement, it did not get sufficient attention at the meeting. I can assure the Member that it certainly did.

The first thing that I want to say is that a lot of preparatory work has been done in my Department and with the Department of Justice in the South on how we can reinforce our cooperation, how we can ensure that we are able to continue with joint operations and, indeed, how we can ensure that we are able to continue to share data on a legal footing because, of course, goodwill is not enough when it comes to Brexit. However, it is clear that significant obstacles would be presented to us in both delay and in cost were we not to have a fully agreed future security partnership. As we know, that future security partnership is inextricably linked to having a wider agreement.

I have no difficulty in saying that I believe that leaving the European Union without an agreement would be an act of folly and recklessness. It would do harm not just to the economy but to the justice system, and it would inhibit our ability to cooperate. It is important for people to recognise that many of the fallback positions that we will take as a safety-net position when we exit the European Union, if we were to do so without a future security partnership, would leave us reliant on protocols and on conventions that were agreed in the 1950s.

I have to say that it is difficult to fight crime in 2020 with the tools that were available in the 1950s. Those tools are still operational and are still effective. They would still allow us to, for example, extradite people, but the length of time that it would take to do so would multiply greatly. One of the key indicators that we are trying to address in the Department of Justice is delay in the court system. It seems to me to be utterly bizarre that we would introduce, potentially, an additional two to three years for extradition, during which time, we have to remember, there could be victims and witnesses who are waiting for a trial to take place.

So, on all of those scores, we will do our best to work within structures that are available to us to keep people safe and to protect the local community. No one should be under any illusions about the loss of capacity that could result if we do not get agreements around things like access to the European arrest warrant through the future security partnership and access to the databases such as Prüm and the European criminal records information system (ECRIS) that we will otherwise lose and, indeed, if we do not get access to a data-adequacy agreement. It would have direct implications for the administration of justice, mainly in cost and in time, although we may be able to work at a slower pace in some areas. The PSNI and an Garda Síochána have done a huge amount of work to ensure that they will be able, under existing arrangements and future arrangements, to continue to share data as far as possible. You will understand that, until we have clarity about what is expected, it is very difficult to give people the reassurance that they will rightly seek on these issues.

Mr Frew: Public protection arrangements in Northern Ireland (PPANI) manage sexual offenders, and there have always been concerns, problems and blind spots about offenders travelling across the border multiple times. That has nothing to do with Brexit, of course. Will the Minister enlighten the House on

improvements over the last number of years on the management of sexual offenders between two jurisdictions?

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for his question. He will be aware that there was a meeting of various public protection agencies last week, including the Probation Board and the Probation Service. I was able and very pleased to attend that meeting prior to meeting Minister McEntee under the IGA. The public protection advisory group (PPAG) carries out its work in a positive, progressive and professional manner, with representatives from probation, the police, prisons and the Justice Departments in Northern Ireland and Ireland. Staff training and development opportunities are being explored across the justice agencies on a cross-border basis, and PPANI-related training on domestic violence and sexual offenders is being progressed and developed.

The annual PPAG seminar is now in its eleventh year, so considerable work has been done in that time. The theme for this year is emerging North/South needs and the development of criminal justice practice. It was hosted by colleagues in the South via a virtual platform on 27 November, and Minister McEntee and I were present at the event. I was encouraged by the level of cooperation, on a cross-border basis, between all the agencies. It is absolutely crucial, as the Member rightly said, that we continue to share data, evidence and intelligence to keep people safe in their communities.

Ms Kimmins: My question follows on from the previous question on sexual violence and the impacts across both jurisdictions. Minister, based on what you have said, will you commit to the development of an all-island strategy to tackle sexual violence, mainly for the issues that have been outlined.

Mrs Long: Close coordination and cooperation are very important. Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are at different stages in the roll-out of our various strategies. We try to keep pace with each other. I certainly have no objection to an additional strategy if it were to bring added value. However, the working groups already established under the five-strand approach to the IGA are probably more effective because they drill down at operational level to what cooperation and collaboration we can bring about and what learning we can take from each other. I am happy to talk to the Member further if she believes that additional value can be drawn from having a more coordinated approach.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her statement, which heralds the success of law enforcement agency interventions, which have seen the seizure of almost €10 million worth of drugs. Such seizures are very welcome in reducing the amount of drugs in our communities. In my opinion, real success should be measured on the arrest and apprehension of big-time drug dealers and the dismantling of drug gangs who continue to flood our communities with dangerous drugs that ruin lives. Does the Minister agree, and does she know how many arrests were made with regard to these interventions?

Mrs Long: I do not have those figures, but, if I can obtain them, I am happy to write to the Member. The figures will be held in different formats in different jurisdictions, but I will endeavour to get some indication. I agree entirely with the Member that it is not enough simply to take the drugs out of the community. That is a huge issue, but it is also important to take the drug dealers out of the community and ensure that they face justice. All partners in the JATF are absolutely committed to that task. Part of the strategy is to disrupt criminal gangs so that they can no longer profit from dealing in drugs or, indeed, human misery via human trafficking. However, the Member is quite right that it is also important that those responsible are brought before the courts. Unfortunately, disrupting their activity is often not sufficient to disabuse them of their interest in continuing with it.

Ms Anderson: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an ráiteas. I thank the Minister for her statement. As you know, Minister, I concur with your view that Brexit is folly, reckless and wrong.

Picking up on what you said in a previous answer, am I right in understanding that losing access to key EU justice and security cooperation arrangements means that the North will be left with substandard tools to tackle cross-border crime, that we could become more susceptible to criminality at the end of the transition period and that there will be no good Brexit, whether there is a deal or no deal?

Mrs Long: The Member makes an important point but I want to reinforce a couple of things. First and foremost, we have worked very hard within the Department of Justice and with the Department of Justice in the South to ensure that, wherever possible, we are able to find alternative means of doing the work that we currently do, because we do not want people to

feel unsafe, nor do we want to send a message to criminals that life will be any easier post the Brexit transition period than it is currently. Our intention and that of all the agencies involved in cross-border cooperation is that we will find those alternative means. However, if we do not have a justice and security partnership fully negotiated between the UK and the EU, there will potentially be gaps in the system. That could affect our access to certain databases of information held in the EU and some of the measures and tools available in the EU. That would drive us back to relying on older conventions, such as the Lugano convention from 1957.

Those conventions work — I do not want people to think that they do not — but they take much longer. For example, an extradition under the Lugano convention can take many, many more months than an extradition under a European arrest warrant. That multiplication factor has an impact on those accused of crime and on the ability of alleged victims of crime to seek justice. It also has a cost implication because it is much more onerous for us to manage. There are genuine challenges there.

If a future security partnership is not agreed as part of the current talks, we fall into the situation where it would be for the UK Government to enter bilateral negotiations with the Irish Government to try to find a way forward. We would certainly lobby very strongly, and we have been lobbying the Home Office and others, that that should be the first priority and that the first country whose door they should knock for a bilateral agreement is Ireland. It is, by far, our and the UK's largest customer when it comes to issues like extradition and data sharing. It would make sense to start with Ireland and work from there, rather than starting elsewhere and working backwards.

We are very clear that there are a number of routes to get to where we want to be, which is good, continued cooperation. However, there are a number of obstacles to be overcome in order to get there. It is clear to me that huge energy and expenditure are involved in trying to get us to where we want to be. That is regrettable when that money and attention could instead be focused on the job that other Members referred to: trying to put criminals out of business.

Mr Allister: I read in this statement that the intergovernmental agreement proclaims a focus on support for victims. Does that extend to seeking truth for IRA victims who died because the Dublin Government assisted in the spawning of the Provisional IRA? Does it

extend to those who failed to obtain justice because the Dublin Government denied extradition for decades and allowed collusion between the gardaí and the Provisional IRA? Does any of that interest the Minister enough to have pressed her Dublin counterpart for truth and justice for such victims, whom she should represent?

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for his question. No, it does not extend to that particular issue. It is about support for victims who are going through the justice system and are involved in live cases. Of course, some of those will be legacy cases, and therefore it would extend to some of those cases.

The Member asked whether it interested me sufficiently that I would be willing to press my Irish counterparts on that. The answer to that, of course, is yes, because I believe that truth and justice for all victims matter and that legacy issues need to be comprehensively dealt with. I have stood in this place many times, and I assure the Member that, wherever collusion may come from, whoever may be behind it, wherever the information comes from and whether it requires a public inquiry or another form of legacy investigation, I am in favour of that happening.

12.45 pm

I reassure the Member that I, not only as leader of my party but as Minister of Justice, recognise fully that our not being able to resolve legacy issues is having a toxic effect on our ability to deliver justice in many communities in the here and now. It is polluting our ability, through the new start that we had for policing and justice, to move forward. It is therefore incumbent on the British and Irish Governments and all the parties in the Chamber to find a comprehensive way forward, be that through the Stormont House Agreement, which is what we signed up to, or through an alternative proposition that is to be put to us and that we have yet to see. It is important, and incumbent on all of us, to find a way forward that delivers for all victims by providing truth and justice. It cannot continue to be dealt with in a piecemeal fashion. That is not fair on victims, and they should be at the forefront of our consideration of those matters.

Mr Speaker: That concludes questions on the statement. Members, please take your ease for a moment or two. Thank you.

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

North/South Ministerial Council: Inland Waterways

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I have received notice from the Minister for Infrastructure that she wishes to make a statement.

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I will make a statement about the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) inland waterways meeting that was held on 11 November 2020 in the North/South Ministerial Council joint secretariat headquarters in Armagh and by videoconference. The Executive were represented by me, as Minister for Infrastructure, and Robin Swann, the Minister of Health. The Irish Government were represented by Darragh O'Brien TD, Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, and Malcolm Noonan TD, Minister of State for Heritage and Electoral Reform. The statement has been agreed with Minister Swann, and I am making it on behalf of us both.

The meeting was chaired by Minister O'Brien and dealt with issues relating to inland waterways and the constituent agency, Waterways Ireland. The following topics were discussed and decisions taken, where appropriate. First, we noted the response of Waterways Ireland to the challenges posed by COVID-19. The Council was advised that there had been an increase in user numbers along towpaths and trails during the period of COVID-19-related restrictions and noted the role of Waterways Ireland in leading a user-engagement project through the Network of Inland Waterways of Europe (NIWE) to achieve a greater understanding of the increased recreational use of inland waterways since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Council also noted the increasing popularity of inland waterways as a holiday destination for the domestic market. The Council further noted Waterways Ireland's preparations for Brexit in the context of its status as a North/South implementation body.

We noted the comprehensive progress report provided by Waterways Ireland that covered matters including the management and maintenance of waterways, capital expenditure projects and an ongoing programme of replacing existing jetties and lock gates and installing new ones along the navigations. Ministers also noted plans for blueway developments and restoration work on the Ulster canal and that Waterways Ireland had

successfully hosted the World Canals Conference in Athlone in September 2018.

In terms of corporate governance, the Council noted Waterways Ireland's annual report and accounts for 2016, 2017 and 2018, which have been laid before the Northern Ireland Assembly and both Houses of the Oireachtas. We also noted that Waterways Ireland's annual report and draft accounts for 2019 have been submitted to the Comptrollers and Auditors General in both jurisdictions and, following certification, will be laid before the Assembly and both Houses of the Oireachtas.

The Council approved Waterways Ireland's corporate plan for 2017-2019 and associated business plans, which were prepared in accordance with the guidance issued by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and the Department of Finance, and it recommended the budget provision for each.

We noted that Waterways Ireland's 2020-22 corporate plan and 2020 and 2021 business plans have been prepared and, following necessary approvals, will be submitted to the NSMC for approval before the end of 2020.

We also noted the process for the recruitment of the chief executive officer for Waterways Ireland. The Council consented to a number of property disposals and received a progress report on the restoration of the Ulster canal and the development of the Ulster canal greenway. We noted the progress that was achieved in the restoration of the Ulster canal, including the completion of phase 1 of the restoration from Upper Lough Erne to Castle Saunderson, the ongoing work and future plans for the restoration from Clones to Clonfad and the development of the Ulster canal greenway.

The Council agreed to hold its next NSMC inland waterways meeting in early 2021.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Go raibh maith agat, a Aire. We will now move to Michelle McIlveen, Chair of the Committee for Infrastructure.

Miss McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Minister for her statement. While I understand that there is a format for recording those meetings, it is somewhat disappointing that, given the time that has lapsed since the last update and the work that has been carried out in the interim by Waterways Ireland, all that we are receiving today is a list of noted reports. That said, will

the Minister outline the main priorities for Waterways Ireland in Northern Ireland in 2021 and provide details of the properties that the Council has agreed to dispose of? Will she indicate whether she would be prepared to share the reports with the Committee?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. The properties that were disposed of included a lease agreement for the airspace at Grand canal dock; the portion of the cantilevered office development of Waterways House, which extends over Grand canal dock; three separate lease agreements for the lease of airspace at Grand canal quay for the redevelopment of Bolands Mill, which will encroach into Waterways Ireland airspace over Grand canal quay at Barrow Street, Dublin; to facilitate the development of a pedestrian boardwalk and 10 residential balconies and two cultural exhibition balconies; and a 999-year lease of airspace at Grand canal quay for the development of the Mill 2 Dock Mill apartment development Barrow Street, Dublin into apartments with balconies and an incorporated lower deck.

Also disposed of was a lease of airspace at Grand canal dock for the portion of the cantilevered office development at the Malthouse, which extends over Grand canal dock; an easement of the installation of a polyethylene pipe at Rathangan across the Grand canal to facilitate storm outfall; a lease for the erection of a pedestrian bridge to service a new railway station at Pelletstown railway development, Dublin 15; an easement for an installation of a docked housing; and a power cable to provide power to the rail lines at Pelletstown railway development, Dublin 15. The Council also disposed of a 35-year lease for a revised area of land to facilitate the construction of an access gangway and retractable pontoon at Ballyvollane, Mountshannon Road, Annacotty in County Limerick; a lease to facilitate the continued construction of the Royal canal greenway; an easement to facilitate a prescribed right of way to the domestic residents and land at Moyvally, Enfield in County Kildare; an easement to formalise a right of way to access land at Bracklin Little, Kilbeggan in County Offaly; the granting of a 99-year lease and sale of an area of ground along the shoreline at Priors Point, Carrick-on-Shannon, County Leitrim; and an easement to facilitate a right of way to a property at Clogheen, County Kildare, that they purchased from Waterways Ireland.

Also disposed of was an easement to formalise a right of way to access lands in Mullingar in County Westmeath; an easement in respect of

a 500 millimetre diameter and 300 millimetre diameter rising main under the Grand canal using an existing 1,500 millimetre culvert as part of the Upper Liffey Valley sewerage scheme; an easement for surface water and foul sewer pipes under the Royal canal at Branniganstown; an easement to facilitate access to their property at Skirteen, County Kildare; a right-of-way easement to facilitate access to the property at Jigginstown, Naas, County Kildare; and an easement to facilitate access to their property at Rogerstown, Edenderry, County Offaly. It also disposed of a 99-year lease for the erection of a road bridge crossing the Barrow River as part of the Athy distributor road scheme; and the granting of a supplemental lease of an area of Shannon waterway in County Roscommon.

All the disposals were in the South of Ireland. None was contentious. Some were financially significant, and each property is, naturally, subject to valuation prior to disposal to ensure that best value for money is achieved.

I am happy to share the reports with the Committee and with Members.

Ms Ennis: I thank the Minister for her statement. On the issue of waterways, what plans are there for a lifting bridge at Newry southern relief road as well as at Narrow Water to ensure continued access to Newry canal?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. That issue was not discussed at the meeting. However, the Member will know that I have been engaging with local stakeholders on the issue. Most recently, I met representatives of all political parties in the council to hear their views on a lifting bridge. I am continuing with that focused engagement to ensure that we get the right project for the Newry southern relief road. The Member will also be aware of my commitment to a bridge at Narrow Water.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for her statement. She will be aware that, in my constituency, there has been a campaign for many years to extend the Ulster canal to Portadown. I look forward to hearing about that in a future statement. The canal is a commitment in New Decade, New Approach, so can the Minister provide an update on the Ulster canal greenway?

Ms Mallon: I am happy to provide an update on the Ulster canal greenway. As the Member rightly points out, the Ulster canal restoration project is a commitment in New Decade, New Approach, as is the Ulster canal greenway.

Waterways Ireland, in collaboration with Monaghan County Council, Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council, and East Border Region Ltd, took the lead in submitting an application for INTERREG funding for the project. The application was successful, and just under €5 million was allocated towards the cost of the greenway.

The Ulster canal greenway strategy, devised by Waterways Ireland in collaboration with local authority partners along the Ulster canal corridor, identified 12 potential greenway routes totalling almost 200 km in length, and two of them comprised this project: Smithborough to Monaghan, and Monaghan to Middletown.

The annual socio-economic value of improved health outcomes from local population access to those 200 km of greenway for walking and cycling is estimated at £14.4 million, so they are projects with huge multiple benefits. That fits into my priorities as well in ensuring that we have a green recovery from COVID-19.

Mrs Barton: Thank you, Minister, for your statement. It is quite a large project. What conversations have there been with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board to promote the project in Northern Ireland?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. Waterways Ireland is committed to working in partnership with local authorities and their tourist representative bodies. The Ulster canal greenway, and the canal itself, are projects that will deliver multiple benefits, not only for physical and mental health but also in attracting visitors to the area, so they are hugely important for their tourism benefits. Waterways Ireland will, no doubt, continue to work with all key partners in the delivery of the project.

1.00 pm

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for her statement. My question is on the Ulster canal greenway. Phase 2 is Smithborough to Middletown, and the Minister said that that is on course for delivery in 2021. Is the Minister confident that that will occur? Are there any timescales for future phases and completing the entire project?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I have not received any information on the time frame other than what has been set out, but I am happy to come back to the Member with further details if that does not prove to be correct.

Mr Hilditch: Thank you, Minister, for your statement. Can you advise whether the recruitment competition for the chief executive post has begun? If so, when will it be concluded?

Ms Mallon: The CEO post in Waterways Ireland became vacant with the departure of the former postholder. As a result of the absence of the NSMC at that time, a successor could not be appointed, so the post was filled on an interim basis and with a fixed-term contract. I can confirm to the Member that a recruitment competition was launched by the Public Appointments Service on 23 October; the closing date was 12 November. Following the normal process of shortlisting and interview, the successful candidate will be appointed by the NSMC.

Mr Boylan: Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire inniu. I welcome the Minister's statement and the announcement in relation to the Middletown section. There are question marks over whether it is Middletown to Monaghan and then on to Smithborough. Did that discussion come up on the day, Minister? Is that the whole route? Will the Minister give a commitment to work with local councils to get that project under way as soon as possible? This will be a game changer for Middletown, with big opportunities to promote tourism and everything else. It will certainly help that wee border village.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I agree that it is a game changer and that there are huge benefits. My understanding of the route is as he has set out, but I am happy to provide further detail to the Member as we move this project forward.

Mr K Buchanan: Minister, I have a rundown of every culvert and pipe in all the counties throughout Ireland, and I appreciate the work that is going on down there. However, can you confirm what the priorities are for Waterways Ireland here in Northern Ireland in 2021 and beyond?

Ms Mallon: Waterways Ireland is obviously about ensuring that we maximise our blue infrastructure. The Member will be aware that, particularly during COVID, we have seen a huge increase in the number of people who are accessing our local heritage and our local blue and green infrastructure. It is about ensuring that that is safe and that we are able to invest in that infrastructure so that we grow it. One of the things that we have seen during COVID is a huge increase in the number of visitors and the number of people who are using this

infrastructure as part of their staycations. I would like to see us build on that, and I know that Waterways Ireland is committed to that. It has been engaging across Europe and looking at international best practice to ensure that we are able to showcase our blue infrastructure, our navigations and our canals in a way that ensures maximum benefit to health and well-being, but also for tourism — for people who live here, but also for when we are able to open up again and invite people from around the world to come and see the many assets that we have.

Ms Anderson: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an ráiteas. I thank the Minister for her statement. Minister, you said in the statement that you discussed the status of Waterways Ireland. However, given that the North will lose EU oversight, perhaps by the end of today, did the North/South Ministerial Council discuss issues relating to improving and maintaining the quality of Waterways Ireland's waters and protecting that from further environmental harm? We know that there will be no good Brexit for the North of Ireland.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. It is absolutely clear that there should be no reduction in any of our environmental standards. When we spoke about Brexit, we examined the preparations that Waterways Ireland has undertaken for the end of the transition period. We also talked about the impact that it may have. Although there is no possible outcome from Brexit that will impact solely on Waterways Ireland, there are various outcomes that will impact on the organisation. EU directives will no longer apply to GB and NI, which may lead to an incremental divergence in legislation between the two jurisdictions over time. GB and NI will also not have to comply with the EU procurement directives, so some rules may be changed. In the short term, following the exit, our rules are likely to remain the same; however, they may change in the medium term. The additional procurement regime will also bring added administration and Waterways Ireland has considered the implications of the need to migrate to a new tender advertising portal and platform.

As the Member highlighted, EU funding will no longer be available in the North, except for PEACE PLUS, which the EU has committed to continue to allocate. Of course, any changes to the common travel area arrangements would impact on Waterways Ireland staff whose area of work covers both jurisdictions, as well as on users of the navigations, particularly the Shannon/Erne waterway that runs through Counties Leitrim, Cavan and Fermanagh. To

assure the Members, those issues were discussed.

Mr Catney: Minister, thank you for your statement. I live on the towpath, and it is a real asset. I was on it yesterday on my new electric bike, which you also made legal.

I noted the increase in the capital budget that was provided to Waterways Ireland. Will the Minister tell us more about why that was provided?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. It is great to hear that he is embracing the active travel agenda — literally on his e-bike.

Waterways Ireland has a statutory duty to engage, maintain, develop and promote the navigations for which it is responsible, mainly for recreational purposes. To fulfil that statutory duty, the navigational infrastructure must be fit for purpose and meet health and safety requirements and customer expectations. Severe weather events, particularly the more frequent incidences of flooding in recent years, as well as ongoing usage, causes the deterioration of infrastructure. DFI capital allocations to Waterways Ireland are invested in repairing damage to the infrastructure — replacing jetties, moorings and other facilities that are beyond repair — and providing additional facilities to accommodate the increasing number of users on Lough Erne and the lower Bann.

Specifically, in the years 2017 to 2020, Waterways Ireland delivered a number of capital projects on Lough Erne and the lower Bann. Toome lock house was refurbished and opened as a waterways heritage centre and cafe that is operated by Toomebridge Development Amenities and Leisure Limited, a local community association. Existing jetties were replaced, some with floating jetties, at six sites on Lough Erne, and access ramps were also replaced where necessary. A leakage and the swing bridge were repaired at Portna lock and an automated lifting device was installed. Work will commence on the rehabilitation of Carnroe weir in spring 2021 with an anticipated completion date of autumn 2022.

It is also important to note that Waterways Ireland has reported an increase of 3,288 boat registrations since 2016. That demonstrates the increasing popularity of our inland waterways.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for her statement. It refers to the draft accounts for 2019, which are not yet completed. That is

some 11 months after the accounts were closed. In accounting for public money, it is helpful to have timely reporting. Given that Waterways Ireland does not have a board, who can be held to account for that late finalisation of the accounts and expenditure of public money?

Ms Mallon: The Minister of Finance here had cleared the accounts. The Minister of Finance in the South did not have time to clear them in advance of the meeting, but I understand that they have now been cleared. Therefore, those accounts will be laid in the Assembly and the Houses of the Oireachtas.

As to there being no board, the Member will know that North/South bodies were established under the North/South Co-operation (Implementation Bodies) (NI) Order 1999. Two of the six bodies were established without a requirement in legislation to have a board, one of which was Waterways Ireland. At the NSMC plenary meeting on 15 June 2012, Ministers endorsed the St Andrews review recommendation that sponsor Departments should consider options for the setting up a board to direct Waterways Ireland's affairs, and an options paper was presented to Ministers for consideration at the North/South Ministerial Council meeting on 19 June 2013.

I am advised that Ministers agreed that the existing governance arrangements should be strengthened but that there was no requirement for the appointment of a board at this time. I assure the Member that steps have since been taken to strengthen the governance arrangements. An annual service level agreement has been put in place between Waterways Ireland and sponsor Departments, and Waterways Ireland provides biannual assurance statements to sponsor Departments.

Mr McGuigan: Like everybody else, I welcome the announcement and information on the Ulster canal greenways. I am a bit jealous of Pat getting out on his bike yesterday. The rural roads of North Antrim were very frosty yesterday, but the gritting of rural roads is an issue for another day. Can the Minister update the House on the Ulster canal restoration works, particularly phase 2 of the project, and when it is estimated that the restoration of the canal to Clones will be built?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. As he will know, in 2007, the Irish Government gave a commitment to fund the total cost of the restoration of the Ulster canal from Lough Erne to Clones. In the same year,

Waterways Ireland was given NSMC approval to explore the possible restoration of the Ulster canal from Lough Erne to Clones. Phase 1 — the restoration of the stretch from Lough Erne to Castle Saunderson — was completed in spring 2019 and is now open for navigation. Phase 2 — the restoration of the stretch from Clones to Clonfad — is under way. A commission to investigate the source of a sustainable water supply for the marina has been completed. Waterways Ireland is satisfied that a suitable supply has been sourced in order to facilitate the development. Creative design is also ongoing to develop a vision for the canal in Clones. Work relating to land requirements and purchase arrangements for that section of the restoration has also commenced. I will briefly mention phase 3. Work will commence on the restoration of the stretch from Castle Saunderson to Clonfad when phase 2 is complete. All three phases of the project have been funded by the Irish Government.

Mr McCrossan: Before I ask the Minister a question, I wonder whether Pat Catney would bring his e-bike to Stormont and give us a demonstration going up and down the mile a few times.

I thank the Minister for her very useful statement and also for her huge efforts over the past number of months to support communities during the pandemic. I know that COVID-19 has had a particular impact on services. Can the Minister tell the House what impact the restrictions have had on Waterways Ireland?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. It points to something that has been very positive during the pandemic. Where counter metrics are available, comparisons with the 2019 figures showed a 110% increase in user numbers on towpaths and trails along the navigations from March to August 2020. Where counter metrics are not available, feedback from local government and community partners indicated an unprecedented increase in the number of users, many of whom were using the facilities for the first time. During August, all boat hire companies reported 100% bookings, solely from the domestic market, as the inland waterways became a popular option for staycations. In previous years, the domestic market accounted for, on average, 22% of boat hire business. Bookings for September and October were at 80% to 90%, again from the domestic market. It is important that we build on that momentum and success.

A number of times, I have talked about the "quiet revolution" during COVID, whereby

people are re-engaging with nature, having a more active lifestyle and getting a renewed appreciation for their shared home place. I am really pleased that Waterways Ireland has been part of the delivery of that and that it will continue to build on that success and the positive feedback from visitors and local communities, because we have a real opportunity to make inland waterways a more integral part of the local community as we build the green recovery in the post-pandemic era.

Members to take their ease while we move to the next item of business.

Mr Allister: I want to return to the question of openness and transparency with regard to Waterways Ireland. The Minister has told us that it has no board. That means that there are no minutes that any member of the public could ever read. In fact, when my office phoned Waterways Ireland to ascertain how one could follow its work, we were told to read its annual report. Read its annual report? The 2016 report has just been published this year. We are in the ridiculous situation where even the Chair of the Committee has to come to the House to ask what projects are under way. If there are no minutes, no accountability and no oversight, how is a member of the public meant to follow the work of Waterways Ireland as it spends our public money? Is it not a farcical situation?

1.15 pm

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. Waterways Ireland is accountable to the Department for Infrastructure, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH) and the North/South Ministerial Council. Ministers discharge their oversight responsibilities in respect of Waterways Ireland through the NSMC. That includes consideration and agreement of the budget, of corporate and business plans, and of progress towards agreed business targets and project milestones.

Quarterly monitoring meetings are chaired by senior civil servants from DFI and DHLGH. The chief executive officer and appropriate directors attend to account for business performance and corporate governance. Waterways Ireland's audit committee meets quarterly. The committee, which has an independent chair and two external members, has unrestricted access to the internal and external auditors. It also has access to the work of internal audit, approves the internal audit work plan and receives reports on various aspects of internal control.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That concludes questions on the statement. I ask

Executive Committee Business

The Administration of Estates (Small Payments) (Increase of Limit) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020

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

That the Administration of Estates (Small Payments) (Increase of Limit) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 be affirmed.

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

Mr Murphy: The purpose of this legislation is to raise the limit on the amount of property that certain organisations are permitted to distribute on the death of a member without the necessity for probate or other proof of title or where the deceased has nominated a specific beneficiary.

The Administration of Estates (Small Payments) Act (NI) 1967 is the relevant legislation that falls within the remit of my Department. The legislation applies to certain payments made by industrial and provident societies, credit unions, trade unions, councils and Departments. It allows the organisation to release money to a nominee or beneficiary up to a fixed value to which the deceased or the deceased's personal representative was entitled without that nominee or beneficiary having to prove title or seek a grant of probate through the probate office. The primary legislation vests the power to make this order in my Department. However, as the legislation relates to bodies associated with several other Departments, Executive colleagues were consulted, and they have approved the proposed increase in limit.

The limit was originally set at £500 in 1967. It has been reviewed and increased a number of times since, most recently in 2004, when the limit was raised to the current figure of £10,000. Sixteen years have therefore passed since the last review, and a recent short and targeted consultation revealed that the existing limit is posing problems for affected parties. It is now much more frequent for amounts of a little over £10,000 to be left by a deceased person, meaning that beneficiaries need to seek a grant of probate. That adds costs, which takes away from the amount of the estate that is left to distribute. For those with minimal resources,

those additional costs can be significant and can delay access to the estate at the most difficult of times, not least now in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic. In some cases, beneficiaries may have to forgo receiving the whole amount to which they are entitled, because the cost of obtaining a grant of probate is greater than the amount in excess of £10,000 that is available.

Raising the small payment sum will assist with some of the difficulties that beneficiaries may experience with the deceased's estate. It will result in a quicker and more efficient process of the payment of money to nominated persons or beneficiaries. Having had the opportunity to consider those issues, I think that raising the sum to £20,000 is proportionate and takes account of inflation and the concerns that stakeholders raised.

Article 2 of the order, which revokes the 2004 order, therefore increases the small payment limit to £20,000. By virtue of section 6(2) of the 1967 Act, the order applies to deaths occurring or nominations affected after the expiration of a period of one month beginning on the date on which the order comes into operation.

This is a short, technical yet important piece of legislation that will assist many people during difficult times. I therefore recommend that the Administration of Estates (Small Payments) (Increase of Limit) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 be affirmed.

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): The Committee considered the policy proposals in the Administration of Estates (Small Payments) (Increase of Limit) Order 2020 at its meeting on 21 October. It considered the benefits of increasing the limit on the amount of money that may be released to the beneficiaries of a deceased person from that person's estate by certain organisations without the need for a grant of probate.

I put on record my thanks to the Irish League of Credit Unions (ILCU) for responding to the Department's consultation. Indeed, it was the only organisation to do so. The ILCU response outlined the difficulties caused by the current limit of £10,000, whereby credit unions required deceased members' families to apply for grants of probate or letters of administration from the court. Such decisions can be difficult for recently bereaved next of kin or personal representatives, because the cost of obtaining a grant of probate can often exceed the remaining estate. The Committee noted that the increase in the limit to £20,000 will enable payments to be made directly to the nominated

person without partial payments being made in lieu of waiting for a court-answered grant of probate for the remaining moneys.

I also thank Mr McHugh MLA, who is a member of our Committee, for his assistance in helping the Committee come to its decision on the order. His wide experience of the credit union movement helped the Committee in its deliberations. The Committee considered the statutory rule at its meeting on 2 December and agreed that it be affirmed by the Assembly. Finally, I put on record the Committee's sincere appreciation of the work that credit unions do, much of it on a wholly voluntary basis, in providing responsible and affordable financial services at a local level for the benefit of their members and the communities that they serve. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Frew: I also support the move. It is common sense, and, having looked through all the evidence at the Committee, I am satisfied that it is the right thing to do. It seems to be needed as a result of progression in inflation throughout the years, and, in most decades, the legislation has been amended. It is therefore common sense and right and proper. When people pass on, their affairs can sometimes be tricky, and you have grieving families and other persons in amongst it all. The order will allow a good bit of latitude for all those financial institutions that deal with this type of thing, so, as a party, we must welcome it.

Mr McHugh: I speak in support of the motion as someone who has experience, as mentioned by the Chair of the Finance Committee, of credit unions. I was a founder member of Mourne Derg Credit Union in Castlederg in the 1970s, when four of us came together to set up a credit union in order to address the needs of our local people. It not only facilitated them to receive low-interest loans but it encouraged them to be thrifty and to take responsibility for their own affairs.

That is what credit unions represent in so many ways. People could, over time, build up savings in excess of £5,000. You might wonder why I mention that figure. It is a feature of credit unions that, in the event of a death of a member who is under 65 years of age, their shares are doubled and forwarded to their next of kin. That would immediately bring them over that limit of £10,000. I am not one bit surprised that the credit union movement was the only organisation that replied to the consultation, given that this provision is in the interest of all its members. Very often, its members are people who do not have large savings, but those are still their life savings. In the event of

their death, particularly if it is untimely, that is all the more reason why those resources should be available to their family without them having to go to the extent of looking for a grant of probate.

I welcome the opportunity to support the motion, because it is at a time like that that those people desperately need to be able to access funding to, for example, cover the cost of a wake and funeral and to maybe purchase a grave and a headstone in memory of the person who died. It is so easy for that figure of £10,000 to be surpassed, and it is only appropriate to have legislation to accommodate that.

Mr Catney: I also welcome the motion. Although the proposed change through order is small, its impact should not be understated. A death in the family is a time when we should come together to grieve, support each other and celebrate life; it is not a time to have the added worry about financial difficulty or long and difficult court proceedings.

The Assembly has, rightly, increased the limit of funds that can be released by certain organisations without probate or another proof of title in order to allow families to cover pressing costs like funeral expenses. However, the last increase was 16 years ago. Without going too far off the point, I will say that the cost of funerals is spiralling and has become a burden to everyone, regardless of wealth. It is certainly sensible to increase the limit in order to allow families a small bit of relief at the most difficult of times.

Furthermore, the cost of accessing probate put it out of reach for some of our low-income families. That is not fair, and it should be tackled in the wider context of access to our justice system. In addition, the time that it takes from the application to the granting of probate can be lengthy, which can add stress and worry for families and create financial difficulties for beneficiaries as funeral costs, which I mentioned, mount up. That situation has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with getting access to solicitors to effect probate and to court proceedings incredibly difficult. It should also be noted how stressful it can be going to the courts. It is not a normal activity for a lot of our community, and it is certainly not a burden that should be allowed at a time of grief.

I do not know whether this is a conflict of interest, but I said at the Finance Committee that I am a member of the credit union in Lisburn. On Friday morning, I met Atlas Women's Centre, which is across the road from

our credit union. A crowd of people was waiting to get in. That shows that it is much needed and much welcome in our community.

The current limit has had a great impact on the operations of our credit unions. I thank the credit unions for their support for the increase as well as for the good work that they do in general to support our communities at this difficult time.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Anois iarraim ar an Aire Airgeadais conclúid a chur ar an dóspóireacht. I call the Finance Minister to conclude the debate.

1.30 pm

Mr Murphy: I thank the Chair of the Committee and all the Committee members who spoke in the debate for their support for the change to the legislation and for their work in analysing the proposition before them. I concur with the views that the Chair and others expressed in relation to the credit union movement. I am a member of a credit union and know that it provides a valuable service, particularly to those who, although they have little, what they have is precious to them; and for assisting families during bereavements. As Members said, the point of the change is to ensure that timely and correct support is available to families.

This is a technical but, nonetheless, useful change to the law, which will greatly assist those in need in our community to access property on a death without the need to seek probate in the circumstances that I have set out. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Administration of Estates (Small Payments) (Increase of Limit) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 be affirmed.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask Members to take their ease while we make changes for the next item of business.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister of Justice, Mrs Naomi Long, to move the Bill.

Not moved.

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): It is with regret and disappointment that I beg not to move the Further Consideration Stage of the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill today.

Members will be aware that good progress was being made through the amendments proposed to the Bill as a result of ongoing and constructive engagement with the Justice Committee to approve a number of provisions in the Bill. As a result of our collective and collaborative efforts, I had intended to bring forward a number of positive amendments to the Bill today. Those amendments would have further strengthened how offences would operate as well as further detail on potential regulations for the safeguards and protections to be afforded to victims of domestic abuse, including through new domestic abuse protection notices and orders, on which I launched a consultation today.

Unfortunately, however, I now have no choice but to postpone the Further Consideration Stage of the Bill. I asked the Chair of the Committee not to move amendment No. 15, but he refused to give me that assurance this morning. There are potentially significant financial ramifications for the Executive from the amendments on legal aid. At the end of last week, I was made aware that the Treasury's Budget guidance would put the entire cost of doing something that has repercussive implications for other parts of the UK on to the Northern Ireland block grant. Those issues would normally be examined and addressed during policy development and economic appraisal processes for any new policy. However, due to the way in which the legal aid provisions were added into the Bill — via a Member amendment at Consideration Stage — that due diligence was not able to be completed, and, without it, it is not clear whether the legal aid provisions in the Bill, and the further amendments that were to be tabled at Further Consideration Stage — in particular, amendment No 15, which would prevent commencement of the Bill without the legal aid issues — would have financial repercussions on other legal aid schemes. If they were to do so, the impact on the Executive's Budget would be potentially catastrophic. It would be RHI on steroids. It is imperative, therefore, that we do not proceed unless either amendment No 15 is withdrawn or we have time to investigate this important issue.

Many in the House and outside, including myself, key stakeholders and those affected by domestic abuse, will be disappointed by these developments and our inability to complete the Final Stage of the Bill before the end of this year, as I had intended. However, given the risks posed by the legal aid provisions in the Bill at clause 27 and some of the further proposed amendments, particularly amendment No 15, which was to be tabled today, I consider it vital that further time is taken to more fully ascertain the consequences and the best way forward. As has been the case to date, I wish to continue to work with the Committee on a resolution of the matter to ensure that this important legislation can be put on the statute books as soon as possible. I beg not to move.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Minister. The Further Consideration Stage of the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill has not been moved. Therefore, we will move on to the next item of business. I have given some latitude, but I understand that the Committee is of the same view as it was last weekend, so there will be no movement in that regard.

Given that the next item of business is Question Time, I propose to suspend —

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This is a shameful course of action by the Justice Minister. What she is doing today in respect of this issue is a disgrace. This was a Committee amendment, not a Paul Givan amendment. It is not my position to act unilaterally when the Committee has reached a decision. This is an abuse of the democratic process, and caught in the middle are victims of domestic abuse. That is what makes it all the more despicable. The Minister should be moving the Further Consideration Stage. It is for the Assembly to decide whether it votes for amendments that are tabled. The actions of the Minister today do not bode well for the way in which she has conducted herself in respect of this legislation.

Mr Speaker: As I said earlier, I gave latitude to the Minister, so, in deference to the work that has been ongoing, I gave latitude to the Chair of the Committee.

Mrs Long: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I will take a point of order, but I am not going to continue this discussion any longer.

Mrs Long: Mr Speaker, will you confirm that the Minister has the right to withdraw and beg not to move, and that there is nothing disorderly or disrespectful in what I have been forced to do today in respect of the Bill?

Mr Speaker: Of course the Member, as the Minister, is in order not to move. The Minister did not move, so we are not progressing through the debate.

Mr Frew: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: As I said, Mr Frew, I am not taking any further points of order on the matter, because I am going to close it. I allowed quite a bit of latitude to the Minister, in the circumstances, and likewise to the Chair of the Committee, who encapsulated the Committee's thinking on the matter. It is unfortunate that we have reached this moment — this predicament — that we are in, but we are in it. I commend all Members for their hard work throughout this complex Bill, as was testified to last week by Members from every party. I hope that, in due course, that due diligence will return to the debate and that we can try to proceed with this important Bill in a fair and respectful manner. The matter is closed. The Bill has not been moved today. The next item of business is Question Time.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I am not taking a point of order on this matter.

Mr Allister: It is not on this matter. It is on a different matter.

Mr Speaker: Let me finish this. The next item of business is Question Time, which will commence at 2.00 pm. I, therefore, propose, by leave of the Assembly, after Mr Allister's point of order, to suspend the sitting until then.

Mr Allister: Last week, I asked the Business Committee to list, for this afternoon's business, the Further Consideration Stage of my private Member's Bill. The Committee refused to do so. Yet now, we arrive at a point where, after Question Time, there is no business for the House.

Why did the Business Committee not, as a precaution, list a second piece of business, so that that Bill could have been progressed? Now, neither Bill is to be progressed. What sort of management is that?

Mr Speaker: I do not know whether that is a point of order. The fact is, Mr Allister, that you have been around the Assembly long enough to know that the Business Committee, respectfully, schedules the business for the Assembly. You are well aware of that, and recently it has had to accommodate sittings that lasted well into the night and into the early hours of the morning. It has been trying to juggle Members' time and the orderly business of the Assembly. I take no issue with the Business Committee's decisions thus far whatsoever, and I have every confidence in its ability to continue managing business well.

The circumstances today are unexpected. As I said, I regret that they have arrived and the way in which they have done. Let us hope that we can get back to this Bill in a respectful manner that resolves the outstanding issues, so that victims of domestic abuse and violence will be safer in the future.

The sitting was suspended at 1.41 pm and resumed at 2.00 pm.

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

Oral Answers to Questions

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: It is time for questions to the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. As Members are aware, the Minister is not available today. I am sure that all Members will join me in wishing Mr Poots a very speedy recovery. The Speaker has received notification from the Minister for the Economy that she will respond to questions today on Minister Poots's behalf.

Farm-gate Prices

1. **Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of farm-gate prices in Northern Ireland. (AQO 1258/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): I thank the Member for her question. Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, with your permission and before we start, I inform the House that I am happy to stand in for my colleague and that I spoke to him this morning. He had his toast and porridge, was in very good form and is looking forward to getting out of hospital. Obviously, he had quite a traumatic period over the weekend. We will do our best to answer your questions as they arise.

The Department publishes statistical reports that contain the latest average farm-gate prices in Northern Ireland. Each of those reports average prices for the latest period, along with comparisons against prices in previous periods. Those reports show that average beef, lamb and pig prices from January to September 2020 were higher than those of the same period in 2019, whereas average milk prices have been 0.9p per litre lower. They also show that average prices since September have remained around or above prices of the previous year for each of the farm products that are reported.

Ms Sugden: Thank you, Minister, and please pass on my best wishes to Minister Poots for a speedy recovery. It is quite fortunate that the Minister for the Economy is answering these questions. If the Principal Deputy Speaker will

indulge me, can I ask the Minister for the Economy to give her assessment of farm-gate prices in Northern Ireland given that agriculture is one of the largest industries in Northern Ireland and underpins our local economy?

Mrs Dodds: Thank you for the question. In many ways, agriculture was an area of policy that I looked at for many years in the European Parliament. I really enjoyed meeting and talking to the sectors right across Northern Ireland. We understand, from the published statistics, that milk prices are, on average, a little lower. Although milk prices for September were 1.59p higher than in September 2018, the average price across the period is 0.9% lower. That represents volatility and shows that the price is lower than the rest of the United Kingdom. It also represents the market and the exposure that Northern Ireland milk prices have, for example, to the commodity market. In GB, much greater supplies of milk go into the liquid market and supermarkets and producers can have longer and more stable contracts.

We understand that, for the week ending 21 November, beef prices are 13.2% higher than for the same period last year.

That is a difference of £150 per finished head of cattle and is a significant uplift in beef prices. In fact, we probably are third in the EU league table for beef prices. Nevertheless, and again from a processing point of view, this is typically a low-margin process where issues of competitiveness and productivity are hugely important.

Pig prices have remained much the same, and —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am afraid —

Mrs Dodds: — dropped calf prices are round about, or slightly higher, than we would have expected.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am loath to interrupt the Minister, and she will probably give me a kicking for it afterwards [*Laughter*] but it is important that we try to stick to two minutes or less.

Mr Allister: Looking forward, Minister, under the iniquitous protocol, overheads and production costs will be very adversely affected by reason of feedstuff and fertiliser imports. What is the likely consequence for profitability, for farm-gate prices and, indeed, for consumer prices, of the gallows for the Union that Mr Poots is building at our ports?

Mrs Dodds: Of course the ports issue is an implementation rather than an end of the transition period issue. For Northern Ireland as a whole, let us be absolutely clear that my party believes that having a free-trade deal and zero quotas and zero tariffs is in the best interests of Northern Ireland. We think, and we want people to understand, that there are issues under the protocol that could be sorted out. We want to see unfettered access between us and our main market. I understand that the Internal Market Bill is being reintroduced in Parliament today and that there is a legislative route for that in the United Kingdom. However, there are also routes for that in the Joint Committee. Sensible, practical, pragmatic approaches by the EU could ensure that those things happen. We want to understand that goods at risk will be sorted out in the Joint Committee and that, as the Member quite rightly says, goods coming into Northern Ireland for input into the agricultural sector are treated as not being at risk of going into the single market.

Mr McGlone: I join others in wishing Edwin all the very best for a speedy and full recovery. It is a tricky enough situation that he found himself in over the weekend.

Minister, I do not necessarily expect you to know the answer to my question because it is a bit complicated. However, I was contacted this morning by a sheep farmer who has bought hundreds of sheep that are in the UK. Before the sheep can be brought over here, they have to be a year old and that year will take them into the new year. With everything that is going on at the moment, he finds himself in a new year limbo as to whether he may bring them over. He has invested hundreds of thousands of pounds in that stock. We spoke earlier about productivity, but we need the product in order to be productive. Perhaps the Minister could get back to me with some clarity on that.

Mrs Dodds: Yes. Thank you for your good wishes to Edwin. I will certainly pass on the good wishes of the House when I speak to him later and give him an update on how we got on.

In fact, the Minister updated the Executive on this issue at our EU meeting on Thursday, as he has been working on it over the past number of days. As yet, there still needs to be a resolution, but I will, of course, ask the Minister to write to you specifically on the issue and on any ways of resolving the impasse.

Mrs Barton: Minister, if you could also pass on my good wishes to Mr Poots and wish him a speedy recovery.

Might an oversight body similar to the Groceries Code Adjudicator, in place throughout the United Kingdom but tailored for Northern Ireland's needs, improve farm-gate prices in future?

Mrs Dodds: Again, I thank the Member for her good wishes.

There has been much talk about minimum-price legislation and about Northern Ireland primary producers being price-takers as opposed to price-makers in the whole supply-chain system. Personally, I think that, while the Groceries Code Adjudicator had the potential to do good things, the lack of any kind of enforcement powers meant that, although it sounded good, it did not actually have the powers to respond to the needs of the supply chain. Therefore, if we were to have more of that, it would need to have much more legislative power to take remedial action.

Ms Sheerin: This follows on from the question asked by my constituency colleague Mr McGlone. I have written to your colleague Mr Poots about the fact that sheep are now being brought in from Scotland, the majority of which are blackface sheep that require scrapie monitoring. I just want to impress upon the Minister the urgency of the situation, given that, as Mr McGlone mentioned, this involves thousands of pounds for local sheep producers, who are depending upon sheep that they have already bought from Scotland.

Mrs Dodds: Again, I know that the Minister is alive to the situation and will respond to it. On a general point, this demonstrates the issues with the protocol and how some in the House who call for its full implementation are creating rods for the backs of some of our farmers.

Illegal Dumping

2. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what steps are being taken to strengthen legislation and expedite proceedings in response to illegal dumping. (AQO 1259/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Thank you for the question. Responsibility for dealing with illegal dumping is shared between the local councils, which deal with low-level waste offences, and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), which deals with large-scale waste criminality and hazardous waste. While there are no plans at present to strengthen the legislation around illegal dumping, officials are working with councils to consider the effectiveness of the

existing legislation and explore how they can work together to make best use of the powers that it provides. That may create opportunities to deal more quickly and effectively with lower-level offending on a local level through fixed penalty notices rather than being reliant on court proceedings, the timings of which are outside our control.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for her answer. Over the summer, some 200 tons of illegal rubbish was dumped at Edenderry industrial mill on the Crumlin Road in my constituency of North Belfast. That led to a plague of rats, a swarm of flies and noxious smells, with people feeling and taking ill. Belfast City Council was too slow in its response, and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency was somewhat secretive in passing information to and sharing information with elected representatives. The situation simply was not good enough, and it took an intervention from the Minister to resolve it. I ask the Minister, in responding for her colleague Mr Poots — to whom I, too, sent my regards for a speedy recovery this morning — what more the Department, working with local councils, can do to ensure that, if such a situation arises again — sadly, it is happening more often in Northern Ireland — there is a more effective and speedy response.

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. I followed the story and how it impacted on the lives of local people in that part of the Shankill. It really is quite disgraceful that such things continue to happen. The answer lies in the closer working relationship between district councils and the NIEA. While the NIEA is responsible for larger waste criminality, councils can take a proactive approach to fly-tipping. It is about trying to bring the two together so that one does not pass the responsibility on to the other, and we then see a situation like we had in the Shankill where the Minister had to intervene. The additional powers that the Minister is looking at include giving councils discretionary powers to take enforcement action in respect of illegal waste disposal other than littering and to provide them with more robust penalties as this works through the system.

2.15 pm

Dr Aiken: I thank the Minister for her comments so far. Can she pass on our good wishes to Edwin? It is good to see that he will be getting some first-hand knowledge of how well our NHS is coping at this moment in time.

Is there any information to confirm that waste from the Republic of Ireland is being illegally dumped in Northern Ireland?

Mrs Dodds: I thank my colleague for his good wishes for Edwin, but I remind everyone that he is a former Health Minister and is acutely aware of how amazing our National Health Service has been in response to the pandemic. His wife is a nurse, who has many years of service in the National Health Service.

I do not have specific information on that. If there is information in the Department, I will, of course, ask the Department to write to the Member on that specific area. I am aware that there have been various news stories on the issue, and we need to make sure that criminality of this sort is dealt with, appropriate penalties are levied and costs are directed to where they should be.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. I extend my good wishes to Minister Poots and wish him a speedy recovery.

In my constituency, in the Fews Forest, at a nature spot called Carrigatuke viewpoint, there have been over 50 incidents of illegal dumping over the last 18 months. Will the Minister take it back to Minister Poots that we need a cross-border approach, because there is clear evidence that there is illegal dumping of material from across the border?

Mrs Dodds: Yes, I fully accept and agree. The Minister will talk to his counterpart to ensure that that kind of criminality does not take place, that we can levy appropriate fines and make sure that costs are apportioned appropriately and sensibly in the matter. I am sure that the Department will write to you about any specific incidences that have occurred at the beauty spot that you spoke about.

Ms Bradshaw: Minister, given that we appeared to see an increase in illegal dumping during the COVID lockdown, how is the Department working with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and the councils to look at the broader issues around waste management?

Mrs Dodds: The councils, NIEA and the Department are looking at how effective the legislation is, and they will bring forward further proposals on that. As I said to my colleague from the Shankill, where there were some very serious incidents, additional powers would perhaps be conferred on councils to allow them

to have an immediate response to littering and illegal dumping.

UK Trade Deals: Japan and Canada

3. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline the benefits to the agri-food sector of the recent UK trade deals with Japan and Canada. (AQO 1260/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The UK-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) was signed on 22 October 2020 and is largely based on the existing agreement between the EU and Japan. Similarly, the agreement in principle with Canada, announced on 21 November 2020, will roll over the provisions of the existing Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA).

These agreements have still to be fully ratified, but once that has been done, they will give certainty to agri-food businesses that are exporting goods and will ensure that they can continue to benefit from the existing trading arrangements. For example, CETA includes tariff-free trade on 98% of goods that can be exported to Canada, including beef, fish and seafood. The CEPA agreement with Japan secured tariff-free access for more agri-food goods and protection for some of our iconic products. Commitments on tariffs for the UK and Japan have largely been transitioned from the EU deal without changes. That deal sees tariffs for UK exports to Japan fall on beef, pork, salmon and a range of other agricultural exports, subject to staged tariff liberalisation, which is in line with the EU agreement.

Mr Dunne: I also pass on my best wishes to the Agriculture Minister, Edwin Poots. I got a message from him today saying that he is receiving great service, so he appreciates the health service to which he contributed as Minister.

I thank the Minister for her answers. I welcome the great news and the opportunities for the agri-food sector in Northern Ireland. Can she give the House an assurance that incoming products to Northern Ireland will continue to meet the required high quality standards?

Mrs Dodds: Northern Ireland will meet the standards because it will continue to employ EU single market rules. I suppose that the wider issue to which the Member refers is the potential for wider UK free trade deals. What we would really like to see is the United Kingdom as a whole not accepting agricultural produce

that is produced to a lesser environmental standard or social standard in terms of employment than it would expect of Northern Ireland or other member states from the United Kingdom. It is important that we do not make Northern Ireland produce — indeed, United Kingdom produce — uncompetitive by undercutting it with cheap imports.

Dr Archibald: I also extend my good wishes to Edwin to get well soon.

The Minister said that the UK-Japan agreement largely replicates that between Japan and the EU. Does she accept that, due to the fact that no new tariff rate quotas (TRQ) were agreed, some exporters could be at a disadvantage under the agreement?

Mrs Dodds: The Japan agreement largely replicates the agreement that the EU has with Japan. Commitments and tariffs have been transitioned largely without changes. That will see tariffs for UK exports to Japan fall on pork, beef, salmon and other agricultural produce. For butter, milk and milk powders, where there were UK exports in 2019, UK exporters will continue to access Japan's market via their WTO TRQ.

Mr Chambers: I join in the good wishes to Minister Poots. It is reassuring that the NHS was there for him in a timely manner when he needed it.

Minister, following 1 January 2021, will Northern Ireland food products for export be labelled "UK" or "EU"?

Mrs Dodds: Those matters will be worked out in the Joint Committee.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr John Stewart. Sorry, Mr John Blair. I am on autopilot.

Mr Blair: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. May I associate myself and my colleagues with the good wishes expressed to Minister Poots for a full and speedy recovery?

I think that the Minister has clarified that what is being talked about is, at the very best, a replication of existing EU arrangements for Canada and Japan. More specifically, from an economic or agricultural perspective, can she tell us whether any data is available to show whether there is any benefit at all for trade or the economy with the new arrangements?

Mrs Dodds: I presume that the Member means in relation to the trade deals with Japan and

Canada. Canada is one of our largest partners. The CETA deal means that 98% of all products that pass between the countries, and now the United Kingdom, are tariff-free. That is a huge boost to the economy of Northern Ireland and the wider economy of the United Kingdom.

The good news about the Canada deal is that Canada is committed not only to the rollover of the deal signed in November but the renegotiation of parts of that deal so that it is bespoke to the rest of the United Kingdom. It is a really important trade deal for Northern Ireland.

The Japan trade deal is also important. Japan is one of the largest importers of agricultural produce in the world. There is an enormous opportunity to take our product to that market. That is another extremely important trade deal for the Northern Ireland economy. The crux of the matter for Northern Ireland will be making sure that we are a full part of those trade deals, notwithstanding the implications of the Northern Ireland protocol.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Once again, I apologise to the Member for getting his name wrong. There is only one John Blair.

Gorse Fires

4. **Mr McGrath** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline the impact of gorse fires on mountainous areas such as the Mourne. (AQO 1261/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. Gorse fires or wildfires in mountainous areas in Northern Ireland have a significant impact on the environment and are a risk to life and property. Semi-natural habitats often affected by such fires include heathland and blanket bog. Many of these areas are important nature conservation sites. Indeed, between 2010 and 2019, 64 wildfires were recorded in areas of special scientific interest.

These habitats can be damaged by fires, with impacts ranging from gradual change in species composition arising from surface burns to complete loss of vegetation and seed banks in severe, deep burns. In surface burns, the shift in vegetation composition can be undesirable, such as increases in gorse or bracken. In deep burn, the impacts can lead to long-term erosion due to lack of vegetation cover. The wildlife living in these areas is also negatively impacted. The impacts include the loss of foraging areas and the destruction of the nests

and eggs of important breeding birds such as hen harriers. The damage caused to habitats and species can take many years to recover, and some may be lost for ever. Such fires also threaten life, property, forestry, agricultural land, public water supplies and other public utilities. They impact on emergency response services at the cost of millions of pounds to the public purse.

Most wildfires are the result of human activities and are preventable. Proactive steps to recognise and address the risk of wildfires have been, and will continue to be, taken by the Department, other stakeholders and landowners. Those steps include public messaging and awareness raising, the establishment of wildfire groups, such as those in the Mourne and Belfast hills, and the development of wildfire management plans in areas of special scientific interest. Officials have gained considerable expertise in wildfires through liaison with local landowners and knowledge exchange with other European countries. We will continue to develop ways forward.

This year, 2020 —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Minister —

Mrs Dodds: May I add one important fact? This year, 2020, was the worst year for wildfires since 2011. To May of this year, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service had to deal with over 600.

Mr McGrath: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive response and add my weight to the remarks wishing Minister Poots well. Does the Minister agree that something has happened? The number of wildfires in mountainous areas across the North and the island of Ireland is substantially increasing. Events supposed to happen only once in 100 years or once in 50 years are happening annually and costing millions of pounds. Does the Minister agree that climate change is playing a part and that we must respond accordingly?

Mrs Dodds: As my answer made clear, a range of factors is involved, including pressures from climate change. However, human behaviour, such as people walking in the mountains etc, is also a factor. We need to ensure that we work together and properly disseminate information about not only the dangers of the fires themselves but the dangers to our environment and the cost to the public purse.

Mr McAleer: I also associate myself with extending best wishes to Minister Poots. I sent him a message earlier today and am glad to note that he is moving in the right direction. I also want to commend Minister Dodds for coming in at short notice. You have done a good job so far, so fair play to you.

2.30 pm

Unfortunately, earlier this year, at the beginning of lockdown, when the weather was incredibly warm, we witnessed many gorse fires, many of them in my district. It is important that the Department, and, indeed, all the Departments, educates and informs people about the damage that such fires do to people's lives and to biodiversity. When those who are impacted on by the fires try to engage with compensation services, it can become a legal quagmire. Does the Minister agree that it is important that everyone do their best to educate and inform people about those fires and their impact?

Mrs Dodds: We are very privileged to live in one of the most beautiful parts of the world. Like the Member for South Down, my whole family are from the Mourne area, so I know exactly the beauty of the areas. It is therefore really disappointing when people abuse the privilege of walking and spending time in the hills.

We need to have a multi-agency approach among the NIEA, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS), the Forest Service and the other rescue services to try to get the strategy right so that people can be safe in those beautiful areas but also respect them. I agree with the Member that that will require information campaigns so that people understand their responsibilities.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We now move on to topical questions. Before I call the first Member to ask a topical question, I say to Members that they will know that I am a relaxed and fairly easy-going sort of person and do not stand too much on formality or anything like that, but I impress on Members the need for short, sharp questions. For a perfect example of that, I call Mr Daniel McCrossan.

Mr McCrossan: You may judge that in a minute.

Meenbog Landslide

T1. **Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, after

associating himself with the comments to wish Minister Poots well and a speedy recovery and putting on record his sincere appreciation for the fact that Minister Poots visited Meenbog outside Castledearg following the slippage that caused huge difficulties, where they had a good meeting that he was glad to attend, for an update on the Department's work on the Meenbog landslide, specifically progress on the clean-up, work to confirm the root cause and work to prevent such a thing happening in future. (AQT 781/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I read some of the newspaper reports of the visit to Meenbog. It is only over the past 12 hours, however, that I have become much more tuned into the issues involved there.

I am happy to tell the Member that Loughs Agency staff are continuing their investigation into the recent major water pollution incident at Meenbog. The incident appears to be the result of significant slippage of an enormous quantity of peat and soil at the upper end of the catchment around the waterway. The nature and type of remedial measures will depend on the environmental assessments that are under way. Those include assessments and evaluations of water-quality data, fisheries, invertebrates and riverbed silt that will take some time to complete. It is, however, an issue that the Minister has taken on board and on which he has met his counterpart from the Republic of Ireland to discuss, so it is being worked on and taken forward by the Loughs Agency as a matter of priority.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Minister for her answer. I absolutely acknowledge that the Meenbog slippage was a catastrophe. It affected Killeter, Aghyaran, Castledearg, Ardstraw and the surrounding areas quite significantly. The meeting between Minister Poots and Minister McConalogue was very effective and showed a great sign of strength and unity on that cross-border issue.

Minister, one particular business was impacted on very badly by the slippage. I am not sure whether you will be aware, but will you update us now or at a further stage on whether there is any form of compensation that could help with the pressure that has been put on that business?

Mrs Dodds: While I am aware of measures that the Loughs Agency is undertaking on the remedial issues that need to be resolved because of that, I am unaware of that particular business. I will, of course, ask officials from the

Department to contact you to talk through the issue that is of interest to you.

Clean Air Strategy

T2. **Miss Woods** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, after wishing Minister Poots all the best as he recovers and thanking the Minister for the Economy for standing in, to outline how rural perspectives were considered when drafting the clean air strategy. (AQT 782/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As with all these strategies, a number of wide-ranging perspectives is taken into account. If the Member has a concern that a particular issue was not addressed, I advise her to write to the Minister so that it can be properly considered.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for her answer. Why was a population of 10,000 chosen as the threshold beyond which air quality assessment would be conducted, even though that would exclude most rural areas from assessment and risk agricultural pollution not being fully measured?

Mrs Dodds: I presume that the modelling indicated that that number was acceptable in that instance. Of course, I advise the Member to contact or write to the Minister to advise him of her concerns.

River Blackwater: Works

T3. **Mr Beattie** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, after stating that it is good to see the Economy Minister supporting her ministerial colleague and telling the House that he looks forward to the day when Ministers from across the Floor will support each other, to outline whether, following the successful works on the River Blackwater catchment, there are any plans to expand those works along the River Bann. (AQT 783/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I would, of course, be very supportive of that from a constituency point of view. I consider the River Bann and our particular part of it to be one of the most beautiful parts of Northern Ireland. Since I walk along the river with the dogs quite a lot during the week, and this is a personal view, I consider that to be important.

I will report the issue to the Minister, and I will say on a general basis that really good work has been done with remedial tidying up and

dredging so much of the rubbish that has been unnecessarily dumped in the river and so on. From a general point of view, we want to see cooperation in order to make sure that those things do not happen and that people act responsibly to ensure that the beautiful environment that we have is maintained.

Mr Beattie: Minister, I kept my questions local because I knew that you were standing in. As you know, local constituent Jon Medlow has been working hard with volunteers to clean the River Bann. I believe that you might have met him. Does the Minister have any plans to give financial aid in order to allow volunteers like Jon and other groups to carry on that important work?

Mrs Dodds: I agree that it is important work. Caring for, sustaining and future-proofing the assets that we have is hugely important. I speak not just as a local but as the tourism Minister, because we need to ensure that we make the best of those assets. That is what brings people to Northern Ireland. I commend the groups for their work and what they do. Of course, I will pass on to the Minister your concerns about funding for such groups.

Litter

T4. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to clarify, as we all strive for a cleaner and greener environment, who has responsibility of cleaning of litter and detritus from our public footpaths and roadsides. (AQT 784/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As the Member said, we all have our part to play in that. I know that the Minister is committed to education and to building civic pride around our beautiful environment.

The Department works closely with councils and other NGOs to support educational and promotional campaigns that achieve behavioural change in reducing litter.

DAERA's environment fund supports Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful, which runs a series of successful programmes, including Eco-Schools; Live Here, Love Here; Clean Coasts; and Adopt a Spot. More than £3 million has been awarded to Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful since 2007, with additional current funding of more than £1 million to support educational and promotional campaigns. The Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act enables councils to issue fines of up to £80 for litter offences or £2,500 fines for cases that have to be dealt with through the courts. They

are very important issues and impact on everybody's everyday lives, and I thank the Member for raising them.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for her answer. Can she assure us that, under the Litter (Northern Ireland) Order 1994, the NIEA will use its influence on local councils to ensure that public footpaths and roadways are clean and safe for all road users? There seems to be a reluctance by some councils to clean public footpaths on roads where there is extensive traffic.

Mrs Dodds: I am sure that the Minister will agree with the Member that it is extremely important that we use every power available to us to make sure that we have done our best to ensure that roads, footpaths etc are clean, fit for purpose and suitable for the beautiful environment that we have in Northern Ireland.

Anaerobic Digestion Plants

T5. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, after asking the Minister for the Economy to pass on his best wishes to his constituency colleague Edwin Poots, to outline the potential impact on the provision of anaerobic digestion plants in light of the fact that Minister Poots has let it be known more than once that he does not think that Northern Ireland needs an incinerator. (AQT 785/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: There is a debate about the incinerator, and I have no intention of engaging in it today. However, my Department is responsible for a new energy strategy, and looking at different types of energy and how they can be inputted into the grid will be key to it. We hope to bring out that strategy for consultation in March 2021, and the Member will, I am sure, contribute his views on anaerobic digestion and waste and energy to it.

Mr Lunn: The Minister will know that the jury is out on anaerobic digestion as a long-term solution to our needs, particularly in view of the carbon footprint of the whole process, the extent to which anaerobic digestion plants depend on government subsidy at the moment, and the limited life of the plant involved, which, I believe, is no more than about 10 years. There is also huge cost involved in replacing it. So, are we quite sure that Minister Poots should not exclude totally the requirement for an incinerator because an awful lot of academic information seems to indicate that we need one, and fairly quickly?

Mrs Dodds: I am sure that the Member will make his views on waste known to Minister Poots. As I said, the energy strategy will be out for consultation in March 2021, and I look forward to receiving various views on all those issues.

Rural Poverty and Social Isolation

T6. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, after passing on his best wishes to his colleague Edwin Poots and adding to the Minister for the Economy's comments about the River Bann, in that she will know that it runs through his constituency, where Drumahagles, which is adjacent to the River Bann, is a beautiful part of Northern Ireland, where, no doubt, she has enjoyed some happy times, to provide an update on the initiative to tackle rural poverty and social isolation, which has become an issue that the Minister will be well aware of through her ministerial responsibilities, particularly given the impact of COVID over the past number of months. (AQT 786/17-22)

2.45 pm

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question on rural poverty and social isolation. Isolation and loneliness in particular have been exacerbated by the COVID restrictions, and there are some very touching stories of how that has impacted on folk, particularly older folk, in isolated rural areas. The tackling rural poverty and social isolation (TRPSI) programme continues to provide support for a range of initiatives in collaboration with other Departments, statutory agencies and the community and voluntary sector. That has helped, on average, 60,000 rural dwellers to address poverty, isolation and health and well-being issues. An additional £5 million has been confirmed to help rural dwellers and communities and to assist businesses to recover from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. That brings the TRPSI programme budget for 2020-21 to almost £11 million. That increase in financial support has enabled the Department to approve a number of schemes to bolster the rural economy and sustain and increase its capacity.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: There are 30 seconds left, Mr Storey.

Mr Storey: Will the Minister clarify whether there has been collaboration with the Department for Communities in relation to this initiative?

Mrs Dodds: Yes, the Department works closely with the Department for Communities and with local councils as delivery agents in relation to the initiative. It is very valuable for rural dwellers in Northern Ireland.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister of Agriculture. Members may take their ease for a few moments before we move to questions to the Minister for Communities. If you are leaving the Chamber, do not forget to clean the surface where you were sitting.

Communities

Intimidation Points System

1. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister for Communities when her Department will publish alternative proposals to replace the intimidation points system, as outlined in her statement of 3 November 2020. (AQO 1272/17-22)

10. **Ms Dillon** asked the Minister for Communities whether the revised system of housing allocation points will include intimidation points for the victims of domestic violence. (AQO 1281/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister for Communities): Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, with your permission, I will group questions 1 and 10.

I will publish a consultation outcome report on the fundamental review of social housing allocations next week. That will include a preliminary time frame for the implementation of the proposals. I have publicly stated that I will not proceed with the removal of intimidation points. I want to retain those points for those who really need them. There is a strong perception that the intimidation points system is being abused, and I want to see alternative mechanisms implemented to strengthen the verification process and put an end to that abuse.

That may require the establishment of an independent body, once options have been developed.

It is unacceptable that victims of domestic violence are not currently treated with the same priority as those who receive intimidation points. I want that to change as soon as possible.

Mrs D Kelly: Minister, many people in my constituency have 130 points and more, such is

the housing shortage and crisis for many families, even without intimidation points. I am sure that you are well aware of that in your constituency. I welcome the particular regard that you paid to victims of domestic violence in your answer. Will you put in place a process or framework to ensure that domestic violence victims are not disadvantaged in any way by any review?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question and supplementary. As she knows, in my constituency, some people are sitting on 240 points without intimidation, with no prospect of going anywhere. I think that there was a broad assumption that people who were subject to domestic abuse and violence were allocated intimidation points. That is not the case. The issue did not come up in the consultation as strongly as I felt that it would, but it certainly came up once people realised that that was not the case. After I publish the consultation report next week, I will move straight to options with officials, and, hopefully, I will have something in the coming months. It is really important that that is changed.

Ms Dillon: My question has been answered by what the Minister has just outlined. I was well aware that, unfortunately, domestic abuse points are not included in intimidation points. I think that you, Minister, have just given a time frame, but, to clarify, when might we expect those points to be in place? It has been an outstanding issue, certainly in my constituency, for a long time.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. As she will be aware, as part of the recent statement that I made here about the overall housing transformation, the case of the fundamental review was certainly highlighted. The changes outlined in that statement need to be made within this mandate, and I am, with others, progressing work in that regard. I hope that, in the coming months, we will have a completely different system for the allocation of points, which will include intimidation points for victims of domestic abuse and violence.

Mr Dickson: Thank you very much, Minister, for indicating your strong priority for victims of domestic violence in the future. Do you agree that there were disgraceful scenes in the House earlier today, when the Chair of the Justice Committee attempted to derail important domestic violence legislation, and that that will exacerbate the situation that you find yourself in?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will take the Member's last point first. I did not see it, so I will look at it. The start of his question was about why people have waited for so long. Going by his and others' responses, I think Members will agree that it is quite appropriate that intimidation points are kept for people who have been subject to domestic abuse and violence.

Business Adaptation and Improvement Grant Scheme

2. **Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister for Communities whether additional moneys will be made available to local councils to administer a further business adaptation and improvement grant scheme. (AQO 1273/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. My Department's COVID-19 recovery revitalisation programme has already allocated £17.6 million to councils to enable them to create a safer environment for shoppers, visitors and workers. It includes contributions of £5 million and £2 million from the Department for Infrastructure and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, respectively. The programme was designed to be as flexible as possible to ensure that each council delivers a plan that addresses the specific needs in its area. Every council plan has included a small grant scheme to help businesses to provide a more COVID-secure environment for their customers. The eligibility criteria and value of the grants were determined by each council in consultation with local stakeholders. The total value of the grants across all councils is approximately £6.9 million.

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Minister for her response. The previous tranche of funds that was distributed to Ards and North Down Borough Council, which covers the majority of my constituency, was available only to businesses in the designated town centre. That was at the suggestion of her Department, and it left many dozens of businesses without the benefit of assistance. In fact, there were 22 businesses in one street in Comber alone. Will the Minister do anything to provide assistance to those businesses, which by virtue of a line on a map were unable to avail themselves of that funding?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am sorry to hear that. The Member will be aware, given her previous role, that I am responsible for townlands and villages with a population of 5,000 and over. Edwin Poots — I wish him the very best — and I did this scheme jointly to ensure that no one was

left out. I will find out what happened and write to the Member. Hopefully, whatever happened, whatever gaps there are will be closed. I will get the detail and talk to the Member personally.

Mr Catney: Will the Minister provide a breakdown of the number of businesses that the money has already reached and give examples, if possible, by council area?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I do not have that detail to hand, but I will write to the Member. When I was talking to some businesses about how they were hoping to avail themselves of support, they were looking at additional sanitisation and infrastructure for safe social distancing. A number of them were looking at outside heaters, street furniture, awnings, gazebos and things like that in order to help to bring customers in safely. Again, I do not have the details to hand as to what each council got, but I will get them for the Member.

Ms Ennis: We know that there has been a delay with some of the financial support schemes that were established recently. Will the Minister set out the steps that she is taking to ensure that councils receive those allocations quickly?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. That is why I was a bit surprised to hear Michelle McIlveen's concerns. The onus was on Edwin Poots, Nichola Mallon and me to ensure that those schemes, unlike others, got out as quickly as possible through the councils, which have been funded by my Department to ensure that they in turn can provide front-line services as quickly as possible.

Unlike with other schemes, the councils, to be fair to them, have acted very quickly. We have made the application as simple and straightforward as possible while respecting and honouring due diligence and ensuring that each council was as flexible to the needs of their local businesses as possible. Again, as each tranche is rolled out, we have ensured that speed has been of the essence. I hope that that is the case across the board and look forward to ensuring that it is.

Winter Support for Vulnerable People

3. **Ms Mullan** asked the Minister for Communities to outline her plans to support the most vulnerable people over the winter period. (AQO 1274/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. My Department has a number of supports in place, including an automatic one-off COVID-19 heating payment of £200 to people who are in receipt of pension credit or the highest rates of disability benefits; a £10 Christmas bonus, which is paid to people who are in receipt of a qualifying benefit; a winter fuel payment of between £100 and £300 for eligible older people; and a cold weather payment of £25. The universal credit allowance has also been increased. I have increased the annual income threshold for discretionary support and introduced a self-isolation grant for people who have been diagnosed with COVID-19.

The provision of food support remains a priority for me, so I have provided almost £800,000 to FareShare, which is a food redistribution charity. I have allocated £750,000 to councils to provide access to food. My Department has also allocated a further £3.5 million to support access to food, and I hope to make an announcement in the not-too-distant future about our warm, well and connected policy, which will operate throughout December and January.

Ms Mullan: I thank the Minister for her answer and for her work and ongoing support for those who are most vulnerable. I also want to thank her for meeting the community and voluntary sector in Derry and Strabane with me last week. Will she outline her intention to work collectively with other Departments and agencies to ensure that long-term and targeted support is provided to those who are most in need?

3.00 pm

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. It was a pleasure to meet, along with the Member and Martina Anderson, the many workers from across the community in the Foyle constituency. It is important to put on record — this is also in response to the previous question — that Edwin Poots, Nichola Mallon and I are working on the revitalisation fund for councils; and Naomi Long, Robin Swann and I are working on supporting people, particularly in relation to homelessness. From an Executive point of view, I have enjoyed the full support of each Minister for every substantial allocation of money that has gone to sports and arts. It is important that we use public money to get better outcomes for people. I reassure the Member, and other Members, that I will continue to take that approach.

Mr Durkan: Will the Minister confirm whether a household can receive multiple heating payments if more than one eligible individual is living at the address?

Ms Ní Chuilín: It is for one household. The COVID heating payment is a one-off, and the household is the applicant. It is on top of the winter fuel payment, which is anything from £100 to £300. This payment is in addition to what is already there. Given that people have had to isolate for a lot longer than we thought in March would be the case and the fact that we are going into a very, very cold spell, I am sure that the Member will agree that it is important that people stay not only warm but safe and well.

Mr Beggs: Are individuals who are in receipt of a supplementary payment, due to the complete loss of their award when transitioning from DLA to PIP, entitled to the additional heating payment?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The payment is for anybody on pension credit, higher rates of disability or higher rates of PIP, and it includes the children. People who are currently in receipt of any of those, never mind what they are transferring to, meet the criteria and should receive the payment. If the Member has examples of where he feels that that may not be the case, he can drop them up to my office.

Ms Bradshaw: The Minister will recall that, approximately this time last year, she, Christopher and I met with the —. Sorry.

Sign Language Legislation

4. **Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the proposed legislation on sign language. (AQO 1275/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: It is too close to Christmas, Paula.

Ms Bradshaw: I know. I am sorry.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yes, I recall that. A draft framework and policy proposals for legislation on sign language were consulted on prior to the publication of 'New Decade, New Approach', which committed us all to introducing a sign language Bill. I hope to introduce a sign language Bill very soon, within this mandate. My officials are engaging with the Office of the Legislative Counsel with a view to establishing a timetable and preparing instructions.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, and apologies. The Minister will recall from the evening that we spent in a church hall in my constituency how important the sign language Bill will be. I am sure that she will have heard from many constituents about the loneliness that they have felt during lockdown. To what degree will access read across not only to public services but to wider societal issues such as sport and community life?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member will be aware that I brought forward the framework in my last year in DCAL. That framework was widely consulted upon, and it touched on different sectors. That sign language framework will help to inform the Bill. This has been widely consulted on, and, if we have heard anything from the sector, it is that we should, "Just get on with it".

Ms Sheerin: Will lessons be learned from what has been done in the South of Ireland and Scotland? Will the Minister commit to meeting with the sector on the implementation of the Bill?

Ms Ní Chuilín: All other jurisdictions and legislatures have been consulted. Not only have any Bills, Acts or pieces of work that they have brought forward helped to shape the framework, they will help to shape the Bill.

Not so long ago, I met with people who are deaf or partially deaf. I made a point of meeting as many people from the sector as possible, including parents who have children who have lost their hearing or who do not have hearing. I am more than happy to meet more people in that situation, particularly given that the framework is not on a statutory footing. There is therefore a denial of rights, particularly for families. People communicate through sign language, and we definitely need legislation to enable that.

Water Leak Claims

5. **Mr Robinson** asked the Minister for Communities whether the Northern Ireland Housing Executive or third-party contractors are responsible for paying tenants' claims for goods damaged due to a water leak. (AQO 1276/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. For a payment to be made in a public liability claim, some degree of negligence must be established. Depending on the circumstances giving rise to a water leak, in some cases that negligence may attach to the Housing Executive, while in others it may attach

to the contractor. It is also possible that negligence could be established jointly against both the Housing Executive and the contractor. Tenants are advised to have contents insurance in place, but that is not always affordable. The Housing Executive provides useful guidance and information on public liability claims on its website, and I welcome comment on that content from anyone who looks at it.

Mr Robinson: I thank the Minister for her answer, but will she undertake to ensure that clear guidance is issued to tenants? At present, there is confusion and frustration over the fact that there is no clear pathway for Northern Ireland Housing Executive tenants.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will certainly have another look at it. The Member tells me that it needs cleared up, so I will need to have a look at it. I will write to the chief executive and the chair of the board thereafter. Any guidance on a departmental website needs to be as clear and plain as possible so that people can access the information and services that they need.

Mr Nesbitt: I wonder whether the Minister can inform the House, either today or in writing, of the average amount paid out in recent years because of damage that is the responsibility of contractors.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will have to respond in writing, because I do not have that information. When responsibility is contested, the situation can become protracted, and it is tenants who are, unfortunately, caught in the middle. I do not think that anyone thinks that is a satisfactory position to be in. I will get the information in writing to the Member.

Ms Kimmins: Will the Minister advise whether public liability claims against the Housing Executive are a frequent occurrence?

Ms Ní Chuilín: For anyone who has been subjected to water damage and leaks, particularly if a contractor has been in, once is enough. As I said to the Member for Strangford, Mr Mike Nesbitt, I will provide the Member with a breakdown of what has happened, even for 2019-2020, and I will share it with Mr Robinson, who asked the listed question, to determine whether the Housing Executive was responsible or the contractor was responsible, and what the outcome was, if any.

Mr McGlone: I ask the Minister about the importance of updating tenants on their responsibilities to have proper insurance cover

for contents and the like. We are coming into really cold weather. We have had a wee sample of it. We do not want people being left literally wet and caught with no cover at all, and their house possibly ruined through flooding or another circumstance that has occurred in their home as a result of poor weather.

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member probably heard what I said at the start of my answer to Mr Robinson. It is about affordability. For many families who are on low income and living in poverty, they are often dealing with a decision either to pay for house insurance or to feed their kids. It is the tenant's responsibility — it is in the tenant's handbook — and housing associations and the Housing Executive constantly remind tenants of it. When you are talking about families living in poverty, however, house insurance is not at the top of their list.

Financial Hardship: Christmas Support

6. **Ms Bunting** asked the Minister for Communities how her Department will support people facing financial hardship over the Christmas period. (AQO 1277/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. My Department has a range of initiatives to support people facing financial hardship over the Christmas period. In my answer to Karen Mullan, I gave a breakdown of the supports that are in place, including the winter fuel payment; the cold weather payment, if there are prolonged cold spells; a Christmas bonus payment of £10; an increase in discretionary support; and access to food and other supports that my Department funds through the councils. I hope to announce other additional supports very soon.

Ms Bunting: I am grateful to the Minister for her answer, and I noted her earlier answer. At this stage, I am asking particularly about food banks and the people who use them. In East Belfast, we have Manna and the Larder, which are both run by churches and are doing sterling work, but, regrettably, they provide a vital service. The Minister will know that, as more people struggle, there are more desperate people in need and fewer people who can give, and the food banks are running short of supplies. Is there anything that her Department can do directly with food banks, or can she advise how food banks can tie in with FareShare?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Both. FareShare has received money from my Department, and most community food banks, if not them all, work very closely with FareShare. In the Member's constituency, money has been coming to food banks from my Department through allocations made by Belfast City Council. I am looking at additional supports.

I want to put on record that, ideally, there should not be food banks. That is the bottom line: there should not be food banks. We need to put more money into people's pockets so they can make their own choices. However, while we are in this situation, I am sure that the Member will agree that, from right across the Executive, substantial support for bids has been provided through my Department for me to help people with food support and other essential items.

Ms Hunter: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. If someone should need to claim universal credit in December, given that there is usually a wait of six weeks for a payment, will her Department take any steps to ensure that people receive the payment more quickly so that no one will be left penniless at Christmas?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Absolutely, and the contingency fund is available. People should not wait five weeks for their UC payment, and they should not be offered loans either. There is the contingency fund, and there is also discretionary support so that people can get a payment. No one should be sitting like that over Christmas. I remind people that, while a wait of a few weeks for universal credit is in the legislation, people should not be offered a loan first; they should be offered money from the contingency fund, and, if that does not suit, they should be offered money from the discretionary fund.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for her answer. On the back of Ms Hunter's question, as you pointed out, the discretionary support fund is a vital support mechanism. However, I am aware that applications are taking over seven days in some instances. Will the Minister advise what steps she will take to reduce the time taken to process applications this side of Christmas?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am genuinely sorry to hear that. I was, and am, keeping a close eye on the average payment time. It worked out at about four days, and I still felt that we should try to get a payment out as quickly as we could. I assure the Member that staffing and training have been increased, and the staff are dedicated and committed to ensuring that no one is left without

food or money, particularly in these very cold days and in the run-up to Christmas.

Ms Rogan: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. Minister, what is your Department doing to ensure that people are aware of the benefits that they are entitled to and take up the help that is available to them?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will give Advice NI a plug and say that it has been very good at publicising benefit take-up campaigns and publicising what is available. I know that anyone who is involved in the independent advice sector will be letting people know, as will Age NI, NICVA and many other organisations. The difficulty is that you will always find people who do not have access to social media and who may not be connected to those groups. The Department publishes information. If the Member or anybody else knows of groups or individuals who have found out about a benefit after the fact, they should come back to me so that we can close the gaps. I do not want anybody to be left sitting destitute or without.

3.15 pm

Job Start Payment Scheme

7. **Dr Archibald** asked the Minister for Communities to outline progress in delivering a scheme similar to Job Start in Scotland, which takes account of local circumstances and needs. (AQO 1278/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. I am pleased to advise that we will be providing increased funding to help to remove barriers to work for people who receive income-related benefits. For example, in Scotland, the Job Start scheme payment is a grant of £250, or £400 if the recipient is the main carer for a child or children. That is available only to those aged 16 to 24. Here, the adviser discretionary fund can provide up to £300 to remove a barrier to work. I am increasing that limit to £1,500 in a 12-month period and expanding the range of supports that it can be used for.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Minister for her response. That is useful information. Can the Minister provide any assurances about participation in Job Start programmes?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am not sure: is the Member asking about sanctions? This is not about sanctions. This is about a voluntary programme that, hopefully, young people aged 18 to 24 will avail themselves of. If they cannot — rather

than do not want to — avail themselves of it, they will not be sanctioned, which was the problem, particularly for young people with educational challenges, those with mental health issues, and those who are leaving care or being looked after. They were in the bracket of young people who were more sanctioned than others. It is about the fact that some of them cannot make their appointment, rather than that they just did not bother turning up.

Charity Sector: COVID-19 Support

8. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister for Communities how she intends to support the charity sector through the COVID-19 pandemic. (AQO 1279/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: *[Long Pause.]* Sorry about this; we are flying through these questions.

Our local charity sector is vital to us as a community, especially now. I know that charities have been struggling financially because fundraising is down. In June of this year, I put £15.5 million into the charity fund, and I am pleased to say that 501 successful applicants received a total of £8.8 million. I am acutely aware that charities still face significant financial challenges, and I am working on making an announcement shortly on a further phase of funding to support them.

Mr Newton: The Minister will know that, although the number of charities that she quoted have been supported, quite a number have not. It seems that there are charities that, even though they are independent in Northern Ireland, because they operate nationally and the national body has reserves, the local body is perceived to be ruled out of getting funding from the Department for Communities. Will the Minister look at the situation so that local bodies that are tied to national bodies are eligible for funding from the support that she has on offer?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am sorry to hear that, because having reserves does not exclude any charity from applying to this fund. If the Member has any examples, I will be happy to receive them. This is about how people try to raise money here for charitable purposes and to provide good outcomes for people. Charity fundraising has been greatly inhibited, almost to the point where it has ceased, so I would be really disappointed, particularly given the work that people are doing on our behalf, if they did not get any support at all.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We now move on to topical questions.

Grassroots Sports

T1. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister for Communities to clarify the situation with grassroots sports, particularly on the younger side, given that there has been a lot of talk and communication about elite sports, which have got back on the road again, albeit with barriers in place. (AQT 791/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. I know about his interest in grassroots sport. I will, hopefully, get a bit more detail on that today or early tomorrow. The number of spectators has increased, but I think that the Member is asking me whether training and so on can recommence. I am still waiting on those regulations to be sorted out.

I hope that they will be sorted out as soon as possible, because I know that a lot of the sporting bodies, and particularly the smaller clubs, have been excellent at social distancing and at providing sanitisers for the youngsters and trying to keep them as safe as possible.

Mr Hilditch: I appreciate the Minister's answer, and I am sure that she will appreciate that kids are now developing from around five or six years of age through to early teens before they go into the older age groups, so I am talking about that very young element, who have lost out so much this year. I am seeking the Minister's support for that to be looked into as quickly as possible and clarity sought.

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Chair of the Communities Committee is here, and, when those regulations are brought forward and further clarification and guidance is offered, it will be copied to the Committee. I will make sure that it is copied to you as well.

Business Rates

T2. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Communities, given that retail forms an important social and community space and element in our town centres, albeit that all retailers, whether multinational or local independents, are struggling with the shift to online shopping, what action she has taken to contact the Minister of Finance to achieve a long-term reduction in the rates that are charged so that more realistic rents will be charged, with more businesses able to survive and provide a service to the community. (AQT 792/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have not had a conversation with the Finance Minister about the long-term trajectory of rates. We are more focused on, first, the fact that there has been rates relief. We have had his support and the support of all of our Executive colleagues, including your colleague, for the revitalisation fund, which gets money out to help, in particular, small and local businesses. I am happy to copy the section from Hansard containing your question to Conor Murphy.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for her response. Considerable pressure will be ongoing beyond the COVID period, and that is why I am asking the question. Similarly, has the Minister made contact, or in conjunction with the Finance Minister made contact, with the Chancellor so that online large retailers such as Amazon pay fair taxation and are unable to continue to shift their profits offshore and use complex tax avoidance methods, leaving local retailers at a disadvantage?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I would not ever contact the British Chancellor, because the normal protocol is that it goes through the Finance Minister. I have absolutely no doubt that the matter of supporting our local businesses has been raised. The issue of big global companies coming here and paying very little tax is one that has been with us for a long time, and I agree with the Member. I do not think that they pay their fair share. In fact, there have been court battles, which are probably still ongoing, around some of those big names. They are not paying their fair share. Their employees are, but, as companies, they are not, and that is not right.

Sports Hardship Fund

T3. **Mr Butler** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the sports hardship fund and any other work that her Department has undertaken, given that she has been very vocal and supportive of sporting groups at all levels and will share his fear that some groups, whether grassroots, amateur or elite, are coming under viability pressures at this time. (AQT 793/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. I share his concern about the impact of what, indeed, David Hilditch raised. This year has been horrendous for many people, particularly young people, who have lost out on quite a lot of socialisation with their friends. There is no better example of when they are with their friends as when they are playing sport.

On sports hardship, I am sure that the Member will be aware that I have put a significant amount of money forward. Indeed, £25 million is going into sport. I met the governing bodies and the Northern Ireland Sports Forum last week, along with Sport NI. We want this process to be as straightforward as possible. The applications are open, and, hopefully, awards will be made at the end of January or the beginning of February to help people not just with their loss but with the impact of COVID. The best thing that we can do is to get this guidance sorted out as quickly as possible so that people can get back to doing what they want.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for her answer. I have had a number of emails and letters from constituents who are concerned about the viability of the Belfast Giants at the SSE Arena, which has been a great success for Northern Ireland and one of the sports that truly unites us here. Can the Minister outline whether she has had any contact with Belfast Giants or if she is aware of any assistance that has been sought? Would she consider any application that was made?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Like many others, or maybe not, I was shocked to find out that the Belfast Giants have been here for 20 years. Time has gone in the blink of an eye. I will not receive any applications; it will be Sport NI. I am aware that they will make an application because I saw it covered in a local news bulletin. I will not mention the name in case I give them an unfair advantage. It is something that many groups have been talking about because they need some support. The Belfast Giants are more than aware of the application process.

Sports Hardship Fund

T4. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister for Communities, in a follow up to Mr Butler, and after welcoming the sports hardship fund, which opened last Friday, to outline the rationale behind the fact that the groups, organisations and clubs have to go through their governing bodies, which might benefit some of the larger organisations such as football, GAA and rugby but could make it more difficult for some of the smaller groups and clubs whose affiliated bodies might be in other parts of the UK or in the Republic of Ireland. (AQT 794/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: To assure the Member, the governing bodies are not making decisions on the applications; they are supporting them. The Sports Forum deals with a lot of other governing bodies — the smaller ones — and,

indeed, Sport NI usually deals with the elite athletes and others. It is also to help smaller groups, in particular, with the template. For example, a small five-a-side football team should not have to go through the same due diligence as Linfield. That is not fair, but the IFA should be there to help them and, indeed, anybody else. That was the rationale behind that.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for her answer. In the same vein, what conversations has the Minister had with the Finance Minister? I was recently made aware that a cricket club had applied, through the Finance Minister, for that stream of funding but was told that it had to apply through the sports fund. Will there be an even playing field? Whether it is a working men's club, social club or sports club, will they not be disproportionately affected by applying through the sports fund, instead of through the Department of Finance funding?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The primary function is about sport. A working men's club that does not have any attachment to sport, other than its name, need not apply. You would not be surprised at some of the queries I have had. In my opinion, this needs to be as straightforward as possible because people have had a tough enough year. If anybody is in any doubt, they should go to Sport NI to ask for support with the guidance. If they are not getting support from a governing body, or they do not get enough and maybe need more detail, they should go straight to Sport NI, because it is primed and ready to take any queries. I got that assurance last week because it was one of the things that I asked.

Arts Funding

T5. **Mr O'Toole** asked the Minister for Communities, in relation to arts funding and the different funds that have been announced, to state how much of the £29 million has been allocated and how many grants have been given out. (AQT 795/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I do not have that information to hand, but I will write to the Member. I want to assure him that we will make, and have made, additional funding available for individuals and freelancers because they are going through a difficult time. They do not normally receive public money. With regard to the breakdown, I am not saying this to be smart, but the Arts Council has published it on its website. I will get a breakdown of the grant given under each heading, but I suggest that the Member also goes to the website.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she give some assurance that all the allocation will be given out to artists and creatives, whether or not they are technical? I have dealt with constituents who, for example, run stage crews. A wide range of people have been completely excluded from other schemes and are a vital part of our creative industries. Is the Minister confident that all that money will be given out before the end of the financial year and that people who need help will get it, because some of these schemes are not opening until the new year?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I want to assure the Member because I have heard speculation, not only about when the sports funding will be available but when the arts funding will be available. The Arts Council has got that out to people as quickly as possible.

Some of the feedback that I have received from individuals is that they have been helped at the right time with the appropriate amount of money. I assure the Member and everybody else that the process has been as open and transparent as possible and has been supported and made easy by the staff of the Arts Council.

3.30 pm

Intimidation Points

T6. **Ms Dolan** asked the Minister for Communities to outline how the proposals in her statement on 3 November — to establish a statutory body to oversee the verification of intimidation points and greater PSNI involvement in the intimidation points system process — will be progressed. (AQT 796/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. That was one of the first questions asked by Dolores Kelly and Linda Dillon at today's Question Time. We need a robust scheme that is properly verified because some people have abused intimidation points. While some people abuse the system, other people are lying on sofas with four generations under one roof. Some of us have constituents with over 200 points who have not received intimidation points, and they need to be supported. We need to ensure that the system is robust and that it verifies anyone's claim for intimidation points.

Ms Dolan: Go raibh maith agat. Thank you, Minister for that answer. It will clearly will take time to develop new proposals. Will interim

arrangements be put in place during that development phase?

Ms Ní Chuilín: It will take time to develop the proposals. Next week, I will announce the consultation on the fundamental review of housing allocation points. My officials and I will meet Housing Executive officials to look at next steps. I want the proposals to be brought forward as soon as possible, particularly for victims of domestic abuse and violence to ensure that they are not further penalised as a result of the current system.

Councils: Loss of Income

T7. **Ms Anderson** asked the Minister for Communities what support has been put in place for councils, including Derry City and Strabane District Council, to deal with loss of income in 2020-21. (AQT 797/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: At this stage, I am counting to well over £85 million, and we are still going. This money is needed. It will keep the councils open and essential functions going. In the Member's constituency, she will see that the council is the funding conduit to get money out for food and essential support for the community. The Executive have completely supported that. I met representatives from the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) and the NI Local Government Association (NILGA). I have no doubt that they will put in more bids, and my Department has fully funded each of their requests.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, Minister, for that answer. What decision-making model has the Department put in place for income support allocations for each council?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The model has been that, when the first application went in, when Deirdre Hargey was here, there was strong due diligence to ensure that any asks of the councils were tested by our financial mechanisms and procedures. They withstood that due diligence. The requests are coming in based on councils' needs, and, to be fair, that relationship has been respectful and inclusive, and it has worked. All 11 councils have received the full amount for which they applied to my Department.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Gary Middleton: one question and one answer.

Subregional Stadia Programme for Soccer

T8. **Mr Middleton** asked the Minister for Communities when funding from the subregional stadia programme for soccer will be allocated. (AQT 798/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The short answer is this: as soon as I get the final business cases. My officials, Sport NI and the IFA are working very closely together. I hope that an announcement on the subregional programme will be made in the spring or early summer.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister for Communities.

Mr Givan: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I would appreciate the Speaker's Office investigating the Alliance Party Member for East Antrim, Stewart Dickson, who, during question 1 to the Communities Minister, made very serious allegations and maligned my character when he said that I had sought to derail the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill in earlier proceedings today. Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, you can confirm that it was the Justice Minister who decided not to move the Further Consideration Stage, thus preventing the Assembly from considering this important legislation.

Members will know that Chairmen, or Madam Chairs, of Committees do not act unilaterally, and the decision in respect of that amendment was supported by the SDLP, the Green Party and the Ulster Unionist Party. It also had conditional support from Sinn Féin. Had the Justice Minister's legal aid amendment been successful, Sinn Féin, too, would have supported the commencement order associated with that amendment.

To that effect, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, will you insist upon the Member for East Antrim coming to the House, retracting his outrageous statement and apologising to me and the House for misleading Members?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you. Standing Orders 36 to 42 deal with the procedures of the House in relation to the scheduling of Bills. What the Member said — I am not getting into the debate — about the legislation not being moved by the relevant Minister is accurate. In relation to the comments made by Mr Dickson, I suggest that the best way to proceed is to allow Mr Speaker to review Hansard — I am not calling for a basin of water — to see whether any breach occurred and take the appropriate action arising from that. I hope that that satisfies the Member.

Adjourned at 3.36 pm.

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